LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF ASSERTIVES IN PRESIDENTS' WELCOME MESSAGES ON OFFICIAL WEBSITES OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES IN THE USA

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Abstract - Pragmatically, an assertive is one type of illocutionary speech acts. The typical function of the assertive is to assert or claim some statement or fact. Noticeably, assertives occur so often in Presidents' Welcome Messages (PWMs) posted on the official websites of the colleges and universities in the USA. These assertives help to highlight the purpose of PWMs -attracting more and more learners to the higher education institutions. This paper attempts to identify and analyze the assertives used in PWMs in terms of lexical, syntactic and semantic aspects. The findings help to illuminate the linguistic features of assertives commonly found in PWMs.

Key words - assertive; President's Welcome Messages (PWMs); illocutionary speech act; lexis; syntax; semantics.

1. Rationale

It is obvious that higher education is expanding more rapidly than ever before. One important task of colleges and universities is to enroll students. For learners, the more education institutions develop, the more choices and opportunities they have in choosing an appropriate institution. Moreover, it is vital for them to make the right decisions on which programs to attend and which tertiary institutions to enroll in.

On one hand, training service providers have to establish an impressive image for their institutions. On the other hand, potential learners have to make wise choices on applying for the appropriate higher education. PWMs on the official websites of American colleges and universities optimally fulfill the need of building tertiary institutions' images and of learners' decision-making. It is noticeable that PWMs contain many assertives stating the institutions' strengths and reputations. Therefore, this research is conducted with a view to clarifying the linguistic features of assertives used in PWMs.

It is hoped that the results of the study can be beneficial, to some extent, to the teaching and learning of English. This study may also be of some help to those who are supposed to write welcome messages for the purpose of attracting as many learners to their training institutions as possible.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Searle's Taxonomy of Illocutionary Speech Acts

In this paper, to identify assertives in PWMs, the researcher employs Searle [1975]'s Taxonomy of Illocutionary Speech Acts, which includes five categories: Representatives or Assertives, Directives, Commissives, Expressives, and Declaratives. The first reason is that this classification system is more popular than those by other linguists such as Austin [1962], Bach and Harnish [1979], Yule [1996]. The second reason is that in order to classify speech acts, Searle presents twelve linguistically significant dimensions of variation whereby illocutionary acts differ from one another and he builds most of his taxonomy around three primary dimensions. These are *the illocutionary points*, *the direction of fit*, and *the sincerity condition*.

Table 1. Five General Functions of Speech Acts (Searle 1975)

Speech act type	Direction of fit	S=speaker X=situation
Representatives / Assertives	make words fit the world	S believes X
Expressives	make words fit the world	S feels X
Directives	make world fit the words	S wants X
Commissives	make world fit the words	S intends X
Declaratives	words change the world	S causes X

In the above table, *Direction of fit* is the relationship between the propositional contents and the referred world; *words* are utterances that convey the proposition contents of the illocution; *the world* is the existing state of affairs in the world.

In addition, Searle maintains that there are four *directions of fit* in language:

a. *Word-to-world*, where the utterance fits an independently existing state of affairs in the world. A statement of fact exhibits this *direction of fit*.

b. *World-to-word*, where the world is altered to fit the proposition content of the illocution.

c. *The double direction of fit* is when the world is altered to fit the propositional content of the utterance by being represented as so altered.

d. *The null direction of fit* is where there is no question of achieving success of fit between word and the world.

Searle also states that a speech act is *an assertive* if its purpose is to represent some truth, if it has a word-to-world *direction of fit* (the word matches the world), and if the speaker believes what he says.

In addition, the study also makes use of the definition of *representative* by Yule [1996, p. 53] because its content is similar to that of an assertive speech act. He listed 4 types of representatives or assertives namely *statements of fact, assertions, conclusions, and descriptions,* whereby the speaker represents the world as he or she believes it is.

2.2. Definitions of Terms

Below are the working definitions of the key terms employed in this research:

- *"Welcome"* means to greet somebody in a friendly way when they arrive somewhere or to be pleased that

somebody has come or has joined an organization or an activity. In PWMs, the presidents welcome the expected learners to their institutions through the PWMs.

- **"President's Welcome Message"** is a letter to the audience by the president of a college or university that describes the institution's strengths, identifies what is unique or special about the institution, and invites readers to seek more information about the institution.

- "*Assertive"* in PWMs is a speech act that the president produces to assert or claim some statements about the institution's status and describe the institution's strengths to the audience for the purpose of persuading and attracting more and more learners to the president's tertiary institution.

3. Research Methods

The descriptive method is used to describe, give details, explanations and clarify the characteristics of assertives in PWMs in terms of lexis, syntax and semantics.

Then the inductive method is employed to draw out conclusions on the common linguistic features of assertives in the PWMs. The analysis of assertives in this research is based on Searle's theory.

In order to collect the data for the study's analysis, the researcher has built up some criteria for choosing samples as follows:

As regards **President's Welcome Message,** a PWM must be from the President of a higher education institution and available on the official website of an American college or university; it must be in the written form and from 200 to 400 words in length. This is because through the process of collecting data from many official websites of American colleges and universities in the USA, the researcher found that most PWMs are in letter forms with a variety of lengths. Then the researcher divided these messages into five groups based on their lengths and picked out the group accounting for the vast majority which were to be chosen for investigation.

Table 2. Length of Welcome Messages in Groups

Number of words in PWMs groups	Number of messages	Percentage
0 – 200 words	24	19,83
200 – 400 words	77	63,64
400 – 600 words	17	14,05
600 – 800 words	1	0,83
800 – 1.000 words	2	1,65
Total	121	100

As far as *Assertives* are concerned*,* the sample of an assertive speech act must be a sentence or a sequence of sentences which conveys information about some state of affairs of the world (i.e. tertiary institutions) from the writers (i.e. presidents) to the readers (i.e. perspective learners).

Assertives in PWMs are based on Yule's classification [1996] which shows 4 subtypes namely *assertion, description, conclusion* and *statement of fact.*

With the above set criteria, 50 PWMs have been collected to build up the data. All these PWMs are

available on the official websites of American colleges and universities. The data shows that on average there are from five to fifteen assertives in one PWM.

4. Findings and Discussion

Through the process of collecting and analyzing data, the researcher found that in PWMs, among 5 categories of illocutionary speech acts, assertives predominate the others with 429 instances, accounting for 67,45% whereas there are small proportions of 117 expressives with 18,40%, 70 directives with 11,01% and 20 commissives with 3,14%. Furthermore, the researcher did not find any declaratives in these PWMs. This shows that assertives play the most important role in asserting some information, especially in PWMs.

Table 3. Frequency of Five Speech Act Categories in PWMs

Categories	Occurrence	Rate (%)
Assertives	429	67,45
Expressives	117	18,40
Directives	70	11,01
Commissives	20	3,14
Declaratives	0	0
Total	636	100
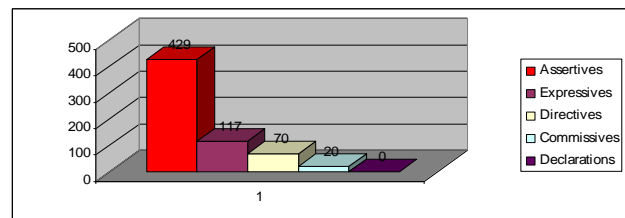
Figure 1. Distribution of Categories of Illocutionary Speech Acts' Taxonomy in PWMs

4.1. Lexical features of assertives in PWMs

4.1.1. Adjectives

In PWMs, descriptive adjectives, extreme adjectives and superlative ones are exploited most in assertives in PWMs in order to describe, compare and state something about the tertiary institutions.

Table 4. Frequency of Adjectives in Assertives in PWMs

Adjectives	Occurrence	Rate (%)
Descriptive Adjectives	345	76,7
Extreme Adjectives	56	10,9
Superlative Adjectives	49	12,4
Total	450	100

From the data, the descriptive adjectives are used with a surprising number to describe the strengths of the American colleges and universities. The superlative adjectives and extreme adjectives also frequently appear in the discourse because they help to assert the strong positions of the institutions with their distinctive capacities in the tertiary education system. Here are some examples:

*(1) Our **outstanding** faculty are not only **excellent** teachers and scholars, they are dedicated to providing a uniquely **engaging, collaborative, hands-on** learning experience.*

*(2) We are justifiably proud of our **safe, comfortable, and attractive** campus**, with its **cutting-edge** technology, **modern** and **convenient** library, **spectacular athletic** facilities, and **updated** facilities for science and the arts.*

4.1.2. Noun phrases

The data shows that there is a variety of noun phrases used in the assertives to denote the modern facilities and infrastructures of the American colleges or universities:

*(3) Of course, the best way to experience Western's vibrant learning environment is to visit our **state-of-the-art facilities** in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains on the Puget Sound, between Seattle and Vancouver, Canada.*

*(4) We are conducting **leading–edge research** in production of ethanol from grass, E–20 ethanol conversion kits, and other alternative energy products and sources.*

4.1.3. Mottos

In this study, it can be seen that mottos facilitate the management of the institutions. Higher education institutions employ mottos to make the audience remember their beliefs or purposes more easily.

Mottos play an important role in the manipulation and development of the educational institutions. They convey the educational visions and missions of the institutions as well as help the educational institutions to be widely publicized. Therefore, in PWMs, such mottos are included in assertives for the purpose of capturing readers' attention. As a result, these assertives will carve the institutions' images in the readers' hearts and minds.

The data of the research shows that the motto is one of the common characteristics found in the assertives in most PWMs. This can be atributed to the fact that the mottos are brief, succinct, impressive and memorable. In PWMs, the mottos are structured by various patterns such as prepositional phrases, noun phrases and verb phrases to highlight the function of assertives. For example:

*(5) They form an inclusive community centered on this campus but extending throughout the nation and around the globe, where its members strive to live up to the University's informal motto: to be **"in the nation's service, and in the service of all nations."***

*(6) You have found a special place, where **Faith**, **Wisdom**, and **Service** are the hallmarks of the Huntingdon College tradition.*

*(7) Atlanta Metropolitan State College is the place to **BELIEVE, BEGIN** and **BECOME**.*

The mottos: **"in the nation's service, and in the service of all nations."**, **"Faith, Wisdom, and Service"**, **"BELIEVE, BEGIN and BECOME"** are embedded in these assertives to highlight the crucial missions of the institutions which are closely attached to the learners' benefits, to denote the striking characteristics of the institutions and to affirm their strong determination in realizing their set goals.

4.2. Syntactic features of assertives in PWMs

4.2.1. Sentence Types

With 429 occurrences of assertives found in 50 PWMs,

these assertives belong to 4 types of sentences: *simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences* and *compound-complex sentences*. These types of sentences are distributed in PWMs with different proportions:

Table 5. *Sentence Types of Assertives in PWMs*

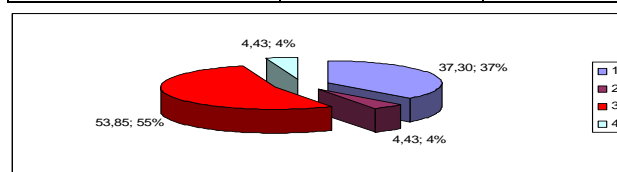| Sentence Types	Occurrence	Rate (%)
Simple	160	37,30
Compound	19	4,43
Complex	231	53,85
Compound-complex	19	4,43
Total	429	100

Figure 2. *Distribution of Sentence Types of Assertives in PWMs*

As can be seen from Table 4, complex sentences are most commonly used for assertives in PWMs, which account for 53,85% with 231 instances. The second most popular type is simple sentences which make up 37,30% with 160 instances. Compound and compound-complex sentences occupy the lowest rates with more than four percent in total.

From the data, we find that complex sentences are used for making some statements of fact and providing information on the higher education institutions. In PWMs, one of the striking structures of complex sentences of assertives in PWMs is the presence of the clause of concession. Below are some examples:

*(8) The liberal arts have long been at the heart of a Linfield education, **whatever** major a student may choose, and I strongly believe that the liberal arts provide the best preparation for life and a career in any field.*

*(9) **No matter what** type of student you are - professional worker, stay-at-home mom, career seeker or military service member - the convenience and flexibility of online learning can help make your goals attainable.*

4.2.2. Voices

The data analysis shows that the sentences in the active voice appear with a much higher frequency than the sentences in the passive voice, as tabulated below:

Table 6. *Distribution of Active and Passive Sentences of Assertives in PWMs*

Voice	*Occurrence*	*Rate (%)*
Active	391	91,14
Passive	38	8,86
Total	429	100

Significantly, as can be seen from Table 5, assertives in the form of active sentences predominate in PWMs. With 391 instances occupying 91,14% of the total, the active voice is given top priority in forming assertives in PWMs.

Orwell [2003] claims that the active voice "is shorter

and more forceful". This has proved to be true in the case of assertives in PWMs because the active voice helps to make assertives more direct, succinct and powerful.

(10) One of our primary focuses is to make a quality college education affordable to you.

In the following examples, the active voice is used because it is more suitable than the passive voice in expressing the information the writers intended to convey:

*(11) We **offer** a wide range of experiential opportunities that are designed to deepen student learning, broaden perspectives and provide valuable, real-world experience.*

*(12) Recent campus facility upgrades **include** the construction of the Margaret R. Preska Residence Community, remodeling of Trafton Science Center, completing of an Outdoor Recreation project that included four new softball fields, a new outdoor track with a soccer infield, along with other facilities, and remodeling of the Centennial Student Union Ballroom.*

4.2.3. Parallel Structures

Through the scrutiny of the collected data, it can be said that parallelism is thoroughly employed in many assertives of the PMWs. The analysis has found out some parallel structures as follows:

a. Parallel Structures with Verbs

*(13) Linfield **emphasizes** lifelong learning, **embraces** diverse cultures and international study, and **recognizes** moral principle and the freedom of conscience.*

b. Parallel Structures with Adjectives

Not only verbs but also adjectives are used in parallel to reinforce the various and fantastic characteristics of something or someone. The following assertive serves as an example of this kind:

*(14) We also offer unparalleled occupational skills training in numerous technical, business, and health-care fields geared toward preparing students for **high-wage, high-skill, high-demand** occupations.*

c. Parallel Structures with *Clauses*

In an effort to draw attention to a particular part of the message and make it stand out from the rest of the writing, the writers have made good use of parallel structures to express their ideas in a series of similar structures. This is to emphasize that these ideas are on equal rank, which helps to make the message more memorable.

Especially, parallelism at the sentence level is employed most in order to emphasize the strengths of the *institutions. Below is an example:*

*(15) **We have an excellent faculty**, and our campus boasts a number of state-of-the-art facilities to enhance our living and learning environments. **We have an impressive graduate program** as well, offering technical, professional and scholastic skills and competencies in teaching, research, and public service, including extension. **We provide our graduates with marketable skills** that are among the nation's best.*

Besides, the writers prefer to use conditional sentences

so commonly to present the supposition in the if-clause and to affirm something in the main clause. This emphatic form stresses the important information or key figures expressed in the assertives. The following sentences are the most impressive structures that the researcher found during the data analysis. This structure has a profound effect on the audience because they are kept unchanged in many successive utterances:

*(16) **If you are** wondering whether FLC is the right fit, please think about the following points. **If these points are** important, then **this is the place for you**.*

***If you want** a world-class education on one of the most beautiful campuses in the nation, **Fort Lewis College is for you**!*

If you want** to have your pick of more than 100 majors, minors and certificates in four different schools, **Fort Lewis College is for you!

If you are** interested in learning from the best professors in small classes where you're more than just a number, **Fort Lewis College is for you!

***If you want** a diverse student body, **Fort Lewis College welcomes** all students of goodwill, and FLC's commitment to Native American education dates back a century.*

As can be seen from the above example, the writers repeatedly use the clause *"If you…"* to picture a great deal of the learners' demand. This series of parallel sentences implies that the institution recognizes all the concerns of the learners and then shows them that this institution is the place where their desires and their future plans can be fully satisfied. That is why the clause *"Fort Lewis College is for you!"* is continuously repeated at the end of the sentence.

In the following example (17), by choosing four concise nouns *faith, service, responsibility* and *initiative* to be used in four parallel structures in the corresponding assertives, the writer has been successful in asserting his belief in his fabulous institution. This way not only makes the writing credible but also arouses readers' attention.

*(17) **This a community of** faith.*
*   **This is a community of** service.*
*   **This is a community of** responsibility.*
*   **This is a community of** initiative.*

4.2.4. Sentence Structures Commonly Used in PWMs

a. Complex Sentences with "Whatever/Whichever/ Whether…"

As specified in Table 4, complex sentences predominate the other sentence types. The researcher found that the complex sentences with concessive clauses of the patterns: ***"Whatever / Whichever / Whether (+ Noun) + Subject + Verb + Main clause"*** are mostly used. Particularly, these clauses take the first position in the sentence that reveals the writers' purpose of introducing something first, then concluding or recommending appropriate things at the end. They are demonstrated as follows:

The first pattern is "Whether you are + Noun phrases as Subject Complements + Main clause":

*(18) **Whether you are** a new student seeking to get started, a current student accessing course or college*

information, or a community member inquiring about WWCC, you should be able to find needed information here.

The second pattern is "You + Will + Bare Infinitive Verb":

This second common structure of assertives in PWMs is worth being considered because of its high degree of assertion. In contrast with the concessive clauses, the pattern **"You + Will + Bare Infinitive Verb"** directly addresses what the writer wants to say and assures the readers of his uttered things. Here is an instance:

*(19) **You will** find that Linfield is committed to educating the whole person, both within and outside the classroom, and that it offers something that students crave but rarely find elsewhere in today's America: a sense of genuine community and civil intellectual exchange.*

It is obvious that through these sentences, the Presidents of the American colleges and universities show their strong determination to meet the perspective learners' relating to the aspects of academic training courses, facilities, faculty staff and the institutions' output.

b. Conditional Sentence Type 1

Assertives are also formed in the structures of conditional clauses in the PWMs. Once again, this structure not only requires a person to implement one thing before obtaining the other thing but it also wants to confirm or assert that the things they are wondering is no matter. Conditional Sentence Type 1 is highly preferred as illustrated in the following example:

*(20) **If** you are a student, you will find the information you need to progress smoothly to graduation and enhance your college experience.*

4.3. Semantic features of assertives in PWMs

According to Richards and Platt [1992, p.164], the semantic field is defined as *"the organization of related words and expressions into a system which shows their relationship to one another".*

As Riemer [2010, p. 2] claims, *"any attempt to understand the nature of language must try to describe and explain the ways in which linguistic expressions have meaning"* and he concludes that *"semantics is the study of meaning in language".*

Moreover, in the article *"Semantic Analysis of English Performative Verbs"*, MacQueen [2] asserts:

The nature of the primary speech acts that are performed in the use of a natural language is determined by the semantic structure of that language. Actual natural languages such as English and French have in their lexicon a large number of speech act verbs whose meanings serve to determine the possible illocutionary forces of the utterances of their sentences.

In this study, based on Richards and Platt [1992]'s view, Riemer [2010] and especially Yule [1996]'s classification of representatives, through the data analysis of assertives in PWMs, the researcher found 4 types of assertives in PWMs. They are *assertions, descriptions, statements of fact* and *conclusions*. Here are some examples:

Assertion*: (21) We believe this unique combination of classroom learning, active service, and spiritual formation creates a transformational education that produces graduates who think critically and creatively, lead with high ethical and professional standards, embody the character and compassion of Jesus Christ, and who thereby are prepared to impact the world.*

Description: *(22) We have high quality transfer courses and curricula for students who wish to pursue their first two years of a four-year degree at SMC before transferring to a four-year college or university.*

Statement of fact: *(23) As a matter of fact, the College is approved by SACS to offer 100% of the Business Administration and General Education Programs and 70% of all courses online.*

Conclusion: *(24) It's clear that our special, focused approach to learning leads to effective problem-solving collaborations and creative new thinking.*

The statistics results of the types of assertives found in PWMs are shown in the following table and figure:

***Table 7.** Types of Assertives in PWMs*

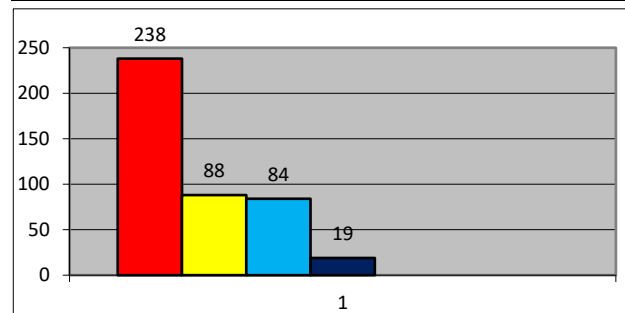| Types of assertives	Occurrence	Rate (%)
Assertions	238	55,48
Descriptions	88	20,51
Statements of fact	84	19,58
Conclusions	19	4,43
Total	429	100

***Figure 3.** Types of Assertives in PWMs*

As shown in Table 7, while there appear 4 types of assertives in PWMs, just three of them account for the vast majority of the total number. They are *assertions* with 238 instances making up 55,48%, *descriptions* with 88 instances making up 20,51%, and *statements of fact* with 84 instances making up 19,58%. These *assertions, descriptions* and *statements of fact,* which are in the word-to-world *direction of fit*, are the important types of assertives in PWMs inasmuch as they function in asserting the high positions of the institutions in the academic world, stating the best quality of their training services and providing as much as necessary information about the institutions' faculty and facilities for the audience.

The remaining type of assertives in PWM - conclusions - is sometimes used for the purpose of persuading the learners to believe in the institutions' capability as well recommending the learners some ideas useful for their future study. Following is the clarification of the above 4 types:

4.3.1. Assertions

Assertions occur with the highest rate - 238 instances occupying 55,48% and are mostly expressed with the verb "*to be*" and " *to believe*". They function in asserting or claiming the mission, vision, and commitment of the colleges and universities. Take the following assertives as examples:

(21) Our students are the pride of BGSU.

(22) The heart and soul of our University is our faculty.

(23) Huntingdon is a comfortable place where every student is known and where relationships with faculty, staff, and students form lifetime bonds.

4.3.2. Descriptions

Descriptions occur with the second highest proposition. They are to provide more information about the capacity of the colleges or universities including training courses and modes, types of degrees, modern facilities and high qualified faculty and staff. Here are some examples:

(24) That's why we offer NCAA Division II Athletics programs, many visual and performing arts activities, research and outreach endeavors, and a host of student programming and volunteer opportunities.

(25) We also have a strong global presence with our own facilities in Delhi, Beijing, London, Paris, and Singapore, active educational programs in the College in locations throughout the world, and the ongoing interaction of scholars and students at work with colleagues from around the globe.

4.3.3. Statements of facts

Statements of facts rank third from the analyzed data. A *statement of fact* exhibits *word-to-world* direction of fit, where the utterance fits an independently existing state of affairs in the world. In PWMs, they mainly focus on the admirable and amazing achievement of institutions.

(26) And our Virtual Campus was recognized as the "Best of the Best" in the Education and Academia category of the Computerworld Honors Program in June 2009.

(27) We also continue to be the university of choice for many of the state's best and brightest high school graduates: this year, 127 of 211 Montana high school graduates offered Montana University System Honor Scholarships, or 60 percent, chose MSU.

4.3.4. Conclusions

Conclusions rarely occur in PWMs but they also contribute to the asserting function of an assertive speech act. Once again, they confirm the strong capacity of the institution among many other colleges and universities.

(28) From models of urban sustainability to the impact of scientific exploration and invention, GW is making a difference.

(29) That's why we offer NCAA Division II Athletics programs, many visual and performing arts activities, *research and outreach endeavors, and a host of student programming and volunteer opportunities.*

5. Conclusion

This article is aimed at investigating assertives employed in PWMs. The results from the analysis of 50 PWMs show that the assertives outnumber other illocutionary speech acts.

In terms of the lexical features, most of the assertives are composed of descriptive adjectives, superlative adjectives and extreme adjectives. Besides, there appears a variety of noun phrases denoting the modern facilities and infrastructures of the US colleges or universities. Additionally, the mottos which are in forms of prepositional phrases, noun phrases and verb phrases are frequently found in theses assertives.

With regard to the syntactic features, the active voice outweighs the passive voice. Interestingly, although assertives in PWMs are found in four sentence types: *simple, complex, compound and complex-compound*, complex sentences occupy the highest proportion. Especially, the complex sentences with concessive clauses are very common. Furthermore, the parallel structures of *verb phrases, adjective phrases and clauses,* the structure "*You will .....*" and Conditional Sentence Type 1 are also commonly used.

As regards the semantic features, in PWMs, there appear four forms of assertives namely *assertion*, *description*, *statements of fact* and *conclusion*, which can be considered as the semantic fields of assertives in PWMs.

In a word, assertives as a type of illocutionary speech act have proved to be one striking linguistic feature of PWMs, which play a significant role in rendering the contents of the PWMs.

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