

An Analysis of Illocutionary Acts Performed by The Characters in Peaky Blinders Movie

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Abstract

Article information

This study aims to analyze the types of illocutionary acts performed by the characters in Peaky Blinders. This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach. The data were collected from selected utterances in Season 1 Episodes 1–6, through observation and documentation techniques. The findings show that five types of illocutionary acts are used, namely representatives, directives, expressives, commissives, and declaratives, with a total of 26 utterances identified. Among these, directive acts are functionally dominant as they are frequently used to control and influence other characters. Furthermore, the use of illocutionary acts is closely related to the characters' intentions and the social context of post-World War I Birmingham. The characters use language strategically to express authority, emotions, and social roles. Therefore, this study highlights the importance of understanding illocutionary acts in interpreting meaning in communication.

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Introduction

Communication is a cornerstone of human social interaction, allowing individuals to exchange ideas, emotions, and strategic knowledge across various domains such as casual chats, professional boardrooms, or complex literary narratives. Pragmatic linguistics establishes that the meaning of an utterance often transcends its literal structure, relying heavily on contextual background. Within this academic domain, Speech Act Theory originally introduced by J. L. Austin in his foundational lectures later compiled as *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) and systematically expanded by John R. Searle (1976) provides an analytical mechanism to interpret language as a form of purposeful action. According to Austin's classic formulation, "to say something is to do something."

This report presents an exhaustive extraction and evaluation of the patterns of illocutionary acts utilized by characters in the historical crime drama series Peaky Blinders, focusing primarily on Season 1, Episodes 1 to 6. In communication, speakers routinely perform actions through speech to influence others, express emotional states, establish long-term commitments, or formalize social statuses. While Austin established a threefold model comprising the locutionary act (the literal utterance), the illocutionary act (the intended performance or communicative force), and the perlocutionary act (the resulting effect on the hearer), this investigation isolates the illocutionary level as the central foundation of pragmatic comprehension.

In the scripted yet structurally authentic environment of Peaky Blinders,

dialogue serves as a mechanism for expressing authority, executing negotiations, issuing threats, asserting group loyalty, and processing acute psychological trauma. By examining how characters shift between structural speech forms, this document maps the exact functional and social configurations of language under the volatile conditions of post-World War I Birmingham.

Method

To ensure maximum interpretive accuracy and scientific validity, the study employs a rigorous qualitative approach combined with a descriptive analytical design. The primary objective is to categorize and evaluate linguistic utterances without relying on reductionist numerical measurements, prioritizing text-in-context analysis, character intentionality, and situational variables. The scope of the research is carefully demarcated to filter out non-linguistic variables such as physical gestures, cinematic lighting, facial expressions, and musical soundtracks, isolating verbal interactions as the standalone data corpus.

The operational framework relies strictly on John Searle's fivefold classification system for illocutionary acts, which maps utterances into functional types based on their specific communicative direction. These categories include:

1. Representatives (Assertives): Utterances that commit the speaker to the truth or factuality of a proposition (e.g., stating, claiming, reporting).
2. Directives: Utterances designed to get the hearer to execute a future action (e.g., commanding, requesting, advising).
3. Commissives: Utterances that commit the speaker to a future course of action or plan (e.g., promising, threatening, offering).
4. Expressives: Utterances that articulate the speaker's internal psychological state or emotional attitude toward a specific situation (e.g., apologizing, thanking, sorrow, love).
5. Declarations: Specialized utterances that instantly alter an institutional or social reality upon performance, provided the speaker possesses appropriate authority.

The systematic data collection process followed a rigorous four-tiered track: repetitive textual review of the cinematic episodes, identification of candidate utterances displaying explicit illocutionary force, transcription via official textual sub-tracks or manual validation, and final compilation into structured data sheets. The subsequent pages present the exact findings and deep discussion regarding these patterns.

Results and Discussion

The analytical extraction performed across the selected episodes of *Peaky Blinders* yielded a total of N = 26 vocal utterances containing distinct, classifiable illocutionary acts. Rather than showing a completely skewed distribution, the data reveals a fascinating structural balance among four primary categories, juxtaposed against a highly restricted appearance of formal institutional declarations. This pattern underlines the

communicative realities of an environment driven by conflict, negotiation, and shifting hierarchies.

- a. Representatives: 6 data
- b. Directives: 6 data
- c. Expressives: 6 data
- d. Commissives: 6 data
- e. Declaratives: 2 data

The precise equal frequency of representatives, directives, expressives, and commissives (6 data points each) points to a highly dynamic narrative structure. Characters frequently cycle through stating factual circumstances, issuing operational directives, dealing with severe psychological subtexts, and making tactical promises or commitments. Conversely, the minimal presence of declaratives (2 data points) implies that formal institutional speech acts are rare in the criminal underworld, reserved strictly for specific moments where negotiations are abruptly severed or military-style discipline is asserted by authorized figures.

1. Patterns of Representative (Assertive)

Representative illocutionary acts commit the speaker to the belief that a proposition is factual and true. In the context of *Peaky Blinders*, these acts serve a dual purpose: establishing operational reality and asserting personal status or authority within a highly competitive social structure. Six distinct representative utterances were extracted from the data, detailed below:

Table 1. Representative Illocutionary Acts in *Peaky Blinders* Movie

No.	Data Timestamp	Pragmatic Meaning	Utterance / Contextual Content
1	6:38 - 6:45	Stating	Thomas Shelby: "I think, Arthur. That's what I do."
2	54:28 - 54:43	Stating	Mr. Kimber: "I am Billy Kimber. I run the races!"
3	49:38 - 49:53	Stating	Grace Burgess: "I'm a clause in a contract."
4	28:17 - 28:32	Reporting	Thomas Shelby: "I have in my hand a legal betting license."
5	45:11 - 45:18	Conclusion	Grace Burgess: "So not until the morning, then."
6	14:19 - 14:26	Reporting	Polly Gray: "They took my children from me."

The pragmatic patterns visible here indicate that representatives are heavily weaponized. For instance, Thomas Shelby's assertion to his brother Arthur ("I think, Arthur. That's what I do") is not merely an informative statement; it serves as a firm declaration of his role as the true strategic intellect of the gang, directly contrasting with Arthur's volatile, impulsive physical nature. Similarly, Billy Kimber's stating of his identity and economic territory functions as a verbal assertion of absolute dominance over regional illegal commerce. Grace Burgess's statements show an acute awareness of her position as an instrument within a broader patriarchal and transactional system. Finally, Polly Gray's historical reporting reveals the deep personal trauma and systematic oppression working-class women faced under post-war institutional structures.

2. Patterns of Directive Illocutionary Acts

Directive acts are highly influential linguistic tools intended to guide or compel the listener into executing a specific future action. In a post-war

criminal environment governed by hierarchy, power plays, and continuous security threats, directives serve as primary instruments of command and control. Despite matching other categories in absolute count, directives remain functionally dominant due to their role in driving character interactions and advancing the plot. Six directive acts were analyzed:

Table 2. Directive Illocutionary Acts in Peaky Blinders Movie

No.	Data Timestamp	Pragmatic Meaning	Utterance / Contextual Content
1	5:34 - 5:39	Command	Arthur Shelby: "Get in here, now!"
2	29:22 - 29:28	Command	Tommy Shelby: "Tell Ada, Freddie went to America or Russia."
3	17:40 - 17:47	Question	Mr. Kimber: "How the bloody hell do you know?"
4	15:11 - 15:18	Suggestion	Polly Gray: "Tommy, I'd like to suggest a strategy."
5	48:12 - 48:20	Requesting	Tommy Shelby: "Will you help me?"
6	41:15 - 41:30	Requesting	Grace Burgess: "I want to ask you one question."

The patterns of directives demonstrate a clear reflection of social status and gender roles. Arthur Shelby's intense command ("Get in here, now!") illustrates post-war working-class masculinity, where immediate compliance and physical dominance are used to assert control. Tommy Shelby uses directives strategically to control information flow and protect the family's position, as seen when he orders a false narrative regarding Freddie's location. Conversely, female characters adapt their directives to navigate patriarchal constraints. Polly Gray frames her strategic insights as a polite suggestion rather than an outright directive to maintain cooperative alignment with Tommy. Grace Burgess utilizes carefully controlled, polite requests ("I want to ask you one question") to navigate a dangerous environment where direct demands could compromise her safety and position.

3. Patterns of Expressive Illocutionary Acts

Expressive illocutionary acts communicate a speaker's psychological state, emotional disposition, or internal reaction toward a situation. They do not alter external physical reality, but instead establish the relational dynamics between characters, highlighting the psychological trauma, loyalty, and emotional subtext that define post-war societal interactions. Six expressive data points were identified in the corpus:

Table 3. Expressive Illocutionary Acts in Peaky Blinders Movie

No.	Data Timestamp	Pragmatic Meaning	Utterance / Contextual Content
1	13:39 - 13:41	Apologizing	Danny: "Oh, God! Mr. Shelby, I'm sorry."
2	47:35 - 47:40	Sorrow	Grace: "But I warn you, it will break your heart." Tommy: "Already broken."
3	6:18 - 6:20	Love	Freddie Thorne: "I love you."
4	37:55 - 37:57	Love	Lizzie Stark: "I love him, Tommy. Really."
5	34:49 - 34:50	Sympathy	Grace Burgess: "You deserve better."
6	25:42 - 25:45	Warning	Polly Gray: "We know who you are."

The structural patterns of expressives reveal deep undercurrents of social vulnerability and hierarchy. Danny's urgent apology ("Oh, God! Mr. Shelby, I'm sorry") highlights an explicit awareness of the dangerous criminal hierarchy in Birmingham, where failing to show proper respect to the gang's leadership can lead to immediate physical consequences. Tommy Shelby's concise, emotionally guarded admission ("Already broken") offers a glimpse into the profound psychological trauma carried by World War I veterans, showing how emotional vulnerability is systematically suppressed behind a cold exterior. Expressives are also used strategically by female characters; for instance, Polly Gray's warning ("We know who you are") functions as an emotional barrier designed to protect family secrets and maintain security against external surveillance and threats.

4. Patterns of Commissive Illocutionary Acts

Commissive illocutionary acts commit the speaker to a specific future plan, action, or reality. In the world of *Peaky Blinders*, where words act as legal tender and broken agreements often lead to violence, commissives serve as critical tools for establishing alliances, issuing strategic threats, and enforcing institutional or territorial control. Six commissive acts were extracted from the primary text:

Table 4. Commissive Illocutionary Acts in *Peaky Blinders* Movie

No.	Data Timestamp	Pragmatic Meaning	Utterance / Contextual Content
1	29:21 - 29:27	Threat	Inspector Campbell: "It is my job to decapitate each one, and by God I will do it."
2	33:42 - 33:50	Promise	Tommy Shelby: "I will make him part of our deal."
3	25:27 - 25:30	Commitment	Inspector Campbell: "I'll say good night then, Tom."
4	24:35 - 24:39	Threat	Polly Gray: "You lay a hand on our Ada, I'll put you in a wooden box myself."
5	31:16 - 31:17	Promise	Inspector Campbell: "You have my word."
6	22:18 - 22:20	Promise	Grace Burgess: "We'll talk about it more."

The pragmatic distribution reveals a persistent battle of wills between state authority and localized criminal structures. Inspector Campbell's violent threat ("It is my job to decapitate each one...") uses religious and state-sanctioned language to assert his absolute determination to dismantle the gang. In contrast, Tommy Shelby uses commissives as diplomatic tools to manage complex alliances, integrating multiple parties into strategic deals to secure his family's long-term business goals. Commissives are also heavily relied upon for internal family defense; Polly Gray's graphic threat to execute anyone who harms Ada ("I'll put you in a wooden box myself") highlights her role as the fierce protector of the Shelby family, establishing clear boundaries through conditional promises of lethal violence.

5. Patterns of Declarative Illocutionary Acts

Declarative illocutionary acts are unique because they immediately transform an institutional or social status upon successful verbal execution. Unlike the previous four categories, declarations require explicit societal authority and adherence to specific institutional rules to be considered valid. Due to the informal and legally non-traditional

nature of the criminal underworld, these acts appear far less frequently in the text, with only two data points identified:

Table 5. Declarative Illocutionary Acts in Peaky Blinders Movie

No.	Data Timestamp	Pragmatic Meaning	Utterance / Contextual Content
1	54:16 - 54:17	Termination	Mr. Billy Kimber: "Okay, right, end of parley."
2	13:42 - 13:45	Termination	Inspector Campbell: "That will be all, Sergeant."

The pattern behind the low frequency of declaratives is highly telling. In *Peaky Blinders*, legitimate institutional declarations are rarely available to street-level gangs. Instead, characters substitute formal authority with physical power or situational leverage. The two instances of declaratives found in the data are acts of termination executed by figures holding distinct institutional power. Billy Kimber uses his position as a dominant racing tycoon to instantly end a negotiation ("end of parley"), closing all lines of communication. Similarly, Inspector Campbell relies on established military and police hierarchies to conclude instructions to his subordinates ("That will be all, Sergeant"). This distribution confirms that within this narrative, formal declarative language is used primarily to shut down dialogue and assert institutional dominance.

When evaluated holistically, the patterns of illocutionary acts in *Peaky Blinders* reveal that dialogue operates as a highly coordinated, purposeful system rather than an arbitrary sequence of words. Characters continually shift between speech categories to navigate the volatile social and political terrain of post-war Birmingham. This shifting pattern is directly tied to the power dynamics and survival strategies of individual speakers, highlighting how language can be used to reshape interpersonal relationships and establish authority.

"The careful balancing of speech acts—shifting fluidly between assertions of fact, commands to subordinates, expressions of trauma, and binding promises—allows characters to build authority, enforce discipline, and protect their positions within a dangerous and unstable social hierarchy."

Thomas Shelby's linguistic profile perfectly embodies this strategic approach. He relies heavily on a combination of assertive representatives and precise commissives to project an aura of absolute calm, control, and long-term planning. By framing his choices around factual statements and calculated promises, he successfully downplays the inherent risks of his criminal operations, convincing both family members and external rivals to align with his vision. This balanced approach helps minimize misunderstandings, which the research identifies as a primary cause of breakdown and conflict in everyday human interactions.

Furthermore, the data highlights how marginalized characters use specific illocutionary patterns to navigate institutional barriers. Female characters like Polly Gray and Grace Burgess adapt their speech to match the expectations of a strict patriarchal society. By wrapping strategic insights and critical inquiries in polite suggestions or controlled requests, they manage to influence decisions and gather intelligence without challenging the formal authority of male figures, thereby preserving their safety and influence.

Conclusion

This pragmatic study demonstrates that the dialogue in *Peaky Blinders* provides an exceptional corpus for evaluating Speech Act Theory. The systematic distribution of illocutionary acts spanning 6 representatives, 6 directives, 6

expressives, 6 commissives, and 2 declaratives, shows that language in high-stakes environments is deeply functional and goal-oriented. While directives serve as the primary force for driving character action and enforcing structural discipline, representatives establish the operational realities, expressives reveal underlying psychological trauma, commissives bind alliances, and declaratives formalize territorial boundaries.

For readers and students of language, understanding these distinct patterns offers valuable practical insights for daily life. Analyzing illocutionary force allows individuals to look past literal word meanings, identify underlying intentions, minimize interpersonal misunderstandings, and navigate complex social hierarchies more effectively. In summary, recognizing the core intent behind a statement remains an essential skill for successful communication in both fictional narratives and real-world interactions.

Future research in this domain would benefit from expanding beyond Season 1 to trace how these linguistic patterns evolve as the characters gain greater political and financial power. Additionally, integrating the study of perlocutionary effects and politeness strategies would offer a more comprehensive understanding of how strategic language shapes long-term narrative outcomes and character development.

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