

**AN ANALYSIS OF SPEECH ACTS IN ENGLISH DIALOGUE IN THE ANIME
COWBOY BEBOP BY SHINICHIRO WATANABE**

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the types and functions of illocutionary speech acts found in the English-dubbed dialogue of the anime Cowboy Bebop (1998), directed by Shinichiro Watanabe. Framed within pragmatics and grounded in the speech act theories of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1979), the research addresses two questions: what types of speech acts appear in the English dialogue of the anime, and what communicative functions each type performs. A qualitative content-analysis design was employed. Data were collected by watching the first eleven episodes of the series, transcribing the English dialogue of the four main characters (Spike Spiegel, Jet Black, Faye Valentine, and Edward), and coding each utterance according to Searle's five categories of illocutionary acts: assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative. The analysis identified 155 illocutionary utterances distributed as follows: directive (46), assertive (39), expressive (28), commissive (25), and declarative (17). A further functional analysis of 281 coded instances showed that assertive utterances were mainly used for asserting a belief, stating a fact, and concluding; directive utterances for requesting, commanding, and ordering; commissive utterances for offering, promising, and vowing; expressive utterances for apologizing, thanking, and congratulating; and declarative utterances for resigning and establishing a state. The findings confirm that directive and assertive acts dominate the characters' interaction, reflecting the high-stakes, action-oriented world of bounty hunting portrayed in the series, while expressive and commissive acts humanize the characters' relationships. The study contributes to pragmatic research on English-dubbed anime and offers pedagogical implications for using anime dialogue as authentic material in English language teaching.

Keywords: speech acts, pragmatics, anime dialogue, Cowboy Bebop, Searle's theory

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji jenis dan fungsi tindak tutur ilokusi yang terdapat dalam dialog berbahasa Inggris pada anime Cowboy Bebop (1998) karya Shinichiro Watanabe. Penelitian ini menggunakan kerangka pragmatik dengan

mengacu pada teori tindak tutur Austin (1962) serta Searle (1969, 1979), dan berupaya menjawab dua rumusan masalah, yaitu jenis tindak tutur apa saja yang muncul dalam dialog bahasa Inggris anime tersebut dan fungsi komunikatif apa yang diemban oleh masing-masing jenis. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain analisis isi kualitatif. Data dikumpulkan dengan menonton sebelas episode pertama serial tersebut, mentranskripsi dialog berbahasa Inggris dari empat tokoh utama (Spike Spiegel, Jet Black, Faye Valentine, dan Edward), kemudian mengklasifikasikan setiap tuturan berdasarkan lima kategori tindak ilokusi Searle, yaitu asertif, direktif, komisif, ekspresif, dan deklaratif. Hasil analisis menemukan 155 tuturan ilokusi, dengan rincian direktif (46), asertif (39), ekspresif (28), komisif (25), dan deklaratif (17). Analisis fungsi terhadap 281 data menunjukkan bahwa tuturan asertif paling banyak digunakan untuk menyatakan keyakinan, menyatakan fakta, dan menyimpulkan; tuturan direktif untuk meminta, memerintah, dan menyuruh; tuturan komisif untuk menawarkan, berjanji, dan bersumpah; tuturan ekspresif untuk meminta maaf, berterima kasih, dan mengucapkan selamat; serta tuturan deklaratif untuk menyatakan penyerahan diri dan menetapkan suatu keadaan. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa tindak direktif dan asertif mendominasi interaksi antartokoh, mencerminkan dunia perburuan hadiah yang penuh tekanan dan berorientasi tindakan dalam serial ini, sementara tindak ekspresif dan komisif memperlihatkan sisi kemanusiaan hubungan antartokoh. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi bagi kajian pragmatik terhadap dialog anime versi dubbing bahasa Inggris serta menawarkan implikasi pedagogis penggunaan dialog anime sebagai bahan otentik dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris.

Kata Kunci: tindak tutur, pragmatik, dialog anime, Cowboy Bebop, teori Searle

A. Introduction

Language is a fundamental means of human communication used to convey ideas, emotions, opinions, and intentions in social interaction. Through language, individuals build relationships, exchange information, and maintain social order. In the era of globalization, English has become an international language that is widely

used not only in formal settings such as education and diplomacy, but also in popular media. As a result, media products play an important role in spreading and shaping the use of English in real communicative contexts.

Linguistic studies do not view language merely as a system of grammatical rules, but also as a tool for performing actions in social life.

Every utterance produced by a speaker is intended to achieve a particular purpose, a perspective that forms the foundation of pragmatics, the branch of linguistics that focuses on meaning in relation to context. One of the central concepts in pragmatics is speech act theory, first introduced by Austin (1962), who argued that utterances do not merely describe reality but also perform actions, and later developed more systematically by Searle (1969, 1979) into five categories of illocutionary acts: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives. Each category serves a distinct communicative function, and this classification allows researchers to identify the intended function of an utterance with greater precision.

Dialogue in audiovisual media such as films and animated series represents social interaction in a dynamic and contextualized manner, serving not only to advance the plot but also to develop character and conflict. Anime, as a globally popular form of audiovisual media, presents complex and meaningful dialogue that is frequently released in English-dubbed versions to reach

international audiences. This makes anime a valuable, yet still underexplored, source of data for pragmatic research, since most existing speech-act studies have relied on films, novels, or everyday conversation rather than dubbed animated dialogue.

Cowboy Bebop (1998), directed by Shinichiro Watanabe, is a widely acclaimed anime that blends science fiction, neo-noir, and jazz-inflected drama. Its English dub is particularly celebrated for preserving the character identity and narrative tone of the original Japanese version through natural and expressive voice acting. Each of the four main characters, Spike Spiegel, Jet Black, Faye Valentine, and Edward, possesses a distinctive speaking style shaped by personality, background, and motivation, so that their dialogue displays considerable variation in the use of illocutionary acts. Because these utterances often carry implicit meaning that cannot be understood literally, interpreting them requires attention to context and to the interpersonal relationships among the characters, which is precisely the

kind of analysis that speech act theory is designed to provide.

Although numerous studies on speech acts have examined data from films, novels, and everyday conversation, studies that focus specifically on English-dubbed dialogue in anime remain limited, despite the distinctive linguistic features and multiple cultural layers that anime dialogue displays. This gap provides the motivation for the present study, which focuses on the illocutionary speech acts found in the English dialogue of *Cowboy Bebop*. Specifically, this study seeks to (1) identify the types of speech acts used in the English dialogue of the anime *Cowboy Bebop*, and (2) describe the function of each type of speech act found in the dialogue. The study is expected to contribute theoretically to pragmatic research on dubbed audiovisual media, and practically to English language teaching, by demonstrating how anime dialogue can be used as authentic material for studying spoken English and the communicative functions that utterances perform in natural-sounding, character-driven interaction.

B. Research Method

This research employed a qualitative content analysis design. Content analysis is a research technique for describing the content of communication in an objective and systematic way (Berelson, 1952), and it can be used to understand how communicative messages are conveyed and received by an audience (Eriyanto, 2011). A qualitative descriptive approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to provide a detailed description of speech acts together with the context that surrounds them, rather than merely reporting numerical frequencies.

The data source of this study was the English-dubbed dialogue of the first eleven episodes (one cour) of the television series *Cowboy Bebop* (1998), focusing on the utterances of the four main characters, Spike Spiegel, Jet Black, Faye Valentine, and Edward. While the original Japanese dialogue is the source text, this research specifically examines the communicative choices and pragmatic functions embedded in the English adaptation, since this is how the majority of the anime's global

audience experiences the series. The analysis was qualitative in nature, focusing on the interpretation and categorization of speech acts rather than on statistical inference, although recurring patterns of frequency are reported to support the discussion.

Data were collected through a documentation technique, in which the researcher systematically observed, recorded, and transcribed dialogue that met the criteria of an illocutionary act. The steps taken were as follows: (1) obtaining the episodes of Cowboy Bebop through a legitimate streaming service; (2) watching each episode carefully while noting the timestamp of every utterance produced by the four main characters; (3) transcribing the English dialogue together with a brief description of the situational context in which it occurred; (4) classifying each utterance into one of Searle's five types of speech acts; and (5) classifying the communicative function performed by each utterance within its type. Two coding instruments were used to organize the data: the first recorded the episode, minute, and type of speech act for every utterance, and the

second recorded the specific function performed by each type of speech act.

The collected data were analyzed using the qualitative content analysis procedure, which is a systematic technique for examining the meaning of a message and the way it is conveyed in communication (Budd, Thorp, & Donahue, 2020). The analysis proceeded through four stages. First, the identified data were classified into the five types of speech acts, namely assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative. Second, coding categories were determined for the function performed by each type, based on repeated patterns observed in the dialogue. Third, each utterance was coded according to its episode, minute, type, and function. Fourth, the coded data were analyzed and presented in narrative form, describing how each utterance was classified and explaining the pragmatic reasoning behind the classification. This procedure was intended to ensure that the findings were grounded systematically in the dialogue itself rather than in the

researcher's impressionistic reading of the series.

C. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings on the types and functions of speech acts found in the English dialogue of *Cowboy Bebop*, followed by a discussion that relates the findings to Searle's (1979) theory and to previous relevant studies. Based on the analysis of the first eleven episodes, the researcher identified a total of 155 illocutionary utterances distributed across the five types proposed by Searle: assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of each type of speech act per episode.

Table 1. Distribution of Types of Speech Acts per Episode in *Cowboy Bebop* (Episodes 1–11)

Epi sod e	As ser tive	Dire ctiv e	Com mis sive	Expr essi ve	Decl arati ve	Total
1	4	0	0	0	0	4
2	2	0	0	0	0	2
3	3	9	5	2	0	19
4	4	6	0	0	2	12
5	2	3	0	0	0	5

Epi sod e	As ser tive	Dire ctiv e	Com mis sive	Expr essi ve	Decl arati ve	Total
6	5	5	4	6	3	23
7	5	5	2	5	2	19
8	6	4	4	5	2	21
9	4	6	5	6	4	25
10	2	5	2	2	2	13
11	2	3	3	2	2	12
Tot al	39	46	25	28	17	155

As shown in Table 1, directive utterances were the most frequent type (46 utterances, 29.7%), followed by assertive (39 utterances, 25.2%), expressive (28 utterances, 18.1%), commissive (25 utterances, 16.1%), and declarative (17 utterances, 11.0%). Directive utterances peaked in episode 3, largely during a high-tension casino heist sequence, while assertive utterances were highest in episode 8, when the crew's everyday routine and background information are foregrounded. The discussion below explains each type in turn, with illustrative examples drawn from the dialogue.

1. Assertive Speech Acts

An assertive speech act

commits the speaker to the truth of an expressed proposition, such as stating, informing, concluding, or explaining. Thirty-nine assertive utterances were found across the eleven episodes, most frequently produced by Jet and Spike. For example, when Jet tells Spike “Bell peppers and beef” while announcing the day's menu, or when Spike, asked who he really is, replies that he is “just a drifter,” both speakers commit themselves to a proposition that can be judged true or false. A more evaluative instance occurs when Jet dismisses a local dish as “totally disgusting,” which is still assertive in form but expresses a subjective belief rather than a verifiable fact, illustrating that assertive acts range from neutral factual reports to strongly held personal convictions.

2. Directive Speech Acts

A directive speech act is an attempt by the speaker to get the hearer to perform a specific action, such as commanding, requesting, or advising. With 46 occurrences, directives were the most common type in the data, reflecting the action-oriented world of bounty hunting

depicted in the series. Firm commands dominate combat and pursuit scenes, as in Spike's order “Drop the gun, Vicious” during a tense standoff, while softer requests appear in domestic or emotionally charged moments, such as Faye's plea “Oh fine, I won't run, at least untie one hand.” This range, from blunt commands issued under authority to polite requests exchanged between equals, shows that the directive category captures both the professional hierarchy among the bounty hunters and the informal camaraderie of life aboard the Bebop.

3. Commissive Speech Acts

A commissive speech act commits the speaker to a future course of action, such as promising, offering, or vowing. Twenty-five commissive utterances were identified, most often functioning as offers made during negotiation, as when Spike tells an informant “I'll give you 200 woolongs for the info, take it or leave it.” Promises appear at moments of trust between crew members, for instance Jet's assurance, “I'll look into the background of this drug, Spike, just

stay put,” while a smaller number of utterances take the form of a personal vow, such as Spike's declaration that he is content living without pretension. Commissive utterances are comparatively rare, but they mark important turning points in the characters' relationships.

4. Expressive Speech Acts

An expressive speech act conveys the speaker's psychological state or emotional reaction to a situation, such as complaining, praising, thanking, or apologizing. Twenty-eight expressive utterances were found, peaking in episodes 6 and 9. Faye's remark to Spike, “You have such a poor heart,” expresses disapproval of his attitude, while Edward's exuberant greeting, “Bebop, here! Here! Welcome,” conveys pure enthusiasm. Expressive utterances such as these humanize characters who are otherwise defined by cynicism or professional detachment, briefly revealing feelings that the plot's action sequences tend to obscure.

5. Declarative Speech Acts

A declarative speech act immediately changes an institutional

or social reality at the moment it is spoken, such as naming, resigning, or establishing a state of affairs. Declaratives were the least frequent type, with 17 utterances. In episode 6, Jet's remark “Thanks for your business” formally establishes Faye's unpaid expenses as a debt owed to the crew, and in episode 9, Edward's spontaneous naming of a satellite program, “You can be MPU! MPU! Cool name,” performs an act of naming that fixes the program's identity from that point onward. Although infrequent, declarative acts carry considerable narrative weight because they redefine a character's status or relationship within the story.

Beyond identifying the five types of speech acts, this study also examined the specific communicative function performed within each type, following the coding procedure described in the Research Method section. A total of 281 functional instances were identified, since a single type of speech act may serve more than one function across different utterances. Table 2 presents the distribution of these functions.

Table 2. Function of Each Type of Speech Act in the English Dialogue of Cowboy Bebop

Type	Function	Frequency	Percentage
Assertive	Stating a fact	33	11.7%
	Asserting a belief	58	20.6%
	Concluding	31	11.0%
Directive	Ordering	20	7.1%
	Requesting	44	15.7%
	Commanding	40	14.2%
Commissive	Promising	5	1.8%
	Offering	25	8.9%
	Vowing	3	1.1%
Expressive	Thanking	3	1.1%
	Apologizing	7	2.5%
	Congratulating	1	0.4%
Declarative	Resigning	6	2.1%
	Establishing a state	5	1.8%
Total		281	100%

As Table 2 shows, assertive utterances performed three functions: stating a fact (33 instances), asserting a belief (58 instances), and concluding (31 instances), with asserting a belief the single most

frequent function in the entire dataset. This pattern indicates that the characters' assertive utterances are used less often to report neutral, verifiable facts than to voice personal conviction, such as Spike's principle that he "never trust[s] anything thieves say," a stance rooted in his worldview rather than in externally verifiable evidence. Directive utterances performed three functions: ordering (20), requesting (44), and commanding (40); requesting was the most frequent, suggesting that, despite the high-stakes bounty-hunting premise, a large share of directives occur in everyday, relatively equal-status exchanges among the crew rather than in strict chains of command. Commissive utterances were dominated by offering (25 of 33 instances), consistent with the crew's recurring need to negotiate deals, bounties, and favors with outsiders. Expressive utterances were led by apologizing (7 instances), often delivered with sarcasm rather than sincerity, which is consistent with the characters' generally cynical interpersonal style. Declarative utterances were nearly evenly split between resigning (6) and establishing a state (5), reflecting

both the characters' frequent acceptance of failure after a lost bounty and the occasional moments in which a character's status or relationship within the crew is formally redefined.

These findings can be situated within the broader literature on speech acts in scripted and animated dialogue. Della and Sembiring's study of the *Sleeping Beauty* movie script found that command was the most frequent type of directive speech act, a pattern also visible in the present data, where commanding (40 instances) is the second most frequent directive function after requesting. Aini and Junaid's analysis of directive speech acts in the anime *Oregairu* identified six directive forms, including orders, requests, and advice, and reported that the representative (assertive) type was the most frequently used illocutionary act overall; in the present study, by contrast, directive utterances slightly outnumber assertive utterances, which may reflect genre differences between *Oregairu*'s dialogue-driven school setting and *Cowboy Bebop*'s action-oriented bounty-hunting narrative. Rosi, Dewa, and

Mahendra's study of the film *Merry Riana: Mimpi Sejuta Dollar* similarly found that representative (assertive) speech acts were the most dominant type, accounting for 48.6% of the utterances analyzed, followed by directive, expressive, and commissive acts, a hierarchy broadly consistent with the ranking of assertive and expressive acts found in *Cowboy Bebop*, even though directive acts occupy the top position in the present data rather than the second. Taken together, these comparisons suggest that while assertive and directive acts consistently dominate scripted dialogue across different genres, the relative ranking between them is sensitive to the narrative setting, with action- and negotiation-heavy narratives such as *Cowboy Bebop* tending to elevate the frequency of directive acts.

The predominance of directive and assertive acts in *Cowboy Bebop*'s English dialogue can also be explained by the nature of the series itself. As bounty hunters operating in high-stakes, often dangerous situations, the main characters frequently need to issue commands, make requests under pressure, and

state facts about targets, rewards, and threats, which naturally privileges directive and assertive utterances. At the same time, the more limited but still meaningful presence of commissive, expressive, and declarative acts reveals the interpersonal dimension of the story: promises and offers sustain trust and negotiation among the crew, expressions of gratitude, apology, or annoyance humanize characters who are otherwise emotionally guarded, and declarative acts of naming or establishing status mark pivotal moments in the characters' evolving relationships, such as Faye's transition from prisoner to unofficial crew member. This distribution of speech acts therefore does more than classify individual utterances; it also traces the pragmatic architecture of the characters' relationships as the story progresses across the eleven episodes analyzed.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings support the use of English-dubbed anime dialogue as authentic material for teaching pragmatics and spoken English. Because *Cowboy Bebop's* dialogue combines direct and indirect

strategies, formal and informal registers, and sincere as well as sarcastic expressive acts, it offers learners a naturalistic model of how illocutionary force is signaled in context, a resource that is often difficult to replicate using scripted textbook dialogue.

D. Conclusion

This study examined the types and functions of illocutionary speech acts in the English dialogue of the anime *Cowboy Bebop* (1998), directed by Shinichiro Watanabe, using Searle's (1979) theory of speech acts within a qualitative content analysis design. Two conclusions can be drawn from the findings. First, all five types of speech acts proposed by Searle were found in the English dialogue of the first eleven episodes, totaling 155 utterances: directive (46, 29.7%), assertive (39, 25.2%), expressive (28, 18.1%), commissive (25, 16.1%), and declarative (17, 11.0%). Directive and assertive acts dominated the data, reflecting the action-oriented, negotiation-heavy world of bounty hunting portrayed in the series. Second, each type of speech act performed several distinct

communicative functions, totaling 281 functional instances: assertive acts were used mainly for stating a fact, asserting a belief, and concluding; directive acts for ordering, requesting, and commanding; commissive acts for promising, offering, and vowing; expressive acts for thanking, apologizing, and congratulating; and declarative acts for resigning and establishing a state.

These findings confirm that speech act theory offers a productive framework for analyzing English-dubbed anime dialogue, revealing not only the surface distribution of illocutionary types but also the pragmatic functions that sustain character relationships and narrative development. Based on these conclusions, several suggestions are proposed. For future researchers, this study can be extended by analyzing the remaining episodes of *Cowboy Bebop* or by comparing the English dub with the original Japanese dialogue to examine how localization affects illocutionary force. For the anime community and the general public, the findings offer a deeper understanding of how animated characters communicate intention

through language. For educators and learners of English, *Cowboy Bebop's* dialogue can serve as authentic material for studying spoken English, by presenting relevant scenes as examples and explaining the pragmatic function each utterance performs.

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