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

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Abstract

*This study examines gendered discourse in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013). It employs speech act theory (Searle, 1969) and feminist pragmatics (Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1990) to analyse fifteen utterances from the novel through a qualitative discourse paradigm. While prior studies have addressed race, identity, and diaspora in the novel, no study has conducted a systematic, utterance-level pragmatic analysis of how gendered power is enacted in its dialogue. The analysis shows how directives, assertives, commissives, and suppressed speech acts distribute illocutionary authority along gender lines. The findings demonstrate that male characters claim epistemic authority through unhedged assertions and indirect commands, while female characters habitually hedge, suppress, or retract their speech acts. Crucially, Ifemelu's pragmatic deference is situational rather than essential: she deploys unhedged assertives in the hair salon and her blog. This pragmatic pattern reveals that accommodation is a structural response to specific relational conditions rather than an individual trait. These patterns are further shaped by race, class, and cultural location, confirming that illocutionary authority is intersectionally distributed. The study implies that feminist pragmatics offers a productive methodological bridge between literary analysis and linguistic inquiry, particularly for postcolonial fiction. *Americanah* is read as a pragmatic counter-narrative that exposes the domain of power encoded in everyday talk. Future research should extend the corpus to Adichie's other novels, deploy computational stylistic methods on larger datasets, and investigate cross-cultural pragmatic variation through parallel corpora of African women's discourse in both real and fictional contexts.*

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

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1. Introduction

Language is never neutral in that every utterance performs a social act: asserting, commanding, promising, or deferring. These acts carry power, and 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. It 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 (Duce, 2021; Mumtazah et al., 2025; Chandran & Govindaraj, 2022; Mustafa, 2025).

Fewer studies have examined the novel's language at the level of utterance structure, a gap the present study directly addresses. While existing literature collectively establishes the ideological and cultural stakes of language in *Americanah*, it has not systematically examined the pragmatic dimension of the novel's dialogue at the utterance level. No existing study applies speech act theory and feminist pragmatics in an integrated, corpus-based procedure. In this respect, this study attempts to explore how gendered power is enacted through directive commands, epistemic assertions, hedged expressions, and suppressed speech. It demonstrates that the novel is deeply concerned with voice, power, and gender. This study addresses that gap by applying speech act theory and feminist pragmatics to fifteen utterances drawn from the novel.

The present study pursues four objectives: (1) It identifies and classifies the illocutionary acts performed by male and female characters across three relational dyads in *Americanah*. (2) It demonstrates how hedging, indirection, and speech suppression function as pragmatic mechanisms of gendered power. (3) It examines how race, class, and cultural location intersect with gender in shaping illocutionary distribution. (4) It interprets *Americanah* as a feminist pragmatic counter-narrative that encodes a sustained argument about 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 *Americanah*? (2) What are linguistic mechanisms that characterise female speakers' pragmatic behaviour in the novel? (3) How do the intersecting factors of race, class, and cultural location modulate gendered illocutionary force? (4) In what ways does *Americanah* function as a sustained pragmatic argument about the discourse of gendered power?

The study employs two complementary frameworks. Speech act theory, developed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), provides the analytical vocabulary of illocutionary force. Feminist pragmatics, associated with Lakoff (1975) and Tannen (1990), contextualises 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 (directives, assertives, suppressed speech, and commissives) is examined across contextually distinct relational conditions. Together, these dyadic analyses demonstrate that the distribution of illocutionary acts in the novel is not random. It is systematically structured along the intersecting axes of gender, race, class, and cultural location (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). The significance of this argument extends beyond literary criticism. *Americanah* is itself a pragmatic theory: a sustained fictional account of how the discourse of power operates in intimate talk (Wodak, 1997). Reading it as such produces insights that are relevant to linguistics, gender studies, and postcolonial literary studies (Thomas, 1995).

2. Literature Review

Existing literature on *Americanah* is extensive and growing rapidly. It spans literary criticism, feminist theory, postcolonial studies, and diaspora research. This study assesses its contributions critically and identifies the gap the present study addresses.

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. For instance, Mustafa (2025) reads the novel alongside Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* through what she terms a 'postwomanist' framework. She argues that both novels deconstruct the myth of the American Dream by exposing “a system of structural oppression under a postcolonial feminist theoretical framework” (p. 24). However, Mustafa's analysis remains largely thematic in that it traces ideological content without attending to the specific linguistic mechanisms through which that content is delivered. Furthermore, Ngwaba et al. (2024) compare Ifemelu's self-discovery with that of Kate Talkingtree in Alice Walker's 2004 novel, *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart*. They foreground the womanist theme of solidarity. Their reading is helpful in contextualising Adichie within a broader tradition of feminist African writing. They argue that “the diverse and unique struggles portrayed by the protagonists reveal the significance of the overall quest for their re-discovery of who women really are and not what the patriarchal society has made them to be” (p. 1266). Yet, they cite scenes of speech to illustrate ideological positions: they do not analyse the pragmatic implications of those scenes.

Karthiga et al. (2025) survey gendered oppression across multiple Adichie novels, including *Purple Hibiscus* (2006) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007). They apply liberal feminist theory usefully. Their analysis of education and liberation is substantive. They indicate that “Adichie's literary oeuvre is a powerful testament to the enduring struggle for gender equality and the complex intricacies of the female experience” (p. 102). However, the study does not engage with speech act theory and conflates the representation of gender with the linguistic performance of gender.

2.2 Discourse, identity, and digital space

Duce (2021) focuses on Ifemelu's blog as a vehicle for identity formation and transnational feminist solidarity — an argument that is well developed. She demonstrates that Ifemelu's blogging represents a movement from voicelessness to community to individual voice. She argues that “Ifemelu's use of technology reveals digital platforms as transmodern tools to negotiate identity, and thus as a means of empowering minorities in their struggle to gain agency” (p. 252). However, Duce's framework— transmodernity and transnational feminism—is sociological and cultural rather than strictly pragmatic. She attends to what Ifemelu says through her blog rather than to how the speech acts embedded in the novel's dialogue function pragmatically. The blog's content is analysed as cultural statement rather than as illocutionary performance (Mey, 2001).

Rahmatullah et al. (2024) develop a similar argument about digital diasporas through Mohanty's transnational feminist framework. Their analysis of Ifemelu's blog as a site of

identity negotiation is persuasive. In *Americanah*, Adichie “intertwines digital diasporic experiences with gendered narratives to highlight how these domains mutually shape and reinforce each other” (p. 8). Like Duce (2021), they focus on digital space rather than on embodied dialogic exchange. The relational dynamics of Ifemelu's face-to-face interactions with Blaine, Curt, and Obinze are not their primary concern.

2.3 Race, gender, and intersectionality

Chandran and Govindaraj (2022) examine race and gender as intersecting structures in the novel. Their reading of Ifemelu's relationships with Obinze, Curt, and Blaine as sites of racial and gendered negotiation is competent. Their study “illustrates how racial and gender issues are indissoluble, and how they cause these numerous risks” (p. 80). They note correctly that these relationships encode distinct forms of power. However, they do not systematically analyse the speech acts that enact that power. The analysis moves at the level of plot and character rather than at the level of linguistic exchange.

Mumtazah et al. (2025) bring a narratological methodology to the novel's representation of postcolonial African women. Their analysis of the hair salon as a micro-African space and of Ifemelu's blog as a reclaimed form of the Atlantic ship is original and compelling. Their application of Bal's narratology and Gilroy's black Atlantic theory is rigorous. Yet, their analysis is structural rather than pragmatic. They examine 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. It acts in the world. Saying 'I promise' does not report a promise; it creates one. This insight—that utterances have illocutionary force in addition to propositional content—is the foundation of speech act theory. Searle (1969, 1975) 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. Declarations bring about a new state of affairs through the act of utterance itself. Each illocutionary type has a characteristic direction of fit. Assertives have a words-to-world direction: they claim to represent reality. Directives and commissives have a world-to-words direction: reality is to be changed in accordance with the utterance. Expressives and declarations have different or double directions of fit. Indirect speech acts (Searle, 1975) occur when the primary illocutionary force differs from the syntactic form. An interrogative may function as a directive. A commissive may conceal a reproach. Indirectness is significant for gender analysis because it is a pragmatic resource with demonstrable gendered valence.

2.5 Feminist pragmatics

Proponents of feminist pragmatics, such as Lakoff (1975) and Tannen (1990), have discussed gendered discourse. In this respect, Lakoff (1975) proposed that women's language

is characterised by hedges, tag questions, apologetic discourse markers, and rising intonation. She argued that these features encode deference and tentativeness. While subsequent research has complicated Lakoff's original claims, noting their cultural specificity and their risk of essentialism, her identification of hedging as a pragmatic resource with gendered valence remains analytically productive. Tannen (1990) distinguished between 'report-talk', in which speakers assert information to establish status, and 'rapport-talk', in which speakers build connection through sharing. She argued that men and women are socialised into different communicative orientations. This distinction is useful in analysing the asymmetric assertive patterns in the novel.

Holmes (1995) and Cameron (1995) have extended the domain of feminist pragmatics. They emphasise that gendered speech patterns are not biological but socially constructed and contextually variable. Cameron argues that discursive dominance operates through the control not only of who speaks but of what speech acts are available and credible for a given speaker. This concept is central to the analysis that follows. Fairclough (1992) provides the concept of subject positioning: the discursive construction of the subject in a position of obligation that serves the interests of the dominant voice. This concept explains how Blaine's interrogative directives, for instance, reposition Ifemelu as the agent of her own subjugation.

This study integrates speech act theory with feminist pragmatics into a single analytical procedure. Each utterance is first classified according to Searle's taxonomy. It is then subjected to a feminist-pragmatic investigation that explores hedging, indirection, suppression, and the social conditions that enable or constrain particular speech acts. This integrated model allows the analysis to move between the micro-level of individual utterances and the macro-level of gendered power structures.

3. Methodology

3.1 Corpus selection

The primary corpus is *Americanah* (Adichie, 2013). The novel is an exceptionally rich site for pragmatic analysis. Its layered social architecture: spanning Lagos, the American Northeast, and the diasporic in-between, enables comparison of gendered speech norms across culturally distinct contexts. Its recurrence of a single female protagonist across three relational dyads permits comparison of Ifemelu's pragmatic behaviour across relationships. Furthermore, its acknowledged feminist commitments render its pragmatic choices ideologically intentional and analytically meaningful. Literary pragmatics, as Palmer (2004) and Toolan (2001) argue, treats fictional dialogue as a legitimate object of linguistic inquiry. Culpeper and McIntyre (2010) observe that fictional dialogue foregrounds pragmatic features that real-time conversation may submerge. *Americanah*'s narratorial apparatus: its metalinguistic commentary, its free indirect discourse, its recording of thoughts not spoken, provides access to the pragmatic unconscious of its characters in ways that naturally occurring conversation cannot replicate.

3.2 Utterance extraction criteria

The analytical corpus consists of fifteen utterances (U1–U15). An utterance is defined following Searle (1969) as a speaker-produced act with a determinate illocutionary force. Extraction was governed by four criteria. First, dialogic centrality: scenes in which exchange crystallises a gendered power dynamic were selected. Scenes of purely phatic communion were excluded. Second, illocutionary diversity: the corpus represents all five of Searle's illocutionary categories. Special attention was paid to indirect speech acts, since indirectness has demonstrable gendered valence. Third, speaker diversity: utterances were drawn from three distinct relational dyads. Both male-to-female and female-to-male utterances are represented. Fourth, contextual density: utterances are analysed within their immediate co-text, their broader narrative context, and the novel's ideological frame.

3.3 Analytical procedure

The analysis proceeds in two stages. In the first stage, each utterance is classified following Searle's taxonomy. The classification records the illocutionary point, the direction of fit, the expressed psychological state, and the propositional content. Where an utterance is indirect, both its literal and its primary illocutionary forces are recorded. In the second stage, each classified utterance is subjected to a feminist-pragmatic reading. Lakoff's inventory of hedging features is used to identify linguistically encoded deference.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the corpus analysis, organised around three relational dyads and fifteen utterances drawn from Adichie's *Americanah* (2013). Each utterance is first classified according to Searle's (1969, 1975) illocutionary taxonomy and then examined for the seven linguistic features Lakoff (1975) associated with women's language: lexical hedges, tag questions, polite forms, empty adjectives, intensifiers, hypercorrect grammar, and rising intonation in declaratives. The analysis proceeds comparatively: for every female-to-male exchange, a symmetrical male-to-female exchange is analysed, enabling systematic evaluation of whether the distribution of Lakoff's features follows the gendered pattern her framework predicts. The findings reveal a more complex picture: Lakoff's features are present in the speech of both male and female characters, and their deployment is governed less by the speaker's biological sex than by relational asymmetry, emotional stakes, and narrative positioning. The analysis thereby challenges the essentialist premises of Lakoff's model while retaining its inventory of features as a productive analytical instrument.

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 crystallise a tension between assertive male authority and a female speaker who oscillates between deference and resistance.

4.1.1 Blaine to Ifemelu

Utterance 1 (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.*" p. 308

Utterance (1) is a directive embedded within an assertive frame. The propositional content asserts the nature of Ifemelu's readership and her associated responsibility, but the illocutionary point is directive. Blaine is instructing Ifemelu to change her writing practice. This is a paradigm case of the 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, followed immediately by the unhedged command 'Keep your style but add more depth.'

Blaine's discourse here departs significantly from the profile Lakoff assigns to male speech. The utterance deploys a lexical hedge ('I'm not saying...'), a form Lakoff (1975, p. 54) associates with female tentativeness. Yet, this hedge functions not as a marker of deference but as a discursive strategy for pre-empting resistance while maintaining illocutionary force. The hedge 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. The absence of tag questions, empty adjectives, or rising intonation confirms male epistemic confidence. The pragmatic effect is the repositioning of Ifemelu as a student whose work requires correction, a form of discursive dominance that Cameron (1995) identifies as the control not merely of who speaks but of what constitutes valid speech.

Utterance 2 (U2): *"You're being lazy, Ifem."* He used that word, "lazy," often, for his students who did not hand in work on time. p. 308

Utterance (2) is an assertive speech act. The speaker commits to the truth of a proposition about the hearer's character and practice. There is no hedging, no indirect framing, no request for confirmation. The illocutionary point is epistemic verdict: Blaine renders judgment about Ifemelu's writing style in her blog. The use of the contracted present progressive ('You're being') ascribes to Ifemelu not a fixed trait but a current, alterable failing, which adds a covert directive dimension: the implication is that she must stop being lazy. The illocutionary force is rebuking.

Utterance (2) is entirely free of every feature Lakoff associates with women's language. There are no hedges, no tag questions ('you're being lazy, aren't you?'), no polite softeners, no rising intonation. The utterance is hypercorrect in its grammatical economy. This accords with Lakoff's (1975, p. 49) claim that male speech favours direct, unqualified assertion. However, the analysis also reveals that this directness carries relational cost: Ifemelu reports irritation. The novel narratorially frames Blaine's 'laziness' judgments as a recurring feature of his authority over students, black celebrities, and his partner alike. The word functions as what Holmes (1995) would call a discourse of dominance, in which evaluative labels are applied unilaterally by the speaker with greater institutional or relational power.

Utterance 3 (U3): He came back the next day and looked at her, a glare like silver in his eyes, and said, *"You lied."* p. 338

Utterance (3) is a confrontational assertive with the illocutionary force of scolding. Blaine asserts the propositional content ('you lied') while simultaneously expressing a psychological state — the narrator specifies 'a kind of horror that baffled her, as though he had never considered it possible that she could lie.' The assertive speech act is also implicitly directive: the unstated perlocutionary goal is a confession and apology from Ifemelu.

Utterance (3) continues the pattern of male assertive directness. The two-word utterance is syntactically minimal, lexically unhedged, and delivered without polite forms or mitigation. There is no tag question ('you lied, didn't you?'), no intensifier softening the claim. The absence of every Lakoff feature reinforces the moral weight Blaine assigns to the charge. Crucially, 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 hypercorrect assertive grammar — the refusal to hedge, qualify, or question: Ifemelu is constituted as a moral subject who has violated a code she did not know existed.

4.1.2 Ifemelu to Blaine

Utterance 4 (U4): He told her to include details about government policy and redistricting. She did, but after rereading it, she took down the post. *"I don't want to explain, I want to observe."* She said. p. 308

Utterance (4) is a declarative assertive that functions 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 epistemic authority over the blog. The parallel syntactic structure ('I don't want... I want...') gives the utterance a rhetorical precision that signals deliberate, not defensive, rejection. In other words, the illocutionary force of U4 is rejecting Blaine's critique of Ifemelu's writing style.

Utterance (4) is a direct challenge to Lakoff's prediction. There are no hedges ('I sort of feel...'), no tag questions, no polite forms or apologetic prefaces. The utterance is syntactically hypercorrect and semantically unambiguous. Ifemelu deploys what Cameron (1995) calls 'verbal hygiene': a self-conscious assertion of communicative authority. This is precisely the kind of unhedged female assertive that Lakoff's model cannot accommodate, since Lakoff's framework associates such directness exclusively with male speech. The novel thus encodes a feminist pragmatic argument: Ifemelu is capable of Lakoff-masculine speech acts when her epistemic territory is invaded.

Utterance (5): *"It has enough depth."* she said, irritated, but with the niggling thought that he was right. P. 308

Utterance (5) is a minimally hedged assertive whose illocutionary force is rejecting Blaine's critique of Ifemelu's writing style. In isolation, the utterance seems direct; however, the narrator immediately qualifies it: 'she said, irritated, but with the niggling thought that he was right.' The propositional content is thus spoken against a backdrop of epistemic uncertainty, making U5 a semi-sincere assertive: one performed partly to save face, even though Ifemelu does not fully endorse its truth.

Utterance (5) presents a nuanced departure from Lakoff's model. While the surface form is unhedged, the semantic vagueness of 'enough' functions as a covert hedge—a weak quantifier

that avoids the full assertive force of 'It has plenty of depth' or 'It is deeply analytical.' Empty modifiers are part of Lakoff's (1975) category of 'weasel words' that soften claims without obviously doing so. In this light, U5 shows how a female speaker may resist hedging overtly while deploying lexical vagueness as an unconscious softener. This finding suggests that Lakoff's features operate at multiple registers of awareness, not always as conscious deference strategies but as pragmatic habits acquired under relational pressure.

Utterance 6 (U6): "I don't know why, Blaine. I just didn't feel up to it. I didn't think you would mind too much. *"I'm really sorry. I should have told you about the lunch.* 339

Utterance (6) is a compound expressive-commissive. The first clause ('I'm really sorry') is an expressive whose illocutionary force is regret: it conveys Ifemelu's psychological state of regret. The second clause ('I should have told you') is a commissive-retrospective, acknowledging a past obligation unfulfilled and implicitly committing to future transparency. Together, the utterance (whether expressive or commissive) functions as a performative apology.

Utterance (6) deploys an intensifier ('really') that Lakoff (1975, p. 55) identifies as a marker of female emotional emphasis. This linguistic device is employed to make affect credible in a context where it might otherwise be doubted. Ifemelu adds 'really' not because the apology is weak but because Blaine's frozen silence has already communicated that no apology will be easily accepted. The intensifier is therefore pragmatically reactive rather than inherently deferential. This distinction—between features deployed out of relational subordination and those deployed as dynamic responses to a specific interactional context—constitutes one of the principal limitations of Lakoff's original framework, which could not theorise this contextual variability. The polite form 'I should have' further softens the admission, representing an indirect acknowledgment of blame rather than the unqualified 'I lied to you' that Blaine's own formulation had implied. The asymmetry between Blaine's unhedged accusation (U3) and Ifemelu's hedged apology (U6) demonstrates the gendered distribution of illocutionary forces: he condemns without qualification; she apologises with elaboration.

4.2 The Ifemelu–Obinze Dyad

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

4.2.1 Obinze to Ifemelu

Utterance 7 (U7): "*I'm chasing you.* I saw you in school some time ago. I even asked Kay about you," he said. p. 64

Utterance (7) is an unhedged assertive with commissive undertones. By stating 'I'm chasing you,' Obinze asserts a current relational fact and simultaneously commits to a future

orientation. The utterance has the double direction of fit that Searle (1975) identifies in declarations: it describes reality while also performing it. In saying it, Obinze makes it socially real that he is pursuing Ifemelu. Obinze's utterance conveys playful pursuit whose illocutionary force is flirting.

Utterance (7) contains none of Lakoff's female features. There is no hedge ('I sort of like you'), no tag question ('I'm chasing you, aren't I?'), no polite preface. The present progressive construction is assertive and temporally immediate. The utterance is syntactically minimal and semantically precise. This is Lakoff-masculine speech: the epistemic confidence of a speaker who names desire without qualification. However, the broader context qualifies any simple reading: Obinze makes this declaration only after observing that Ginika — the girl Kayode had intended for him — has been displaced by Ifemelu in his attention. The assertion is therefore also an act of social courage, spoken in a context where it violates the arrangement his friend had made. The directness is thus not merely a gendered stylistic feature but a form of relational agency.

Utterance 8 (U8): *"You haven't stopped being honest, Ifem. Thank God."* p. 416

Utterance (8) is a compound assertive-expressive. The first clause ('You haven't stopped being honest') asserts a continuity of character, attributing to Ifemelu a stable relational trait observed over many years. The second clause ('Thank God') is an expressive of gratitude and relief, spoken as a benediction. The illocutionary force of Obinze's assertive speech act is praise (to revive their past romantic relationship). He presupposes that she has been honest.

Utterance (8) contains no hedges, no tag questions, and no empty adjectives. Obinze's expressive is syntactically confident. However, the expression 'Thank God' is an instance of what could be read as an intensifier of gratitude, amplifying the emotional weight of his observation. Lakoff (1975) identifies intensifiers as features that amplify feeling where mere statement would not be believed — a strategy she associates with female speakers who feel they must prove their emotional sincerity. Here, Obinze deploys an intensifier-equivalent to reinforce the depth of his relational relief. This finding complicates Lakoff's gender attribution: in contexts of emotional vulnerability and relational longing, male speakers can deploy affect-intensifying devices that Lakoff's framework assigns to female pragmatics.

Utterance 9 (U9): *"You are hiding behind sarcasm."* It was barely a week since she first saw him but already she was angry, furious that he would drop her off and go home to his other life, his real life, p. 432

Utterance (9) is a confrontational assertive. Obinze diagnoses Ifemelu's pragmatic strategy — her deflection of emotional directness through humour — and names it publicly. The utterance is not a directive (he does not say 'stop hiding') but its illocutionary force approaches that of a challenge: he sees through her performance and says so.

Utterance (9) contains no Lakoff features. There is no hedge, no polite form, no rising intonation. The metaphorical construction ('hiding behind sarcasm') is lexically precise and structurally confident. This is consistent with the pattern of Obinze's speech acts throughout: emotionally perceptive but linguistically unhedged. What is significant here is the contrast this creates with Ifemelu's immediately following utterance ('Oh, how very lofty of you'), which is

saturated with ironic distancing. Obinze names the relational reality; Ifemelu deflects it — a reversal of the gendered pattern in which, according to Lakoff, women speak the personal and men avoid it. Adichie's novel consistently distributes emotional directness across both genders, depending on relational context rather than biological sex.

4.2.2 Ifemelu to Obinze

Utterance 10 (U10): “So,” Obinze said, dragging the word. “How are you? Where are you? When can I see you?” *“What about now?” p. 415*

Utterance (10), *what about now*, is an indirect directive. The interrogative form 'What about now?' has the surface structure of a question but its primary illocutionary force is a proposal — a directive addressed to Obinze to meet her immediately. The narrator contextualises the utterance as 'recklessness': Ifemelu produces it before she can restrain herself, and she immediately hedges it retrospectively in the next speech turn ('I'm actually running a bit late... But I just wanted to say hi').

Utterance (10) presents the full complexity of Lakoff's framework at work in a single exchange. The initial utterance is unhedged and bold: a female speaker makes an undisguised request without polite preface or tag question. However, the moment Ifemelu senses hesitation in Obinze's response, she immediately produces a classic Lakoff hedge sequence: 'I'm actually running a bit late for a meeting... But I just wanted to say hi and we can meet up soon.' This retrospective self-correction deploys lexical hedging ('I just'), minimisation ('say hi'), and an implicit withdrawal of the original directive. The sequence demonstrates that Lakoff's features are not stable properties of a female speaker's idiolect but dynamic resources activated under interactional pressure — specifically, when a female speaker anticipates rejection or relational risk.

Utterance 11 (U11): *"I already think I'm going to want to remember this.* Her nervousness was melting away; they had raced past the requisite moments of awkwardness. p. 416

Utterance (11) is an assertive with prospective commissive undertones. Ifemelu commits to the significance of the present moment, projecting forward into her own memory. The illocutionary point is self-disclosure: she declares her emotional investment in the meeting.

Utterance (11) contains the hedge 'I think,' which Lakoff (1975, p. 54) identifies as a primary marker of female tentativeness. However, the temporal complexity of the utterance complicates this reading: 'I already think I'm going to want to remember' is not uncertain — it is the opposite. The hedge 'I think' introduces a cognitive layer that enhances rather than diminishes the epistemic weight of the claim. Obinze's narrative response confirms this reading: he smiles and says 'only she could have come up with that expression,' indicating that the utterance is received as distinctive and confirmed rather than hesitant. This constitutes a counter-example to Lakoff's claim that 'I think' invariably signals tentativeness: here it is a marker of Ifemelu's characteristic cognitive-emotional precision, the kind of reflexive self-awareness that makes her voice distinct in the novel.

Utterance 12 (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. 432

Utterance (12) is a compound assertive-directive. The first clause asserts the relational facts; the rhetorical question ('Who are we kidding?') functions as an indirect assertive that dismisses the pretence of their situation. The final clause ('we might as well get it over with') is an indirect directive — a proposal with the illocutionary force of a command.

Utterance (12) is perhaps the most significant counter-example to Lakoff's model in the corpus. The utterance contains no lexical hedges ('I think,' 'sort of,' 'perhaps'), no tag questions, no polite forms, and no empty adjectives. The rhetorical question and blunt idiom ('hot for each other,' 'get it over with') represent Lakoff-masculine discourse strategies: direct, sexually explicit, and strategically assertive. The novel frames this utterance as Ifemelu speaking out of anger — 'she was angry, furious' — a register Lakoff does not address when discussing female hedging, because her model assumes that female speakers hedge regardless of emotional state. U12 demonstrates that emotional arousal (specifically, female desire and frustration) can produce speech that is entirely free of deferential features, confirming the contextual and variable nature of gendered pragmatic behaviour.

4.3 The Kosi–Obinze Dyad

Kosi's speech to Obinze offers a different and analytically distinct case. Unlike Ifemelu, who oscillates between hedged and unhedged registers in response to relational pressure, Kosi's pragmatic repertoire is consistently oriented toward social cohesion and relational maintenance. She is, as the narrator repeatedly observes, a woman who 'chose peace over truth' and whose modesty 'announced itself.' Yet, her speech acts also include bold directives and emotionally forceful utterances that complicate any simple association between her character and Lakoff's deferential female speaker.

4.3.1 Kosi to Obinze

Utterance 13 (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. 40

Utterance (13) is a directive embedded in a concern-expressive. The first clause ('Darling, you must be hungry') asserts a physical state of the hearer, functioning as a caring observation that motivates the second clause. The second clause ('You ate only that spring roll?') is formally declarative but contextually interrogative, with a rising-intonation function that invites Obinze to confirm the inadequacy of what he has eaten. The illocutionary point is an indirect directive to eat more — backed by the commissive implication that food has been prepared at home.

Utterance (13) is rich in Lakoff's features. The address term 'Darling' is a polite form that simultaneously marks intimacy and social role (the attentive wife). The utterance 'You ate only that spring roll?' exhibits rising intonation in a declarative, which Lakoff (1975, p. 17) identifies as a characteristic female feature signalling that the speaker is seeking confirmation or approval rather than asserting a fact. The use of 'only' as a minimising intensifier implies that the meal was inadequate and that Obinze should acknowledge this. However, the function of these features is not deferential: Kosi is not seeking permission or expressing uncertainty about her own view. She is managing Obinze's physical and relational wellbeing through apparently subordinate speech.

Utterance 14 (U14): *"I agree. But I also see what Obinze is saying." p. 36*

Utterance (14) is a hedged assertive. Kosi agrees with the dominant social position (the senior women's endorsement of elite foreign-curriculum schools) while simultaneously acknowledging her husband's dissenting view. The conjunction 'but' enacts a double assertive: thesis and antithesis are held simultaneously. The illocutionary effect is to smooth social friction without taking a definitive position.

Utterance (14) deploys the lexical hedge 'I also see' rather than the more assertive 'I agree with Obinze.' The hedge 'I also see what Obinze is saying' does not commit Kosi to agreeing with him, only to understanding him — a minimal epistemic concession. Lakoff (1975) identifies such hedged assertives as female features encoding tentativeness. However, the narrator explicitly frames this utterance as a pragmatic strategy: 'She was taking two sides at once, to please everyone; she always chose peace over truth, was always eager to conform.' Kosi's hedging is therefore not a reflection of epistemic uncertainty. The hedging is a professional-social tool rather than an expression of personal tentativeness, which fundamentally revises Lakoff's original interpretation of such features as encoding female psychological subordination.

Utterance 15 (U15): *"Obinze, this is a family. We have a child. She needs you. I need you. We have to keep this family together." p. 450*

Utterance (15) is a directive complex. The opening assertive ('This is a family') establishes the normative frame. The series of declaratives ('We have a child. She needs you. I need you.') enumerates the relational facts that constitute the grounds for the directive. The final clause ('We have to keep this family together') is a commissive-directive: it commits both parties to a future course of action and, in doing so, refuses Obinze the option of dissolution. The illocutionary force of the utterance is order (invocation) in the Searlean sense: by naming the family as an institution that must be preserved, Kosi is attempting to bring about a social reality through the act of speaking.

Utterance (15) challenges Lakoff's model most directly. The utterance is replete with intensifiers: each clause amplifies the emotional and moral weight of the directive. There are no lexical hedges, no polite forms, and no apologetic prefaces. Kosi does not say 'I think perhaps we should consider keeping the family together'. Rather, she commands it through repetition and institutional framing. This is precisely the kind of illocutionary forcefulness that Lakoff assigns exclusively to male speech. Yet, Kosi deploys it at the moment of greatest relational crisis, when she is on her knees before her husband. The intensified directive force of U15 is not male-coded pragmatic confidence; it is the speech of a woman who has exhausted all softer options.

The analysis of fifteen utterances across three relational dyads yields four findings that collectively challenge the essentialist premises of Lakoff's (1975) framework while affirming the analytical productivity of her feature inventory.

First, Lakoff's features are not exclusively female. Blaine's discourse in U1 deploys a lexical hedge ('I'm not saying...') as a pre-emptive face-saving strategy, and Obinze's expressive in U8 deploys an intensifier-equivalent ('Thank God') to amplify relational affect. In both cases,

the features function as strategic communicative choices rather than markers of subordination. The finding corroborates Cameron's (1995) argument that the features Lakoff identified are not gendered by nature but by use: any speaker can deploy them in contexts of relational vulnerability or strategic softening.

Second, female speakers in the novel deploy unhedged, Lakoff-masculine speech acts in contexts of emotional urgency or epistemic self-assertion. Ifemelu's U4 ('I don't want to explain, I want to observe'), U12 ('Who are we kidding with this chaste dating business?'), and Kosi's U15 ('We have to keep this family together') are entirely free of the features Lakoff associates with women's language. These utterances are produced by women in contexts of relational confrontation or self-protection—precisely the contexts where Lakoff's framework would predict maximum hedging and deference. This finding confirms Holmes's (1995) argument that gendered speech patterns are socially constructed and contextually variable.

Third, female speakers deploy Lakoff's features according to specific contexts or certain social conditions. In other words, the features, which women employ, are not expressions of inherent tentativeness but pragmatically rational responses to specific interactional conditions. Such conditions include (but are not limited to) anticipation of rejection, the need to repair relational damage, or the management of epistemic risk (Goffman, 1967). This contextual account of Lakoff's features is more consistent with the evidence of the novel's dialogue than her original essentialist framing. For instance, Ifemelu's U6 ('I'm really sorry') or U10's retrospective hedging ('I'm actually running a bit late'). Thus, female discourse in the novel is contextually oriented rather than biologically innate.

Fourth, the analysis reveals that Lakoff's features frequently serve functions opposite to deference. Kosi's rising intonation in U13 achieves a caring directive. Her hedge in U14 manages competing social allegiances and her intensified directive in U15 maximise illocutionary force. In none of these cases do the features encode the psychological subordination that Lakoff originally attributed to them. Adichie's novel, read as a pragmatic argument, encodes precisely this critique: gendered language features are available to all speakers and are deployed strategically rather than symptomatically. Illocutionary authority in *Americanah* is not the stable possession of male speakers; it is a relational achievement, contested, negotiated, and sometimes reclaimed by female speakers who know—as Ifemelu knows—that language is not neutral (Bhabha, 1994).

Although this study makes a substantive contribution to the feminist pragmatics of postcolonial fiction, several limitations qualify the scope and generalisability of its findings. First, the analytical corpus comprises 15 utterances, constituting a purposive rather than a representative sample of the novel's dialogic structure. A larger corpus subjected to frequency-based quantitative analysis might yield distributional findings that either confirm or complicate the qualitative patterns identified here. Second, the analysis is restricted to three relational dyads and the dialogic exchanges of a small number of characters. The novel's pragmatic landscape extends well beyond these dyads. This selectivity reflects a methodological preference for depth over breadth, but it limits the completeness of the account of gendered illocution in the novel as a whole.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined gendered discourse in Adichie's *Americanah* through an integrated application of Searle's (1969, 1975) speech act theory and Lakoff's (1975) feminist pragmatics. The study has analysed fifteen utterances drawn from three relational dyads: Ifemelu–Blaine, Ifemelu–Obinze, and Kosi–Obinze. The study addressed four research questions: the distribution of illocutionary acts along gender lines, the linguistic mechanisms characterising female speakers' pragmatic behaviour, the intersectional modulation of gendered illocutionary force, and the function of *Americanah* as a feminist pragmatic counter-narrative.

With respect to the first research question, the analysis established that directive and assertive speech acts are not exclusive to male speech. Blaine's discourse displays a systematic pattern of unhedged assertives and covertly directive speech acts (evident in U1, U2, and U3). Likewise, female characters demonstrate comparable illocutionary force in contexts of emotional urgency or epistemic self-protection. 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 unhedged, syntactically confident speech acts that directly challenge any essentialist account of gendered illocution as a fixed distribution. Illocutionary authority is relational: it is achieved and contested within specific interactional conditions rather than passively possessed by virtue of gender.

Regarding the second research question, the analysis identified three primary mechanisms characterising female pragmatic behaviour in the novel. These mechanisms comprise retrospective hedging under conditions of anticipated rejection (U10), semi-sincere assertiveness in which surface directness conceals epistemic uncertainty (U5), and the deployment of intensifiers to bolster affective credibility (U6). These mechanisms are not markers of inherent tentativeness. They are pragmatically rational responses to specific structural conditions. This distinction is theoretically significant: where Lakoff (1975) attributed these features to women's internalised socialisation into subordination, the present analysis demonstrates that they are dynamically activated in response to immediate interactional pressures, consistent with the positions advanced by Cameron (1995) and Holmes (1995).

Concerning the third research question, the analysis confirmed that gendered illocutionary authority is intersectionally distributed. Ifemelu's pragmatic deference is situational rather than essential. It is most pronounced in her interactions with Blaine, whose epistemic authority is reinforced by his institutional position, his racial politics, and his relational history with her. By contrast, her speech acts with Obinze—grounded in a longer and more symmetric relational history—exhibit greater assertive balance. Kosi's pragmatic repertoire is shaped by the double bind of domestically enforced femininity and the structural imperative of relational maintenance. Race, class, and cultural location constitute a pragmatic ecology within which gender performs its illocutionary work, confirming the intersectional account of discourse.

In terms of the fourth research question, the study affirms that *Americanah* functions as a sustained feminist pragmatic counter-narrative. The novel does not merely represent gendered speech: it interrogates the conditions under which particular speech acts are available, credible, and effective for particular speakers (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Through its representation of Ifemelu's utterances with Obinze in particular, the novel encodes a structural argument about language and power. That argument is more contextually nuanced than the theoretical positions advanced by the feminist pragmatic literature it implicitly engages.

Taken together, the four findings produce a coherent theoretical contribution. Lakoff's feature inventory retains analytical productivity as an instrument for identifying pragmatic asymmetry, but her essentialist interpretation of that inventory is empirically unsustainable. Gendered speech features are available to all speakers. Their deployment is governed not by biology but by relational asymmetry, emotional stakes, and the structural conditions of specific interactional contexts. *Americanah* enacts this argument through its fictional dialogue. Reading it through the lens of speech act theory and feminist pragmatics reveals a text that does not merely depict gender and power but performs a theory of gendered discourse in its very narrative structure (Coates, 2004). The study thus positions feminist pragmatics as a productive methodological bridge between linguistics and postcolonial literary studies, whose potential remains considerably underexplored in the existing literature on African women's fiction.

Future studies should extend the corpus to encompass a larger and more systematically sampled set of utterances. They could apply computational stylistic methods to enable frequency-based distributional analysis of Lakoff's features across the entire novel. Besides, they could undertake cross-cultural comparative analysis using parallel corpora of African women's discourse in both real and fictional contexts. Such extensions would consolidate the contribution of feminist pragmatics to postcolonial literary linguistics and address the methodological constraints that the present study has necessarily accepted in the service of analytical depth.

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The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

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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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