

## An analysis of the functions of illocutionary acts used by the main characters in *The Little Mermaid* (2023) movie

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**Abstract:** This study analyzes the functions of illocutionary acts used by the main characters, Ariel, Eric, and Ursula, in *The Little Mermaid* (2023) using Leech's (1983) pragmatic theory. A qualitative descriptive method was applied, and the data were taken from the movie script, focusing on utterances that contain illocutionary meanings. The analysis identifies four functions of illocutionary functions: competitive, convivial, collaborative, and conflictive. Among these, the collaborative function is the most dominant. This indicates that most conversations in the movie are used to share information, explain intentions, give guidance, and build mutual understanding between characters. Competitive and conflictive functions appear in scenes that involve disagreement, pressure, or open conflict, especially in interactions related to power, authority, or manipulation. Meanwhile, convivial functions are found in polite and friendly expressions such as greetings, offers, congratulations, and expressions of gratitude. The dominance of the collaborative function shows that communication in *The Little Mermaid* (2023) mainly supports cooperation and helps move the storyline forward. In addition, this pattern highlights how language is used to clarify intentions, reduce misunderstanding, and support character development. Overall, this study demonstrates that illocutionary functions play an important role in shaping character relationships, conveying meaning, and supporting narrative development, while cooperative communication becomes a key pragmatic feature that strengthens the central themes presented.

**Keywords:** collaborative function; illocutionary functions; pragmatics; speech act theory

### 1. Introduction

Language in movies serves not only to tell a story but also as a tool for expressing intentions, emotions, and social relationships among characters. Through dialogue, characters use language to inform, persuade, cooperate, confront, or maintain social harmony. The way language functions in a movie allows the audience to understand how characters interact and how the story develops through communication. Therefore, analysing movie dialogue requires attention not only to what is said but also to the social purpose behind each utterance.

Movies are a popular form of entertainment that reflect human life, culture, and communication. According to [Bordwell & Thompson \(2008\)](#), a movie is a series of moving images combined with sound and visual elements to convey a story or message. Movies allow viewers to experience a range of emotions and situations while presenting diverse ways people communicate across different social contexts. Disney movies, in particular, often combine fantasy, emotion, and moral values, making them rich sources for pragmatic analysis. One example is *The Little Mermaid* (2023), a live-action film

that blends musical, fantasy, romance, and adventure genres. From a pragmatic perspective, movie dialogue is particularly suitable for analyzing language functions because characters use language to achieve specific purposes in interaction. [Leech \(2016\)](#) explains that illocutionary functions describe how language is used in relation to social goals, including competing with, supporting, cooperating with, or opposing others. These functions are categorized as competitive, convivial, collaborative, and conflictive, providing a framework to understand how speakers manage social relationships and achieve communicative goals.

Several previous studies have analysed illocutionary acts in various forms of communication such as speeches, songs, debates, interviews, and movies. In speeches, [Olii et al. \(2023\)](#) analyzed Taylor Swift's speech, while [Sanusi et al. \(2022\)](#) examined Boris Johnson's speeches, showing how illocutionary acts are used to inform, advise, and persuade. In religious contexts, [Akmal et al. \(2020\)](#); [Annahlia et al., 2020](#)) found that illocutionary acts function to convey beliefs and influence audiences. In other forms, [Nasim & Mariana \(2024\)](#) analysed song lyrics, [Effendy & Simatupang \(2024\)](#) studied debates, and [Haucsa et al. \(2020\)](#) examined interviews, highlighting how language expresses emotions, arguments, and interaction. In movies, [Ramayanti & Marlina \(2018\)](#); [Safira et al., \(2022\)](#); [Sihombing et al., \(2021\)](#) found that illocutionary acts are used by characters to express feelings, deliver information, and support communication in different situations. These studies show that illocutionary acts are important in understanding language use across contexts.

Previous studies on illocutionary acts in movies, speeches, songs, and interviews have mostly focused on identifying types of speech acts using Searle's theory. Although some research mentions illocutionary functions, these discussions are usually brief and not treated as the main focus. As a result, research that specifically analyses the functions of illocutionary acts in movie dialogue remains limited, creating a gap in the understanding of how language drives character interaction and story development. To address this gap, this study focuses on analysing the functions of illocutionary acts used by the main characters Ariel, Eric, and Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* (2023). By examining their dialogue from a pragmatic perspective, this study aims to show how language is used to support character relationships, express intentions, and advance the storyline. The innovation of this research lies in its detailed focus on illocutionary functions as the primary analytical framework, rather than merely identifying speech acts, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the social and communicative roles of language in movies.

## 2. Literature review

Pragmatics is the study of how language is used in context and how meaning is interpreted based on situation. [Peccei \(1999\)](#) states that pragmatics involves understanding meaning through both language and social context, while [Yule \(1996\)](#) defines it as the study of how context influences meaning. Speech act is a concept in pragmatics that explains how language is used to perform actions. [Searle & Sadock \(1976\)](#) defines speech act as an action carried out through speaking, such as requesting or ordering. [Yule \(1996\)](#) also explains that speech acts show how utterances function as actions in communication. In pragmatics, the function of illocutionary acts refers to the speaker's purpose in producing an utterance. Illocutionary functions help explain how language is used to express attitudes, manage relationships, and guide interaction. [Munir & Yavuz \(2024\)](#) emphasizes that illocutionary acts connect linguistic form with social meaning, allowing speakers and hearers to understand intended meanings beyond literal words.

[Leech, \(2016\)](#) provides a widely used framework for analyzing illocutionary functions by connecting a speaker's communicative goals with social goals such as politeness and harmony. He classifies illocutionary functions into four categories: competitive, convivial, collaborative, and conflictive. The

competitive function occurs when the speaker's goal competes with social politeness, as seen in requests, orders, or demands, where achieving an outcome is prioritized over maintaining harmony. The convivial function arises when the illocutionary goal aligns with social goals, such as in thanking, greeting, offering, or congratulating, which strengthen social bonds. The collaborative function is evident when the speaker aims to deliver information or guidance without concern for social distance or politeness, including reporting, explaining, announcing, or instructing. Meanwhile, the conflictive function occurs when the speaker's intention directly opposes social norms, as in accusing, threatening, criticizing, or reprimanding.

Several studies have applied these frameworks to analyze dialogue in movies, speeches, songs, and interviews. Most research focuses on identifying types of speech acts based on [Searle \(1979\)](#) theory, but fewer studies emphasize illocutionary functions as a primary analytical tool. For instance, previous research has shown that identifying functions such as collaborative or convivial can reveal how characters build relationships, negotiate social norms, and express intentions through language. However, research specifically examining the four functions proposed by Leech in the context of movie dialogue remains limited. This study builds on these theoretical and methodological contributions by applying Leech's framework to analyze the dialogue of main characters in *The Little Mermaid* (2023). By examining how illocutionary acts function within social interactions, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how language shapes character relationships, supports narrative development, and reflects communicative strategies in a cinematic context. This approach offers an innovative perspective, emphasizing the social and strategic functions of language rather than merely categorizing speech acts.

### 3. Methods

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the functions of illocutionary acts expressed in the utterances of the main characters in *The Little Mermaid* (2023). According to [Creswell & Creswell \(2018\)](#), qualitative descriptive research is an approach used to explore and understand the meanings ascribed by individuals or groups to a social or human problem. This approach is suitable because analyzing illocutionary acts requires understanding the context, speaker's intention, and situation, which cannot be measured numerically. A qualitative method allows for a detailed interpretation of how the characters' utterances show their thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Previous studies, such as [Dewi & Jannah \(2022\)](#) in *Brave* and [Ramayanti & Marlina \(2018\)](#) in *Tangled*, have used similar qualitative methods to analyze illocutionary functions in movie dialogues, supporting the appropriateness of this research design.

The data for this study are utterances containing illocutionary acts spoken by the main characters, Ariel, Eric, and Ursula. These utterances were taken from the official movie script available at Fandom and checked against the movie streamed on Hotstar to ensure accuracy. Using both the script and the movie ensures that the data are reliable and complete. The research instruments include a laptop, a mobile phone, and stationery, along with structured notes designed to identify and classify the functions of illocutionary acts. The analysis focuses on the four functions proposed by [Leech \(2016\)](#): competitive, convivial, collaborative, and conflictive. These functions help the authors understand how characters use language to achieve communicative goals, manage social relationships, and express intentions.

Data collection was done in several steps. First, the authors watched the movie carefully to understand the context of each dialogue. Second, the script was downloaded and compared with the movie to ensure that the text matched what was spoken. Third, each dialogue from Ariel, Eric, and Ursula was examined and categorized according to the four functions of illocutionary acts. Finally, the classified utterances were organized in structured notes for clear presentation and analysis.

The data analysis followed a structured process. All utterances were classified into the four functions of illocutionary acts. The data were then analyzed to identify patterns, frequency, and dominance of each function, providing insight into the characters' intentions, emotions, and communication styles. To maintain validity and reliability, dialogues were carefully cross-checked between the movie and the script. The use of clear indicators and systematic categorization minimized subjectivity. References to previous studies, including [Dewi & Jannah \(2022\)](#); [Ramayanti & Marlina, \(2018\)](#), provided a solid foundation and ensured that this study followed established research practices.

#### 4. Results

Based on the analysis of the utterances produced by Ariel, Eric, and Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* (2023), four illocutionary functions proposed by [Leech \(2016\)](#) were identified: competitive, convivial, collaborative, and conflictive. The distribution of these functions is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Findings table of functions of illocutionary

Character	Competitive	Convivial	Collaborative	Conflictive
Ariel	21	22	46	3
Eric	42	40	65	6
Ursula	16	0	11	88
<b>Total</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>97</b>

The findings reveal that the collaborative function is the most dominant, occurring 122 times across all three main characters. Eric contributes the highest number (65), followed by Ariel (46), while Ursula produces only 11 collaborative utterances. The high frequency of collaborative acts indicates that much of the dialogue in the film serves informational and explanatory purposes. Characters frequently use language to clarify intentions, share knowledge, provide guidance, and maintain mutual understanding. This pattern suggests that cooperation and shared understanding are central communicative strategies, particularly in interactions between Ariel and Eric.

The second most frequent function is conflictive, appearing 97 times. Notably, Ursula accounts for 88 of these utterances, demonstrating a strong tendency toward confrontation, accusation, manipulation, and threat. In contrast, Eric and Ariel produce significantly fewer conflictive utterances (6 and 3, respectively). This distribution clearly reflects character alignment within the narrative structure: Ursula's dominance in conflictive acts reinforces her antagonistic role, while Ariel and Eric function primarily as cooperative protagonists. The competitive function occurs 79 times, with Eric producing the highest number (42), followed by Ariel (21) and Ursula (16). Competitive utterances typically appear in contexts involving requests, commands, persuasion, or attempts to influence others. These instances highlight moments where speakers prioritize achieving personal goals over maintaining social harmony, though without overt hostility. Lastly, convivial utterances are found 62 times. Eric produces 40 of these, Ariel 22, and Ursula none. Convivial functions include greetings, expressions of gratitude, compliments, and polite offers. The absence of convivial utterances from Ursula further emphasizes her oppositional stance and lack of affiliative communication strategies.

Overall, the results demonstrate a clear polarization of communicative behavior: Ariel and Eric predominantly employ collaborative and convivial strategies that support relational development, whereas Ursula relies heavily on conflictive acts that intensify narrative tension. The interplay of these functions contributes significantly to the film's dramatic progression and thematic contrast between harmony and domination.

## 5. Discussion

According to [Kreidler \(2013\)](#), there are seven types of illocutionary acts, but only six were found in *The Little Mermaid* (2023), namely assertive, verdictive, directive, commissive, expressive, and phatic, with assertive as the most dominant type (175 utterances). Assertive acts are used to express beliefs, opinions, and information, showing that the characters frequently convey their thoughts and intentions. Eric often expresses curiosity and confidence, Ariel shows her dreams and determination, while Ursula uses assertive utterances to manipulate others, indicating that the story emphasizes the characters' perspectives and motivations. This finding is in line with [Dewi & Jannah \(2022\)](#), who found that assertive was also dominant in *Brave*, where Merida uses language to express beliefs and make decisions, and with [Nadiya et al. \(2025\)](#), who found assertive as the most frequent type in *A Man Called Otto*, where the main character uses firm statements to show his viewpoint.

In terms of function, based on [Leech \(2016\)](#), four functions of illocutionary acts were identified: competitive, convivial, collaborative, and conflictive, with collaborative as the most dominant (122 utterances). This function appears when characters use language to cooperate, share information, and build understanding, as seen in the interactions between Ariel, Eric, and their friends, which reflect supportive and empathetic communication. The dominance of the collaborative function underscores the movie's emphasis on cooperation, harmony, and mutual understanding among the characters. However, this result differs from [Arisma Duniary et al. \(2024\)](#), who found competitive as the dominant function in *Little Women*, and [Widyawanti et al. \(2024\)](#), who also found competitive as the most frequent function in *The Translator*, where characters often use direct commands and strong requests. These differences indicate that the dominance of illocutionary types and functions depends on the story's context, and in *The Little Mermaid* (2023), assertive types and collaborative functions play an important role in expressing characters' thoughts, building relationships, and advancing the storyline.

Beyond the frequency distribution, the dominance of assertive types and collaborative functions can also be interpreted in relation to narrative structure and character positioning. In cinematic discourse, especially in fantasy-romance genres such as *The Little Mermaid* (2023), dialogue often serves to reveal internal motivations and advance relational development. The high frequency of assertive acts, combined with collaborative functions, suggests that the language in the movie is primarily used to articulate personal perspectives while fostering shared understanding. This combination reflects a communicative environment in which characters negotiate identity, belonging, and aspiration through explanation and clarification rather than coercion.

Moreover, the contrast between Ariel and Eric on the one hand, and Ursula on the other, illustrates how illocutionary functions contribute to character construction. Ariel and Eric's reliance on collaborative and convivial functions portrays them as relationally oriented and socially aligned with cooperative norms. Their language supports emotional transparency and mutual trust, which are central to the development of their relationship. In contrast, Ursula's overwhelming use of conflictive functions positions her as socially disruptive. Her speech patterns frequently undermine harmony and emphasize dominance, manipulation, and opposition. This pragmatic contrast reinforces the moral dichotomy embedded in the storyline, where cooperation is associated with virtue and conflictive manipulation with villainy.

From a pragmatic perspective, this distribution also reflects [Leech's \(2016\)](#) view that illocutionary functions are closely related to social goals and politeness orientation. Collaborative acts are socially neutral but strategically important in maintaining clarity and efficiency in communication. In this movie, they serve to reduce ambiguity between characters coming from different worlds (human and mermaid). Meanwhile, conflictive acts intentionally violate social harmony, thereby increasing

dramatic tension. The coexistence of high collaborative and high conflictive frequencies indicates that the movie structurally balances cooperation and confrontation to sustain audience engagement. In addition, the findings suggest that illocutionary functions operate as mechanisms of power negotiation. Competitive and conflictive utterances often emerge in situations involving authority, control, or persuasion. Eric's relatively high number of competitive utterances may reflect his royal status and decision-making responsibilities, where directing and requesting are pragmatically necessary. However, unlike Ursula's conflictive dominance, Eric's competitive acts are generally embedded within cooperative contexts, which softens their imposing force. This distinction demonstrates how similar pragmatic strategies can carry different interpersonal meanings depending on character intention and relational alignment.

Another important implication concerns genre influence. As a Disney live-action adaptation, the film emphasizes emotional development, moral growth, and reconciliation. Therefore, the predominance of collaborative functions aligns with the genre's didactic and relational orientation. Compared to political debates or intense drama films, where competitive or conflictive acts may dominate, this movie prioritizes understanding and emotional expression. This supports the argument that illocutionary dominance is context-dependent and shaped by thematic and generic conventions.

Finally, these findings highlight the importance of examining illocutionary functions rather than focusing solely on speech act types. While identifying assertive, directive, or expressive forms provides structural classification, analyzing their functions reveals how language strategically shapes interaction, power relations, and narrative movement. By applying Leech's functional framework, this study demonstrates that pragmatic analysis can uncover deeper communicative patterns that contribute to character development and thematic construction in cinematic texts.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings show that four functions of illocutionary acts are used by the main characters in *The Little Mermaid* (2023), namely competitive, convivial, collaborative, and conflictive. Among these functions, the collaborative function is the most dominant. This indicates that most interactions in the movie focus on cooperation, information sharing, explaining intentions, and building mutual understanding, especially in conversations among Ariel, Eric, and their friends. The dominance of the collaborative function reflects the movie's emphasis on unity, harmony, and cooperation as central themes. Meanwhile, competitive and conflictive functions appear in situations involving disagreement, pressure, or confrontation, particularly in scenes of conflict or manipulation. Convivial functions are found in polite and socially supportive interactions, such as greetings, offers, and expressions of goodwill. Overall, the prevalence of the collaborative function suggests that the movie's communication is largely oriented toward maintaining understanding, strengthening relationships, and advancing the narrative.

## Author's declaration

### Author contribution

**Rahmanicka Bella Savitri:** responsible for research conceptualization, conducting the literature review, designing the methodology, drafting the manuscript, revising the content, checking grammar accuracy, and finalizing the manuscript. **Anisa Nurjanah:** contributed to writing, revising the manuscript, and reviewing the final version. **Dorota Weclawski:** contributed to writing, revising the manuscript, and reviewing the final version.

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## **Data availability**

The data that support the findings of this study are publicly available. The primary sources include the official script of *The Little Mermaid* (2023), which can be accessed on Fandom at <https://littlmermaid.fandom.com>, and the movie streamed on Hotstar, available at <https://www.hotstar.com>. These sources contain all the utterances analyzed in this research. No additional sensitive or personal data were used in this study. Authors interested in reproducing or verifying the results can access the data through these public sources.

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## **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that they have no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research, analysis, or interpretation of the results in this study. The authors are not affiliated with or involved in any organization, entity, or activity that has a direct or indirect interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

## **Ethical clearance**

This research does not involve humans as subjects. The data used in this study consist of publicly available materials, specifically the official script and the recorded movie *The Little Mermaid* (2023). No personal or sensitive information from individuals was collected or analyzed. Therefore, ethical approval from an institutional review board was not required. All research procedures were conducted in accordance with standard academic and ethical guidelines to ensure the integrity and responsible use of publicly available data.

## **AI statement**

This article is the original work and was completed without using any AI tools for writing sentences or creating/editing tables and figures. All data collection, analysis, and writing were conducted manually, and the accuracy and correctness of the content have been fully verified.

## **Publisher's and Journal's Note**

Researcher and Lecturer Society as the publisher, and the editor of *Scientific English* state that there is no conflict of interest towards this article publication.

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