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The pragmatic function of illocutionary acts in children's narrative: A study of The Tale of Peter Rabbit

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of illocutionary acts in the children's story The Tale of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter, based on the classification proposed by John Searle. Speech acts are important in understanding how characters use language to achieve communicative purposes within a narrative. Therefore, this study aims to analyze how illocutionary acts are expressed through the characters' dialogue and how they function pragmatically in the story. The study focuses on two main types of illocutionary acts, namely representatives and directives, as they frequently appear in the narrative. The data were taken from the text of The Tale of Peter Rabbit and analyzed by identifying relevant utterances, examining their linguistic forms, interpreting their contextual meanings, and explaining the speaker's intentions. The findings show that representative and directive acts are used to convey information, give instructions, and express authority, especially through adult characters such as Mrs. Rabbit and Mr. McGregor. These illocutionary acts also produce perlocutionary effects, which are reflected in the characters' responses and actions, contributing to plot development and moral lessons in the story. In conclusion, the use of speech acts in children's narratives not only serves communicative functions but also plays an important role in conveying educational values beyond the surface meaning of the text.

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INTRODUCTION

Communication involves more than just words; it is the way people share information and ideas with others. The primary role of language is to serve as a tool for communication, which can be accomplished through either spoken or written means. This corresponds with the perspective that the language facilitates individuals in understanding the meanings expressed in the speech of others (Nugraheni & Ahsin, 2021). Consequently, the message intended to be shared may not be received or comprehended clearly by the listener. This limitation highlights the need for a linguistic approach that examines meaning beyond literal interpretation. Pragmatics is a field within linguistics that studies language in its context (Sudiyono et al., 2023). This indicates that pragmatics significantly emphasizes the importance of context in conversations between speakers and listeners. Importantly, an utterance is not solely characterized by its phonetic quality; it also plays a vital role in transmitting a message that extends beyond its literal meaning, thus making it understandable to the listener (Meliyawati et al., 2023). A speech act refers to an action intended to communicate a message or express an individual's intentions in a face-to-face communication context (Rizza et al., 2022). Therefore, these factors collectively constitute the components of speech acts, which encompass locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary acts. These components form the foundation of speech act theory, which explains how utterances function as meaningful actions in communication.

Speech acts are present in the way we communicate. A speech act results from a statement made under specific circumstances and it is the smallest unit of communication that gives meaning to a sentence. It is a pragmatic component that involves a speaker, a listener, or a reader. A speech must have a clear aim and purpose, directed at the listener to provide information. Within speech acts, there exists a category specifically intended to inform, known as illocutionary speech acts (Halliday & Hasan, 1989) (Bach, 1997). Illocutionary speech acts can be classified into five categories: representative, commissive, directive, expressive, and declarative. Because these acts function within purposeful communication, they can also be observed and analyzed in written texts that represent social interaction, including literary narratives.

Dialogues in literary narratives can be analysed because they often reflect societal life. This study focuses on the illocutionary acts exhibited by the characters in Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit*. The researchers examine directive illocutionary acts to uncover the underlying meanings behind the characters' words. Delivering a statement goes beyond conveying information; it also requires action. Speech acts are actions carried out verbally by individuals. Directive illocutionary acts pertain to pragmatics, a

branch of linguistics that investigates utterances. It explores the connection between the language context and the speaker's intention, taking into account the circumstances under which the speech occurs. In pragmatics, context is crucial for interpreting what is said. Interpretation arises from what the speaker means, and context relates to both the speaker and the speech environment. Consequently, sentences that may lack grammatical correctness can still be understood when the speaker and listener share the same context. In pragmatic analysis, this phenomenon highlights how certain speech acts function effectively through contextual authority rather than formal linguistic structure.

The story of *Peter Rabbit* features a mischievous little bunny named Peter who ignores his mother's warnings and sneaks into Mr. McGregor's garden. While his sisters behave properly by picking blackberries, Peter ventures into the restricted garden and ends up taking vegetables such as lettuce, beans, and radishes. His actions trigger a perilous chase when Mr. McGregor spots him and pursues him. Throughout the tale, Peter feels fear, confusion, and remorse as he tries to escape the garden and find safety. Symbolically, Peter represents the curiosity and impulsiveness of children, whereas Mrs. Rabbit embodies parental authority through advice and warnings aimed at guiding her children's behavior.

The interactions among the characters in *Peter Rabbit* reveal various illocutionary acts such as warning, commanding, asking, and showing fear. These utterances do not merely convey information but also perform actions and reflect the speakers' intentions within specific contexts. When expressing emotions and intentions, individuals do not rely solely on grammatical correctness; rather, they use language to carry out actions that listeners are expected to recognize and respond to. Consequently, this research is conducted to identify the different types of illocutionary acts made by the characters, the intended meanings behind their statements, and the speakers' intentions when making assertive utterances (Martin et al., 1999; King et al., 1998). One of the central purposes of speech acts, therefore, is to facilitate meaningful interaction by sharing information and regulating behavior. In this narrative, the prevalence of directive speech acts underscores the establishment of authority and control, particularly by adult figures such as Mrs. Rabbit and Mr. McGregor. These directives function not only to manage the characters' behavior but also to reinforce the instructive nature of children's literature by conveying moral lessons and societal norms. Accordingly, this study highlights that speech acts in children's stories serve significant pragmatic and educational functions that extend beyond their surface meanings.

Previous academic studies on speech acts have primarily focused on identifying different types of illocutionary acts within various texts, among other aspects. However, there is a scarcity of scholarly works that pragmatically analyze these speech acts, particularly concerning authority and didactic discourse in children's tale texts; this situation highlights a gap in understanding how these texts function beyond mere structural identification. Even though a large number of scholars have looked into illocutionary acts, there remains a necessity for more thorough examination regarding how statements illustrate the speaker's goal and anticipated result in dialogue. Illocutionary acts involve more than simply the words spoken, they focus on what the speaker aims to achieve, whether it is making a request, issuing a warning, trying to persuade, or making a promise. In numerous communication scenarios, confusion arises when the listener does not identify the speaker's intended force behind the statement. Thus, investigating illocutionary acts is crucial to revealing the expectations and communication objectives inherent in spoken language.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining the pragmatic functions of illocutionary acts in Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* using Searle's speech act framework. Specifically, the study aims to (1) identify the types of illocutionary acts employed by the characters, (2) analyze the communicative intentions underlying these utterances, and (3) explain how illocutionary acts function to establish authority and convey moral values within the narrative. By focusing on character interactions in context, the present analysis of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* highlights how meaning in children's literature is constructed through speaker intention rather than literal expression alone.

METHOD

This study employs a pragmatic approach to analyze illocutionary acts in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter. A text-based analysis was selected as it allows for an in-depth examination of how meaning is constructed through language use in a literary narrative. The focus is placed on representative and directive illocutionary acts, as these types are most relevant to the construction of authority and moral instruction in children's stories.

The data consist of utterances produced by characters in the narrative. Data collection was conducted through close reading, followed by the identification and selection of utterances that reflect the use of illocutionary acts. The inclusion of these utterances was guided by their relevance to the study's focus on communicative intention and pragmatic function.

The analytical framework is based on the classification of illocutionary acts proposed by John Searle. Each utterance was systematically analyzed by considering (1) its linguistic form, (2) its contextual meaning within the narrative, (3) the speaker's intention, and (4) its pragmatic function. In addition, the analysis examines the perlocutionary effects of these utterances, particularly how they influence other characters' responses and contribute to plot development. To enhance analytical rigor, the data were reviewed iteratively to ensure consistency in classification and interpretation. This repeated analysis also helped to refine the identification of patterns related to authority and didactic meaning, thereby strengthening the validity of the findings.

RESULTS

The analysis identified that representative speech acts play a significant role in shaping the narrative discourse. Rather than merely presenting factual information, these utterances establish the credibility of the speaker, reinforce moral values, and prepare listeners to interpret subsequent events. The findings demonstrate that representative acts frequently function as indirect warnings and as a means of constructing authority, thereby supporting the persuasive and educational purpose of the narrative.

Representative acts as implicit warning and authority construction

Representative acts in the narrative are not limited to conveying factual information; rather, they function as implicit mechanisms for constructing authority and delivering moral framing. While representatives are typically associated with expressing the truth value of a proposition (Searle, 1980), the findings indicate that their role in this narrative extends into persuasive and cautionary domains.

This utterance occurs at the beginning of the story when Mrs. Rabbit warns her children before leaving them alone. She introduces a past event involving their father to justify her instructions.

Data 1

Mrs. Rabbit: Your father had an accident there. He was put into a pie by Mrs. McGregor.

At the surface level, this utterance presents a factual statement about a past event. However, its pragmatic function operates beyond information delivery. The reference to the father's fate implicitly constructs a warning, positioning Mrs. Rabbit as an authoritative figure whose knowledge legitimizes her subsequent directives. This indicates that representative acts can function as preparatory strategies for behavioral control, reinforcing parental authority through experiential justification.

Moreover, the utterance embeds a moral implication: disobedience leads to danger. In this sense, the representative act contributes to the narrative's didactic function, aligning informational content with moral instruction. This finding suggests that representative acts in children's narratives are multifunctional, simultaneously conveying information, constructing authority, and shaping moral interpretation.

Directives act as behavioral control and social regulation

Directive acts emerge as the most dominant and functionally significant category, particularly in interactions between adult and child characters. Rather than merely instructing actions, these directives systematically regulate behavior and encode social norms, reflecting hierarchical relationships within the narrative.

This statement is delivered by Mrs. Rabbit before she leaves to go out. She gives instructions to her children regarding where they are allowed and not allowed to go.

Data 2

Mrs. Rabbit: Now, my dears, you may go into the fields or down the lane, but don't go into Mr. McGregor's garden.

This utterance demonstrates a complex directive structure that combines permission ("you may go") with prohibition ("don't go"). This duality reflects a controlled autonomy, where freedom is granted within clearly defined boundaries. The coexistence of these elements indicates that directive acts do not function as simple commands but as structured guidance systems that balance independence and restriction. From a pragmatic perspective, this pattern reinforces parental authority while simultaneously framing safety as a moral responsibility. The directive thus operates as both behavioral regulation and value transmission.

Data 3

This utterance is also given before Mrs. Rabbit leaves her children, emphasizing expected behavior during her absence.

Mrs. Rabbit: "Now run along, and don't get into mischief. I am going out."

The use of imperative forms (“run along,” “don’t get into mischief”) reflects a more direct exertion of authority. Unlike Data 2, which combines permission and restriction, this utterance emphasizes control during the parent’s absence. The directive functions as a preventive mechanism, anticipating potential misbehavior and attempting to regulate it in advance. This suggests that directive acts in the narrative are temporally strategic, not only responding to situations but also pre-empting undesired actions. Such usage highlights their role in shaping expected behavior even in the absence of authority figures.

Data 4

This utterance occurs when Mr. McGregor discovers Peter in his garden and attempts to stop him from escaping.

Mr. McGregor: Stop thief!

This utterance illustrates a highly condensed directive characterized by urgency and power assertion. Despite its minimal structure, the imperative “stop” functions as an immediate behavioral command, reflecting the speaker’s authority within a specific spatial domain.

Pragmatically, this directive reinforces ownership and control, positioning Mr. McGregor as an enforcer of rules within the narrative. At the same time, it contributes to the tension and progression of the plot, indicating that directive acts also serve dynamic narrative functions beyond interpersonal interaction.

Indirect directives and pragmatic softening

Not all directives in the narrative are expressed through imperative forms. Some are realized indirectly, demonstrating a mismatch between grammatical structure and pragmatic function. For example, in Data 5, this utterance occurs after Peter returns home sick following his misadventure. Mrs. Rabbit gives him instructions for recovery.

Data 5

Mrs Rabbit: One tablespoonful to be taken at bedtime.

Although structurally declarative, this utterance functions as a directive by guiding Peter’s behavior following his illness. The indirect form reduces the force of the command, presenting it as advice or instruction rather than obligation. This softening strategy reflects a shift in relational dynamics from authority as control to authority as care. The directive maintains its behavioral function while simultaneously expressing concern, suggesting that indirectness plays a role in mitigating the imposition of commands in caregiving contexts. This finding highlights that directive

acts in children's narratives are not uniform; they vary in strength and form depending on the intended interpersonal effect.

Perlocutionary effects and narrative consequences

Perlocutionary acts encompass the effects or outcomes that illocutionary acts have on the listener. These effects or outcomes relate to the emotions or thoughts a person experiences as a result of what they have heard. Additionally, as noted by (Alston, 2000), perlocutionary acts involve the feelings of the listener in response to what has been articulated by another individual. In conclusion, perlocutionary acts are characterized, among other elements, by the events or consequences that occur following the utterance of a statement.

The effects of perlocutionary acts may be either deliberate or accidental, with the speaker aiming to persuade, intimidate, convince, motivate, or dissuade the listener. However, the actual result will be influenced by the listener's interpretation and the specific context in which the communication takes place. In the context of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, the perlocutionary effects are evident in the behavior of the characters. For instance, when Mrs. Rabbit reprimanded or prohibited her children, they were not permitted to enter Mr. McGregor's garden. However, in Peter's case, his act of defiance demonstrates that the perlocutionary effect does not always align with the speaker's expectations or desires. This highlights the importance of perlocutionary acts in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* as they significantly contribute to the characters' development.

Furthermore, this mismatch plays a crucial role in driving the narrative forward. Peter's disobedience leads to conflict, tension, and eventual moral consequences, indicating that perlocutionary effects are integral to plot development. This finding suggests that speech acts in children's narratives function not only at the level of interaction but also as structural elements that shape the progression and resolution of the story.

Overall, the results indicate that speech acts in the narrative operate as a cohesive system that integrates communication, authority, and moral instruction. Representative acts establish contextual justification and authority, directive acts regulate behavior and encode social norms, and perlocutionary effects determine how

these intentions are realized within the narrative. Rather than functioning independently, these elements interact dynamically to construct meaning and guide character development. This demonstrates that pragmatic features are central to the narrative structure, serving both communicative and didactic purposes.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that representative and directive illocutionary acts are central to the construction of meaning in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter. This supports John Searle's foundational claim that speech acts function as purposeful actions shaped by speaker intention and context (Searle, 1969, 1980). This supports broader pragmatic research showing that meaning is constructed through context-dependent linguistic features, such as deixis, which can create interpersonal and emotional connections in discourse (Nurjannah & Saerudin, 2025). However, the present findings extend this view by demonstrating that, within children's narratives, these acts are not only communicative but also pedagogical, reinforcing moral values and social norms.

The analysis shows that representative acts, while structurally conveying information, often perform implicit pragmatic functions such as warning and legitimizing authority. For instance, Mrs. Rabbit's statement about Peter's father functions beyond a factual report and serves as a cautionary device. This aligns with Levinson's (1983) argument that utterances frequently carry indirect meanings shaped by context. Moreover, recent studies have similarly found that representative acts in narratives are used to "inform and convince" audiences, thereby extending their role beyond simple information transfer (Husnah, 2025). This suggests that representative acts in children's literature contribute to ideological framing and moral positioning, a dimension that remains underexplored in many pragmatic analyses. This suggests that representative acts in children's literature contribute to ideological framing and moral positioning, a dimension that remains underexplored in many pragmatic analyses. While literary studies have highlighted how narratives convey broader social meanings such as collective memory and discrimination (Shiekha & Endrayatno, 2025), the present study demonstrates that these meanings are also constructed through pragmatic mechanisms, particularly speech acts.

Directive acts, on the other hand, appear as the most dominant and functionally

significant category in the narrative. Their frequent use in adult-child interactions reflects their role in regulating behavior and establishing authority. This finding is consistent with recent research showing that directives are among the most dominant speech acts in literary texts and educational contexts (Widiani, 2024). Additionally, studies on children's storybooks highlight that directive acts often involve politeness strategies to mitigate their controlling function, especially in parent-child discourse (Dewi, 2024). In the present study, the coexistence of permission ("you may go...") and prohibition ("don't go...") reflects this balance between control and care, reinforcing both authority and nurturing roles.

Another important finding concerns the use of indirect directives, such as declarative forms functioning as instructions. This supports pragmatic theories that emphasize the indirectness of speech acts and the mismatch between form and function. However, while this study identifies such patterns, it does not systematically analyze politeness strategies or face-threatening acts, which are crucial in understanding how directives are softened in children's narratives. This represents a limitation and suggests a need for future research integrating frameworks such as Brown and Levinson's politeness theory.

The role of perlocutionary effects further enriches the analysis by showing that the impact of speech acts is not always predictable. Peter's disobedience illustrates a divergence between illocutionary intention and actual outcome, supporting Alston's (2000) view that perlocutionary effects depend on the listener's interpretation. This finding is also supported by recent research on children's interactions, which shows that responses to speech acts vary depending on developmental and contextual factors (Apriani et al., 2026). Therefore, meaning is co-constructed rather than fully controlled by the speaker, highlighting the dynamic nature of pragmatic interaction.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that illocutionary acts in children's narratives function not only as tools of communication but also as mechanisms for constructing authority and conveying moral meaning. By focusing on representative and directive acts, the analysis shows that language in narrative dialogue operates beyond its surface level, shaping character relationships, guiding behavior, and embedding didactic values. In particular, representative acts extend their role from conveying information to implicitly warning and legitimizing authority, while directive acts regulate actions and reinforce social norms through both direct and indirect forms. These findings highlight that pragmatic features are central to how meaning and moral lessons are structured in

children's stories.

The key contribution of this study lies in extending pragmatic analysis into the domain of children's literature by demonstrating how speech acts function simultaneously as communicative, narrative, and pedagogical devices. This perspective moves beyond traditional classifications of speech acts by emphasizing their role in shaping moral interpretation and character development within a narrative context.

However, the study is limited to a single text and a selective focus on specific types of illocutionary acts, which may not fully represent the diversity of pragmatic strategies in children's literature. Future research is therefore recommended to explore comparative analyses across different children's narratives to identify broader patterns of speech act usage. In addition, further studies could examine how readers of different age groups interpret these pragmatic features, providing insight into the relationship between language, cognition, and moral understanding. From a pedagogical perspective, these findings may also be applied in English language teaching, particularly in developing students' pragmatic awareness and critical reading skills through the analysis of narrative dialogue. Overall, this study underscores the importance of integrating pragmatic analysis with literary interpretation, showing that speech acts play a crucial role in linking language use with moral and educational functions in children's narratives.

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