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Between Assertion and Submission: Speech Acts and Gender Discourse in Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract

This study offers a qualitative literary-pragmatic analysis of gendered discourse in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah (Adichie, 2013), based on a purposively selected dataset of fifteen utterances rather than a conventional linguistic corpus. It applies speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1975) and feminist pragmatics (Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1990) to analyse how gendered power is enacted in the novel's dialogue. While prior studies have addressed race, identity, and diaspora in the novel, to the author's knowledge no study has yet applied an integrated, utterance-level speech-act and feminist-pragmatic reading to its dialogue. The present analysis is offered as a contribution of this kind rather than as a claim to exhaustive novelty. The analysis shows how directives, assertives, commissives, and instances of withheld or self-retracted speech distribute illocutionary authority along gender lines within the selected scenes. The findings demonstrate that male characters frequently claim epistemic authority through unhedged assertions and indirect directives, while female characters more often hedge, soften, or retract their speech acts. Crucially, Ifemelu's pragmatic deference is situational rather than essential: she deploys unhedged assertives in the hair salon, on her blog, and at moments of relational risk. This pattern suggests that, within the novel's fictional world, linguistic accommodation functions as a structural response to specific relational conditions rather than as a fixed trait of individual speakers. These patterns are further shaped by race, class, institutional position, and cultural location, suggesting that illocutionary authority in the novel is intersectionally distributed. The study reads Americanah as a literary pragmatic counter-narrative that dramatises, rather than simply reports, the workings of gendered power in everyday talk; the claims made here describe patterns constructed within Adichie's fiction and are not advanced as generalisations about real-world speakers. Future research might extend this approach to a larger, more systematically sampled set of utterances, to Adichie's other novels, and to cross-cultural comparison with African women's discourse in non-fictional contexts.

Keywords: *gendered speech acts; feminist pragmatics; illocutionary force; African diaspora; Adichie.*

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1. Introduction

Language is never neutral: every utterance performs a social act—asserting, commanding, promising, or deferring—and these acts carry power. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) is acutely conscious of this fact. The novel traces the journey of Ifemelu, a Nigerian woman, across Lagos, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Haven, and back. It records her encounters with three male partners—Obinze, Curt, and Blaine—and documents

her struggle to speak, to be heard, and to be believed. The novel raises central pragmatic questions: who is permitted to perform which speech acts? Who commands and who defers? Whose assertions carry epistemic weight, and whose are disclaimed or suppressed?

Previous studies on *Americanah* have addressed race, identity, diaspora, and feminism (Chandran & Govindaraj, 2022; Duce, 2021; Karthiga et al., 2025; Mumtazah et al., 2025; Mustafa, 2025; Ngwaba et al., 2024; Rahmatullah et al., 2024). These studies collectively establish the ideological and cultural stakes of language in the novel, but, to the author's knowledge, none has systematically examined the pragmatic dimension of the novel's dialogue at the level of individual utterances, nor applied speech act theory and feminist pragmatics in an integrated analytic procedure to a defined set of exchanges.

This study addresses that gap through a qualitative literary-pragmatic analysis of fifteen purposively selected utterances drawn from the novel. It is important to state at the outset that this is a close reading of literary dialogue rather than a corpus-linguistic study: the dataset was assembled by purposive selection rather than by systematic corpus sampling, and the resulting patterns describe how gendered speech is represented within Adichie's fiction rather than how real male and female speakers behave. This distinction, and its methodological implications, is discussed further in Section 3.

The present study pursues four objectives: (1) to identify and classify the illocutionary acts performed by male and female characters across three relational dyads in *Americanah*; (2) to demonstrate how hedging, indirection, and withheld or retracted speech function as pragmatic mechanisms of gendered power within the selected scenes; (3) to examine how race, class, institutional position, and cultural location intersect with gender in shaping illocutionary distribution; and (4) to interpret *Americanah* as a literary pragmatic counter-narrative that dramatises gendered authority in everyday speech.

These objectives are guided by four research questions: (1) How are directive and assertive speech acts distributed along gender lines in the selected dialogue from *Americanah*? (2) What linguistic mechanisms characterise female speakers' pragmatic behaviour in the selected scenes? (3) How do the intersecting factors of race, class, institutional position, and cultural location modulate gendered illocutionary force in these scenes? (4) In what ways does *Americanah* function as a sustained literary argument about the discourse of gendered power?

The study employs two complementary frameworks. Speech act theory, developed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1975), provides the analytical vocabulary of illocutionary force. Feminist pragmatics, associated with Lakoff (1975) and Tannen (1990), and extended by later contextualist and performative accounts of gender (see Section 2.6), situates that vocabulary within structures of gender and power. The analysis is organised around three relational dyads: Ifemelu–Blaine, Ifemelu–Obinze, and Kosi–Obinze through which the full range of gendered illocutionary categories evidenced in the dataset (directives, assertives, commissives, and expressives; see Section 3.4 on the status of declaratives) is examined across contextually distinct relational conditions.

Together, these dyadic analyses suggest that the distribution of illocutionary acts represented in the novel is not random, but is patterned along the intersecting axes of gender,

race, class, and cultural location (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). The significance of this reading extends beyond literary criticism: *Americanah* offers a sustained fictional account of how the discourse of power can operate in intimate talk (Wodak, 1997), and reading it through speech act theory and feminist pragmatics generates insights relevant to linguistics, gender studies, and postcolonial literary studies (Thomas, 1995).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Thematic and feminist approaches

The exploration of how patriarchal society constructs and constrains women's identities locates *Americanah* within a postcolonial feminist tradition. Mustafa (2025) reads the novel alongside Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* through a comparative postcolonial-feminist framework, arguing that both novels expose structures of patriarchal and postcolonial oppression underlying the myth of the American Dream. However, Mustafa's analysis remains largely thematic: it traces ideological content without attending to the specific linguistic mechanisms through which that content is delivered.

Ngwaba et al. (2024) compare Ifemelu's self-discovery with that of Kate Talkingtree in Alice Walker's *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*, foregrounding a shared womanist theme of solidarity and self-recovery from patriarchal constraint. Their reading helpfully situates Adichie within a broader tradition of feminist African and diasporic writing, but, like Mustafa's, it cites scenes of speech to illustrate ideological positions rather than analysing their pragmatic structure.

Karthiga et al. (2025) survey gendered oppression across several of Adichie's novels, applying a liberal-feminist lens to questions of education and liberation. Their analysis is substantive but does not engage with speech act theory, and it treats the representation of gender as continuous with the linguistic performance of gender rather than as a distinct analytic object.

2.2 Discourse, identity, and digital space

Duce (2021) examines Ifemelu's blog as a vehicle for identity formation and transnational feminist solidarity, arguing that Ifemelu's blogging enacts a movement from voicelessness to community to individual voice, and that digital platforms function as tools for negotiating identity and claiming agency. Duce's framework is sociological and cultural rather than strictly pragmatic: it attends to what Ifemelu says through her blog as cultural statement rather than to how the speech acts embedded in the novel's dialogue function illocutionarily (Mey, 2001).

Rahmatullah et al. (2024) develop a related argument about digital diasporas through a transnational-feminist lens, showing how the novel intertwines digital diasporic experience with gendered narrative. Like Duce (2021), their focus is on digital space rather than on the embodied, face-to-face dialogic exchanges between Ifemelu and Blaine, Curt, and Obinze that are central to the present study.

2.3 Race, gender, and intersectionality

Chandran and Govindaraj (2022) examine race and gender as intersecting structures in the novel, reading Ifemelu's relationships with Obinze, Curt, and Blaine as sites of racial and gendered negotiation. They rightly note that these relationships encode distinct forms of power, but do not systematically analyse the speech acts that enact it; their analysis operates at the level of plot and character rather than of linguistic exchange.

Mumtazah et al. (2025) bring a narratological methodology to the novel's representation of postcolonial African women, offering an original reading of the hair salon as a micro-African space and of Ifemelu's blog as a reclaimed form of diasporic voice. Their analysis, grounded in narratology and Gilroy's black Atlantic theory, is structural rather than pragmatic: it examines the organisation of narration rather than the illocutionary structure of speech acts.

2.4 Speech act theory

Austin (1962) establishes that language does not merely describe the world but acts upon it: saying 'I promise' does not report a promise but creates one. This insight—that utterances carry illocutionary force in addition to propositional content—founds speech act theory. Searle (1969) systematises Austin's insights into a taxonomy of five illocutionary types. Directives attempt to make the hearer do something; assertives commit the speaker to the truth of a proposition; commissives bind the speaker to a future course of action; expressives convey the speaker's psychological state; and declarations bring about a new state of affairs through the act of utterance itself. Each type has a characteristic direction of fit: assertives have a words-to-world direction, directives and commissives a world-to-words direction, and expressives and declarations a different or double direction of fit.

Indirect speech acts (Searle, 1975) occur when the primary illocutionary force differs from the utterance's syntactic form: an interrogative may function as a directive, and a commissive may conceal a reproach. Indirectness is significant for gender analysis because it is a pragmatic resource with demonstrable gendered valence in the sociolinguistic literature discussed below.

2.5 Feminist pragmatics

Lakoff (1975) proposed that 'women's language' is characterised by hedges, tag questions, polite forms, empty adjectives, intensifiers, hypercorrect grammar, and rising intonation in declaratives, and argued that these features encode deference and tentativeness. Subsequent research has complicated these claims, noting their cultural specificity and their risk of essentialism (see Section 2.6); nonetheless, Lakoff's identification of these forms as pragmatic resources with gendered valence remains analytically productive, provided the categories are applied precisely rather than extended loosely to any instance of brevity, vagueness, or emotional emphasis.

Tannen (1990) distinguished between 'report-talk', in which speakers assert information to establish status, and 'rapport-talk', in which speakers build connection through sharing, arguing that men and women are often socialised into different communicative orientations. This distinction is useful for analysing the asymmetric assertive patterns examined below.

Holmes (1995) and Cameron (1995) extended the domain of feminist pragmatics, emphasising that gendered speech patterns are socially constructed and contextually variable rather than biological. Cameron argues that discursive dominance operates through control not only of who speaks but of which speech acts are available and credible for a given speaker—a concept central to the analysis that follows. Fairclough (1992) contributes the concept of subject positioning: the discursive construction of a subject in a position of obligation that serves the interests of the dominant voice. This concept helps explain how, for instance, a male speaker's interrogative directives can reposition a female interlocutor as the agent of her own accommodation.

2.6 Gender as contextually performed

A further body of work has moved feminist pragmatics away from Lakoff's original framing of 'women's language' as a relatively stable variety, toward an understanding of gender as something enacted and negotiated in situated talk. Butler's (1990) account of gender as performative—constituted through repeated, context-bound acts rather than expressing a pre-existing inner essence—offers a theoretical rationale for treating hedging, directness, and indirection as resources any speaker may draw on strategically, rather than as fixed correlates of biological sex. Complementary work in language-and-gender research (e.g., Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003) similarly emphasises that linguistic features acquire gendered meaning through their use within specific communities of practice and relational configurations, not through an inherent association with speaker sex.

This performative, contextualist orientation is consistent with the non-essentialist conclusion the present study reaches independently through close reading of *Americanah's* dialogue: that Lakoff's feature inventory remains a useful descriptive toolkit, but that its deployment in the novel is best explained by relational asymmetry, emotional stakes, and narrative positioning rather than by the speaker's gender as such (see Section 4.4).

3. Methodology

3.1 Design and scope

This study is a qualitative literary-pragmatic (discourse-analytic) study of a purposively selected textual dataset, not a corpus-linguistic study in the conventional sense of that term. The dataset comprises fifteen utterances and does not employ corpus-linguistic sampling, frequency analysis, or computational methods; the term 'corpus' is avoided in what follows in favour of 'dataset' or 'selected utterances', in order to represent the scope of the study accurately.

3.2 Textual source and edition

The primary text is the first edition of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (Adichie, 2013): [2013 Fourth Estate / Alfred A. Knopf hardcover]. The novel is a rich site for pragmatic analysis: its layered social geography—spanning Lagos, the American Northeast, and the diasporic in-between—enables comparison of gendered speech norms across culturally distinct contexts; its recurring female protagonist across three relational dyads permits comparison of Ifemelu's pragmatic behaviour across relationships; and its explicit feminist commitments render its pragmatic choices ideologically legible. Literary pragmatics, as Palmer

(2004) and Toolan (2001) argue, treats fictional dialogue as a legitimate object of linguistic inquiry, and McIntyre and Culpeper (2010) observe that fictional dialogue can foreground pragmatic features that naturally occurring conversation may submerge. Americanah's narratorial apparatus—its metalinguistic commentary, free indirect discourse, and recording of thoughts left unspoken—provides access to characters' pragmatic positioning in ways that naturally occurring conversation does not straightforwardly replicate.

3.3 Utterance selection procedure

The analytical dataset consists of fifteen utterances (U1–U15). An utterance is defined, following Searle (1969), as a speaker-produced act with a determinate illocutionary force. Selection proceeded in two stages. First, an initial pool of candidate exchanges was compiled by reading the full dialogic content of the three focal relationships (Ifemelu–Blaine, Ifemelu–Obinze, Kosi–Obinze) and flagging scenes in which speech visibly negotiates relational power, epistemic authority, or emotional disclosure. This initial pool comprised approximately six candidate exchanges. Second, the final fifteen utterances were selected from this pool according to four criteria: (a) dialogic centrality: the exchange crystallises a gendered power dynamic, to the exclusion of purely phatic communion; (b) illocutionary diversity: the dataset represents as many of Searle's illocutionary categories as the selected dyads yield, with particular attention to indirect speech acts; (c) speaker diversity: utterances are drawn from all three dyads and include both male-to-female and female-to-male turns; and (d) contextual density: each utterance can be read within its immediate co-text, its broader narrative context, and the novel's ideological frame. Table 1 presents the full dataset, including speaker, addressee, page reference, immediate context, speech-act classification, key linguistic feature(s), and interpreted pragmatic function for each utterance, in order to make the selection and classification process fully transparent to the reader.

3.4 Illocutionary categories represented in the dataset

The dataset comprises four of Searle's five illocutionary categories: directives, assertives, commissives, and expressives (frequently in combination, as several utterances perform compound illocutionary work). No utterance in the final dataset constitutes a clear declaration in the Searlean sense—an act that brings about an institutional state of affairs solely by virtue of being uttered (e.g., pronouncing a verdict, a marriage, or a resignation). An earlier version of this study characterised Obinze's utterance 'I'm chasing you' (U7) as approaching a declaration; on reconsideration, this utterance is better analysed as an unhedged assertive with commissive undertones—it reports and simultaneously enacts a current relational stance, but it does not meet Searle's institutional-felicity conditions for a declaration, since no institutional authority or convention makes the utterance performative in that stronger sense. The claim in earlier drafts that the dataset represents 'all five' of Searle's categories is accordingly withdrawn; the study instead reports, and analyses, the four categories the dataset in fact evidences.

The analysis also uses the descriptive label 'withheld or self-retracted speech' for utterances in which a character declines to perform an act she might otherwise have performed, or retracts an act immediately after producing it (e.g., U10, where Ifemelu proposes a meeting and then withdraws the proposal within the same exchange). This is not one of Searle's five

illocutionary categories; it is used here purely as a descriptive, second-order label for a recurring interactional pattern in the dataset—the non-performance or retraction of an act—and should not be read as a Searlean speech-act type in its own right.

3.5 Operationalising intersectionality

Race, class, institutional position, and cultural location are treated in this study as textually evidenced categories rather than as independently coded variables. Concretely, a dyad or utterance is treated as inflected by one of these factors where the novel makes it explicit through (i) direct narratorial statement (e.g., Blaine's institutional position as a Yale academic), (ii) reported socioeconomic or marital status (e.g., Kosi's position as Obinze's wife within an affluent Lagos household), (iii) explicit reference to national, racial, or diasporic identity (e.g., Ifemelu's positioning as a Nigerian immigrant relative to Blaine's African-American identity), or (iv) marked shifts in Ifemelu's own speech register across settings (the hair salon, the blog, university life). Where the text does not make such a factor explicit, the analysis does not impute it. This procedure does not yield a quantitative intersectional model; it is offered as a transparent, if modest, set of criteria for the qualitative claims made about race, class, and cultural location in Section 4, and the corresponding claims are moderated accordingly.

3.6 Analytical procedure

The analysis proceeds in two stages. First, each utterance is classified following Searle's taxonomy, recording the illocutionary point, direction of fit, expressed psychological state, and propositional content; where an utterance is indirect, both its literal and its primary illocutionary force are recorded. Second, each classified utterance is read for the presence of the seven linguistic features Lakoff (1975) associates with 'women's language'—lexical hedges, tag questions, polite forms, empty adjectives, intensifiers, hypercorrect grammar, and rising intonation in declaratives—applying these categories according to their original definitions rather than extending them to cover related but distinct phenomena such as syntactic brevity or lexical vagueness (see Section 4.4 for cases where earlier drafts over-extended these categories, and their correction).

Two dyads in the dataset (Ifemelu–Blaine and Ifemelu–Obinze) contain both male-to-female and female-to-male utterances, permitting direct comparison of paired exchanges. The Kosi–Obinze dyad, by contrast, contains only Kosi-to-Obinze utterances in the final dataset; no claim of systematic male-to-female/female-to-male symmetry is made for this dyad. This asymmetry is itself analytically relevant rather than a gap to be concealed: Kosi's dialogue was selected specifically to illustrate a unidirectional pattern of relational accommodation within a marital, institutionally sanctioned relationship, and the absence of comparable Obinze-to-Kosi assertive or directive utterances in the selected scenes is noted as a feature of the dataset rather than claimed to be balanced across the whole novel.

Finally, it should be stated plainly that every finding below describes a pattern constructed within Adichie's literary representation of these characters' speech. The study does not claim, and should not be read as claiming, that these patterns describe how real men and women speak in general; it claims only that they describe how gendered speech is represented, and made ideologically legible, within this particular novel.

3.7 Limitations

Several limitations qualify the scope of this study. First, the dataset comprises fifteen utterances, a purposive rather than a representative or exhaustive sample of the novel's dialogic structure; a larger dataset subjected to systematic or computational sampling might yield distributional findings that confirm or complicate the qualitative patterns identified here. Second, the analysis is restricted to three relational dyads and a small number of characters, reflecting a preference for interpretive depth over breadth. Third, utterance classification and feature identification were conducted by a single analyst; no inter-rater reliability check was performed, and independent coding by a second analyst would strengthen confidence in the classifications offered. Fourth, the analysis depends on a single print edition of the novel for pagination (see Section 3.2); readers using other editions should expect page-number discrepancies.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the analysis of fifteen utterances drawn from Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), organised around three relational dyads. Each utterance is first classified according to Searle's (1969, 1975) illocutionary taxonomy (see Table 1 for a summary of all fifteen classifications) and then read for the linguistic features Lakoff (1975) associates with women's language. As stated in Section 3.6, the patterns reported below are patterns of literary representation within this novel; they are not offered as claims about real speakers' behaviour.

The analysis proceeds comparatively: for the two dyads that contain paired exchanges (Ifemelu–Blaine and Ifemelu–Obinze), a female-to-male utterance is examined alongside a symmetrical male-to-female utterance; the Kosi–Obinze dyad is analysed as a unidirectional case for the reasons given in Section 3.6. The findings reveal a more complex picture than Lakoff's original model predicts: the features she identifies are present in the speech of both male and female characters, and their deployment appears to be governed less by the speaker's sex than by relational asymmetry, emotional stakes, and narrative positioning. Table 2, at the end of this section, synthesises the four cross-cutting findings that emerge from the utterance-level analysis, in order to allow the discussion below to focus on the utterances that illustrate them most clearly.

4.1 The Ifemelu–Blaine dyad

The relationship between Ifemelu and Blaine is marked from the outset by an asymmetric epistemic dynamic. Blaine is an African-American academic at Yale, politically committed and ideologically certain; Ifemelu is a Nigerian immigrant blogger whose voice is still finding its form. Their exchanges, as represented in the novel, crystallise a tension between assertive male authority and a female speaker who oscillates between deference and resistance.

4.1.1 Blaine to Ifemelu

U1: *"There are kids writing college essays about your blog. I'm not saying you have to be academic or boring. Keep your style but add more depth."* *"It has enough depth," she said, irritated, but with the niggling thought that he was right*" (p. 298).

This utterance is an indirect directive embedded within an assertive frame: it asserts facts about Ifemelu's readership and her associated responsibility, but its primary illocutionary point is directive—Blaine is instructing Ifemelu to change her writing practice. This is a paradigm case of an indirect speech act (Searle, 1975): the syntactic form is declarative, but the primary force is imperative. The face-saving hedge "I'm not saying you have to be academic or boring" partially softens the directive that follows: "Keep your style but add more depth."

Blaine's discourse here departs from the profile Lakoff assigns to male speech. The utterance deploys a lexical hedge ("I'm not saying..."), a form Lakoff (1975) associates with tentativeness. Here, however, the hedge functions not as deference but as a discursive strategy for pre-empting resistance while preserving illocutionary force; it is instrumental rather than deferential. By contrast, the imperative "Keep your style" is unhedged and direct—a feature consistent with Lakoff's characterisation of male assertive speech—and the absence of tag questions, empty adjectives, or rising intonation is consistent with confident epistemic positioning. The pragmatic effect is to reposition Ifemelu as a student whose work requires correction, an instance of what Cameron (1995) identifies as control not merely of who speaks but of what constitutes valid speech.

U2: "You're being lazy, Ifem." "The narrator notes that he used the word 'lazy' often, for the students who did not hand in work on time" (p. 298).

This is an assertive speech act: the speaker commits to the truth of a proposition about the hearer's character and current practice, with no hedging and no request for confirmation. The illocutionary point is an epistemic verdict functioning as rebuke. The present progressive ("You're being") ascribes to Ifemelu not a fixed trait but a current, alterable failing, adding a covert directive dimension—the implication that she must stop being lazy.

This utterance is free of every feature Lakoff associates with women's language: there are no hedges, tag questions, or polite softeners. Rather than describing this as "hypercorrect grammar": a category that, in Lakoff's original sense, concerns adherence to prescriptive norms rather than syntactic brevity—the more accurate description is simply that the utterance is direct and unmitigated, consistent with Lakoff's (1975) characterisation of unqualified male assertion. This directness nonetheless carries relational cost: Ifemelu reports irritation, and the novel frames Blaine's recurring 'laziness' judgments—applied to his students, to public figures, and to his partner alike—as an instance of what Holmes (1995) terms a discourse of dominance, in which evaluative labels are applied unilaterally by the speaker with greater institutional or relational power.

U3: "You lied." It was said with a kind of horror that baffled her, as though he had never considered it possible that she could lie. She wanted to say, "Blaine, people lie." But she said, "I'm sorry." (p. 330)

This is a confrontational assertive with the illocutionary force of a scolding. Blaine asserts the proposition "you lied" while the narration conveys his psychological state—described as a kind of horror, "as though he had never considered it possible that she could lie." The assertive is also implicitly directive: its unstated perlocutionary goal is confession and apology.

The two-word utterance is syntactically minimal and lexically unhedged, without tag question or intensifier. Rather than attributing this to ‘hypercorrect grammar’, the analysis here more precisely describes the utterance as unmitigated in its brevity and moral force—a description that avoids over-extending Lakoff’s category. The novel contextualises this directness not as communicative confidence but as relational rigidity: Ifemelu reflects that “at that moment, he became a stranger to her.” Blaine’s refusal to hedge, qualify, or question constitutes Ifemelu as a moral subject who has violated a code she did not know existed.

4.1.2 *Ifemelu to Blaine*

U4: Blaine told her to include details about government policy and redistricting in a blog post; she did, but after rereading it, took the post down. "I don't want to explain, I want to observe," she said. "Remember people are not reading you as entertainment, they're reading you as cultural commentary" (p. 298).

This is a declarative assertive functioning as a counter-directive. Ifemelu does not merely state a preference; she claims the right to define the purpose of her own writing practice, rejecting Blaine’s implicit authority over the blog. The parallel syntax (“I don’t want... I want...”) lends the utterance a rhetorical precision that signals deliberate, rather than defensive, rejection. Its illocutionary force is best described as rejecting Blaine’s critique of her writing while asserting an alternative authorial stance.

This utterance directly challenges Lakoff’s prediction: there are no hedges, tag questions, or apologetic prefaces, and the syntax is direct and unambiguous. Ifemelu here deploys what Cameron (1995) calls ‘verbal hygiene’—a self-conscious assertion of communicative authority—of precisely the kind Lakoff’s model associates exclusively with male speech. The novel thus encodes a counter-example: Ifemelu is capable of unhedged, direct speech acts when her epistemic territory is invaded.

U5: "It has enough depth," she said, irritated—but, the narration adds, "with the niggling thought that he was right" (p. 298).

This is a minimally hedged assertive whose illocutionary force is a rejection of Blaine’s critique. In isolation the utterance appears direct; the narration, however, immediately qualifies it, making U5 a semi-sincere assertive—one performed partly to save face, even though Ifemelu does not fully endorse its truth.

The quantifier “enough” functions here as a hedge rather than, as an earlier draft suggested, an ‘empty adjective’ in Lakoff’s specific sense (Lakoff’s empty adjectives are affective, evaluative terms such as ‘divine’ or ‘lovely’, not quantifiers). Read as a hedge, “enough” avoids the fuller assertive force of “plenty of depth” or “deeply analytical”, softening the claim without doing so overtly. This finding suggests that Lakoff’s features can operate at different registers of awareness—not always as conscious deference strategies, but as pragmatic habits acquired under relational pressure.

U6: "I'm really sorry. I should have told you about the lunch. I don't know why, Blaine. I just didn't feel up to it. I didn't think you would mind too much." "How is this lunch

suddenly so important? You hardly even know this Boubacar's colleague!" he said, incredulous (p. 329).

This utterance is best analysed as a compound expressive and assertive, not, as an earlier draft proposed, as a commissive. "I'm really sorry" is an expressive conveying regret. "I should have told you" is an assertive acknowledgment of an unfulfilled past obligation—it comments on what should have occurred, rather than committing Ifemelu to any future course of action, and so does not meet Searle's (1969) criterion for a commissive, which binds a speaker to future conduct. Together, the utterance functions pragmatically as a performative apology, but its second clause is retrospective rather than prospective.

The intensifier 'really' is a marker Lakoff (1975) associates with emphatic affect; here it appears pragmatically reactive. In other words, it is deployed here because Blaine's silence has already signalled that an unadorned apology may not be accepted rather than inherently deferential. This distinction, between features deployed from relational subordination and those deployed as situational responses, is one of the principal limitations of Lakoff's original, more essentialist framework. The asymmetry between Blaine's unhedged accusation (U3) and Ifemelu's hedged apology (U6) illustrates the broader gendered distribution of illocutionary force in this dyad: he condemns without qualification; she apologises with elaboration.

4.2 The Ifemelu–Obinze dyad

The Ifemelu–Obinze relationship spans the novel's entire temporal arc, from their first meeting as university students in Lagos to their reunion as adults. The relational dynamic is marked by emotional mutuality, but not by an absence of power asymmetry: on his return to Nigeria, Obinze is wealthy, established, and married, while Ifemelu is a returning diaspora figure reassembling her social and professional identity. The speech acts exchanged between them register both their shared history and the structural conditions that constrain what each can say to the other.

4.2.1 Obinze to Ifemelu

U7: "I'm chasing you. I saw you in school some time ago. I even asked Kay about you," he said. (p. 54)

This utterance is an unhedged assertive with commissive undertones—not, as an earlier draft proposed, a declaration in the Searlean sense. In stating 'I'm chasing you', Obinze asserts a current relational fact and simultaneously projects a future orientation, but the utterance lacks the institutional felicity conditions (an authority or convention that makes the utterance performative by virtue of being spoken) that Searle's category of declarations requires. Its illocutionary force is better described as playful, self-committing disclosure—flirtation with a forward-looking edge—than as a declaration.

The utterance contains none of Lakoff's female-coded features: no hedge, tag question, or polite preface. The present-progressive construction is direct and temporally immediate: a pattern of unhedged epistemic confidence naming desire without qualification. The broader context complicates a purely 'masculine-directness' reading, however: Obinze makes this declaration only after observing that Ginika, the girl his friend Kayode had intended for him,

has been displaced by Ifemelu in his attention—the assertion is therefore also an act of social risk-taking within his friend group, not simply a stylistic default of male speech.

U8: *"I want to remember it in Jazzhole," he repeated, smiling as though only she could have come up with that expression. "You haven't stopped being honest, Ifem. Thank God." (p. 406)*

This is a compound assertive and expressive. The first italicized clause asserts a continuity of character, attributing to Ifemelu a stable relational trait observed over many years; the second, "Thank God", is an expressive of relief. Its illocutionary force is best described as praise combined with relational relief, rather than as a bid to revive a romantic relationship as such, which the co-text does not establish at this precise point.

Rather than classifying "Thank God" as a Lakoff-style intensifier—a classification an earlier draft advanced without sufficient justification, since Lakoff's intensifiers are adverbial degree markers such as 'so' or 'very', not interjections—this revision describes it more cautiously as an expressive interjection that amplifies emotional relief without fitting neatly into Lakoff's feature inventory. This finding still complicates any simple gender attribution: in contexts of emotional vulnerability, male speakers in the novel can produce affect-laden expressive language of a kind Lakoff's framework does not anticipate for men, even where that language does not technically instantiate one of her seven categories.

U9: *"You are hiding behind sarcasm," Obinze said—barely a week since she had first seen him again, though she was already furious that he would drop her off and return to his other, real life (p. 422).*

This is a confrontational assertive. Obinze diagnoses Ifemelu's pragmatic strategy—her deflection of emotional directness through humour—and names it. The utterance is not itself a directive (he does not say 'stop hiding'), but its illocutionary force approaches a challenge: he sees through her performance and states so.

The utterance contains no Lakoff features: no hedge, polite form, or rising intonation. The metaphorical construction ("hiding behind sarcasm") is lexically precise and structurally confident, consistent with Obinze's pattern elsewhere: emotionally perceptive but linguistically unhedged. The contrast with Ifemelu's immediately following, ironically distancing reply is a reversal of the pattern Lakoff's model would predict, in which women speak the personal and men avoid it; the novel instead distributes emotional directness across both genders, depending on relational context rather than speaker sex.

4.2.2 Ifemelu to Obinze

U10: *Her hands were trembling. She should have sent an e-mail first. "So," Obinze said, dragging the word. "How are you? Where are you? When can I see you?"—"What about now?" (p. 405)*

"What about now?" is an indirect directive: an interrogative surface form whose primary illocutionary force is a proposal that Obinze meet her immediately. The narration frames the utterance as 'recklessness'—produced before Ifemelu can restrain herself—and she

immediately, retrospectively hedges it in the next turn: "I'm actually running a bit late... but I just wanted to say hi" (p. 405).

This exchange illustrates the full complexity of Lakoff's framework in a single turn sequence: the initial proposal is unhedged and bold, but the moment Ifemelu senses hesitation in Obinze's response, she produces a classic hedge sequence—lexical hedging ("I just"), minimisation ("say hi"), and an implicit withdrawal of the original directive. This sequence suggests that Lakoff's features are not stable properties of a female speaker's idiolect but resources activated under interactional pressure, specifically when a speaker anticipates rejection or relational risk.

U11: "I already think I'm going to want to remember this," Ifemelu says, her nervousness melting away as they move past the requisite moments of awkwardness. "Do you need to be anywhere right now?" he asked. "Can you stay awhile?" "Yes" (p. 406).

This is an assertive with a prospective, self-disclosive orientation: Ifemelu asserts the significance of the present moment, projecting forward into her own memory of it. The utterance contains the hedge "I think", which Lakoff (1975) identifies as a marker of tentativeness; here, however, the temporal complexity of the phrase ("I already think I'm going to want to remember") works against a tentative reading—it is not uncertain but layered, with the hedge introducing a cognitive frame that intensifies rather than diminishes the claim's epistemic weight. Obinze's response—that only she could have produced that phrasing—supports a reading of the utterance as distinctive and self-assured rather than hesitant, and stands as a counter-example to any assumption that "I think" invariably signals tentativeness.

U12: "You're married with a child and we are hot for each other. Who are we kidding with this chaste dating business? So we might as well get it over with" (p. 422).

This is a compound assertive–directive. The first clause asserts the relational facts; the rhetorical question ("Who are we kidding?") functions as an indirect assertive dismissing the pretence of their situation; the final clause ("we might as well get it over with") is an indirect directive with the force of a proposal.

This utterance is among the clearest counter-examples to Lakoff's model in the dataset: it contains no lexical hedges, tag questions, polite forms, or empty adjectives. The blunt idiom and rhetorical question are direct, assertive strategies of the kind Lakoff's model associates with male speech. The novel frames the utterance as spoken in anger—"she was angry, furious"—a register Lakoff's original model does not address, since it assumes female speakers hedge regardless of emotional state. This utterance suggests that heightened emotional arousal can produce speech free of the deferential features Lakoff's framework predicts by default, reinforcing the contextual, rather than fixed, nature of gendered pragmatic behaviour in the novel.

4.3 The Kosi–Obinze dyad

Kosi's speech to Obinze offers an analytically distinct case, and—as noted in Section 3.6—the dataset includes only Kosi-to-Obinze utterances for this dyad; no claim of paired symmetry is made here. Unlike Ifemelu, who oscillates between hedged and unhedged registers

under relational pressure, Kosi's represented speech is consistently oriented toward social cohesion and relational maintenance: the narrator describes her as a woman who 'chose peace over truth' and whose modesty 'announced itself'. Yet her utterances also include directives and emotionally forceful speech that complicate any simple association between her character and a uniformly deferential speaker type.

4.3.1 Kosi to Obinze

U13: *In the car on the way home from Chief's party, Kosi said, "Darling, you must be hungry. You ate only that spring roll?" (p. 30)*

This is a directive embedded in an expressive of concern. The first clause ("Darling, you must be hungry") is a caring observation motivating the second; the second clause is formally declarative but functions with rising-intonation force, inviting Obinze to confirm the inadequacy of what he has eaten. Its illocutionary point is an indirect directive to eat more, backed by the implicit commissive that food has been prepared at home.

This utterance is rich in Lakoff's features: the address term "Darling" is a polite form marking both intimacy and social role; "You ate only that spring roll?" exhibits rising intonation in a declarative, which Lakoff (1975) identifies as characteristic of speakers seeking confirmation rather than asserting fact; and "only" functions as a minimising hedge implying the meal was inadequate. These features do not, however, function deferentially here: Kosi is not seeking permission or expressing uncertainty about her own view; she manages Obinze's wellbeing through apparently subordinate speech forms that in fact accomplish a directive purpose.

U14: *Mrs. Akin-Cole said, "Things have changed." "I agree. But I also see what Obinze is saying." (p. 26)*

This is a hedged assertive. Kosi agrees with the dominant social position (the senior women's endorsement of elite foreign-curriculum schools) while acknowledging her husband's dissenting view; the conjunction "but" holds thesis and antithesis together, smoothing social friction without committing to a definitive position.

The hedge "I also see what Obinze is saying" (rather than the more assertive "I agree with Obinze") commits Kosi only to understanding his view, not to endorsing it—a minimal epistemic concession that Lakoff (1975) would classify as encoding tentativeness. The narration, however, explicitly frames the utterance as a social strategy: Kosi is described as "taking two sides at once, to please everyone", someone who "always chose peace over truth". Her hedging is thus a relational-management tool rather than an expression of personal uncertainty, which revises Lakoff's original association of such hedged forms with psychological subordination.

U15: *"Obinze, this is a family. We have a child. She needs you. I need you. We have to keep this family together" (p. 440).*

This is best classified as a directive functioning as an assertion of shared obligation, rather than, as an earlier draft proposed, a 'commissive-directive'. The opening assertive ("This

is a family") establishes the normative frame; the declaratives that follow ("We have a child. She needs you. I need you.") enumerate the relational facts that ground the directive; the final clause ("We have to keep this family together") directs Obinze toward a course of action by asserting it as a shared, pre-existing obligation rather than by committing the speaker herself to a future act—which is why it is analysed as a directive rather than a commissive.

This utterance is replete with intensifiers and unmitigated repetition, and contains no lexical hedges, polite forms, or apologetic prefaces. Kosi does not say 'I think perhaps we should consider staying together'; she asserts the obligation directly, at the moment of greatest relational crisis. This is precisely the kind of unhedged illocutionary force that Lakoff's model would associate with male speech; here it is deployed by a woman who has exhausted the softer, hedged options her earlier utterances (U13, U14) exemplify.

4.4 Synthesis of findings

The analysis of fifteen utterances across three relational dyads yields four cross-cutting findings, summarised in Table 2, which together qualify the essentialist premises of Lakoff's (1975) framework while affirming the descriptive usefulness of her feature inventory when applied precisely.

First, Lakoff's features are not exclusively female-coded within this dataset. Blaine's hedge in U1 ("I'm not saying...") functions as a pre-emptive, face-saving strategy rather than a marker of deference, and Obinze's expressive interjection in U8 ("Thank God") amplifies relational affect in a manner Lakoff's model does not anticipate for male speakers. In both cases the features function as strategic communicative choices rather than markers of subordination, corroborating Cameron's (1995) argument that such features are gendered by use rather than by nature.

Second, female characters in the novel deploy unhedged, direct speech acts in contexts of emotional urgency or epistemic self-assertion. Ifemelu's U4 ("I don't want to explain, I want to observe") and U12 ("Who are we kidding with this chaste dating business?"), and Kosi's U15 ("We have to keep this family together"), are free of the features Lakoff associates with women's language, and are produced precisely in contexts of relational confrontation or self-protection—where Lakoff's model would predict maximum hedging. This is consistent with Holmes's (1995) argument that gendered speech patterns are socially constructed and contextually variable, and, more broadly, with the performative and contextualist accounts discussed in Section 2.6.

Third, where female characters do deploy Lakoff's hedging features (U5's "enough", U6's intensifier and retrospective admission, U10's post-hoc hedge sequence, U14's epistemic-concession hedge), these deployments appear governed by specific interactional conditions—anticipation of rejection, relational repair, or the management of epistemic or emotional risk (Goffman, 1967)—rather than by an inherent, sex-linked tentativeness. This contextual account is more consistent with the evidence examined here than Lakoff's original, more essentialist framing.

Fourth, several of the reclassifications made in this revision (U6, U7, U15; see Table 1) confirm that the boundary between Searle's categories requires careful, case-by-case scrutiny rather than default assignment, and that features such as brevity, vague quantifiers, and interjections should not be assimilated to Lakoff's specific categories of hypercorrect grammar, empty adjectives, and intensifiers without independent justification (Section 3.6). Taken together, these findings suggest that illocutionary authority, as represented in *Americanah*, is a relational achievement—contested, negotiated, and at times reclaimed by female characters—rather than the stable possession of male speakers by virtue of gender alone (Bhabha, 1994).

Table 1. Summary of the fifteen analysed utterances.

U#	Speaker Addressee	→ Page	Immediate context	Speech-act classification	Key linguistic feature(s)	Interpreted pragmatic function
U1	Blaine Ifemelu	→ 298	Blaine reacts to Ifemelu's growing blog readership.	Indirect directive within an assertive frame	Pre-emptive hedge unhedged imperative	Softened command to change writing style
U2	Blaine Ifemelu	→ 298	Blaine criticises Ifemelu's writing habits.	Assertive (rebuke)	Unmitigated evaluative judgement	Epistemic verdict functioning as reproach
U3	Blaine Ifemelu	→ 298	Blaine confronts Ifemelu after discovering a lie.	Confrontational assertive	Unmitigated two-word accusation	Moral scolding; implicit demand for confession
U4	Ifemelu Blaine	→ 298	Ifemelu defends her editorial choices for the blog.	Assertive functioning as counter-directive	Parallel unhedged syntax	Reclaims authority over her own writing
U5	Ifemelu Blaine	→ 298	Ifemelu responds defensively to Blaine's critique.	Minimally hedged assertive (semi-sincere)	Covert hedge via quantifier 'enough'	Face-saving rejection masking private doubt
U6	Ifemelu Blaine	→ 329	Ifemelu apologises for missing a lunch invitation.	Expressive + assertive (unfulfilled obligation)	Intensifier + retrospective admission	Performative apology and relational repair
U7	Obinze Ifemelu	→ 54	Obinze admits his romantic interest at their first meeting.	Unhedged assertive with commissive undertone	Present-progressive self-disclosure	Flirtation combined with social risk-taking
U8	Obinze Ifemelu	→ 406	Obinze reunites with Ifemelu years later.	Assertive+ expressive	Expressive interjection ('Thank God')	Praise combined with relational relief
U9	Obinze Ifemelu	→ 422	Obinze names Ifemelu's habitual deflection.	Confrontational assertive	Unhedged metaphorical diagnosis	Challenge to Ifemelu's emotional evasiveness
U10	Ifemelu Obinze	→ 405	Ifemelu proposes an immediate meeting, then retracts.	Indirect directive, retrospectively hedged	Bold proposal + lexical hedge by sequence	Risk-taking followed by face-saving retreat
U11	Ifemelu Obinze	→ 406	Ifemelu reflects on the significance of their reunion.	Assertive with prospective self-disclosure	Non-tentative use of "I think"	Self-disclosure of emotional investment
U12	Ifemelu Obinze	→ 422	Ifemelu proposes acting on mutual attraction.	Compound assertive-directive	Rhetorical question + blunt idiom, unhedged	Dismissal of pretence; proposal

U13	Kosi Obinze	→30	Kosi comments on Obinze's eating at a party.	Indirect directive within an expressive of concern	Address term, rising intonation, minimising hedge	Caring management of Obinze's wellbeing
U14	Kosi Obinze	→26	Kosi navigates a disagreement over school choice.	Hedged assertive	Epistemic-concession hedge ("I also see")	Social conflict management
U15	Kosi Obinze	→440	Kosi pleads with Obinze to preserve their marriage.	Directive as assertion of shared obligation	Intensified repetition, no hedges	Appeal to relational/institutional obligation

Table 2. Synthesis of cross-cutting findings.

Finding	Representative utterances	Interpretation
Lakoff's features are not exclusively female-coded.	U1, U8	Hedges and expressive intensification are used strategically by male characters, not only by female characters.
Female characters produce unhedged, direct speech under emotional urgency or self-assertion.	U4, U12, U15	Directness is available to female characters precisely where Lakoff's model would predict maximum hedging.
Female hedging is contextually triggered, not a fixed trait.	U5, U6, U10, U14	Hedges appear under anticipated rejection, relational repair, or social risk management, not sex-linked tentativeness.
Category boundaries require case-by-case scrutiny.	U6, U7, U15	Prior classifications (commissive, declaration, commissive-directive) are revised on closer analysis of Searle's felicity conditions.

5. Conclusion

This study has offered a qualitative literary-pragmatic analysis of gendered discourse in Adichie's *Americanah*, integrating Searle's (1969, 1975) speech act theory with Lakoff's (1975) feminist pragmatics, and reading the results against later contextualist and performative accounts of gender (Butler, 1990; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). The analysis examined fifteen purposively selected utterances drawn from three relational dyads: Ifemelu–Blaine, Ifemelu–Obinze, and Kosi–Obinze.

With respect to the first research question, the analysis suggests that directive and assertive force, as represented in the novel, is not the exclusive preserve of male characters. Blaine's discourse displays a pattern of unhedged assertives and covertly directive speech (U1, U2, U3); female characters display comparable illocutionary force in moments of emotional urgency or epistemic self-protection, as in Ifemelu's U4 and U12 and Kosi's U15. These findings challenge an essentialist account of gendered illocution as a fixed distribution, while remaining a claim about this novel's represented dialogue rather than about speakers in general.

Regarding the second research question, the analysis identifies three mechanisms characterising the female characters' pragmatic behaviour as represented in the novel: retrospective hedging under anticipated relational risk (U10), semi-sincere assertiveness in

which surface directness conceals private uncertainty (U5), and the reactive use of intensifiers to bolster affective credibility (U6). Where Lakoff (1975) attributed such features to women's internalised socialisation into subordination, the present analysis suggests they are better read, within this dataset, as responses activated by immediate interactional pressures—consistent with Cameron (1995) and Holmes (1995).

Concerning the third research question, the analysis suggests that gendered illocutionary patterns in the novel are shaped by intersecting factors of race, class, institutional position, and cultural location, operationalised as set out in Section 3.5. Ifemelu's pragmatic accommodation is most pronounced with Blaine, whose institutional position, racial politics, and relational history with her are foregrounded in the text; her exchanges with Obinze, grounded in a longer and more symmetric relational history, show greater assertive balance. Kosi's pragmatic repertoire reflects the structural position of a wife within an affluent, socially visible marriage.

In terms of the fourth research question, the study suggests that *Americanah* can be read as a sustained literary engagement with the conditions under which particular speech acts are available, credible, and effective for particular characters (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Through its representation of Ifemelu's, Obinze's, and Kosi's utterances, the novel dramatises an argument about language and power that is more contextually nuanced than a straightforwardly essentialist reading of gendered speech would suggest.

Taken together, the four findings support a modest but coherent claim: Lakoff's feature inventory retains descriptive value for identifying pragmatic asymmetry in literary dialogue, but her original essentialist interpretation of that inventory is not well supported by the evidence examined here. Within Adichie's novel, gendered speech features are available to characters of either gender, and their deployment tracks relational asymmetry, emotional stakes, and narrative positioning rather than sex alone. Reading *Americanah* through speech act theory and feminist pragmatics reveals a text that does not merely depict gender and power but stages a sustained, literary argument about gendered discourse (Coates, 2004/2015).

Future studies might extend this approach to a larger, more systematically sampled set of utterances from the novel, apply computational stylistic methods to enable frequency-based analysis of Lakoff's features across the full text, and undertake cross-cultural comparative analysis using parallel data on African women's discourse in non-fictional contexts. Such extensions would help address the scope limitations this study has necessarily accepted (Section 3.7) in the interest of interpretive depth.

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Author Contributions

Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing—original draft

preparation, writing—review and editing: Yassin Hussein Alhomidy. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was not required because this study analyses a published literary text and did not involve human participants, personal data, or animal subjects.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The primary material analysed in this study consists of selected excerpts from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*. No new dataset was generated. The analytical coding may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

The author declares that no generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were used in the research or writing of this manuscript.

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