



Representation of Independent Women on A Miniseries Entitled Self-Made Inspired by The Life of Madam C.J. Walker: Pragmatics Study

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Abstract. This study explores the ways in which speech acts shape and convey the image of an independent woman in the miniseries *Self Made*, as embodied through the character of Sarah Breedlove (Madam C. J. Walker). The study is directed toward three objectives: (1) examining how the notion of independent womanhood is constructed by means of speech acts, (2) identifying the categories of speech acts utilized, and (3) elaborating on how these speech acts portray women's independence. A qualitative descriptive approach is adopted, drawing on pragmatic analysis rooted in speech act theory as formulated by Austin and Searle. The data are drawn from selected utterances delivered by the main character across pivotal scenes throughout the series. The findings demonstrate that independence is built through language that captures resilience, defiance against social and gender constraints, economic self-sufficiency, and leadership. Four categories of speech acts are identified: assertives, directives, commissives, and declaratives. Each speech plays a distinct role in the construction of meaning and identity. Of particular note, the study reveals that speech acts convey independence through personal agency, acts of resistance, financial autonomy, identity assertion, and collective empowerment. These findings underscore that language does not merely communicate meaning, but also embodies and reinforces women's independence. Taken together, the findings indicate that speech acts in *Self Made* operate as potent instruments in portraying independent womanhood, attesting to the capacity of discourse to shape agency and drive social transformation.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Representation, Sarah Breedloves, *Self Made*, Speech Acts, Women's Independence.

1 Introduction

The portrayal of women in media has long attracted considerable scholarly attention. The growing freedom women have to assert their presence and demonstrate their capabilities across various fields reflects the shifting norms of society and its evolving cultural narratives. Within today's media environment, the figure of the independent woman is becoming more prevalent, pushing back against longstanding stereotypes and

introducing new perspectives on female empowerment and self-determination. These portrayals serve not only as a mirror of changing societal attitudes toward gender roles, but also shape public perception and fuel individual ambition. Hall argues that representation is essentially the process of conveying or depicting something, whether a person, an event, or an object, by means of an external element, typically in the form of a sign or symbol [1]. Representation is not always tangible but can also convey imaginary worlds, fantasies, and abstract ideas.

The miniseries *Self Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C.J. Walker* presents a captivating story of a self-reliant woman confronting socio-economic hardships in early twentieth-century America. This dramatized biographical account traces the remarkable journey of Madam C.J. Walker, recognized as the first African-American woman to become a self-made millionaire, shedding light on her path as an entrepreneur, her unwavering determination, and her dedication to advancing her community. Walker's sense of independence stems from her ability to define herself on her own terms and to reclaim power against the prevailing stereotypes imposed on Black womanhood. Throughout the miniseries, she is depicted rejecting submissive roles, forging her own identity as a businesswoman, and exercising personal agency, embodying what Collins describes as the liberating potential of self-defined standpoints among Black women [2].

This miniseries serves as a powerful medium to explore themes of independence, ambition, and the intersectionality of race and gender. "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts... that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a natural sort of being." [3, p.33].

This study aims to examine how the miniseries represents women's independence through the lens of pragmatics. Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that focuses on the meaning communicated by a speaker and interpreted by a listener [4, p.3]. The analysis focuses on language use, contextual meaning, and the social implications embedded in dialogue and interaction. One branch of pragmatics is speech acts. Austin's Key Idea about speech acts is "To say something is to do something" [5]. The meanings embedded within an utterance can be revealed through conversation that is grounded in context. Speech acts are not confined to real-life interactions alone; they can equally be found across a wide range of dialogues in entertainment media, including films, dramas, and television series. Film, in particular, also functions as a medium through which reality is reflected [6, p.260]. This study aims to explore a deeper narrative that highlights the portrayal of female independence within the miniseries "Self Made." In the field of Pragmatics, the concept used to uncover the meaning behind an utterance is known as Implicature: a framework that investigates meanings that are suggested rather than explicitly expressed [7]. This proves particularly significant in *Self Made*, where indirect forms of communication serve as a reflection of social hierarchy, racial tension, and gender inequality. Furthermore, implicature analysis is capable of delving into the underlying meaning embedded within statements exchanged throughout a conversation [8]. Therefore, from the opinions above, it can be understood that readers, listeners, or viewers can interpret the speaker's intent and purpose in a conversation even if the speaker or writer does not convey it directly or explicitly.

Drawing from this background, the research questions addressed in this study are: in what ways does the miniseries "Self Made" employ speech acts to shape the representation of an independent woman? And what categories of speech acts are used by the character Sarah Breedlove/Madam C. J. Walker, and how do these acts linguistically enact empowerment and agency?

By centering on the story of a Black woman entrepreneur, this study fills a gap in existing speech act research, which has predominantly concentrated on Western-centric or non-marginalized subjects. It provides both a linguistic and socio-cultural examination of female agency, independence, and representation. The study makes a timely contribution to ongoing conversations surrounding gender representation in media, illustrating how narratives of independent women are shaped and understood through the use of language. It additionally underscores the value of a pragmatic lens in bringing to light the subtler layers of meaning found within media texts.

2 Method

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative research approach to examine speech acts as depicted in the miniseries *Self Made*. Qualitative research itself is characterized as a method for investigating and comprehending the meanings that individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem [10]. In line with this, qualitative descriptive studies "provide a comprehensive summary of events in the everyday terms of those events" [11]. This study further employs a descriptive qualitative design as put forward by Moleong [9], which centers on gaining understanding of phenomena through thorough description and interpretation. This approach proves especially fitting for the analysis of media discourse, as it allows for an in-depth investigation of both linguistic and contextual dimensions within the narrative. Rather than placing emphasis on numerical data, this method gives precedence to meaning, interpretation, and representation. As such, it is well-suited for examining how speech acts function in constructing and portraying women's independence through the utterances of Sarah Breedlove in *Self Made*, while drawing attention to the ways in which language mirrors gender empowerment within a historical and social context.

The primary source of data is the 2020 Netflix miniseries *Self Made: Inspired by the Life of Madam C.J. Walker*, comprising four episodes that dramatize the life of Sarah Breedlove. The analytical focus is directed toward the characterization of Madam C.J. Walker, particularly in moments that illuminate themes of female empowerment, resilience, and self-determination. The selection of data was carried out through purposive sampling of dialogues and scenes in which the protagonist exhibits agency, navigates power dynamics, or faces social adversity.

Data collection was conducted through documentation and note-taking techniques, widely used in qualitative media research to capture textual and visual elements while preserving the integrity of the source material. The researcher watched the miniseries on multiple occasions, recording verbatim transcripts of selected dialogues alongside detailed contextual notes on relevant scenes, including non-verbal cues, setting, and interpersonal dynamics. This approach enabled a thorough record of linguistic choices

and their pragmatic significance, while repeated cross-checking against the original content ensured the reliability of the data.

3 Results and Discussion

Data #1: Episode 1

Sarah Walker : "Making Products for our hairs is my passion, hasn't been easy, but no matter what, I refuse to give up the fight".

The utterance by Sarah Breedlove in *Self Made*, "Making products for our hair is my passion... I refuse to give up the fight," reflects strong personal determination. At the locutionary level, Sarah expresses her passion, struggle, and persistence.

At the illocutionary level, the utterance functions as an assertive, expressing belief, and a commissive, committing to perseverance. The phrase "I refuse to give up" highlights her determination.

While for a representational perspective, independence is constructed through agency and resistance. "My passion" signals self-driven purpose, while acknowledging difficulty represents independence as a process shaped by struggle. The utterance portrays an independent woman as resilient, determined, and actively shaping her own path.

Data #2: Episode 1

Sarah: "Maybe I could sell your product, I'd be honoured, in fact".

Addie: "I don't think Sales is for you"

Sarah's utterance "Maybe I could sell your product, I'd be honoured," in the interaction between her and Addie functions as an indirect directive combined with an expressive, using politeness to seek opportunity. This reflects emerging independence, where she navigates social hierarchy carefully. Addie's reply, "I don't think sales is for you," is a dismissive assertive that restricts her potential. Representationally, independence is shown as something developed through rejection and persistence, where obstacles become motivation for self-reliance.

Data #3: Episode 1

Sarah Walker: "From now on, I am doing my own hair, making my own hair grower. I'm through with Addie Munroe".

The utterance "From now on... I'm through with Addie Munroe" functions as a commissive and declarative, marking a decisive shift in Sarah's life. The utterance functions as a commissive shows She commits to producing her own products while symbolically ending dependence. Independence is represented through self-reliance and ownership, emphasized by repetition of "my own," indicating control over both her work and identity.

Data #4: Episode 1

Sarah Walker: "I can't be a washerwoman for the rest of life, CJ. I'll be a millionaire"

Sarah's utterance "I can't be a washerwoman... I'll be a millionaire" functions as an assertive and commissive, rejecting her present condition and committing to a new future. The strong certainty in "I'll be" highlights her determination. Independence is constructed through ambition and future vision, showing a woman who challenges imposed social roles and defines her own success.

Data #5: Episode 1

Sarah Walker: "All I'm saying is don't gamble your future away on that man, Any man! Always make your own money"

The utterance by Sarah Walker to her daughter Leila "Don't gamble your future... Always make your own money" functions as a directive and assertive, offering advice based on belief. The imperative form emphasizes urgency. Independence is represented through financial autonomy, positioning economic self-reliance as essential for women to maintain control over their lives.

Data #6: Episode 1

Sarah Walker: "Everything we negroes reflects back on us, So if I can help one person, I'm lifting us all up".

The utterance by Sarah Breedlove in *Self Made*, "Everything we Negroes reflects back on us, so if I can help one person, I'm lifting us all up," reflects a broader dimension of independence that extends beyond the individual to the collective. The statement functions as an assertive with commissive nuance, expressing belief in collective responsibility. By linking individual success to community uplift, Sarah constructs independence as collective empowerment, where personal achievement contributes to broader social progress.

Data #7: Episode 1

Addie: "Sarah.."

Sarah: "No No..., You want to speak to me? You call me Madam CJ Walker"

The interaction between Sarah Breedlove and Addie, where Addie says, "Sarah.." and Sarah responds, "No, no... You want to speak to me? You call me Madam C. J. Walker," demonstrates a powerful assertion of identity, authority, self definition, and independence as she controls how she is recognized and addressed by others. At the locutionary level, Sarah corrects how she is addressed, insisting on being called by her professional title. So, that functions as a directive and declarative.

Data #8: Episode 2

CJ Walker: " His support can triple your business, that's why I figured me and Daddy, take Jhon"

Sarah Walker: " what about me?"

CJ Walker:" All the wives, they congregate in the kitchen, they make refreshment".

Sarah Walker: " How am I supposed to meet investor and hear speeches from the kitchen?"

The conversation between Sarah Walker and her husband CJ Walker highlights the negotiation of women's independence within restrictive gender roles. At the locutionary level, CJ explains that men will attend the convention to gain business opportunities, while women are expected to remain in the kitchen preparing refreshments. Sarah responds by questioning this arrangement: "How am I supposed to meet investors and hear speeches from the kitchen?". CJ's explanation functions as an assertive reinforcing traditional roles, while Sarah's response is a directive/assertive challenge questioning exclusion. Her rhetorical question challenges the logic of limiting women to domestic spaces. Independence is represented through resistance to gender norms and demand for equal opportunity.

Data #9: Episode 2

Sarah Walker: "All I'm saying is don't gamble your future away on that man, Any man! Always make your own money"

The utterance by Sarah Walker, "All I'm saying is don't gamble your future away on that man, any man! Always make your own money," emphasizes the importance of financial independence. At the locutionary level, Sarah advises against relying on men and stresses the need for economic self-sufficiency. At the illocutionary level, Sarah's utterance functions as a directive and assertive, warning against dependence on men. The phrase "make your own money" reinforces the message. Independence is constructed through economic control, highlighting financial independence as a foundation for personal freedom.

Data #10: Episode 2

Sarah Walker: " where exactly is a woman's place? I mean, you're all accomplished women with college degrees. Most of you smarter than your husbands. Why hide back here?"

Margaret: We live in a man's world. we choose to be here, we maybe near the kitchen, but we're together.

The interaction between Sarah Walker and the group of women reflects a critical on women's roles and independence. Rhetorical questions from Sarah Walker "Where exactly is a woman's place? ... Why hide back here?" function as directive/assertive challenges, encouraging women to reconsider their roles. In contrast, Margaret's response is an assertive that justifies conformity. From a representational perspective, independence is constructed through critical awareness and resistance. Sarah represents an independent woman as one who questions societal norms and refuses passive acceptance of limitations. Her reference to women being "accomplished" and "smarter

than your husbands” highlights the contradiction between women’s capabilities and their restricted roles.

Data #11. Episode 2

Sarah Walker: "Sometimes silence is the only protection a colored woman can count on. And now that I've finally learned to tell my story, I can't be silent anymore"

The utterance by Sarah Walker, “Sometimes silence is the only protection a colored woman can count on. And now that I’ve finally learned to tell my story” function as an assertive and commissive, contrasting past silence with present voice “I can’t be silent anymore,” signals transformation. Independence is represented through self-expression and resistance, emphasizing the power of speaking out.

Data #12: Episode 2

Sarah: "Now my factory will create jobs, and opportunity for our people, especially our women".

Sarah’s statement at illocutionari level, it functions as an assertive, expressing belief in the impact of her enterprise, and also carries a commissive element, as she positions herself as committed to creating opportunities. Independence is constructed through leadership and empowerment of others, especially women, extending beyond personal success.

Data #13: Episode 3

Sarah Walker: "I have a dream of helping to better all colored women. I want you all to be just like me. Independent, self-sufficient women with their own businesses”.

The utterance by Sarah Breedlove in *Self Made*, “I have a dream of helping to better all colored women. I want you all to be just like me. Independent, self-sufficient women with their own businesses” reflects a visionary articulation of women’s independence. Sarah expresses her aspiration to uplift other women and encourage them to become economically independent. The utterance operates as an assertive and directive, expressing vision and encouraging others. Independence is represented through entrepreneurship and collective empowerment, promoting self-sufficiency among women

Data #14: Episode 3

Sarah Walker: If you become a Walker sales agent, you'll have a better job and more money. Madam CJ Walker will make sure all your dreams come true.

Sarah’s utterance “If you become a Walker sales agent, you’ll have a better job and more money. Madam C. J. Walker will make sure all your dreams come true,” reflects the promotion of economic independence through entrepreneurship. Sarah offers an opportunity for women to join her business and improve their financial situation.

At the illocutionary level, The statement functions as a directive and assertive, persuading others to join her business. It also implies commitment to their success. Independence is constructed through economic opportunity and supportive networks, enabling women to achieve financial stability.

Data #15: Episode 3

CJ. Walker: Damn, Sarah. How Big you wanna be?

SarahWalker: Big as Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller put together.

The interaction between Sarah Walker and CJ where CJ asks, “How big you wanna be?” and Sarah responds, “Big as Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller put together,” reflects an ambitious articulation of women’s independence. Sarah expresses the scale of her business aspirations by comparing herself to major industrial figures.

At the illocutionary level, Sarah’s response functions as an assertive, expressing belief in her potential, and a commissive, signaling commitment to achieving extraordinary success. The bold comparison intensifies the force of her statement, transforming it into a declaration of ambition. From a representational perspective, independence is constructed through limitless ambition and redefinition of possibility. By aligning herself with powerful male industrialists, Sarah challenges traditional gender boundaries and asserts that women can achieve equal or even greater success.

Data #16: Episode 4

Sarah Walker: “Yes, I don’t need a chain store to grow my business. I have you!, Warriors!, An army of strong, powerful women. Stand with me. Stand with me, and I vow to help each and every one of you take control of your lives.”

The utterance combines assertive, directive, and commissive acts, motivating collective action. From a representational perspective, independence is constructed through collective empowerment and shared agency. The metaphors “warriors” and “army” portray women as strong, united, and capable of overcoming barriers together. Independence is no longer individual but communal, where women support each other in achieving autonomy. Sarah is represented as a leader who not only attains independence herself but also mobilizes others to do the same.

4 Conclusion

This study shows that the miniseries *Self Made* constructs and represents the image of an independent woman through the speech of Sarah Breedlove (Madam C. J. Walker). Independence is portrayed as a dynamic process, evolving from limitation and negotiation into confidence, authority, and leadership. Through her utterances, Sarah is represented as resilient, self-determined, economically independent, and capable of empowering others.

The findings also reveal that Sarah employs four main types of speech acts: assertives, directives, commissives, and declaratives. Assertives express her beliefs and

challenges to social norms, directives are used to advise and encourage others, commissives reflect her commitments to success and empowerment, and declaratives assert her identity and social status.

Furthermore, these speech acts represent independence in several key ways. Independence is shown through personal agency and determination, resistance to gender and social limitations, economic autonomy, assertion of identity and authority, and collective empowerment of other women.

On the whole, speech acts in the mini serie *Self Made* function not only as communication but as a means of representing independent womanhood, highlighting how language shapes agency, power, and social transformation.

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