Speech Act Analysis of Charlotte McConaghy's *Once There Were Wolves*: An Ecofeminist Study of Abuse and Resistance

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Abstract

Literature and language are inseparable. Reading literature through linguistic analysis can greatly augment our understanding of the author's purpose and the characters' psychology. This paper employs Searle's classification of speech acts to make an ecofeminist reading of Charlotte McConaghy's novel *Once There Were Wolves and* examines how some characters show abuse towards women as well as nature, and others express resistance to it through specific speech acts. It also makes a comparative analysis of the patterns of speech acts of men and women, the oppressor and the oppressed, and those who want to rewild and protect the natural world, and those who stand against it and want to maintain the status quo.

The research establishes a fundamental correlation between language, gender, and the environment. It reveals the significant role of language in shaping and communicating social structures, and highlights the significance of speech act analysis in ecofeminist studies.

Keywords: Speech Act Analysis, Ecofeminism, Abuse, Resistance

1. Introduction

Speech Act Theory studies the use of language in social contexts to perform actions such as making requests, giving orders, making promises, and so on. Speech acts are defined

as actions performed through the use of language and they reflect the speaker's understanding of their relationship to the listener and their intentions in communication (Austin, 1962).

Speech Act analysis focuses on decoding the linguistic patterns of a speech to understand how specific speech acts achieve specific communicative goals of the speaker, such as asserting power, changing opinions, creating social relationships, negotiating identity, challenging norms, and changing the world.

Speech acts are the basic units of study in speech act analysis and are divided into three categories: locutionary acts (the act of uttering words), illocutionary acts (the intended act performed by the utterance), and perlocutionary acts (the effect of the utterance on the hearer). Speech Act Analysis has been applied to a variety of contexts, including political speeches, literary works, and everyday conversations.

Ecofeminism is a theoretical framework that recognizes the interconnectedness of social and environmental issues and how the oppression of women is parallel to the destruction of the environment. Ecofeminist study investigates the relationships between women and the environment in culture, economy, religion, politics and literature while also drawing parallels between the exploitation of women and that of nature (Adams, 1993). Ecofeminists believe that capitalism embodies paternalistic and patriarchal attitudes. They argue that capitalism and materialism have been detrimental to the interests of women and have resulted in a damaging divorce between nature and human civilization (Oksala, 2018). Ecofeminist theory is rooted in the belief that patriarchal and capitalist systems of oppression, and the exploitation and destruction of the natural world, are interconnected.

Published in 2021, Charlotte McConaghy's novel *Once There Were Wolves* is a remarkable example of ecofeminist fiction. It is set in the Scottish Highlands and follows the story of Inti Flynn, a wildlife biologist. She leads a project to reintroduce wolves into the highlands that have been devoid of large predators for centuries. The wolf project faces

aggressive resistance from the local community of ranchers, who fear the wolves will attack their livestock and disrupt their way of life.

The narrative intertwines several subplots of sexual abuse, environmental abuse and patriarchal power dynamics. Inti's twin sister, Aggie, was brutally abused by her husband in the past and is now in an emotionally frozen state. Lainey Burns, the wife of a local rancher, is a victim of brutal domestic violence inflicted by her husband, Stuart Burns, who is shown to be indifferent towards his wife as he is towards the horses in his stable. He shows his cold ownership of both. Duncan MacTavish, a local sheriff, falls in love with Inti. He is shown struggling between his sympathy for the local people and the wolf project. In his childhood, he was a witness to domestic violence inflicted on his mother by his abusive father. He had killed his father in a rage after seeing him beat his mother to death.

As Inti, along with her team, works to reintroduce the wolves, she faces numerous challenges, including sabotage by local opponents who threaten to kill the wolves if they come near their livestock and families. Meanwhile, Inti is challenged with saving the wolves as Stuart Burns was found dead, and the ranchers put the blame on them. With all such ups and downs, the story culminates in the wolves acclimatizing to their new habitat and starting to reproduce. Inti and the female wolf are shown in the pain of childbirth together. Eventually, there is emancipation of both – the women and the natural world.

2. Literature Review

The speech act theory was first introduced by J.L. Austin in 1959 and was further advanced by John Searle (4). While Austin focused on the classical understanding of speech acts, Searle prioritized a psychological explanation grounded in opinions, motives, and other factors.

According to Yule (5), speech acts are actions carried out by speaking. He identified two distinct types of speech acts: direct speech acts and indirect speech acts. The three

structural sentence forms – declarative, interrogative, and imperative – as well as the three chief communicative functions – statement, inquiry, and order – are the foundations of this classification. These three combinations of structures and functions of sentences resulted in the model of direct and indirect speech acts.

Trosborg, A. (6) applied speech act theory to the analysis of interlanguage pragmatics, focusing on how non-native speakers of a language use speech acts in social interactions.

Nischik (7) applied the speech act theory to Margaret Atwood's *Uglypuss*. He concluded that the speech acts and their narrative interweaving provide an apparent distinction between the two major protagonists' respective characterizations of activeness and inactiveness, directness and indirectness, initiative and reactiveness, frankness and complicity and interest and absence of it.

Differentiating between general act verbs and speech act verbs, Verschueren (8) thoroughly described the performative character of speech act verbs. According to his theory, an action verb is a performative speech act verb when its function can satisfy both the "action condition or characteristic" of the act that needs to be carried out and the "descriptive condition or characteristic" of the act as it manifests in language. However, an action verb cannot be classified as a speech act verb if it partially meets or complies with the "action condition or characteristic" but not the "descriptive condition or characteristic."

Rahmayani and Dwiyuliana (9) applied speech act analysis to Barack Obama's Speech and concluded that the dominant type of speech act in Obama's speech is representative because he ensures, asserts, and informs the viewers. The least used speech acts are expressives and commissives in his speeches.

Oloo et. al. (10) applied speech act analysis to Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source* and *I Swear by Apollo.* They demonstrated that each speech act has a wide range of

sub-acts distinguished by their felicity criteria. The context of the speech dictates the usage and importance of each illocutionary force and speech act.

Maged and Dab'e (11) analyzed the speech acts in Tony Morrison's *Jazz* and concluded that representative speech acts can function as storytelling acts, and expressive speech acts can highlight psychological attitudes of the characters. Furthermore, the use of expressive speech acts is meant to illustrate and critique the socioeconomic circumstances of the postmodern age, wherein individuals were slaves to fate and human emotions were communicated via a variety of expressive and representative speech acts that changed according to the societal and emotional context.

Reviewing McConaghy's *Once There Were Wolves*, Lane (12) comments that the author ventures back to the well-known ground, addressing an environmental disaster, hidden pain, and the awe of the natural world alongside a different, fearless and wounded lead character. Seemingly unfit to lead the Cairngorms Wolf Project, Inti Flynn describes herself as an irritable Australian who finds it hard to hide disdain and is terrible at public speaking.

Rachmasari et. al. (13) explored human interferences to rewild nature as depicted in the novel. They conclude that the novel's three dimensions of human intervention significantly influence the conservation of the natural world. The wolves begin to reproduce and get stronger. As a result, the deer population is gradually declining, stabilizing the ecology. The Scottish Highlands are now an astounding destination, with nature gradually returning to its original condition. Although the rewilding initiative was successful, everyone shares the obligation of maintaining forests because humans are a part of nature.

Though there have been multiple articles on speech act analysis of literary texts, the applicability of speech act theory to modern writing, like *McConaughy's Once There Were Wolves*, is still largely unexplored. While a few scholars have examined themes such as

feminist thought, trauma, and environmentalism, none have concentrated primarily on the speech acts of the main characters and their effect on the overall discourse.

3. Materials and Methods

The research draws on the theoretical framework of Speech Act Analysis to examine how the language used by the characters in *Once There Were Wolves* expresses abuse and resistance. It analyzes language in terms of its intended function and its effects on the listener. The research employs Austin's theory of speech acts and Searle's classification of speech acts to analyze the ecofeminist expressions in the novel.

The categories used in this study were based on Searle's classification of speech acts. It is a widely used framework for analyzing the use of language to perform various social actions or speech acts. Searle classifies speech acts into five main types. Assertive speech acts – affirmations, denials, or predictions – convey information and make statements about the world. Directive speech acts – commands, requests, or suggestions – are intended to get someone else to do something. Commissive speech acts that commit the speaker to a future course of action take the form of promises, threats, or offers. Expressive speech acts – compliments, apologies, or congratulations – convey the attitude or emotional state of the speaker. Declarative speech acts – pronouncements, oaths, or verdicts – are utterances that change the world simply by being said.

The research examines 816 identified speech acts in the novel *Once There Were Wolves.* These speech acts are made by prominent characters, including the biologist Inti Flynn, chief superintendent of police Duncan MacTavish, all the ranchers, the abusive husband and rancher Stuart Burns, his wife Lainey Burns, Inti's mother, her father, and her identical twin sister Aggie Flynn.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

Table 1 presents a character-wise comparative analysis of all 816 speech acts collected from the novel. Subsequent figures 1,2,3 and 4 present the classification of the speech acts made by the characters Inti Flynn, Duncan MacTavish, Evan, and the Ranchers. Inti Flynn emerges as the most assertive and directive in her speech acts, while Duncan MacTavish's speech acts are mostly declarative, directive, and assertive in nature. The ranchers are seen as very aggressive as they resist the project of the reintroduction of wolves in the forests led by Inti and her team. Their speech acts are mostly commissive as they warn and threaten the project team. Evan, a team member of the wolf project, is mostly assertive in his speech as he tries to explain and convince the ranchers about the harmlessness of the project. Stuart Burns is a typical patriarchal husband who abuses his wife and condescends all women. His speech acts are mostly commissive as he threatens and warns his wife as well as Inti. Lainey Burns's speech acts undergo a surprising shift from expressive in the beginning to assertive after the death of her husband. Inti's mother, a crime detective, mostly uses directive speech acts as she directs and commands her daughters to be careful in the cruel world. Her father mostly uses Assertive speech acts to argue that protecting the wolves is not just a matter of environmental preservation, but also a way of valuing the interconnectedness of all living beings.

Character	Total No. of Speech Acts	Assertives	Directives	Commissives	Expressives	Declaratives
Inti Flynn	383	162 (42%)	152 (40%)	19 (5%)	21 (5%)	29 (8%)
Duncan MacTavish	162	39 (24%)	42 (26%)	20 (12%)	9 (6%)	52 (32 %)
The Ranchers	84	23 (27%)	16 (19%)	33 (39%)	0 (0%)	12 (14%)
Evan	41	22 (54%)	8 (20%)	5 (12%)	0 (0%)	6 (15%)
Stuart Burns	21	6 (29%)	4 (19%)	8 (38%)	0 (0%)	3 (14%)
Lainey Burns	34	22 (65%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	12 (35%)	0 (0%)
Inti's Mother	36	8 (22%)	16 (44%)	6 (17%)	0 (0%)	6 (17%)
Inti's Father	20	12 (60%)	8 (40%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Aggie Flynn	35	11 (31%)	15 (43%)	3 (9%)	0 (0%)	6 (17%)

Table 1: Character-wise distribution of all 816 speech acts in *Once There Were Wolves*

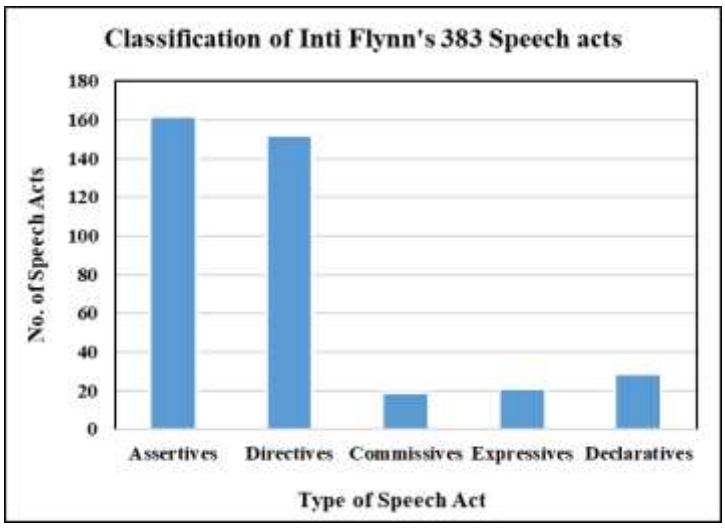


Figure 1: Analysis of Inti's 383 speech acts

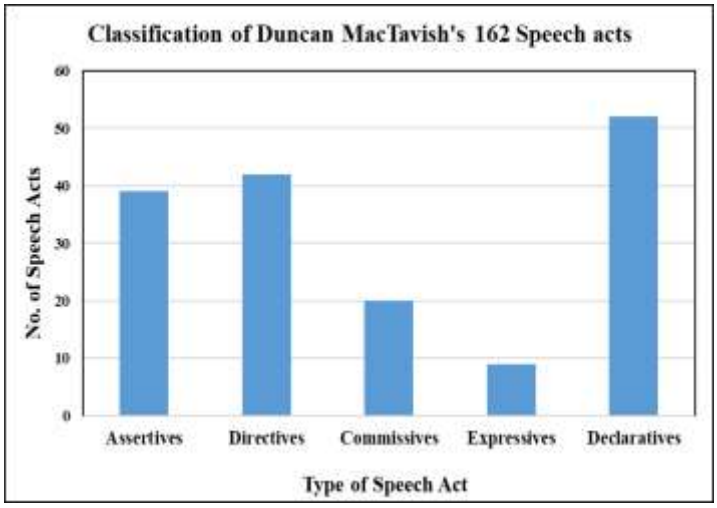


Figure 2: Analysis of Duncan's 162 speech acts

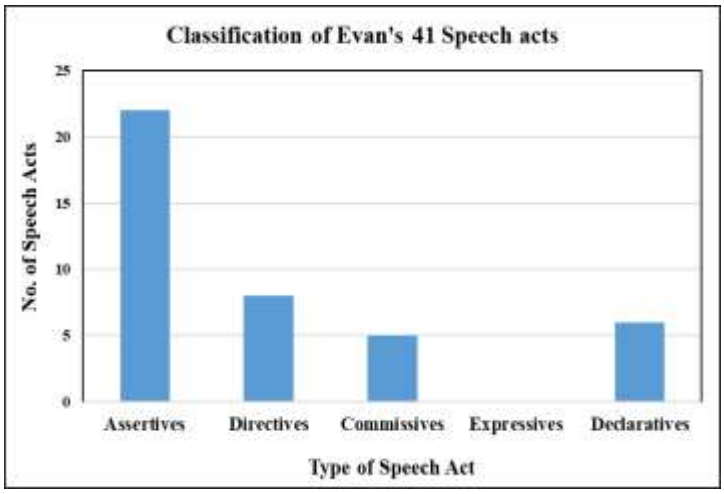


Figure 3: Analysis of Evan's 41 speech acts

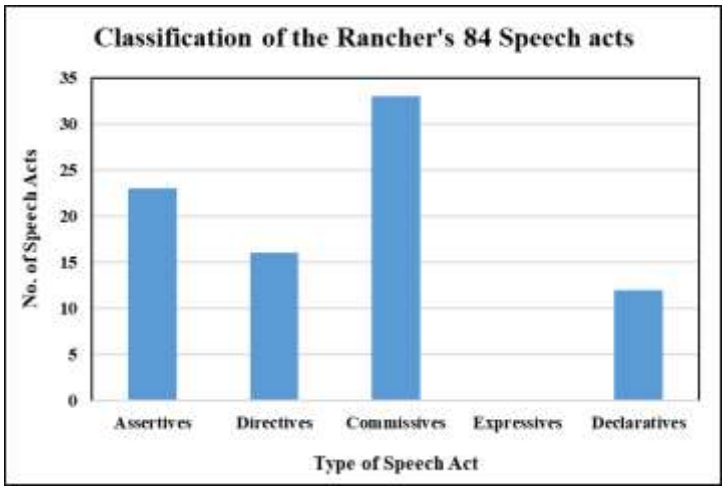


Figure 4: Analysis of the Ranchers' 84 speech acts

4.1 Analysis of Assertive Speech Acts

Assertive speech acts convey the speakers' thoughts, convictions, or verifiable claims about the world. These speech acts seek to elucidate a point or demonstrate the veracity of a statement. They convey a sense of confidence, certainty, and a clear expression of beliefs or ideas. Assertive speech is used by the characters in *Once There Were Wolves* to challenge the dominant discourse of the ranchers who view the wolves as "killing machines" that threaten their way of life, while also asserting the women's agency in the patriarchal society. They drive the narrative forward, enriching the story with vivid descriptions, compelling insights, and thought-provoking ideas about the natural world and humanity's relationship with it.

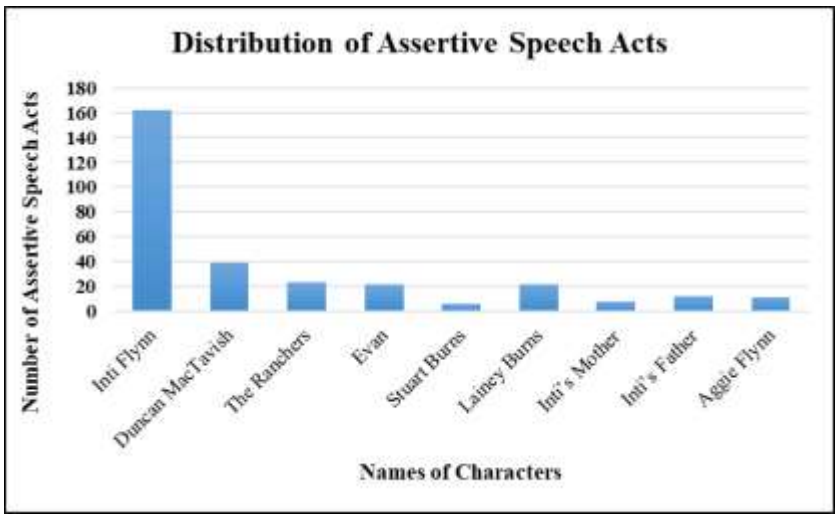
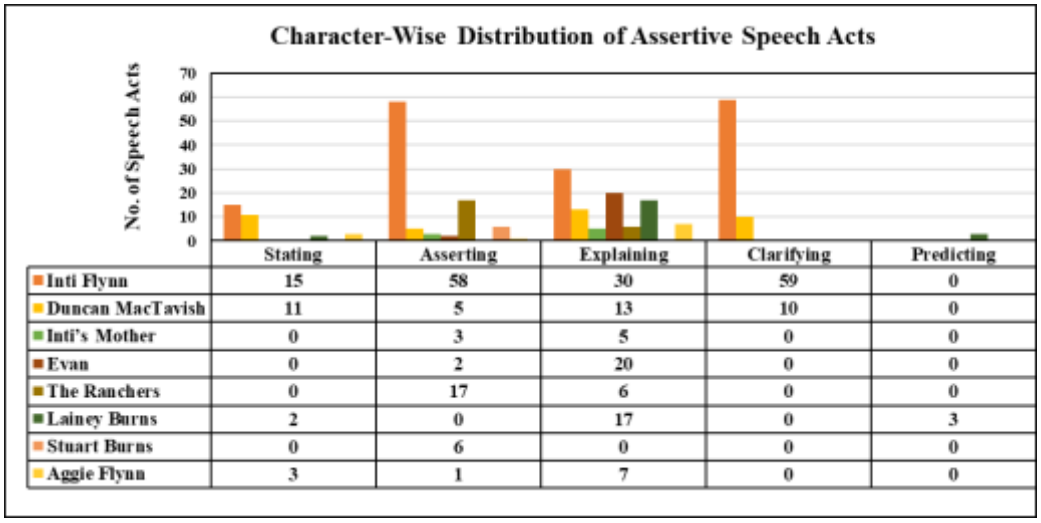


Figure 5: Distribution of all 293 Assertive Speech Acts in *Once There Were Wolves*



	Stating	Asserting	Explaining	Clarifying	Predicting
Inti Flynn	15	58	30	59	0
Duncan MacTavish	11	5	13	10	0
Inti's Mother	0	3	5	0	0
Evan	0	2	20	0	0
The Ranchers	0	17	6	0	0
Lainey Burns	2	0	17	0	3
Stuart Burns	0	6	0	0	0
Aggie Flynn	3	1	7	0	0

Figure 6: A

Comparative Table of all Types of Assertive Speech Acts Made by Different Characters in *Once There Were Wolves*

As shown in Figure 5, Inti Flynn emerges as the most assertive character in the novel. She uses assertive speech to emphasize the need for reintroducing the wolves into the Scottish Highlands and to clarify the doubts and objections of the ranchers against the project.

Figure 6 presents a comparative analysis of all types of assertive speech acts made by different characters in the novel. Inti Flynn's 162 assertive speech acts comprise mainly of asserting (36%) and clarifying (37%). Other characters employing assertive speech acts the most are Evan and Lainey. While Evan uses assertive speech to protect the wolf project as well as the newly introduced wolves in the Scottish Highlands, Lainey seems to defend her feminine identity and assert her agency after the death of her abusive husband. 65% of her speech is assertive, while 35% is expressive. In the presence of her husband, she is seen as a meek and submissive woman, apologizing and regretting everything, but after his death, she emerges as a stronger woman asserting her ownership of her land and business.

4.2 Analysis of Directive Speech Acts

Directive speech acts are used to provoke an action. They are made when the speakers demand that the listeners do something for them. Speech acts that fall under the category of directive speech include commanding, requesting, insisting, questioning, suggesting, proposing, etc.

Figure 7 presents the distribution of 261 directive speech acts collected from the novel across all characters. Directive speech acts are used in the novel to assert power and control over others. Results establish Inti Flynn as the most authoritative speaker in the novel, making the highest number of directive speech acts.

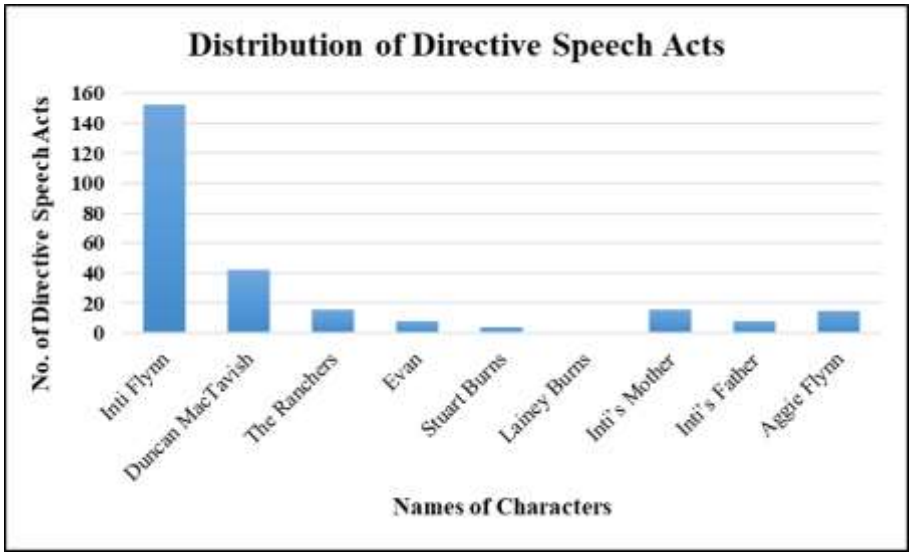
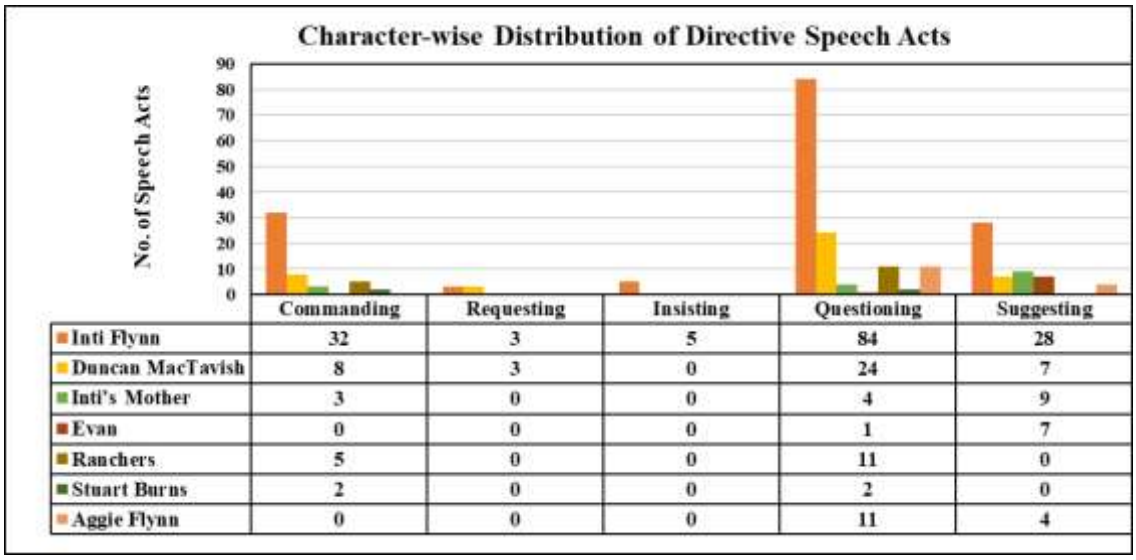


Figure 7: Distribution of all 261 Directive Speech Acts in *Once There Were Wolves*



	Commanding	Requesting	Insisting	Questioning	Suggesting
Inti Flynn	32	3	5	84	28
Duncan MacTavish	8	3	0	24	7
Inti's Mother	3	0	0	4	9
Evan	0	0	0	1	7
Ranchers	5	0	0	11	0
Stuart Burns	2	0	0	2	0
Aggie Flynn	0	0	0	11	4

Figure 8: A Comparative Table of all Types of Directive Speech Acts Made by Different Characters in *Once There Were Wolves*

Figure 8 presents a comparative analysis of all types of directive speech acts made by different characters in the novel. Inti makes 152 directive speech acts (40% of her total speech acts), which comprise mainly questioning (55%), commanding (21%), and suggesting (19%). These speech acts reveal Inti's concerns for the environment and her commitment to protecting the wolves and thereby the natural world. She is often seen questioning the established social norms, the ranchers' selfish attitude towards the environment, and men's

patriarchal attitude towards women. This highlights the important role that women can play in environmental activism and underscores the need for a more ecofeminist approach to protecting the planet. Duncan is concerned about the safety of local people and makes directive speech acts, mostly questioning, to ensure peace in the highlands. Inti's mother, a detective, has seen abusive patriarchal men as criminals and, therefore, she directs her daughters to learn to be strong.

4.3 Analysis of Commissive Speech Acts

Commissive speech acts refer to linguistic expressions through which speakers commit themselves to future actions or states of affairs. These speech acts, including offering, warning, threatening, guaranteeing, and promising, serve as the initial indicators of characters' intentions, motivations, and interpersonal relationships.

Figure 9 presents the distribution of 94 commissive speech acts collected from the novel across all characters. Commissive speech acts in *Once There Were Wolves* are used primarily by the ranchers (39% of their total speech acts).

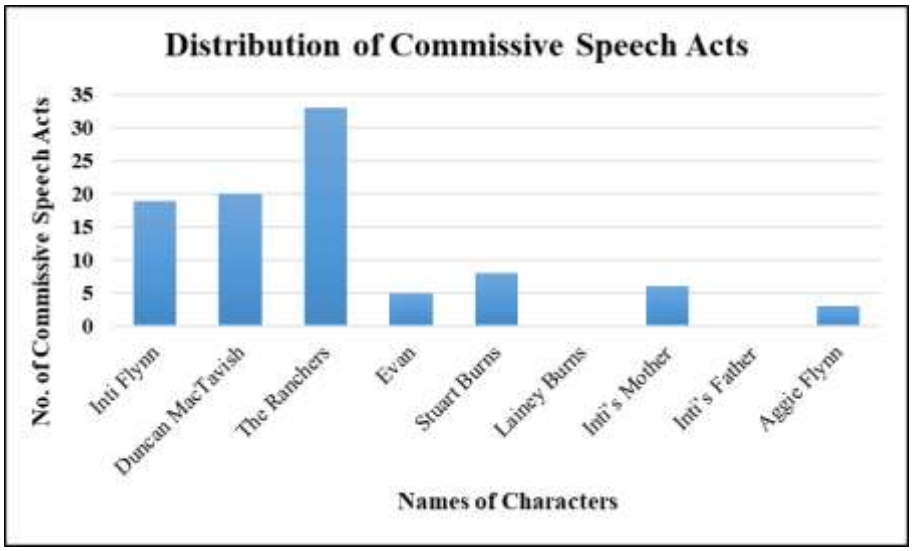
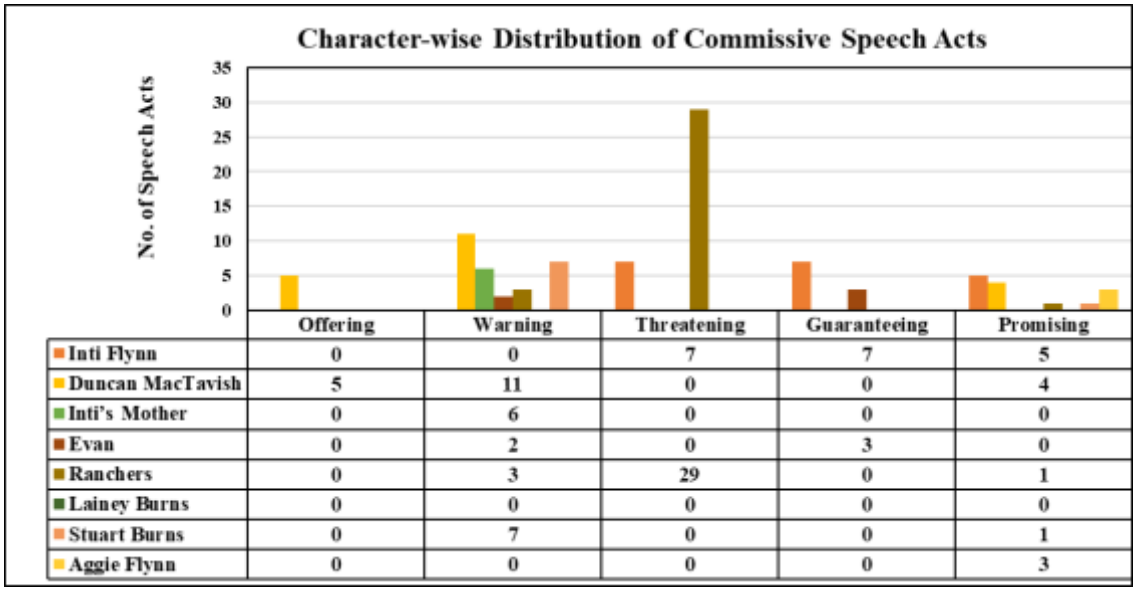


Figure 9: Distribution of all 94 Commissive Speech Acts in *Once There Were Wolves*



	Offering	Warning	Threatening	Guaranteeing	Promising
Inti Flynn	0	0	7	7	5
Duncan MacTavish	5	11	0	0	4
Inti's Mother	0	6	0	0	0
Evan	0	2	0	3	0
Ranchers	0	3	29	0	1
Lainey Burns	0	0	0	0	0
Stuart Burns	0	7	0	0	1
Aggie Flynn	0	0	0	0	3

Figure 10: A Comparative Table of all Types of Commissive Speech Acts Made by Different Characters in *Once There Were Wolves*

As shown in Figure 10, the Ranchers use commissive speech acts to warn and threaten the wolf project team against any harm done by the wolves to their families and livestock. They threaten to kill the wolves as they have been doing for generations. These threats serve as a manifestation of the ranchers' deep-seated concerns about potential conflicts with livestock, economic interests, and perceived threats to their way of life. By employing commissive speech acts – particularly threats – the ranchers assert their stance and exert pressure on other characters involved in the project, contributing to the escalating tensions and conflicts central to the development of the narrative. Inti Flynn, on the other hand, uses commissive speech acts to promise, guarantee, and eventually threaten to express a commitment to taking action for environmental protection and gender equality. Duncan uses commissive speech acts to warn her against the dangers of walking alone in the local patriarchal society.

4.4 Analysis of Expressive Speech Acts

Expressive speech acts carry the speaker's feelings and emotions about themselves or the world. Speech acts that fall under the category of expressive speech include thanking,

regretting, apologizing, exclaiming, appreciating, etc. There are very rare instances of expressive speech acts in the novel. Except for Inti, Lainey, and Duncan, all other characters are seen to be materialistic, practical, selfish, or hardened by experiences. Through expressive speech acts, the characters in the novel create alternative narratives that prioritize the protection of the natural environment and the empowerment of women. These expressive speech acts convey the emotions and feelings of the characters, expressing their love for the natural world, their grief at its destruction, and their sense of urgency to protect it. They also reflect the connection between emotions and environmental values, highlighting the emotional dimensions of ecofeminism and environmental activism.

Figure 11 illustrates the distribution of 42 expressive speech acts collected from the novel across all characters. It shows that only three characters – Inti, Duncan and Lainey – engage in expressive speech acts. This shows the practical attitude of Inti's father, her mother, Aggie and Evan, who seem to have become hardened through their experiences. It also reflects the consumerist attitude of other characters like the Ranchers and Stuart, who are concerned only about their lives, not the environment.

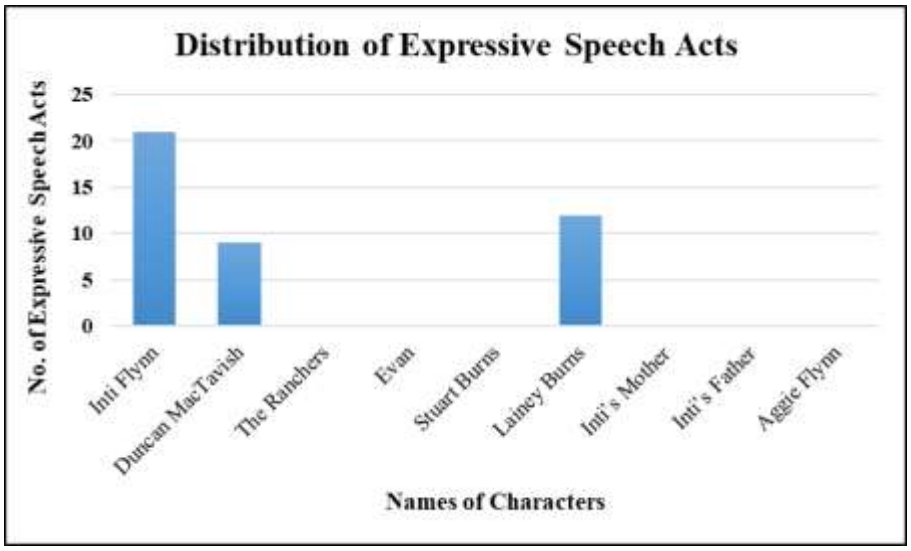
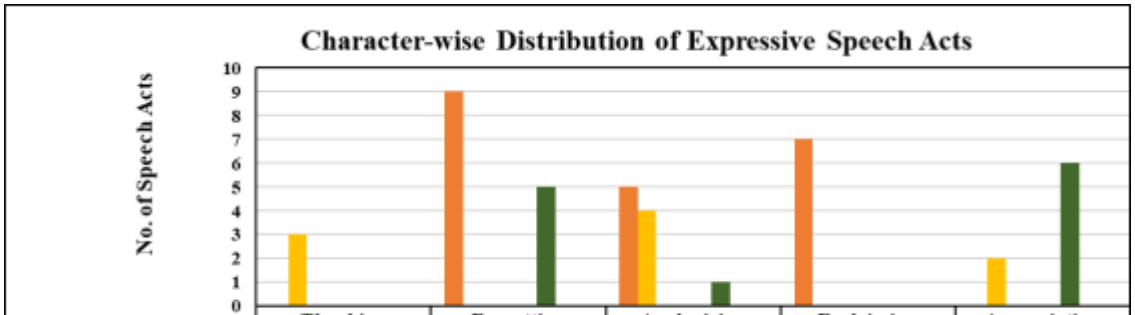


Figure 11: Distribution of all 42 Expressive Speech Acts in *Once There Were Wolves*



	Thanking	Regretting	Apologizing	Exclaiming	Appreciating
Inti Flynn	0	9	5	7	0
Duncan MacTavish	3	0	4	0	2
Inti's Mother	0	0	0	0	0
Evan	0	0	0	0	0
Ranchers	0	0	0	0	0
Lainey Burns	0	5	1	0	6
Stuart Burns	0	0	0	0	0
Aggie Flynn	0	0	0	0	0

Figure 12: A Comparative Table of all Types of Expressive Speech Acts Made by Different Characters in *Once There Were Wolves*

Figure 12 presents a comparative table of all types of expressive speech acts made by different characters in the novel. Inti Flynn often exclaims at the sight of the wolves, regrets not being able to protect all the wolves, and apologizes to Aggie for not being strong enough to save her from her abusive husband. Duncan is found thanking and appreciating Inti after understanding her genuine concern for the highlands, and also apologizing for misunderstanding her. Lainey, like any typical woman in a patriarchal family, is often seen apologizing, regretting and appreciating. However, she speaks more freely after her husband's death and expresses her love for the natural world and her appreciation of Inti for saving the highlands by reintroducing the wolves.

4.5 Analysis of Declarative Speech Acts

Declarative speech acts bring about instantaneous changes in the world. They are statements made by a speaker with the intention of altering the course of events after the speech act has been made. Analyzing the frequency of declarative speech acts among characters can reveal power imbalances and hierarchies within the narrative. Characters who

make more declarations might be seen as exerting more authority or control over others, while those with fewer instances may have less influence or agency.

Figure 13 presents the distribution of 114 declarative speech acts collected from the novel across all characters. Duncan MacTavish makes most of the declarative speech acts in the novel (46% of all declaratives).

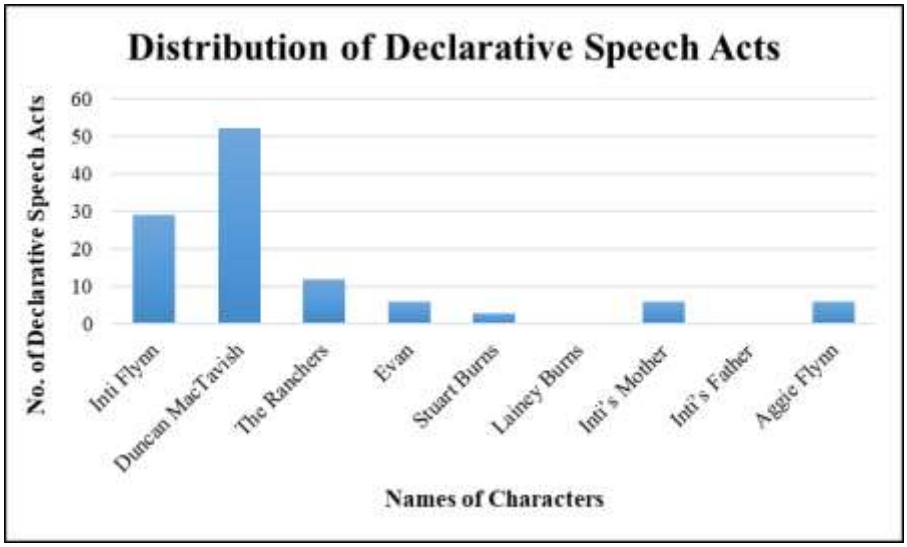
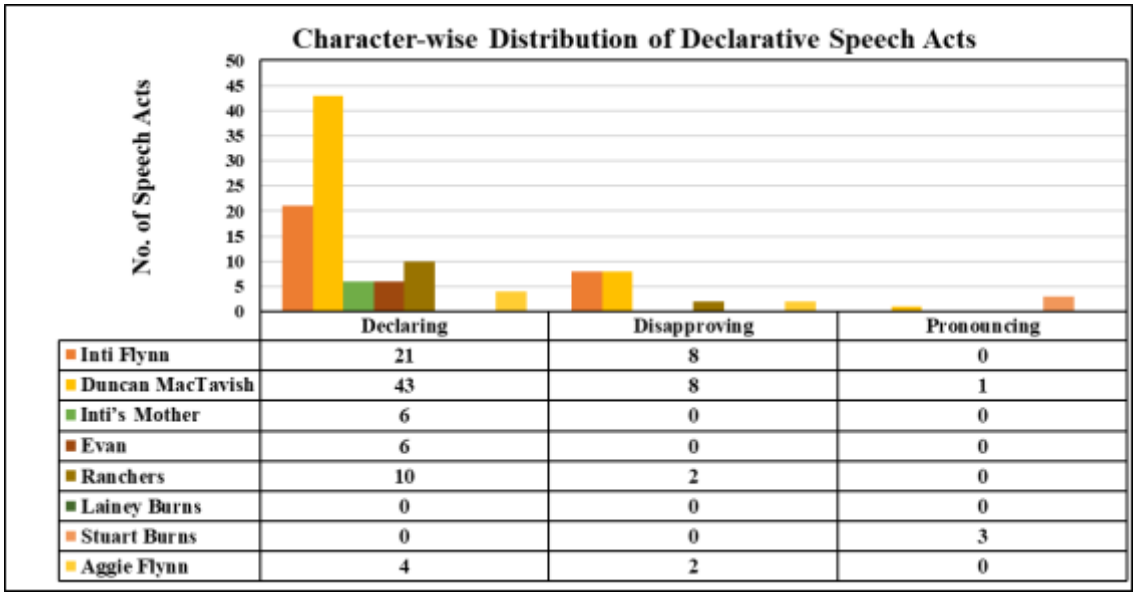


Figure 13: Distribution of all 114 Declarative Speech Acts in *Once There Were Wolves*



	Declaring	Disapproving	Pronouncing
Inti Flynn	21	8	0
Duncan MacTavish	43	8	1
Inti's Mother	6	0	0
Evan	6	0	0
Ranchers	10	2	0
Lainey Burns	0	0	0
Stuart Burns	0	0	3
Aggie Flynn	4	2	0

Figure 14: A Comparative Table of all Types of Declarative Speech Acts Made by Different Characters in *Once There Were Wolves*

Figure 14 presents a comparative table of all types of declarative speech acts made by different characters in the novel. The majority of the declarative speech acts in the novel comprise declarations, disapprovals, and pronouncements. Duncan makes 43 declarations showing his authority in the town as a superintendent of police. He represents a figure of dominance within the narrative. His high frequency of declarative speech acts suggests a strong presence and influence over others, potentially reflecting patriarchal power structures within the society. Inti Flynn also uses declarative speech acts sporadically, which reflect her strong will and commitment in the face of opposition from the ranchers, who also use declarative speech to show their claim on the lands and disapprove of the objectives of the wolf project.

5. Conclusion

The study reveals that the characters in *Once There Were Wolves* use language as a tool for resistance and agency. It shows how linguistic choices—assertions, commands, declarations, refusals and silences—become instruments of both domination and defiance.

The most significant finding is the remarkable use of Assertive and Directive speech acts by the female characters to exercise power and express agency in challenging situations. Characters such as Inti Flynn, her father, Duncan MacTavish and Evan, who are working towards environmental protection and reintroduction of wolves in the Scottish Highlands, are mostly found using assertive and directive speech acts. The same is the case with strong independent women like Inti, her mother and her sister Aggie. On the contrary, the Ranchers, who are against the wolf project as well as patriarchal men like Stuart Burns, are seen using commissive speech acts to threaten others. Another interesting finding is the change in the speech acts of Lainey Burns, from primarily expressive to mostly assertive, after the death of her abusive husband.

The study also draws parallels between the exploitation of women and environmental damage, demonstrating how verbal resistance undermines both patriarchal and anthropocentric institutions. Inti Flynn, the protagonist of the novel, emerges as a strong ecofeminist voice who uses language to resist the patriarchal society and its oppressive practices not only against women but also against nature.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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