



# Psychological and Behavioral Impact: Exploring Gaslighting to Control Woman in Romantic Relationship Using Speech Acts Theory

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Received: 2025-05-23 Accepted: 2025-06-28

DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v13i1.7206

## Abstract

Gaslighting is a form of emotional manipulation that significantly affects a victim's mental health, leading to confusion, anxiety, depression, and emotional instability. This study analyzes the psychological and behavioral impacts of gaslighting in romantic relationships using Austin's speech act theory, which includes locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. The analysis focuses on the interaction between the characters Mark and Alicia in the short film *Your Reality*, selected for its explicit depiction of gaslighting behavior. Data were collected through qualitative analysis of selected dialogues. The findings show that expressive illocutionary acts are the most dominant (37.50%), followed by directives (29.17%), representatives (20.83%), and commissive (12.50%). Psychologically, the most prevalent impact is anxiety (61.11%), reflected in feelings of guilt (22.22%), confusion (16.67%), self-doubt (11.11%), and low self-esteem (11.11%). Depression also appears (5.56%) through feelings of distress. Behaviorally, gaslighting leads to increased obedience and submission (33.34%), seen in over-apologizing (5.56%), prioritizing the gaslighter's needs (11.11%), and loss of personal autonomy, such as difficulty making decisions (11.11%). These findings reveal how gaslighting shapes emotional dependency and restricts victims' ability to act independently. The study highlights the importance of recognizing gaslighting tactics in order to restore autonomy, improve mental health, and break cycles of manipulation in romantic relationships.

**Keywords:** *Behavioral Impact; Gaslighting; Illocutionary; Perlocutionary; Psychological Impact; Speech Act*

## **Introduction**

The use of language and psychological tactics is often practiced as a tactic to control or influence partners in a relationship. The practice that is employed by men in the context of relationships, especially romantic relationship is called as Male-driven manipulation. One common form of male-driven manipulation is gaslighting, is a pattern of repeated manipulation in which the perpetrator causes the victim to doubt their memory, perception, or mental health, resulting in a distorted view of reality (Sweet 2019).

These actions not only aim to maintain power in the relationship, but can also result in serious impacts on the victim's emotional well-being, such as decreased confidence and autonomy. In many heterosexual relationships, this phenomenon often appears as male manipulation, where men use language and psychological tactics to control their partner. Previous researchers showed that social disparity is the cause of gaslighting. They said that women are more often than men the victims of gaslighting.

The term gaslighting originates from Patrick Hamilton's play *Gas Light* (also known as *Angel Street* in the U.S.), which was adapted into films in 1940 and 1944. Over time, the term evolved to describe psychological manipulation aimed at making someone doubt their sanity, inspired by the tactics portrayed in the play and film. According to (Klein et al. 2023) gaslighting often involves accusations that undermine the victim's credibility, such as calling them "crazy," "overly emotional," or cognitively deficient.

Although these remarks may appear as concern, they function as subtle insults. Perpetrators use such tactics to induce self-doubt, implying that the victim is irrational or uninformed. When confronted, gaslighters often deflect blame by highlighting the victim's perceived flaws, causing the victim to feel guilty and apologize even for unrelated or harmless behavior in an effort to reduce conflict.

Research by (Drake et al. 2025) presents a comprehensive interdisciplinary literature review on gaslighting, the study identifies inconsistencies in the operationalization of gaslighting and emphasizes its role as a verbal manipulation tactic in the context of intimate partner violence and coercive control. According to (Klein et al. 2023) in their study titled "A Qualitative Analysis of Gaslighting in Romantic Relationships," many comprehensive analyses of gaslighting originate from self-help books written by licensed therapists.

These books describe various gaslighting tactics, including accusing the victim of being "crazy," as well as less common behaviors, such as "reversing the situation," where the perpetrator shifts critical discussions about their own actions into criticism of their partner. These gaslighting strategies, along with other forms of abuse such as verbal abuse and emotional punishment, can cause victims to doubt their own perceptions and mental health.

Given gaslighting's reliance on verbal manipulation it can be analyzed through the lens of pragmatics, particularly using Austin's (1962) theory of speech acts, there are three basic types of acts performed in speech. The first type is locutionary act. Locutionary act is the basic act of utterance. The second type is the illocutionary act. Illocutionary acts are the intention or purpose behind an utterance (Rismayanti 2021).

Yule (2014) divided illocutionary acts into five categories; representatives, directives, commissive, expressive, declarations. The third type of speech act is perlocutionary act, refers to the effect of the utterance from the locutionary act and illocutionary act that make the action (Rismayanti 2021). Understanding gaslighting through this framework allows for exploration of the function of manipulative language, highlighting the complex relationship between the speaker's intent, the meaning of the utterance, and its impact on the victim.

Psychological and behavioral impacts are among the most significant consequences experienced by victims of gaslighting in romantic relationships, as these experiences can cause intense emotional distress. Psychologically, victims often experience anxiety, which includes excessive fear, guilt, confusion, self-doubt, and low self-esteem (Aurangzeb et al. 2023). Prolonged anxiety may escalate into depression, marked by deep sadness, emotional distress, loss of interest, and feelings of helplessness (Astriani 2022).

Behaviorally, victims may over-apologize, show obedience, prioritize the gaslighter's needs, and struggle to make independent decisions (Astriani 2022). These patterns reflect a loss of personal autonomy and increased emotional dependence. Recognizing these effects is essential to understanding how gaslighting affects victims' mental health and behavior, as well as to developing effective support strategies for those affected by gaslighting behavior.

From the explanation above, the researchers are interested to find out the psychological and behavioral impact by exploring gaslighting using Austin's speech acts theory focuses on the interaction between the characters Mark and Alicia in short film "Your Reality" selected for its explicit depiction of gaslighting behavior. This study fills a significant gap in gaslighting research by employing a linguistic approach, particularly through speech acts theory, which has been relatively underexplored compared to the psychological perspective on gaslighting and manipulation.

This study explores specific language patterns that reveal intended manipulation (illocutionary) acts used by male character to do gaslighting to control woman character and identify the psychological impacts on the victims (perlocutionary) advancing the understanding of gaslighting tactics. This interdisciplinary approach bridging linguistics and psychology as well as in identifying language patterns that can serve as indicators of gaslighting, offering new contributions to early detection and understanding of manipulation tactics in relationships.

## Method

Researchers use qualitative descriptive method to analyze utterances in the short film *Your Reality* on YouTube directed by Tatjana Anders, with a total duration of 21 minutes and 4 seconds. The data consisted of utterances delivered by the main characters in the movie *Your Reality*, namely Alicia (the female character) and Mark (the male character). The dialogues were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on emotionally charged conversations reflected manipulation, power imbalance, or control with criteria relevant for identifying gaslighting behavior.

Data were collected by repeatedly viewing the film, transcribing and cross-checking the dialogue, and annotating utterances for speech acts elements. This research utilized Austin's (1959) speech acts theory, which divides speech acts into three categories: locution, illocution, and perlocution. Yule (2014) further develops the concept by categorizing illocutionary acts into five types: representative, declarative, commissive, expressive, and declaration.

After categorization related to types of illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, the utterances were analyzed to identify indicators of gaslighting and identified psychological and behavior impact on the victim. The triangulation of verbal and visual expressions in the film enhanced the study's validity. This study acknowledges its methodological limitations, including reliance on a single short fiction film that may not fully reflect the dynamics of real life and the potential for interpretive subjectivity inherent in qualitative analysis.

## Results

### *Illocutionary Acts*

The researchers analyzed the types of illocutionary acts found in the dialogue to identify the forms of manipulation present. The findings show that expressive acts account for approximately 37.50% of utterances, followed by directive acts at 29.17%, representative acts at 20.83%, and commissive acts at 12.50%. This distribution is shown in the table below.

Table 1. Types of Illocutionary Acts

<b>Code</b>	<b>Types of Illocutionary Act</b>	<b>Amount</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1.1	<i>Representative</i>	5	20,83%
1.2	<i>Directive</i>	7	29,17%
1.3	<i>Commissive</i>	3	12,50%
1.4	<i>Expressive</i>	9	37,50%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>

The table above indicates that expressive acts, representing characters' emotions and feelings, were the most prevalent illocutionary acts, accounting for about 37.50% of the total. This suggests that emotional expression is a significant

aspect of their communication. In contrast, directives, which involve giving commands or requests, made up about 29.17% of the acts, highlighting the importance of influencing others' actions. Representatives, which state facts or beliefs, constituted around 20.83%, while commissives, which commit the speaker to a certain course of action, represented approximately 12.50%. In addition to categorizing speech acts, the researchers also noted the psychological impacts associated with these utterances. A significant number of these utterances were found to correlate with observable psychological effects on the victim, such as confusion, self-doubt, guilt.

## Discussion

This section discusses the findings from the analysis of illocutionary acts in the dialogue between Mark and Alicia. The primary focus is to explain how Mark's communicative acts function as tools of manipulation, particularly within the context of gaslighting. Each data point is examined to understand the psychological and behavioral impacts experienced by Alicia as the victim, as well as how the power dynamics in their relationship influence her thoughts and decision-making. Ultimately, this discussion aims to provide a clearer understanding of the mechanisms of gaslighting and its effects on individual mental health.

These findings have broader implications for understanding how language can serve as a covert but powerful instrument of psychological control. Gaslighting, as illustrated through various expressive, directive, and representative speech acts, often involves subtle tactics such as denial, or feigned concern, all of which can gradually distort a victim's perception of reality. Recognizing these linguistic patterns is essential not only for academic inquiry but also for practical applications in mental health, education, and interpersonal communication. By identifying these speech markers, psychologists, counselors, and even laypeople can better detect signs of manipulation in everyday interactions, particularly in emotionally abusive relationships.

### *Data 1:*

Mark: *Today was supposed to be special day for us*

Alicia: *Are you upset? I thought I mentioned it last week*

Data 1 shows that the illocutionary act is found in Mark's statement which expresses his expectations and disappointment. Mark's words, "*Today was supposed to be a special day for us,*" clearly reflect his disappointment because he feels that his expectations to spend time with Alicia were not met. The background of the conversation is that it took place in the living room while Alicia was cleaning up her belongings from the move. In this context, Mark invited Alicia to go out with him, but Alicia already had an appointment with her friend, Hannah.

In addition, this statement also functions as a representative, because Mark conveys the fact that he has certain expectations for the day. In this way, Mark conveys information that shows the importance of the day to both of them. This further reinforces the gaslighting tactic that Mark uses to manipulate Alicia's feelings by trying to induce guilt in Alicia. The sentence falls under the category of representative, where by using the sentence, Mark aims to make Alicia feel that she has disappointed the expectations of what should have been a special moment for both of them.

This is a classic example of gaslighting, where the perpetrator attempts to cast doubt on the other person's reality and decisions. Gaslighting often involves emotional manipulation, and in this case, Mark was attempting to change Alicia's perception of the situation. When Alicia replied, "*Are you upset? I thought I mentioned it last week,*" she showed that she felt distressed by Mark's reaction. Mark, with his words, attempted to divert attention from Alicia's decision and placed an emotional burden on her.

This creates confusion and guilt in Alicia, who may begin to doubt her decision to fulfill the appointment with her friend. Mark's words not only serve to convey his disappointment, but also to control and manipulate Alicia's feelings, so that she feels trapped in an uncomfortable situation. In this context, gaslighting becomes a tool that Mark uses to maintain emotional power over Alicia, which can result in long-term impacts on her mental health.

The psychological impact experienced by Alicia as a result of this gaslighting can include guilt, confusion, and feelings of distress. Behaviorally, Alicia shows a tendency to prioritize Mark's needs and expectations over her own needs and desires, even in situations where she feels uncomfortable and insulted.

Data 2:

Mark: *No, it's okay, Go have fun!*

Alicia: *Hey! Mark, I'm really sorry... The last thing I want to do is hurt your feelings. You know what? I have an idea how I can make it up to you.*

Data 2 shows that the illocutionary act is found in Mark's statement, "*No, it's okay, go have fun!*". The background of the conversation is that it took place in the living room while Alicia was cleaning up her belongings from the move. In this context, Mark invited Alicia to go out with him, but Alicia already had an appointment with her friend, Hannah. The utterance is not just an actual word, but there is an intention of illocutionary act to be conveyed by the speaker. In addition, this statement also functions as a directive, because it is intended, and understood, as an act of giving a command, instruction, or request to do something.

It means his utterances use supportive language to mask their true feelings of disappointment or resentment. The illocutionary act aims to manipulate the listener's emotions, creating an internal conflict about her choice. Gaslighting

behavior is evident through Mark's emotional manipulation. When Mark says, "*No, it's okay, go have fun!*", he is trying to create the illusion that he is not bothered by Alicia's decision not to go with him. In fact, behind those words are deep feelings of disappointment, designed to inflict guilt on Alicia. This is a common tactic of gaslighters who often use ostensibly supportive language to hide their manipulative motives. The impact of Mark's statement was significant for Alicia.

By telling her to "*go have fun*," Mark indirectly placed an emotional burden on Alicia, making her feel responsible for Mark's happiness. This creates doubt in Alicia, who then begins to question her decision to keep her appointment with her friend Hannah. Mark manages to divert attention from his own disappointment and puts Alicia on the defensive, where she feels the need to apologize and explain her decision. Alicia's response, "*I'm so sorry...*", is a form of over apologizing, which is when someone apologizes excessively to the situation.

Although she did not make an objective mistake, Alicia responded to Mark's manipulative statement with guilt and a strong desire to fix something that was not actually her responsibility. Alicia's response "*I have an idea how I can make it up to you?*" indicates a tendency to sacrifice herself to preserve Mark's feelings, that emotional pressure has influenced her decisions and perceptions. In this context, gaslighting not only influenced Alicia's decision, but also changed the way she saw herself and her relationship with Mark.

Alicia begins to feel that the responsibility of keeping Mark's feelings in check falls on her shoulders, which is a hallmark of gaslighting behavior. By using emotional manipulation, one party is able to control and influence the other party's decisions. Mark manages to make Alicia feel guilty and responsible for her feelings, which emphasizes how dangerous this tactic can be in interpersonal relationships. The psychological impact Alicia may experience confusion, guilt and uncertainty about herself and her relationship with Mark. Behaviorally, Alicia shows difficulty in making even simple decisions and over apologizing.

### Data 3

Mark : Yeah, and that's not all. I've also been invited to this huge celebrity party tonight, *and you're coming with me*.

Alicia : I don't know... I'm not really in the mood. I'd rather just stay here and start working on the next project. It's in two weeks' time and I'm...

Mark : *Honey, .... Go and get ready* and we'll head out!

Data 3 shows that the illocutionary act is found in Mark's statement, "*you're coming with me*," indicating a commissive illocutionary act. This conversation takes place after Alicia returns home from work, where Mark invites her to attend a big party that night. Although Alicia shows her dislike and desire to rest and prepare for the upcoming project, Mark still insists that Alicia accompany him. Mark's statement reflects his strong commissive to bring Alicia to the party, without considering her wishes.

This shows a clear power dynamic in their relationship. Mark tries to convince Alicia to go along, even though she shows no interest. This reflects a dominant attitude that has the potential to undermine Alicia's autonomy. Mark's use of the phrase "*Honey*", followed by a direct instruction to "*go and get ready*," suggests that he is not only ignoring Alicia's wishes, but also attempting to reshape her reality. In this way, Mark makes Alicia feel that her disinterest is invalid. This is consistent with the characteristics of gaslighting, which is a manipulative tactic in which the perpetrator makes the victim doubt the validity of their own feelings.

The psychological impact that Alicia may experience is significant and complex. The pressure of having to fulfill Mark's wishes can lead to deep guilt and constant anxiety. This condition allows Alicia to start suppressing and ignoring her own needs and desires in order to please her partner. In addition, the guilt of not being able to meet Mark's expectations exacerbated Alicia's emotional state.

This cycle triggered a detrimental emotional dependency, where Alicia tended to feel that her self-worth and acceptance depended on conforming to Mark's will. This pattern creates psychological distress that leads to distorted perceptions of self and reality, potentially leading to decreased self-esteem and a feeling of loss of control over her own life. Behaviorally, Alicia shows a tendency to prioritize Mark's needs and tendency to prioritize Mark's needs.

Data 4:

Mark: *Oh, stop it, Alicia! Just look at yourself! You are so pathetic!*

Alicia: They fired me, Mark!

Mark: *To be honest, I don't blame them! You are useless, any sign of trouble and it's straight to the bottle! You are just an alcoholic!*

Alicia: *No, I'm not!*

Mark: *I'm just being honest, but you could never handle honesty, could you?*

Alicia: *I don't think I deserved that job to begin with...*

The background of the conversation occurs when Alicia asks for Mark's whereabouts and expresses her anxiety about being ignored, Mark responds "*Oh, stop it, Alicia! Just look at yourself! You are so pathetic!*" this utterance is a form of expressive illocutionary act, which is a speech act that expresses the speaker's emotional attitude towards the condition being discussed. In this case, Mark not only shows anger, but also insults and humiliates Alicia, thus establishing emotional dominance in their relationship.

Furthermore, when Alicia tells him that she just lost her job, Mark replies, "*To be honest, I don't blame them! You are useless, any sign of trouble and it's straight to the bottle! You are just an alcoholic!*", this utterance illustrates how Mark interprets Alicia's failure as the result of exaggerated and manipulated personal weaknesses, which is characteristic of gaslighting tactics. Although Alicia tried to deny the accusation by saying, "*No, I'm not!*", Mark continued his psychological pressure



with sentences such as, *"I'm just being honest, but you could never handle honesty, could you?"* this statement is a form of emotional manipulation, in which Mark's verbal abuse is perceived as honesty, and Alicia's discomfort is used as evidence of her own weakness.

This strategy reinforces gaslighting, as it makes the victim doubt the validity of their own emotional responses. This can be seen in Alicia's response, when she says, *"I don't think I deserved that job to begin with,"* it appears that Alicia begins to internalize the negative narrative formed by Mark. She doubts her professional achievements and considers herself undeserving, even though she previously maintained her belief that she was not a drinker. This reaction reflects the classic effects of gaslighting, where the victim begins to question her own perceptions, emotions and even values.

Psychologically, Alicia's impact included decreased self-esteem, guilt, and emotional confusion. She felt that she lost trust in her own perceptions. Behaviorally, she showed a tendency to obey and give in to Mark's pressure, even in situations where she was hurt and humiliated. If this pattern continues, Alicia risks long-term psychological distress such as depression, anxiety, and loss of personal autonomy in relationships.

### ***Perlocutionary Act***

The perlocutionary acts in this analysis reflect the psychological impact Alicia experienced as a result of her verbal interaction with Mark, who used various types of illocutionary acts to manipulate her emotions. In various dialogues, Alicia exhibited reactions such as excessive guilt, emotional confusion, and difficulty maintaining personal boundaries. For example, when Mark implicitly expressed his disappointment, she responds with an apology and an attempt to defuse the situation, despite her innocence.

This shows that her words serve not only as verbal communication, but also as an attempt to avoid conflict and meet Mark's demands in order to maintain the relationship, even at the expense of her own needs. In particular, Alicia tends to doubt her own decisions and feelings, even beginning to internalize the negative narrative created by Mark, such as doubts about her achievements and a decline in self-confidence. Behaviorally, this leads to a tendency to be obedient and prioritize Mark's needs, resulting in a loss of personal autonomy and increased emotional dependence.

Thus, Alicia's perlocutionary acts can be understood as adaptive manifestations of psychological pressure and manipulation, functioning as a mechanism to maintain the relationship while enduring the emotional pain she experiences.

### **Psychological and Behavioral Impacts**

Table 2. Psychological and Behavioral Impacts

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Psychological impact</i>	<i>Anxiety The feeling of excessive fear or worry about things that have not yet happened or are uncertain.</i>	– <i>Feelings of</i>	22.22%
		– <i>Guilt</i>	16.67%
		– <i>Confused</i>	11.11%
		– <i>Self – doubt Low self-esteem</i>	11.11%
<i>Psychological impact</i>	<i>Depression Deep sadness, loss of interest or enthusiasm for life, and prolonged despair. Driven by feelings of loss, failure, or helplessness.</i>	– <i>Feelings of distress</i>	5.56%
<i>Behavioral impact</i>	<i>Obedience (tendency to obey) Over-apologizing Submissiveness (tendency to prioritize Mark's needs) Loss of personal autonomy (difficulty in making decisions)</i>		5.56%
			5.56%
			11.11%
			11.11%

The results of the analysis in Table 2 show that the most dominant psychological impact is anxiety, with feelings of guilt as the highest indicator (22.22%), followed by confusion, self-doubt, and low self-esteem. Behavioral impacts such as loss of personal autonomy and submissiveness (each at 11.11%). Depression indicators such as feelings of distress (5.56%) remain low, but their emergence signals the onset of potential more serious psychological disorders if this toxic relationship pattern continues.

### **Conclusion**

This study concludes that gaslighting in romantic relationships, as depicted in *Your Reality*, has significant psychological and behavioral impacts on the victim. The findings reveal that anxiety is the most dominant psychological effect, with feelings of guilt (22.22%) as the highest indicator. These emotional states reflect the victim's internalization of blame and eroded self-worth. In terms of behavioral impact, the data shows a notable tendency toward submissiveness and loss of personal autonomy (each at 11.11%), suggesting a compromised ability to make independent decisions.

The use of expressive illocutionary acts by the perpetrator dominates the manipulative communication style, reinforcing guilt, anxiety, and confusion, and contributing to emotional dependence. However, this study is limited to a single

fictional source, which may not fully capture the complexity of gaslighting in real-life contexts. Future research is therefore recommended to incorporate multiple sources such as films, literature, or real-life testimonies and to apply interdisciplinary lenses, including psychological and feminist perspectives, to enrich the analysis of gaslighting and its long-term effects. Such efforts could also contribute to the development of practical strategies for prevention and recovery in abusive relationships.

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