



The Illocutionary Act as a Verbal Weapon : An Analysis of Cyberbullying in Bhad Bhabie's 'Ms. Whitman'

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Abstract. Here, it is examined how language is employed as a weapon on the internet by means of the illocutionary acts in Bhad Bhabie's 2023 diss track "Ms. Whitman." According to J.L. Austin's and John Searle's Speech Act Theory, the paper categorizes the lyrics of the song into the various kinds of illocutionary acts-assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives to determine how word aggression is an instrument of cyberbullying. Through qualitative text analysis, the study reveals expressive and assertive acts most prominent in the lyrics to disseminate defamatory claims, insults, and emotional harm against the object of attack Alabama Barker. Commissive and directive acts, on the other hand, serve to threaten, command, and dominate. The analysis shows how these speech acts collectively construct a model of systematic online verbal attack under the guise of musical performance. The findings show how music culture will tend to normalize aggression, make boundaries between entertainment and harassment opaque, and place audiences' understanding of digital communication ethics. The conclusion synthesizes the recommendation of media education as a means to enable listeners to critically understand the linguistic power of such content.

Keywords: Cyberbullying; Diss Track; Illocutionary Acts; Speech Act Theory; Verbal Aggression.

1. INTRODUCTION

The new media has successfully transformed the environment of interpersonal conflict to put public conflict before a world public within seconds. Pop music is extremely likely to be the number one genre of such conflicts, especially in genres such as hip-hop, where diss songs have been a vintage tradition. Artistic license will routinely require inflammatory language and provocation, and the distinction between such machismo and thoughtful harassment is one too readily transgressed. Bhad Bhabie (Danielle Bregoli) 2025 release "Ms. Whitman," aimed at her online adversary Alabama Barker, is a strong example of precisely such a situation. The single strays beyond standard musical beef into territory which guarantees the barely-virtual nature of public cyberbullying.

The aim of this paper is to look for more "Ms. Whitman" for what it accomplishes as opposed to what it says it has implications the things that it accomplishes by saying so. We invoke Speech Act Theory in doing this, as begun by J.L. Austin (1962) and followed up by John R. Searle (1969). This theory allows us to think of the lyrics in terms of a sequence of illocutionary acts: actions performed by that which is said, like accusing, threatening, and insulting. By clustering such acts together, we are able to make the language weapons ordinary. This research is important in that it takes the research on cyberbullying out of reductionist

frequency counts of its frequency or content analysis and strives for greater, i.e., linguistic inquiry into how language is being utilized as a tool of violence (Eden, 2021; Pereira, 2022).

This research is guided by three main questions. First, it seeks to identify the types of illocutionary acts found in the lyrics of "Ms. Whitman" and determine how these acts correspond to Searle's (1969) typology of speech acts. Second, it examines how these illocutionary acts function as weapons of language and instruments of cyberbullying within the lyrical context. Finally, the study explores the broader social and cultural consequences of disseminating such speech acts through an influential media platform, particularly when they are embedded in a commercially released song.

This essay charts Speech Act Theory and music cyberbullying research. It will proceed to describe the qualitative textual approach used, before close textual analysis and interpretation of the lyrics in the song. Then, the conclusion will present a summary of the findings and reflect on their wider implications for digital communication and media literacy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Intellectual Roots of Speech Act Theory

Academic beginnings are J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), which rejected the assumption that there is but one thing that can be done with language, viz., talking about the world. Austin developed the theory of the "performative utterance," an utterance and, if in the appropriate contexts, uttered, does something (e.g., "I now pronounce you husband and wife"). He continued to expound a more general theory to explain three acts in a single speech act: the locutionary act (the saying of something with a particular meaning), the illocutionary act (the act performed in saying something, i.e., promising or warning), and the perlocutionary act (the effect one achieves by saying something, i.e., persuading or frightening) (Austin, 1962; Green, 2007).

John Searle (1969) formalized Austin's work and provided a taxonomy of illocutionary acts in terms of purpose or "illocutionary point." Those that are applicable to our discussion are:

- Assertives: Commit the speaker to the truth of a proposition (e.g., saying, asserting, telling). Example: "It is raining."
- Directives: Attempt to get the hearer to do something (e.g., commanding, asking, challenging). Example: "Close the door."
- Commissives: Pledge the speaker for action in the future (e.g., vow, promise, threaten). Example: "I will be there at six."

- Expressives: Influence the psychological attitude of the speaker towards a state of affairs (e.g., apologize, thanks, congratulate, condemn). Example: "I am sorry for your loss."

- Declaratives: Bring about a change in institutional reality as a result of felicitous performance (e.g., issuing a declaration of war, dismissing). These usually involve a degree of institutional power (Searle, 1969; Barrero Salinas, 2023).

Austin's and Searle's models, and more precisely the locutionary/illocutionary act distinction, have come under academic scrutiny (Reiland, 2024), but for lyric content analysis purposes, Searle's open typology is a sufficient instrument to analyze.

Verbal Aggression and Cyberbullying in Music

Cyberbullying has been defined as intentional and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, phones, and other electronics (Vivolo-Kantor et al., 2014). Verbal aggression has been a core theme in all of the studies conducted and is used to intimidate, control, and damage the social status of a victim (Eden, 2021). Pereira (2022) identifies an aggressive communication style with personal insults, attacks, and threats as the leading predictor of cyberbullying behaviour.

Analysis of song lyrics is a significant area of study for the exploration of the normalization of verbal aggression. It has been found that exposure to song lyrics containing aggressive and misogynistic content influences thoughts, feelings, and behavior among the audience (Warburton, 2024). Maisura et al. (2025), debating taboo language in hip-hop, argue that the presence of such words is not merely an adornment but accomplishes some functions of communication, including the establishment of dominance and the statement of contempt. Similarly, Barman et al. (2019) discuss the inherent prejudice and stylistic choices in words that can potentially aid in enhancing harmful stereotypes and assault individuals or groups.

While music is also a weapon against bullying (Epelde-Larrañaga, 2020), the diss track genre finds itself in oppositional ground. The digital era contributes to this, as internet sites enable rapid dissemination of "hate lingo," which ElSherief et al. (2018) define as a target-practice language use with the aim of producing maximal psychological harm. "Ms." "Whitman" occupies the intersection of these events: it's a rap diss track released into the cyber sphere, and consequently it is a strong example for the study of cyberbullying in terms of speech act.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study applies qualitative research design as textual analysis to investigate linguistic strategy in "Ms. Whitman." Qualitative textual analysis is suitable for this study since it is able to provide in-depth interpretive examination of language in use, exploring nuance, intention, and social meaning (Barman et al., 2019).

The primary research object is the full lyrical content of Bhad Bhabie's "Ms. Whitman," which came out in 2023. The lyrics were downloaded from verified lyric databases and compared with the official audio track for correctness.

The analysis process has three steps:

- a. Identification: The lyrics were parsed into separate utterances or lines. Each utterance was examined to identify its main illocutionary force—what is being achieved by the speaker (Bhad Bhabie) in saying it.
- b. Classification: Each identified illocutionary act was categorized according to Searle's (1969) taxonomy (assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, declarative). This involved identifying the intended meaning in the narrative context of the song.
- c. Analysis: The secret acts were then analyzed overall to compare how they operate as verbal attacks. This involved connecting the linguistic analysis to the theoretical models of cyberbullying (Eden, 2021; Pereira, 2022) and social context of internet stardom. Analysis considers how the combination of different illocutionary acts constructs an extended and multifaceted attack.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

"Ms. Whitman" lyrics are a list summary of verbal abuse. Analysis groups quotes as authentic to describe illocutionary acts used as weapons.

- a) Lyric: "You thought I wasn't gonna come back for more, dumb, dirty bitch?"

Illocutionary Act Type: Expressive (Condemning, insulting) / Directive (Challenging)

Analysis: Aggression bluntly expressed in line one. Directive rhetorical question to, and the "dumb, dirty bitch" are plain contempt expressives, dehumanizing tone initiated at once.

- b) Lyric: "Why this bitch obsessed with me? I just don't understand"

Illocutionary Act Type: Assertive (Accusing)

Analysis: A daring bluff. Before us, a victim of fixation, stands the speaker, victimized and becoming an aggressor upside down, a classic rhetorical bluff so as to be able to rhetorically overwhelm.

- c) Lyric: "You sucked the dick straight out my ass, who got the upper hand?"

Illocutionary Act Type: Assertive (Alleging) / Expressive (Ridiculing)

Analysis: It is an extremely strong angry aggressive slur with the force of scandalizing and shaming. The obscenity has the force of ridicule (expressive) and the aim of asserting superiority and of profaning the victim.

- d) Lyric: "I see why you ain't got no friends, you're Miss I'll-Fuck-Your-Man"

Illocutionary Act Type: Assertive (Asserting an undesirable quality)

Analysis: This is stereotypic name-calling. It creates an unwanted social deficit (no friends) and is grounded in a mocking name, trying to socially ostracize the victim and associate her with an undesirable stereotype.

- e) Lyric: "I know your path, you're extending yourself, you need my name for influence"

Illocutionary Act Type: Assertive (Asserting)

Analysis: This assertive charges the target with being opportunistic and undeserving. It belittles the target's behavior as an indicator of pathological need for significance rather than actual conflict.

- f) Lyric: "You hit my DM like, 'No more diss songs,' you tappin' out"

Illocutionary Act Type: Assertive (Declaring) / Expressive (Gloating)

Analysis: She declares her win over the target ("tappin' out"). It is a declaration (announcement of fact in her view) and a win proclamation, which signifies her win.

- g) Lyric: "Keep my baby daddy name out yo' fuckin' mouth 'fore I Will Smith it"

Illocutionary Act Type: Commissive (Threatening) / Directive (Commanding)

Analysis: This is an attribution of physical violence (a "Will Smith" is a slap or punch), and an expectation that the speaker execute it in the future as punishment (commissive). It also follows from a command (directive), and so it is for control and domination.

- h) Lyric: "She fucked on Tyga and killin' babies, I seen the sonogram"

Illocutionary Act Type: Assertive (Dissemination of injurious information)

Analysis: This is a sadistic intensification of song blame. This is an outraged, unsubstantiated, open-ended blame meant to kill the public's heart and do maximal emotional harm.

- i) Lyric: "They fucked you back to back to back, that could never be me"
Illocutionary Act Type: Expressive (Gloating) / Expressive (Shaming)
Analysis: The lyric gloats over the speaker's assumed superiority (expressive) and victim-blames the target for her assumed sex play (expressive).
- j) Lyric: "Them NFL boys ran the train on you, now you on the team"
Illocutionary Act Type: Assertive (Gossiping) / Expressive (Mocking)
Analysis: The utterance gossips about a rumor rumor (assertive as) and mocks the victim's sexuality (expressive), and insults her in a metaphorical manner.
- k) Ladybug: "I did my part to be your friend, to drive the smoke from you"
Illocutionary Act Type: Assertive (Admitting Machiavellian hypocrisy)
Analysis: Machiavellian hypocrisy is used as a good assertive that shatters all the previous confidence. It lends to the speaker the voice of a smart foe, with an added hint of psychological hypocrisy to the attack.
- l) Lyric: "Bhabie says I'm up the street, like here I am, Alabama"
Illocutionary Act Type: Commissive (Threatening) / Directive (Taunting)
Analysis: Taunting threat. It expresses proximity and that is commissive threat and directive for menacing.
- m) Lyric: "You really dumb enough to think I'll tell you anything, you dumb, dirty ho"
Illocutionary Act Type: Expressive (Insulting) / Assertive (Asserting stupidity of the target)
Analysis: The last line once more parrots the previous put-downs, once more insulting the victim for stupidity. A contemptuous sneer farewell shot.
- n) Lyric: "I wouldn't tell you what color socks I got on"
Illocutionary Act Type: Expressive (Dismissive)
Analysis: This last line is a firm statement of ultimate rejection. It is that the object is dishonored and beyond reach to the extent that she doesn't even receive the opportunity to bare news.

The Arsenal of Aggression: Synthesizing the Illocutionary Acts

The above Lyrics illustrates that the verbal weaponry in "Ms. Whitman" is not uniform but a unified collection of different illocutionary acts. The most frequent are assertives and expressives.

The assertive behaviors are used primarily to disseminate negative, often unverifiable, information about the target. As Gordon (2013) suggests, previous words (or, in this case, accusations) can weigh heavily on the here and now. By framing these accusations within the

framework of a popular song, Bhad Bhabie adopts the platform to give her accusations a kind of public veracity regardless of their factual content. This aligns with Eden's (2021) observation regarding one of the tactics of cyberbullying as the construction of social reality by making false or exaggerated claims.

The emotive acts serve to reinforce continually the power imbalance and emotional tone. The repetitive use of insults ("dumb, dirty bitch," "whore," "tramp") as a linguistic attack is designed to degrade the victim's self-esteem and publicly shame them. This is an explicit display of a hostile communication pattern linked with cyberbullying (Pereira, 2022). The boast expressives ("that could never be me") also aggrandize the speaker, creating a strong contrast between the "superior" aggressor and the "inferior" victim.

The commissives, in this case the threats of violence, escalate the conflict from insult to threatened physical damage. The threat might be hyperbolic, but its illocutionary force is to threaten and to make afraid, and this is a basic goal of bullying behavior (Vivolo-Kantor et al., 2014). The directives, while fewer in number, cast the entire track as a command to the listeners to view the target in a certain manner and as a command to the target to acquiesce.

Social and Cultural Context: The Digital Diss Track

Their illocutionary force is heightened by their medium. A diss track is a cultural genre with conventions of aggression strongly established (Maisura et al., 2025). But when released on streaming media and pushed on social media, it becomes more than musical genre, a viral social phenomenon. Its target, Alabama Barker is not a figure in a fiction but a real person with a known public persona. The allegations against her private life, relationships, and health are therefore not abstract artistic statements but targeted speech acts with real-world perlocutionary force i.e., inciting fan wars, fueling online harassment campaigns, and causing psychological harm.

This is what ElSherief et al. (2018) called "hate lingo," whereby linguistic patterns are tailored to their targets for maximum impact. The song relies on the cultural capital of both performers, making public spectacle of their personal beef. The power dynamic is foregrounded: Bhad Bhabie employs the song as a declarative act in a broad sense, attempting to announce Barker's social status as degraded. Although she lacks the institutional authority for a proper Searlian declaration, within the social situation of their world, this verbal assault, being done in public as it is, amounts to an attempt to make a social declaration of defeat.

5. CONCLUSION

This research has illustrated how the lines in Bhad Bhabie's "Ms. Whitman" can be systematically decoded as a series of armed illocutionary acts. Through the application of Searle's taxonomy, we have described the manner in which assertive acts fend off damaging accusations, expressive acts convey contempt and mockery, commissive acts issue threats, and directive acts call for submission. Collectively, these speech acts represent a very clear-cut instance of cyberbullying, employing the public forum of an available for purchase song to inflict psychological and reputational harm upon a specific individual.

The language relevance of this research serves to alert to the importance of Speech Act Theory in assessing modern conflict. It also moves the argument from words to action, since a more nuanced understanding of verbal aggression can be made through verbs rather than statements. Social relevance is critical; popularization of such intentioned harassment by popular culture, specifically where it is consumed by young people, requires sober examination. It confuses entertainment with abuse and could be teaching children harmful conflict-resolution methods.

Follow-up studies must apply this linguistic model with a more extensive corpus of diss tracks or online feuds to identify patterns of illocutionary aggression. Also, attention must be paid soon to pedagogical programs integrating media literacy and digital ethics. Teaching audience members, particularly teenagers, how to deconstruct the illocutionary forces they witness in order to isolate a threat disguised as a boast, or a character assassination attempted under the form of an allegedly factual claim is a crucial move towards mitigating the harmful effect of cyberbullying written into popular culture. When words are weapons, studying their machinery is the optimal defense.

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