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Speech Acts Analysis in the Film Atonement (2007)

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Abstract

Miscommunication about the meaning of words in some situations is a common problem that speakers and hearers face in daily life. It is interesting how language functions can be identified in human interactions, considering the context that affects communication. This research aims to identify the types of speech acts in the film Atonement (2007). This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach because the analysis focused on interpreting utterances based on their characters' meanings and functions in context. Utilizing George Yule's theory of speech acts, the findings reveal four of the five types of speech acts: representatives, directives, expressives, and commissives. The dominant category in these findings comprised 88 out of a total of 202 speech acts (43%). The speech acts in the film serve various purposes, including reporting information, stating the truth, expressing emotions, making requests, refusing unwanted propositions, and so on. This study presents the numerous meanings and functions that utterances serve in the language used by the characters in the film Atonement (2007).

Keywords: *Atonement; Pragmatics; Speech acts*

INTRODUCTION

Language serves not merely as a tool for communication but fundamentally as a means through which humans perform actions and construct social reality (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). In the field of pragmatics, this concept is encapsulated in the theory of speech acts, which examines how utterances function beyond their literal meaning to accomplish specific communicative goals (Yule, 1996). Yule (1996) defines pragmatics as the study of speaker meaning, emphasizing how utterances can function as actions such as requesting, apologizing, promising, or refusing depending on the context in which they occur (Kecskes, 2019). This perspective shifts the focus from what words mean in isolation to what speakers intend to accomplish through their use of language in specific situations (Verschueren, 2019). Similarly, Levinson (1983) explains that pragmatics examines the relationship between language and context that shapes how meaning is interpreted by speakers and listeners (Chen, 2020). Speech acts, therefore, represent the fundamental building blocks of human interaction, revealing how intentions are conveyed, understood, negotiated, and sometimes misunderstood in communicative exchanges (Bach & Harnish, 2021). Understanding these dynamics is crucial in grasping the nuances of human communication in different cultural and social settings (Rosenberg & Henshaw, 2020).

The study of speech acts has evolved significantly since Austin's (2020) pioneering work *How to Do Things with Words*, which introduced the revolutionary idea that language is performative—that saying something is doing something (Yule, 2020). Austin distinguished between locutionary acts (the act of saying something), illocutionary acts (what is done in saying something), and perlocutionary acts (the effects achieved by saying something) (Chen, 2021). Building upon Austin's foundation, Searle (2019)

developed a more systematic taxonomy of speech acts, categorizing them into five major types: representatives (committing the speaker to the truth of a proposition), directives (attempting to get the hearer to do something), commissives (committing the speaker to future action), expressives (expressing psychological states), and declarations (bringing about changes in the institutional state of affairs). This classification has become foundational in pragmatic analysis and provides a robust framework for examining how language operates in various communicative contexts (Bach & Harnish, 2020). Research in pragmatics has continued to explore these categories in detail, showing how they manifest across different languages and cultures (Kecskes & Zhang, 2020). Furthermore, modern studies have expanded the application of speech act theory to digital communication, highlighting its relevance in understanding online interactions (Gao et al., 2021).

Film dialogue represents a particularly rich source of data for pragmatic analysis because it mirrors natural conversation while being carefully crafted to serve narrative purposes (Ryan & Granville, 2020). Films often encapsulate complex interpersonal dynamics, power relations, emotional conflicts, and social negotiations through dialogue, making them ideal subjects for speech act research.

Previous studies have demonstrated the value of analyzing speech acts in film to understand both linguistic phenomena and the social dimensions of communication. Kpogo and Abrefa (2018) analyzed face-to-face casual conversation patterns, showing how pragmatic functions operate in everyday interaction. Research has also examined speech acts in various film genres, including romantic films, animated films, and dramatic narratives, demonstrating that cinematic dialogue can reveal patterns of language use that reflect real-world communication strategies (Cutting, 2002; Leech, 1983).

The film *Atonement* (2007), directed by Joe Wright and based on Ian McEwan's novel, presents a particularly compelling case for speech act analysis. The narrative centers on themes of misinterpretation, guilt, memory, and the devastating consequences of miscommunication. The film's plot is driven by a single catastrophic misunderstanding: thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis witnesses events she cannot fully comprehend and makes an accusation that destroys the lives of her sister Cecilia and Cecilia's lover, Robbie Turner. The film is known for its emotionally intense dialogues, subtle implications, indirect speech, and interpersonal conflicts that carry significant narrative weight. The characters' utterances often carry indirect intentions, implied meanings, and life-altering consequences, making language essential to the progression of the story. This aligns with Searle's (1979) view that speech acts can perform actions beyond literal meaning, functioning as instruments of power, manipulation, confession, and reconciliation. The film's sophisticated dialogue, which moves between different time periods and perspectives, offers multiple layers of pragmatic meaning that warrant systematic investigation.

Despite the growing body of research on speech acts in film, there exists a significant gap in the literature regarding films with complex psychological and temporal structures like *Atonement*. Most existing research focuses on mainstream or contemporary

films, while fewer studies investigate films that deal with intricate themes of memory, narrative unreliability, and the long-term consequences of communication failures. Furthermore, while several researchers have applied Searle's Speech Act Theory to film analysis, *Atonement* (2007) has not yet been systematically examined through this theoretical lens. Given the film's central concern with the power of words to shape reality and destroy lives, it represents an ideal and as-yet-unexplored case study for understanding how speech acts operate in contexts of high emotional stakes and moral complexity.

The urgency of this research stems from several considerations. First, understanding how speech acts function in narratives about miscommunication can illuminate the pragmatic mechanisms that lead to misunderstanding in real-world contexts. Second, analyzing a film that explicitly thematizes the consequences of language use provides insight into the ethical dimensions of speech acts—how utterances can become actions with irreversible moral implications. Third, the film's structure, which presents multiple perspectives on the same events, offers a unique opportunity to examine how the same speech acts can be interpreted differently depending on the hearer's knowledge, assumptions, and emotional state. This multilayered narrative structure makes *Atonement* an exceptionally rich text for exploring the gap between speaker intention and hearer interpretation, a central concern in pragmatic theory.

The novelty of this research lies in its application of Searle's Speech Act Theory to a film that has not previously been analyzed from this perspective, combined with its focus on how speech acts function within a narrative explicitly concerned with the power and danger of language. Unlike previous studies that may focus on single genres or straightforward narratives, this research examines a complex, multi-temporal narrative in which speech acts are shown to have consequences that unfold over decades. Additionally, this study contributes to the broader understanding of how pragmatic theory can be applied to literary and cinematic texts, expanding the methodological applications of speech act analysis beyond conversation analysis and into narrative discourse.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the types of speech acts found in the main dialogues of *Atonement* (2007) and to explain their pragmatic functions based on Searle's Speech Act Theory. Through this analysis, the study aims to contribute to the understanding of how language performs actions within film discourse and to expand speech act research using data from films with complex narrative structures.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research because the analysis focused on interpreting utterances based on their meaning and function in context. The data consisted of selected dialogues from the film Atonement (2007), particularly those spoken by the main characters and containing potential speech acts.

The data collection technique involved watching the film several times and transcribing the relevant utterances. After transcription, the utterances were identified and

classified based on Searle's (1979) categories of speech acts, which include representatives, directives, expressives, commissives, and declarations. The selection of a qualitative approach was based on the pragmatic perspective that meaning is shaped by context, speaker intention, and interactional situation, making qualitative interpretation the most suitable method for analyzing speech acts.

For data analysis, each utterance was examined to determine its illocutionary force using Searle's Speech Act Theory. The analysis also considered the situational context in the film, including character relationships and narrative events. The results were then described and interpreted to reveal the types and functions of speech acts found in the dialogues.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the findings of the study based on Searle's (1979) classification of speech acts. From the selected dialogues in Atonement (2007), the researcher observed that only four of the five types of speech acts. There are representatives, directives, expressives, and commissives were found. The table below categorizes all types of speech acts:

Table 1. Kinds of Speech Acts

No	The Kinds of Speech Acts	Quantity	Percentage (%)
1	Representatives	88	43%
2	Expressives	52	26%
3	Directives	52	26%
4	Commissives	10	5%
5	Declaratives	0	0%
Total:		**202**	**100%**

The table above displays Atonement's usage of kinds of speech acts. The examination of speech acts reveals that the most dominant kinds of speech acts employed by the characters are Representatives with 43%. Followed by Directives and Expressives, which have a proportion of 26%. Commissives have the lowest percentage of speech acts at 5%.

According to the research, Atonement (2007) uses four of the five different types of speech acts. Representatives, directives, expressives, and commissives are among them. Here are the explanations:

Representatives

Searle (cited in (Levinson, 1983) defined there are several types of representatives which are asserting, reporting, explaining, showing something, suggesting, and refusing. From the collected data, the researcher found six various types of representative utterances that appeared in the dialogues, each representing one of these functions. These types are presented and discussed in the table below:

Table 2. Representatives Utterance

Time	Type	Character	Utterance
01:51:54	Asserting	Older Briony	*"My sister and Robbie would never able to have the time together."*
00:44:14	Reporting	Briony	*"I saw him with my own eyes."*
01:42:01	Explaining	Briony	*"I was thirteen."*
01:44:12	Showing something	Briony	*"He's married Lola, I've just come from their wedding."*
00:02:46	Suggesting	Robbie	*"Why don't you let me read it?"*
00:02:43	Refusing	Robbie	*"I'm not sure that would be quite."*

The first utterance, "My sister and Robbie would never be able to have the time," spoken by older Briony, represents an asserting type of representative speech act. In this context, Briony states her belief regarding the lost opportunity for Cecilia and Robbie to live their future together. This utterance expresses a firm stance based on her reflection about the past that cannot be changed.

The second utterance, "I saw him with my own eyes," spoken by young Briony, illustrates the reporting function. Briony delivers information about what she claims to have witnessed by herself. This utterance serves as a report of an event, even though it is later revealed to be a misinterpretation.

The third utterance "I was thirteen," spoken by Briony in her adulthood, functions as explaining. Through this short statement, Briony provides justification and context for her past actions by referring to her age and lack of maturity at the time. The utterance explains the cause behind her misunderstanding and highlights how her judgment was influenced by childhood innocence rather than malice.

The fourth utterance, "He's married Lola, I've just come from their wedding," spoken by Briony, represents the showing something function of a representative speech act. In this context, Briony provides factual information about the marriage between Paul Marshall and Lola to Cecilia and Robbie. This utterance performs the act of revealing a real-life event that significantly affects the storyline.

The fifth utterance, "Why don't you let me read it?" spoken by Robbie, illustrates the function of suggesting within directive speech acts. Robbie proposes an action—being allowed to read the document—through a softened interrogative form. This formulation allows the speaker to influence the hearer's decision while maintaining conversational harmony, making it a clear representation of a suggestion.

The last utterance, "I'm not sure that would be quite," spoken by Robbie, represents the refusing function of a representative speech act. In this context, Robbie politely expresses his doubt about participating in Briony's play. This utterance communicates his personal opinion and attitude toward the invitation rather than making a commitment about future action.

Directives

A type of speech act called a directive deals with trying to get someone to do something. Leech (1983) defined the examples are requesting, ordering, commanding, advising, and recommending. These types are presented and discussed in the table below:

Table 3. Directives Utterance

Time	Type	Character		Utterance
00:26:49	Requesting	Robbie Briony	→	*"Do you think you could do me a favour?"*
01:01:00	Ordering	Robbie Briony	→	*"Come on, pal. You should be getting dressed."*
01:42:27	Commanding	Cecilia Robbie	→	*"Look at me."*
01:43:57	Advising	Cecilia Briony	→	*"Try and include whatever you can remember of what Danny Hardman was doing that night.*
01:44:53	Recommending	Robbie Briony	→	*"Just write it all down. Just the truth. No rhymes, no embellishments, no adjectives."*

The first utterance, "Do you think you could do me a favour?" spoken by Robbie, represents the requesting function of directive speech acts. In this context, Robbie politely asks Briony to perform an action for him. The interrogative form softens the request and gives Briony freedom to accept or decline, which is a key feature of a request.

The second utterance, "Come on, pal. You should be getting dressed," also spoken by Robbie, illustrates ordering. The structure of the utterance indicates a direct attempt to make Briony carry out an action immediately. By encouraging urgency and assuming compliance, the utterance functions as an order that expects the hearer to follow without resistance.

The third utterance, "Look at me," spoken by Cecilia, represents commanding. This utterance is short, direct, and imperative, indicating a stronger authoritative. Cecilia's emotional state and the critical situation reinforce the command-like intensity of this utterance.

The fourth utterance, "Try and include whatever you can remember of what Danny Hardman was doing that night," spoken by Cecilia to Briony, exemplifies advising. Cecilia suggests a course of action believed to be useful for Briony when writing her statement. The modal structure "try and include" implies guidance rather than an obligation, which reflects the illocutionary force of giving advice.

The last utterance, "Just write it all down. Just the truth. No rhymes, no embellishments, no adjectives," spoken by Robbie, functions as recommending. Although stated in a directive form, the utterance offers an advisable approach for writing the confession. Robbie proposes a specific manner of writing that would benefit the situation, showing that the utterance is intended as a recommendation.

Expressives

Searle (1979) defined expressive is simply to express the sincerity condition of speech act. The speaker adapts their words to the world (of feeling) by employing expressives. Leech (1983) defined these expressives acts can be in the forms of apologizing, thanking, blaming, accusing, congratulating, praising, etc. According to the data analysis, the researcher found six various types of representative utterances that appeared in the dialogues, each representing one of these functions. These types are presented and discussed in the table below:

Table 4. Expressives Utterance

Time	Type	Character	Utterance
01:44:43	Apologizing	Briony	*"I'm very, very sorry to have caused you all this terrible distress."*
01:01:55	Thanking	Briony	*"Thank you, thank you, thank you."*
01:42:23	Blaming	Robbie	*"Thanks to you, they were able to close ranks and throw me to the fucking wolves."*
01:41:49	Accusing	Robbie	*"Did it give you pleasure to think of me inside?"*
00:03:05	Congratulating	Emily	*"Stupendous! It's stupendous, darling!"*
00:18:39	Praising	Marshall	*"Your parents are absolutely wonderful people"*

The first utterance, "I'm very, very sorry to have caused you all this terrible distress," spoken by Briony to Robbie and Cecilia, represents apologizing. This is because Briony acknowledges her past wrongdoing and expresses clear regret. The phrase "very, very sorry" shows recognition of responsibility and an intention to make amends, which are key features of an apologetic speech act.

The second utterance, "Thank you, thank you, thank you," also spoken by Briony to Robbie, illustrates thanking. Briony expresses intense gratitude toward Robbie, and the repetition of "thank you" emphasizes sincerity and acknowledgment of his help or support, making it a clear example of a thanking speech act.

The third utterance, "Thanks to you, they were able to close ranks and throw me to the fucking wolves," spoken by Robbie to Briony, represents blaming. Robbie attributes responsibility for his negative experience directly to Briony. The phrase "thanks to you" signals that she is being held accountable, which is the defining feature of blaming.

The fourth utterance, "Did it give you pleasure to think of me inside?" spoken by Robbie to Briony, exemplifies accusing. Through this question, Robbie challenges Briony's motives and implies wrongdoing. Its direct and confronting nature reflects the illocutionary force of accusation, clearly marking it as an accusing speech act.

The fifth utterance, "Stupendous! It's stupendous, darling!" spoken by Emily to Briony, functions as congratulating. Emily expresses admiration for Briony's achievement of writing her first play. The word "stupendous" emphasizes a specific

accomplishment, distinguishing it from general praise and fitting the definition of congratulating.

The last utterance, "Your parents are absolutely wonderful people," spoken by Marshall to The Twins, represents praising. Marshall communicates admiration and positive evaluation of the Twins' parents. Since the compliment refers to general qualities rather than a specific achievement, it is a clear example of a praising speech act.

Commisives

Kreidler (2002) defined commissives are utterances in which the speaker binds himself to perform (or refrain from doing) some act at a later time. They express what the speaker wishes to express. Cutting (2002) adds that promising, threatening, refusing, vowing, offering, pledging, and volunteering are some examples of the category of commissives. As a result of the research, the researcher found six various types of representative utterances that appeared in the dialogues, each representing one of these functions. Here are some examples:

Table 5. Commisives Utterance

Time	Type	Character	Utterance
01:45:04	Promising	Briony	*"I will. I promise."*
00:30:17	Threatening	Briony	*"If he found out, there's no knowing what he might do."*
00:54:27	Refusing	Cecilia	*"No, I told you I wouldn't"*
01:04:00	Vowing	Robbie	*"I will return. Find you, love you, marry you, and live without shame."*
00:55:52	Offering	Cecilia	*"A friend of mine has a cottage by the Coast, so we can borrow it when you're next on leave."*
01:19:58	Pledging	Robbie	*"You won't hear another word out of me. I promise."*
00:11:04	Pledging	Robbie	*"Let me help with that."*

The first utterance, "I will. I promise," spoken by Briony to Robbie, represents promising. This is because Briony clearly commits herself to carrying out the action she has been asked to do, and the explicit use of the phrase "I promise" emphasizes her sincerity and certainty. By expressing both intention and assurance, she performs a direct and recognizable promising speech act.

The second utterance, "If he found out, there's no knowing what he might do," spoken by Briony, illustrates threatening. Briony implies that a harmful or unpredictable consequence could occur, creating a sense of danger for Lola. This suggestion of potential negative outcomes signals a threat, which is the defining characteristic of a threatening speech act.

The third utterance, "No, I told you I wouldn't," spoken by Cecilia, represents refusing. Cecilia directly rejects the request addressed to her, and her firm reaffirmation of a previous refusal reinforces her unwillingness to comply. This explicit denial of action marks the utterance as a clear example of a refusing speech act.

The fourth utterance, "I will return. Find you, love you, marry you, and live without shame," spoken by Robbie, exemplifies vowing. Robbie expresses a deep, emotionally charged commitment that extends far beyond a simple promise, outlining long-term intentions and moral dedication. This level of profound personal commitment is characteristic of a vowing speech act.

The fifth utterance, "A friend of mine has a cottage by the coast, so we can borrow it when you're next on leave," spoken by Cecilia, represents offering. Cecilia provides Robbie with access to a beneficial resource and presents it as available for their use. By extending something of value to the hearer, she performs the central function of an offering speech act.

The sixth utterance, "You won't hear another word out of me. I promise," spoken by Robbie, demonstrates pledging. Robbie commits to Nettle to a specific future action (remaining silent) and strengthens this commitment through the explicit phrase "I promise." This clear assurance of behavior makes it a prototypical example of a pledging speech act.

The last utterance, "Let me help with that," spoken by Robbie, illustrates volunteering. Robbie offers his assistance spontaneously, without being prompted, showing a willingness to contribute his effort for Cecilia. This self-initiated offer to perform an action reflects the essential nature of a volunteering speech act.

Declarations

Declarations are those types of speech acts that transform the world by their utterance (Yule, 1996). Cutting (2002) stated that these acts include betting, naming, baptizing, marrying, etc. A special institutional role in a particular context is needed to carry out a declaration properly.

In analyzing the data, no instances of declarative speech acts were found in Atonement (2007). Although the film contains situations where declarations could potentially occur, such as the police arresting Robbie or the wedding ceremony of Lola and Marshall, the script does not include any utterance that performs an institutional act through language, such as "You are under arrest" or "I now pronounce you husband and wife." Therefore, this category is absent from the dataset because none of the characters produce utterances that meet Cutting's (2002) criteria for declarative speech acts.

Figure 1. Atonement (2007) Poster

CONCLUSIONS

This study analyzed the types and functions of speech acts found in the dialogues of Atonement (2007) by applying Searle's (1979) Speech Act Theory. The findings revealed that four categories of speech acts, representatives, directives, expressives, and commissives were identified throughout the film, while declaratives did not appear in the dataset. Representatives were the most frequently used, followed by directives and expressives, while commissives occurred the least. These findings demonstrate that the characters communicated primarily through statements, expressions of feelings, and attempts to influence others, which aligns with the film's narrative centered on emotional tension, misunderstanding, and interpersonal conflict. The advantage of using this film as data is that its intense dialogues provide rich examples of pragmatic functions that drive the storyline. However, the limitation of the study is that the analysis was restricted to selected utterances, which may not fully represent the entire spectrum of speech acts in the film. Additionally, the absence of declaratives indicates that future research may explore different film genres, institutional settings, or real-life contexts where declarative speech acts are more likely to appear. Based on these findings, further research is recommended to analyze speech acts in films with different narrative structures, documentary genres, or legal and political discourse, allowing for comparative studies and deeper insights into how speech acts operate across various forms of communication.

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