



Directive Speech Acts of Asian Characters in the Movie *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*: Pragmatic Structures and Directive Strategies

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APA Citation:

Jarudecharat, J. & Worathumrong, S. (2023) Directive speech acts of Asian characters in the movie *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*: Pragmatic structures and directive strategies. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 16(2), 469-481.

| Received 19/04/2023 Received in revised form 03/06/2023 Accepted 10/06/2023 | ABSTRACT Superhero films have become a popular cinematic genre that has attracted the attention of scholars, many of whom focus on the films' dialogues. Through a pragmatic approach, this small-scale study investigates how directive speech acts are represented by the three Asian characters in the superhero movie <i>Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings</i> . Based on previous research, the directive speech acts in the film were extracted and analyzed, and a directive classification taxonomy was created to categorize pragmatic structures and strategies of directive speech acts. Of 342 directive utterances, the characters tend to favor both [H] and (S) oriented structures with more preference toward Single[H] and (S)+[H] structures. Of the 5 directive strategies, <i>Nonsentential</i> , <i>Direct</i> , and <i>Non-Conventionally Indirect/Hint</i> are the preferred strategies over the <i>Conventionally Direct</i> and <i>Hybrid</i> ones. Such preference could be mapped along the directness continuum from the most direct force strategy, <i>Direct</i> directive strategy, to the least direct force strategy, <i>Non-Conventionally Indirect/Hint</i> . The findings may contribute to further exploration of pragmatic features, especially the linguistic constructions of the <i>Nonsentential</i> directive strategy and its function in films, and movie script writing. Keywords: pragmatic approach, directive speech acts, pragmatic structures, directive strategies, superhero movie, superhero dialogues |
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Introduction

Films, television shows, and comic books in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) have long attracted global audiences and scholars' attention due to their transmedia and convergence seriality nature (Brinker, 2017). Roughly three out of every five characters in the MCU's blockbuster films, which include their leading characters (e.g., Iron Man, Captain America, and Thor) and supporting characters (e.g., Howard Stark from *Iron Man*, Maria Hill from *Captain America*, and Jane Forster from *Thor*), are White and Western (Karim, 2018). However, in recent years, prominent Asian characters and narratives have increasingly been circulating in mainstream culture. Examining these films has been done from various dimensions, including Asian stereotypes (Shek, 2022), gender and identity (Kent, 2021) as well as speech acts and film discourse analysis (De Pablos-Ortega, 2020). These previous studies have confirmed the films' authenticity, particularly their scripted dialogue in terms of representing how humans communicate in real-life situations.

In conversational interaction, directive speech acts in which a speaker intends for the hearer to perform or refrain from some action, ranging from ordering or commanding, requesting or begging, questioning, suggesting or advising acts, prohibiting or warning, and permitting (Bach & Harnish, 1973; Pérez-Hernández, 2021). These directive speech acts have been examined widely in regard to their ubiquity in everyday communication, their potential sources of interactional conflicts (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and the relationship between forms and functions or illocutionary forces of those directives (e.g., Ryutenbeek, 2019). Specifically in the study of speech acts in films, research has explored syntactic structures, functions, and strategies among different types of speech acts (e.g., Della & Sembiring, 2018; Kurniawati, 2012). One important conclusion is that directives appear to be common and vital elements of the plot in films, especially in mainstream superhero films, as they have been observed in high frequency in such films' dialogue (e.g., Aldila et al., 2020; Amalia & Adlina, 2022). Since directive speech acts involve speakers' intentions for the hearers to carry out some action or not to do so, a further investigation in mainstream superhero films of both directives' pragmatic structures of head act¹ and supportive move² (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984) and directive strategies could shed light on how the characters manipulate their directives through a degree of (in)directness of directives. In addition, since there is an increase in prominent Asian characters and narratives in mainstream culture, it is worth investigating how directive speech acts, performed by Asian characters, especially those of the leading and supporting roles in superhero films with the focus on the pragmatic structures of head act and supportive move, and directive strategies.

To this end, this small-scale study investigates how directive speech acts in terms of their pragmatic structures and directive strategies are represented by the three Asian characters in the superhero movie *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*. The results of this exploration would provide a complementary angle to the field of pragmatics in terms of politeness, contrastive directive speech acts in different language corpora, and movie script writing.

In this paper, section 2 presents the two main components of the study and related research in pragmatic structures of directive utterances and directive strategies. Section 3 offers the methodological components of the study. Section 4 is devoted to the findings and discussion, followed by section 5, which presents the conclusion.

Review of Literature

Pragmatic Structures of Directive Speech Acts

Central to Austin's (1975) and Searle's (1969) speech act theory is that people use language to perform some specific actions or speech acts, such as requesting, commanding, or questioning. In performing a speech act, the three following categories are entailed. These include the locutionary act (the production or propositional content of what is said); the illocutionary act (the

speaker's intention behind his/her actual performance of an act); and the perlocutionary act (the effect of the act's performance on the hearer). Building upon Austin's work (1975), Searle (1969) proposed the five types of speech acts. They are *declaratives*, *assertives*, *expressives*, *commisives*, and *directives*. *Declaratives* create a new state of affairs, e.g., baptize or arrest. *Assertives* convey information about things or facts in the external world, e.g., naming or stating. *Expressives* describe the speaker's emotion, e.g., thanking or complimenting. *Commisives* commit the speaker to do something in the future, e.g., promising or threatening. *Directives* tell the hearer to do something for the speaker, e.g., requesting or commanding. The latter has been found ubiquitous in daily conversational interactions as people need others to help them achieve their goals.

When people order or command, request or beg, question, suggest, prohibit or warn, and permit, they perform directive speech/illocutionary acts (Bach & Harnish, 1973; Pérez-Hernández, 2021). The main directive illocutionary force is that the speaker intends to get the hearer to do some action(s) (Leech, 2014). To some extent, orders or commands appear to be the most frequent directive force found in film dialogues (e.g., Aldila et al., 2020; Della & Sembiring, 2018). However, to the other extent, requests or begging seem to be the predominant directive act the movie characters perform (e.g., Kurniawati, 2012).

In segmenting directive utterances into each directive act, some scholars (e.g., Freudinger, 2013) focus their attention on clause types, involving imperatives, declaratives, and interrogatives. However, other scholars (e.g., Klinkajorn, 2014) devote space to pragmatic structures of directives with the two key elements of head act [H] and supportive move (S). The segmentation would primarily include [H]s or directive utterances that convey the central or important information. [H]s could be thought of as similar to foregrounding in discourse analysis. The segmentation also involves supportive moves (S)s or other elements that elaborate the [H]s, as background information. Based on Klinkajorn's (2014) work on comparative directives in English and Thai dialogues, the pragmatic structures could be classified into four main patterns. They are [H], [H]+(S), (S)+[H], and (S)+[H]+(S). Although the syntactic approach of clause types could allow us to examine a variety of directive forms that are used to perform them, it tends to single out the directives from the whole dialogue between interlocutors and disregards the surrounding utterances or the pre and post directive utterances or [H]. The pragmatic approach enables us to investigate the train of utterances in the dialogues of interlocutors and determine both the main directive illocutionary force and the degree of (in)directness. When [H] appears alone as in [H] or preceding (S) as in [H] +(S), and more numbers of [H]s are used, it could be interpreted as a greater degree of directness of the directives is performed.

Through the syntactic approach, the results of the studies appear to be varied. To some extent, a direct structure of directives, imperatives (e.g., go out, you go out, or let's go out), as illustrated in (1) are found to be a recurring form the movie characters utter.

(1) Let go off my foot, you whimsy little half-wit.
(Osborne, 1996, p. 29, as cited in Freudinger, 2013, p. 64.)

To another extent, assertions with various linguistic constructions as illustrated in (2) tend to be the most frequent form the characters perform.

(2) Bilbo: Frodo! Someone at the door!
(Kurniawati, 2012, p. 31)

This indicative sentence can be performed either as an assertion that an individual is present at the door or as a command for Frodo to open the door or to examine who's at the door. However, (2) is justified as a sample of directive utterance because Frodo walked toward the door and opened it in the subsequent act.

(1) and (2) further reflect another drawback of the syntactic approach. Although the approach allows us to segment directives, it seems to disregard the context of communication

(Firth, 1957), especially that of situations and participants, which enables us to carefully determine that (1) exemplifies a direct directive and (2) could also be an example of an indirect directive. Through the pragmatic approach, both contexts would be taken into account in determining directive forces.

Influential scholars (i.e., Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Leech, 2014) propose three segments of directive utterances. Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984) offer address term³, head act, and adjuncts to head act. Both address terms and adjuncts to [H]s function to support the [H]s and can be placed before or after them. In addition, adjuncts to [H]s as in (3) could be interpreted as indirect directives.

(3) You left the kitchen in a mess last night.

(3) exemplifies the speaker covertly expressing his or her intention for the hearer to clean the dirty kitchen.

Leech (2014) provides an adapted segmentation to also include pragmatic modifiers: internal and external modifiers. Since his research deals with the degree of imposition and politeness, comprehensive analysis of internal modifiers could explore the interactional balance between two needs: directive clarity and avoiding coerciveness. Examples of such internal modifiers include politeness markers (e.g., please), downtoners (e.g., possible or maybe), or past time reference (e.g., I wondered), and external modifiers, such as apologies (e.g., sorry or excuse me).

Based on the previous research mentioned, it seems clear that the pragmatic structures of directive speech acts could be primarily classified into [H]s and (S)s. To maximize the directive force or the degree of politeness, pragmatic modifiers could be taken into consideration. This careful pragmatic approach to segmenting directive structures allows us to see the levels of directness through the use of [H]s and those of indirectness through the use of (S)s and the pragmatic modifiers. On one end of the continuum, the more [H] structure employed as a stand-alone [H] or as to precede (S), the more direct the directive force is. On the other end, the more (S)s used as a stand-alone (S) or as to precede [H], the more indirect the directive force is. The different levels of directness and indirectness can be examined deeper by looking at the directive strategies.

Directive Speech Acts: Strategies

Based on Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), directive strategies can be classified into the three followings strategies depending on the level of directness. *The most direct strategy* refers to the direct strategy that marks explicitly the speaker's intention for the hearer to perform some actions, such as the use of imperatives to form requests, such as, "Clean up the floor." *The conventionally indirect strategy* is used when the speaker employs contextual preconditions necessary for his/her performance, known as conventionalized in English language. An example could be, "Could you clean up the floor, please?". *The nonconventional indirect strategy or hint* is the highly context-dependent strategy in which the hearer will need to have some contextual clues to decide his/her perlocutionary act, such as "You have left the floor in a mess?".

Along the similar directness level's continuum, Leech (2014) proposes a fourth strategy, called *nonsentential strategy*. This strategy refers to when a speaker utters the utterances in an incomplete sentence or with omission. For instance, the utterance "the messy floor?" could be employed to exhibit the speaker's intention for the hearer to do something with the dirty floor. This strategy seems to be at the most indirect end of the directness continuum.

Based on these main components of the study and previous research, the present study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the pragmatic structures of directive speech acts performed by the three Asian characters in the superhero movie *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*?

2. Based on Research Question 1, what are the directive strategies employed by the three Asian characters in the superhero movie *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*?

Our hypothesis is that the directive structures and strategies of directives the Asian characters perform would be oriented toward indirectness, the main stereotypical characteristic attributed to many Asians (e.g., Byon, 2006; Chen & Wang, 2021).

Methodology

This section presents the components for the data compilation and analytical frameworks that also describe the categorization used for the classification of the directive utterances and directive strategies.

Data Compilation

For the purpose of this investigation, we selected the superhero movie *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* on Disney Plus, an online streaming service platform, based on the two following criteria. Firstly, it is categorized as a superhero film, one of the subgenres of action films⁴ (Forbes, 2017; Koole et al., 2014). Mainstream superhero films tend to reflect a high frequency of directives in the dialogues (e.g., Aldila et al., 2020; Amalia & Adlina, 2022). Thus, it is worthwhile to explore this particular film genre. Secondly, since its release in 2021, this popular first Asian-led film in the MCU, was recognized in the 2022 Gold List for Best Picture (Merican, 2022). This has also marked an important milestone in proliferating leading roles of Asians (Nguyen, 2021) in mainstream films. This second criterion reflects diverse cultural dialogues where not only those dialogues of White and Western characters are dominant but also non-Western ones are taken into consideration.

The superhero movie *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* tells the story of Shang-Chi, the son of a powerful and secretive Chinese warlord, Wenwu. Shang-Chi must return home from America to face his father's army and prevent the release of a dark power onto the world. In so doing, Shang-Chi, Xialing (Shang-Chi's estranged younger sister), and Katy (Shang-Chi's best friend) are recruited to help defend Ta Lo (the village of Shang-Chi's late mother) against his father's army, which will arrive soon. The three need to prepare for the fight together.

To prepare the dialogue for analysis, the film script was extracted and transcribed to an Excel spreadsheet where directive speech acts were then classified, following the proposed categorization taxonomy (see section 3.2), and factored in for the analysis. By taking the plot that marks the three characters to save Ta Lo and the degree of closeness among them into account, our focus is on directive speech acts, performed by Shang-Chi (the Asian protagonist) as well as Katy and Xialing (the Asian supporting characters). We devote our study to directive illocutionary force where one interlocutor asks another to take a particular action and not focus on the successful perlocutionary acts of another. The pragmatic structures of directive speech acts and directive strategies were subsequently quantified using percentages calculated from the total number of directive force utterances and of the ones each character performed.

Analytical Frameworks: Pragmatic Structures and Directive Strategies

In order to analyze the pragmatic structures and directive strategies of the extracted and transcribed directive speech acts, the adapted categorization taxonomies based on Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), Klinkajorn (2014), and Leech (2014) were used. For pragmatic structures, we noticed that the four directive patterns proposed by Klinkajorn (2014) could be under the main categories of [H] oriented structures and (S) oriented structures. We also found four more patterns when extracting our pilot data. Thus, eight patterns of pragmatic structures of directives were proposed to be at work: Single[H], Double[H]s, Multiple[H]s, [H]s+(S)s, Single(S), Double[S]s,

Multiple[S]s, and (S)s+[H]s. For pragmatic structures in our study, the two main elements for the directive speech acts' realization were coded as [H] oriented structures and (S) oriented structures and then classified into eight categories, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

The Eight Pragmatic Structures of Directive Speech Acts Performed by the Three Asian Characters in Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings

| Pragmatic Structures | | Examples from the Film |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| [H] Oriented Structures | Single[H] | [Give me the key.] |
| | Double[H]s | [Just nod.] [Don't talk.] |
| | Multiple[H]s [H]s+(S)s | [Look.] [Look at that.] [Look at that girl.] [Let's get started.] (We have a lot of works to do.) |
| (S) Oriented Structures | Single(S) | (Dane.) |
| | Double(S)s+[H] | (Hey,) (hey,) [get back here.] |
| | Multiple(S)s (S)s+[H]s | (Dad,) (please.) (Your family needs you.) (Please,) [open the door.] |

When more [H] oriented structures are performed by the characters, the more direct the directive forces are. In contrast, the more (S) oriented structures used, the more indirect the directive forces are.

Based on the degree of directness in the pragmatic structures of the speech acts, the five directive strategies were classified as demonstrated in Table 2. These included *Direct*, *Conventionally Indirect*, *Non-conventionally Indirect/Hint*, *Nonsentential*, and *Hybrid* directive strategies. The last directive strategy was added after we observed a possible co-occurrence of two directive strategies in one utterance.

Table 2

The Five Directive Strategies Performed by the Three Asian Characters in Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings

| Directive Strategies | Examples from the Film |
|---|--|
| <i>Direct</i> | go go go. Don't give me that look. |
| <i>Conventionally Indirect</i> | Could you hold the wheel? |
| <i>Nonsentential</i> | On the right. |
| <i>Non-conventionally Indirect/Hint</i> | The tortoise walks faster than this car. |
| <i>Hybrid</i> | You stay quiet and how about a chat later? |

The *Direct* directive strategy could include bare imperative constructions either positive imperatives, such as "go go go" or negative ones, such as "Don't give me that look.". The second category is *Conventionally Indirect* which refers to contextual preconditions necessary for its performance as conventionalized in a language. This strategy could involve the use of modal verbs, such as will, would, can, and could. The use of modal verbs could be considered conventionalized in English when presented in the form of a question, such as "Could you hold the wheel?". Such use could be viewed as denoting the indirectness of the directive force that can be perceived as providing hedging for the performance of the action. The *Nonsentential* directive strategy could involve the speaker uttering fragmentary utterances where ellipsed information is manifest (e.g., through ellipsis structures or bare wh-phrases/sluices) (Fernández et al., 2007) that the speaker uses to supply the sequence of actions necessary to achieve the speaker's directive goals. For instance, the short answer "On the right." could be employed to exhibit the speaker's intention

for the intended hearer to finally locate something on the right-hand side when the intended hearer initially asked, "Was it on the right?". The fourth category is *Non-conventionally Indirect* or *Hint* which derives its directive illocutionary force not from its form, but rather from the requirements of some contextual clues, such as interlocutor relationship, social or distance power, and context of situation for the hearer to interpret the utterances as directives and to decide his/her perlocutionary act. For instance, if the two interlocutors are in a car chase, and one says, "The tortoise walks faster than this car.", this utterance can be interpreted in two ways as a hint, implying that he/she would like the driver to drive faster, or a statement about the car's engine. The sentence in this example, thus, has its illocutionary force as a directive. This strategy seems to be at the most indirect end of the directness continuum due to its being highly context-dependent. The last category is *Hybrid* directive strategy which refers to two directive strategies used in one utterance, such as "You stay quiet and how about a chat later?", which suggests the combined linguistic realization of the *Direct* (i.e., You will remain quiet at this point in time.) and *Conventionally Indirect* (i.e., referring to contextual preconditions of staying quiet and wait for a talk at another time.) directive strategies. The following section presents the findings and discussions of the analysis.

Findings and Discussions

Pragmatic Structures of Directive Speech Acts Performed by the Three Asian Characters in the movie *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*

The total number of directive speech acts found in the film dialogue performed by the three Asian characters is 342. It was broken down into 160 directive utterances performed by Shang-Chi, the leading protagonist, 149 directive utterances performed by Katy, Shang-Chi's best friend, and 33 directive utterances performed by Xialing, Shang-Chi's estranged younger sister. These directive utterances were categorized into [H] and (S) oriented structures as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3

Percentage of Pragmatic Structures of Directive Speech Acts Performed by the Three Asian Characters in the movie Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings

| Pragmatic Structures | | Shang-Chi % (N = 160) | Katy % (N = 149) | Xialing % (N = 33) |
|-------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| [H] Oriented Structures | Single[H] | 38.74 | 58.39 | 42.42 |
| | Double[H]s | 1.25 | 1.34 | 6.06 |
| | Multiple[H]s | 1.88 | 2.01 | 0.00 |
| | [H]s+(S)s | 1.25 | 0.00 | 3.03 |
| | Sub-total | 48.12 | 61.74 | 51.51 |
| (S) Oriented Structures | Single(S) | 8.75 | 5.37 | 12.12 |
| | Double(S)s+[H] | 8.75 | 8.05 | 9.09 |
| | Multiple(S)s | 8.75 | 4.03 | 0.00 |
| | (S)+[H] | 30.63 | 20.81 | 27.27 |
| | Sub-total | 56.88 | 38.26 | 48.48 |
| Total | | 100.00 | 100.00 | 100.00 |

Table 3 reveals that the directive speech acts the three Asian characters performed involve both [H] and (S) oriented structures. For [H] oriented structures, all characters tend to use the Single[H] structure more than other [H] oriented structures. This most frequently used structure could allow us to assume that the preferred pattern in doing directives is the simplest and the most direct pattern, which involves only one element expressing the speakers' primary intention. On the other hand, the relatively more complicated patterns, which have many elements and require more interpretation from the hearers are less preferred. This Single[H] tends to be used in urgent

situations (e.g., car chase or ambush) to request the close social relation interlocutors (i.e., best friend or sister) to hide, fight, or escape. It is observed that Double[H]s and Multiple[H]s structures tend to be used as a statement clarification or to command urgently. For instance, while breaking out of the Ten Rings fortress by car, Katy was driving and accompanied by Shang-Chi, Xialing, and Trevor Slattery, whom Shang-Chi's father had sprung from prison and was keeping as a court jester. They escaped their pursuers in the shifting forest which suddenly moved closer to bury them. Shang-Chi repeatedly uttered to Kathy, "go go go". The repetition of the verb 'go' expressed in the Multiple[H]s structure clearly shows Shang-Chi's intention for Katy to drive faster than she actually was doing.

For (S) oriented structures, the three Asian characters tend to use (S)+[H] structure more than other (S) oriented structures. The (S) preceding the [H] is observed to be used as attention getters or as the speaker and hearer's social relationship markers (e.g., friends or family members), as exemplified in (4).

(4)

Katy: (Shaun.) (Hey.) [You need to tell me what
the hell's going on.] [What are you doing?
Where are you going?]
Shang-Chi: Macau.

In (4), after Shang-Chi and Katy were ambushed on a bus by a group of assassins who worked for Shang-Chi's father, Katy was surprised by Shang-Chi's great fighting skill in fending those assassins off. But the assassins finally were able to steal Shang-Chi's necklace, which was given to him by his mother. Another matching necklace was with his estranged younger sister, Xialing. He needed to meet her in order to warn Xialing to protect it. Katy insisted on coming with him. The address term "Shaun," which is Shang-Chi's preferred name and the attention-getter "Hey," are used to reflect the social relationship marker as close friends, and to draw Shang-Chi's attention as the intended hearer. These two linguistic features are categorized as (S)s since they are used to elaborate the triple directive force utterances or [H]s in which Katy intended to demand Shang-Chi, her intended hearer to answer her questions about what is happening, what he is doing, and where he is going.

Multiple (S)s as illustrated in (5) could be viewed as an example of indirectness in directive acts.

(5)

Shang-Chi: (They took my pendant.)
(They're gonna come for yours next.) (I don't know what he wants with
them,) (but we both know it can't be good.)
Xialing: You know what he said to me when he left?
"I'll be back in three days."

In (5), when Shang-Chi met his sister, Xialing in Macau, he warned his sister, Xialing, about their father who might come to get the pendant from her. The use of multiple (S)s in this light could also be interpreted as indirectly convincing his estranged younger sister to agree to follow his direction in the following sequences of interaction. Moreover, it is possible to view the use of this type of pragmatic structure as a possible linguistic formula in attempting to fix a broken relationship. Although they are siblings, Shang-Chi had left Xialing to live alone without contacting her for many years and decided to meet her in Macau for the first time.

It is also observed that other than the preferred structure of Single[H], the high-frequency use of the (S)+[H] structure reflects another preferred directive pattern. All characters appear to employ (S)s in doing directives before the [H] rather than after the [H], as in [H]+(S) exhibited in (6).

(6)

Shang-Chi: [You can't just march into our mom's village with this bullshit.]
(I mean,) (do you have any idea how insane ...)

In (6), Shang-Chi's father and his army finally invaded Ta Lo. Shang-Chi intended to prohibit his father from invading the village. Nonetheless, while he was conversing with his father, he was attacked by an assassin who worked for his father. Shang-Chi became unconscious before he could finish his conversation with his father. According to the extract, Shang-Chi uses the [H] oriented structure, [H]+2(S)s. The structure reflects the directive construction through using the modal verb 'can' in a negative form followed by the verb to 'march into'. This [H] structure is followed by the verbal filler 'I mean' to require the hearer to pay careful attention to what comes next, and the incomplete question, 'do you have any idea how insane...', which begins by the hedged assertion of 'do you have any idea...?' to probably show conciliation for a negotiation to stop his father from seizing the village. The (S) which comes after the [H] could be fillers or hedges.

Directive Strategies Employed by the Three Asian Characters in *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*

Out of the corpus of 342 directive utterances, 158 directive strategies were performed by Shang-Chi, 133 by Katy, and 22 by Xialing. The five directive strategies were found to be employed by the three Asian characters. They were *Nonsentential*, *Direct*, *Non-conventionally Indirect/Hint*, *Hybrid*, and *Conventionally Indirect* directive strategies as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4

Percentage of Directive Strategies Employed by the Three Asian Characters in Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings

| Directive Strategies | Shang-Chi % (N = 158) | Katy % (N = 133) | Xialing % (N = 22) |
|---|--------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Nonsentential</i> | 44.94 | 12.78 | 40.91 |
| <i>Direct</i> | 26.58 | 37.59 | 40.91 |
| <i>Non-conventionally Indirect/Hint</i> | 22.78 | 45.11 | 13.64 |
| <i>Hybrid</i> | 3.16 | 1.50 | 4.54 |
| <i>Conventionally Indirect</i> | 2.54 | 3.02 | 0.00 |
| Total | 100.00 | 100.00 | 100.00 |

Consistent with the pragmatic structure presented in section 4.1, the *Direct* directive strategy was commonly used by all characters, which is similar to the case of the Single[H] structure. In addition, the findings are along the same line as De Pablos-Ortega (2020)'s study, which suggests the consistent use of the direct type of direct speech acts and the *Direct* directive strategy in English film scripts. Surprisingly, in our investigation, the *Nonsentential* directive strategy tends to be the most frequent strategy used by Xialing and particularly Shang-Chi to respond to a query in urgent situations or to clarify an interlocutors' assertions. It is observed that the use of the *Nonsentential* directive strategy of the characters involves the speakers uttering fragmentary utterances to supply the sequences of actions necessary to achieve the speakers' directive goals. As exemplified in (7), Shang-Chi and Kathy use the *Nonsentential* directive strategy to overtly or covertly convey their directive forces.

(7)

Katy: (Shaun.) (Hey.) [You need to tell me what the hell's going on.] [What are you doing?] [Where are you going?]
Shang-Chi: Macau.
Katy: Macau?

In (7), while Shang-Chi was in a hurry packing his stuff to go somewhere, Katy demanded Shang-Chi answer her questions. Shang-Chi responded, “Macau.” According to Fernández et al.’s (2007) research on nonsentential utterances and their meanings in dialogues, the short answer “Macau” is a typical response when a short answer has an antecedent question containing a wh-phrase. Shang-Chi’s short answer could be viewed as overtly conveying his assertion in an urgent matter. Katy’s interrogative repetition of “Macau?” could be an instance of the clarification ellipsis construction referring to “reprise fragments used to clarify an utterance that has not been fully comprehended” (Fernández et al., 2017, p. 399) by her. The use of this clarification ellipsis could be considered as overtly showing her uncertainty toward Shang-Chi’s assertion that he would leave for Macau. However, it could be interpreted as Katy covertly expressing her intention of the directive force of questioning.

The *Non-Conventionally Indirect or Hint* directive strategy was found as another possible evidence of the characters’ indirectness. As previously exemplified in (5), the linguistic realization of Shang-Chi’s warning Xialing could serve as a prime instance for this directive strategy in which the intended hearer needs to understand the context to recognize that the speaker is with the directive force of warning. Interestingly, Kathy uses this *Non-Conventionally Indirect or Hint* directive strategy more frequently than the other two characters by 1.0-2.3 fold. As exemplified in (8), Kathy attempted to beg and convince Shang-Chi to allow her to drive the red sporty BMW archetype car at the hotel’s valet parking service where both of them worked as valet parking officers.

(8)

Katy: (Oh,) (come on.) (Nothing’s gonna happen to this car.) (I’m the Asian Jeff Gordon.)

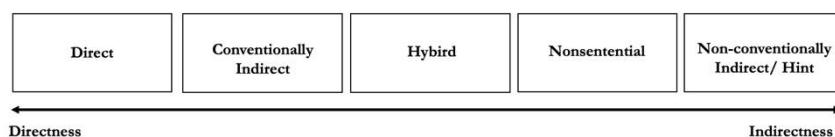
Shang-Chi: I don’t know who that is.

In performing her indirect directives as illustrated in (8), the utterance, “Nothing’s gonna happen to this car.” was performed by Katy to assert that the car would not be damaged. Then it is a shift to the utterance, “I’m the Asian Jeff Gordon.”, which could be interpreted as Katy, the speaker, possessing a comparable driving ability as that of Jeff Gordon, a well-known American race car driver who dominated the race car sport during the 1990s and early 2000s. Shang-Chi as the intended hearer needs to understand the context given by Katy to recognize that she is with the directive forces of begging, especially through a hint in her final assertion of “I’m the Asian Jeff Gordon.” However, if we lack the shared contextual knowledge, we may not recognize who Jeff Gordon is. Shang-Chi reflects this in his response sequence. The use of this statement hint is of interest. It appears that giving a hint could occur between close friends or interlocutors of close social relations and when the weight of begging tends to be high as the damaged BMW car could cost them their jobs at the hotel.

It is observed that *Hybrid* and *Conventionally Indirect* directive strategies are the two less preferred directive strategies performed by the characters, which could be the limitation of our small-scale data. From our findings, we propose the varied realization of directive strategies in differentiating the illocutionary forces of the directive speech acts along the continuum from the most direct force strategy, *Direct* directive strategy, to the least direct force strategy, *Non-Conventionally Indirect or Hint*, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The Continuum of Directness of Directive Strategies Performed by the Three Asian Characters in Shang-Chi and The Legend of the Ten Rings



Conclusion

This investigation has revealed the pragmatic structures of directive speech acts and the directive strategies performed by the three Asian characters, Shang-Chi, Katy, and Xialing in the superhero movie *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*. Our hypothesis that the directive structures and strategies of directives the Asian characters perform would be oriented toward indirectness, the main stereotypical characteristic attributed to many Asians (e.g., Byon, 2006; Chen & Wang, 2021), is rejected. From the small-scale corpus of 342 directive utterances, the findings show a tendency of the characters to favor both the Single[H] structure and (S)s+[H]s structure, as well as *Nonsentential, Direct, and Non-Conventionally Indirect* or *Hint* directive strategies, which suggests their preferences toward both direct and indirect directives. Such preferences could be context dependent. The Single[H] tends to be used in urgent situations (e.g., car chase or ambush) to request the close social relation interlocutors (i.e., best friend or sister) to do something or for conciseness (Poppi, 2020) in interpersonal communication. The (S) preceding the [H] is observed to be used as attention getters or as the speaker and hearer's social relationship markers (e.g., friends or family members).

The *Nonsentential* directive strategy appears to be the most frequently used strategy. Our findings on the directive strategies seem to be in contrast to previous research on directive strategies in films (e.g., De Pablos-Ortega, 2020) that the *Direct* strategy and *Conventionally Indirect* strategy are preferred. It could be because of the differences in the film genres, which we consider as an important context of communication that may affect the linguistic features of directive structures/strategies and their frequency of use appearing in interlocutors' dialogues in the films. Thus, to some extent, such as in emergency situations, they prefer the *Direct* directive strategy over the indirect ones. However, in other situations, such as in friends' small talk, the more indirect directive strategies could be favored. The two less preferred directive strategies of *Hybrid* and *Conventionally Indirect* could be the limitation of our small-scale data.

This small-scale study may contribute to further research in three aspects. Firstly, it may prompt further exploration of pragmatic features, especially the linguistic constructions of *Nonsentential* and *Non-Conventionally Indirect* or *Hint* directive strategies and their functions in films. Both directive strategies seem to have similar characteristics to spoken grammar which could be elliptic or highly context-dependent in nature. These reflect authentic interpersonal conversations in real-life situations, especially among people with close relationships. This highly context-dependent resource could enable learners and instructors of English as a foreign language in meaning making through inductive learning. Secondly, this study may also contribute to movie script writing in which the context of communication involving situations and relationships among characters play key roles in representing the characters through their patterns of conversational interaction. The proposed continuum of directness strategies in Figure 1 may be used as a guideline for movie script writing in mainstream popular cinematic genres. Thirdly, the findings could provide a complementary angle to the field of pragmatics, particularly in the indirectness of politeness in films, and contrastive directive speech acts in different language corpora.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the anonymous reviewers of LEARN. Any remaining errors are our own.

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Endnotes

¹ Head act refers to the directive structure's core and the main element which identifies the directive strategy.

² Supportive move is defined as the element "that gives additional information to justify [the speech act]" (Wang, 2009, p. 216). It could also include a connector which connects two elements, or any other elements other than the head act.

³ The address term is the segment referring to the hearer, such as the hearer's name.

⁴ Action films which include the superhero subgenre consist of fantasy and science fiction content that enables the audience to experience characters who have supernatural abilities. The characters use these given abilities to accomplish their specific goals.

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