A Pragmatic Study of Speech Acts in *Poor Things* (2023) Movie

Syahrani Sam[1], Muhammad Hasbi[*2]

[1,2] *Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia*

syahranisam7@gmail.com[1], emhasby@unm.ac.id[2]

*Corresponding Author: emhasby@unm.ac.id

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study explores the types and functions of speech acts employed by characters in Poor Things (2023), a film rich in philosophical, emotional, and ideological discourse. Drawing upon Yule's classification of speech acts; declarative, representative, expressive, directive, and commissive, this research applies a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze 242 selected utterances from the movie's script. The data were collected through careful viewing, transcription, and contextual interpretation of the dialogues. Findings reveal that representative speech acts dominate the film, indicating characters' tendencies to express beliefs and shape perceptions. Expressive and directive acts also occur frequently, reflecting the emotional depth and interpersonal influence present in the narrative. Notably, declarative acts, though rare, serve pivotal roles in reshaping social realities and character relationships. These patterns underscore how speech act theory can illuminate character development and thematic construction in cinematic dialogue. This study contributes to the field of pragmatics and film discourse analysis by demonstrating how language functions not merely as communication, but as a tool of agency, identity formation, and narrative progression in contemporary cinema.

1. INTRODUCTION

Human life is impacted by language, which serves as a link to building relationships with others and society. Language consists of a system of symbols that transforms thoughts into spoken sentences (Yule, 1996). It enables individuals to express their ideas and communicate effectively. Language is not limited to oral communication; it also appears in written forms, such as magazines, newspapers, letters, and various other formats, including manuscripts found in movies or historical records.

Language is a communication tool that not only expresses information and meaning but also carries out actions (Syahrir & Hasbi, 2024). The linguistic part that focuses on this study is a pragmatic study. Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that studies how language is interpreted within its context. The term pragmatics is broad in the field of linguistics (Ramayanti & Marlina, 2018). Pragmatics discusses communication meaning by the speaker or writer and interpreted by the listener or reader (Yule, 1996). Nadar in Jatmiko et al. (2022) stated that context is an important thing in pragmatic study. Context is the presumptive background information that both the speaker and the hearer share, which helps the hearer interpret the utterance.

Pragmatics encompasses various aspects including context, deictic, presupposition, implicature, and speech acts (Tutuarima et al., 2018). The connection between the utterance which the speaker says and the speaker performs is called a speech act. Yule (1996) defines speech acts as the action performed by a speaker with an utterance. According to Austin (1962) speech acts consist of three types: they are

locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, and Yule (1996) developed Austin's theory by dividing a general classification of speech act types into five categories: declarative, representative, expressive, directive, and commissive.

Speech acts are commonly found in everyday conversations. However, communication is not just spoken and written forms, but also in the form of a movie (Idris & Hasbi, 2024). A movie is a visual communication form that combines moving images and sound to tell stories or facilitate learning. The dialogue between characters plays a crucial role in the overall narrative of a movie. The movie and its script may serve as an excellent illustration of a conversation and can be used as the subject of the study. Subtitles are typically included in movies and movie scripts to help viewers better understand what the speaker is saying.

This study aims to explore and analyze the types of speech acts produced by the characters in the Poor Things movie. A movie is one of the multipurpose forms of entertainment media (Cahyani & Hasbi, 2024). This movie is a dark comedy-drama with themes of feminism, social expectations, and the power dynamics of relationships which played by the famous Scottish actress, Emma Stone, and American actor, Willem Dafoe. The movie was directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, and it was released in 2023 by A24 studios. This movie is based on the 1992 novel with the same title as Alasdair Gray, Poor Things. It is about Bella Baxter, a young woman from Victorian-era London, who after being brutally resurrected by a scientist after committing suicide, flees with a deranged barrister to go on a journey of sexual liberty and self-discovery. This movie's runtime is about 118 minutes. Despite the long duration this movie does not make the viewer get bored because it creates a captivating atmosphere with its visually stunning cinematography and intricate details and unexpected twists.

1.1. Pragmatics

Pragmatics may be defined as the study of language use in context (Birner, 2012), the study of words meaning in context (Cutting & Fordyce, 2020), or the study of relationship between language and context, which is the fundamental account of language understanding (Leech, 2014). Since context is very important in the study of pragmatics, it is not only a study of how meaning is expressed by a speaker and interpreted by a listener but regarded more as the study of context-dependent aspects of meaning which are systematically abstracted away from in the construction of content or logical form (Horn & Ward, 2006).

In addition, Yule (1996) defined pragmatics as the study of speaker meaning, the study of contextual meaning, and the study of expression of relative distance. He also states that pragmatics is the study of the relationship between the linguistic form and the users of those forms. Stalnaker in Searle et al. (1980) defined pragmatics as the study of linguistic acts and contexts in which they are performed. There are two major types of problems to be solved within pragmatics: first, to define interesting types of speech act and speech products; second, to characterize the features of speech context which help determine which preposition is expressed by a given sentence. Parker (1986) also defined pragmatics as the study about how language is used to communicate. Pragmatics takes a sociocultural perspective on language usage; examining the way that the principles of social behaviour are expressed is determined by the social distance between speakers (Cutting & Fordyce, 2020).

The description above states that language use comes last since it is a pragmatic ability that is primarily connected to speech act theory. Nonetheless, knowing the fundamentals of pragmatics improves our comprehension of the theory and strengthens our communication in general.

1.2. Speech Acts

Speech acts are an important area of study in pragmatics. The concept of speech acts originates from Austin (1962) who defined speech acts as the actions performed in saying something. Yule (1996) explains that a speech act focuses on the speaker's intention in making an utterance, which is defined by the purpose for which the language is used, such as making a request, apologizing, or reporting. This

indicates that speech acts are frequently used in everyday conversations, where speakers express something and listeners comprehend the intended goal, thereby improving communication, as highlighted by Tutuarima et al. (2018).

According to speech act theory, the action performed when an utterance is produced can be analysed on three levels: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts (Cutting & Fordyce, 2020). Moreover, Yule (1996) expanded on this by offering a general classification of speech acts, dividing them into five categories: declarative, representative, expressive, directive, and commissive.

1. Declarative: One type of speech act is when someone's words alter the world through their utterances or to put it another way, the speaker changes the circumstances. Yule (1996) stated that in using a declarative speech act, the speaker changes the world via words. There are several subcategories of declarative utterances, including announcing, confirming, blessing, approving, betting, identifying, dismissing, etc. Example: The Minister of Transportation: *I hereby name this train Whoosh.* This utterance expresses a declaration by a minister during the launch of a new type of transportation in which a new fast train is given name as Whoosh.

2. Representative: This type of speech act is when the speaker is stating something they believe to be true, whether it is a fact, an opinion, or an experience. Yule (1996) states that representatives are used to representing the world as the speaker believes it is. Example: *The Earth is round.* This utterance shows the speaker's belief that the earth is round.

3. Commissive: It is a kind of speech act that focuses on the speaker's commitment, and it shows the speaker's intention. Yule (1996) states that speakers use commissive force to express promises, threats, refusals, or pledges. Example: *I will buy you a book after you finish your work.* This utterance conveys the speaker's promising utterance to buy someone a book after he/she finishes the work.

4. Expressive: This type of speech act describes what the speaker feels about a particular situation. Expressive force expresses psychological state such as likes and dislikes, joy, sorrow, pain, and many others. Example: *I am very sorry for my late.* This utterance conveys the speaker's regret or remorse for being late coming to the meeting.

5. Directive: A kind of speech act in which the speaker's goal is to persuade another person to do something (Yule, 1996). Directive consists of asking, inviting, ordering, begging, suggesting, recommending, etc. Example: *Go away!* This utterance is a command that aims at getting the listener to leave or move away from the speaker's presence.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the types and functions of speech acts found in the film Poor Things (2023). The qualitative approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth interpretation of language use within a specific context. Descriptive qualitative research is particularly appropriate for analyzing verbal interactions, as it focuses on meaning, interpretation, and categorization of linguistic data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Rather than quantifying patterns, this approach aims to describe the nature of speech acts and their communicative functions within the narrative.

2.2 Data Source

The primary data source for this study is the dialogue spoken by characters in the film Poor Things, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos. The film was viewed multiple times to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the language used. Additionally, the film script was obtained from an online screenplay database to support accurate transcription and analysis. The focus was on spoken utterances that clearly

reflect illocutionary force, i.e., statements that serve a communicative function beyond the literal meaning.

2.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection involved the following steps:

1. Repeated Viewing: The film was watched several times to capture the context and identify key dialogues.
2. Transcription: Relevant dialogues were transcribed from the film and cross-checked with the official or publicly available script for accuracy.
3. Utterance Selection: From the full dialogue, 242 utterances were selected based on their relevance to speech act theory, specifically, utterances that showed a clear communicative intention or function.
4. Contextual Annotation: Each utterance was annotated with information about the speaker, addressee, and situational context to support accurate interpretation.

2.4 Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis was conducted using a thematic approach, guided by Yule's (1996) five categories of speech acts: representative, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative. The steps were as follows:

1. Identification of Speech Acts: Each utterance was examined to determine its speech act types based on the speaker's intention and the effect on the hearer.
2. Categorization: Utterances were classified into one of the five categories of speech acts.
3. Interpretation: Each speech act was interpreted within the narrative context to understand its function in relation to character development and plot progression.
4. Validation: To enhance the credibility of the findings, the researcher re-examined the categorization in multiple cycles and consulted existing literature and examples on similar speech act analysis in film.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

This study is based entirely on publicly available data from a commercial film and does not involve human participants. Thus, it does not raise ethical concerns typically associated with empirical research. However, proper citation and acknowledgment of intellectual property, such as film script and dialogue sources, were ensured throughout the research.

3. FINDINGS

In this research, the data were taken from *Poor Things* movie by Yorgos Lanthimos and a movie script that was downloaded from the internet. The finding is about types of speech acts which were found from the dialogue of the movie *Poor Things*. All the data of research were analyzed by using Yule's theory of speech acts. In this movie, many of the utterances or conversations are classified as speech acts. A total of 242 utterances were analyzed, with the most frequent type being representative, which accounts for 84 utterances. Other speech act types identified include commissive with 37 utterances, expressive with 71 utterances, directive with 43 utterances, and declaration with 2 utterances.

3.1 Declarative

In this movie, only two utterances are categorized as the type of declaration. The data shown below was an example of the use of declaration in this movie.

Data 1
BELLA   : Duncan Wedderburn, I have made friends, colleagues, comrades.

ASTLEY : *Harry Astley.*
BELLA : ***This is Martha. She is my new friend*** *who has not been fucked in twenty years!*

In this movie, Bella meets Harry Astley and Martha on a cruise ship on the way to Lisbon. Bella declared to Duncan that Martha is now her new friend by saying *"This is Martha. She is my new friend"*. This utterance is categorized as one type of speech act, namely declaration. As Yule (1996) stated that in using declarations, the speaker changes the world through words. In this scene, Bella is officially introducing Martha as her new friend, shifting Martha's status from a stranger to a friend in the social context. By making this statement, Bella creates a new social reality in which Martha is now recognized as her friend. The power of utterance lies in Bella's ability to change the relationship status between herself and Martha through her words.

Data 2
DUNCAN : *Bella! We've been robbed. I won! I won everything, like never before! But now it's gone!*
BELLA : *You haven't been robbed.* ***I took it***
DUNCAN : *What?*
BELLA : *I took it.*

The utterance *"I took it."* expresses declaration by Bella Baxter which in this movie Duncan Wadderburn, who is traveling to Lisbon with Bella Baxter aboard a cruise ship, loses all his money and suspects that one of the passengers may have stolen it. However, it is revealed that Bella herself took the money. She then uses the money to help the poor people she encountered at the Alexandria hotel when the ship stopped there. In this case, Bella is using her words to announce a change in understanding of the situation. It transforms the social reality, admitting her responsibility for taking Duncan's money. This confession shifts her role from an innocent bystander to the one who committed the theft, thereby changing the course of the narrative and the perception of her actions.

3.2 Representative

Representative is the most dominant type of speech act used in this movie which consists of 84 utterances. The data shown below was an example of the use of representatives in this movie.

Data 3
DUNCAN : ***Bella, it is dangerous to go out without me.***
BELLA : *I have adventured it and found nothing but sugar and violence. It is most charming. I am fine.*

The example above expresses the representative type of speech act shown by Duncan by saying *"Bella, it is dangerous to go out without me."* This utterance shows Duncan's concern for Bella because she is going out to explore Lisbon without him. It expresses his belief that she might face danger or challenges on her journey without his presence, implying that he feels responsible for her safety and well-being.

Data 4
DUNCAN: ***You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.***

The utterance above is an example of representative speech act because Duncan expressed his admiration and deep affection for Bella by saying " You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen". It conveys his belief that she is exceptional in her beauty, placing her above all other women he has encountered.

Data 5
BELLA : *I am reading Emerson. He speaks of self improvement of men. I don't know why he does not give advice to women, perhaps he does not know any.*
MARTHA : *You should also try Goethe.*
HARRY : ***Philosophy is a waste of time**, Bella.*

The data above expresses the representative type of speech act shown by Harry by saying *"Philosophy is a waste of time"*. This utterance shows Harry stating his belief or opinion about philosophy. He is asserting what he considers to be true by making a claim about the value of philosophy.

3.3 Commissive

In this movie, commissive consists of 37 utterances. The data shown below was an example of the use of declaration in this movie.

Data 6
BELLA : Will you marry me Max McCandles?
MAX   : **I will.**

The utterance in bold above shows the commissive speech act. The utterance *"I will"* which Max McCandles stated expresses him making a promise or commitment to marry Bella in the future. According to Yule (1996) commissive is when the speaker commits to some future action. In this movie Max's response signifies that he is promising to marry Bella, which shows the essence of a commissive act.

Data 7
BELLA : **I will get us a hotel.** *Do not worry.*
DUNCAN : Uh huh. With what?! We have no money!

The utterance in bold above is a commissive speech act because Bella is making a promise to find them a hotel for both of them despite the situation where they have been stranded in Paris without money. The use of *"I will"* indicates her commitment to take action in the future which is finding a hotel.

3.4 Expressive

Expressive is the second most dominant type of speech act used in this movie which consists of 71 utterances. The data shown below was an example of the use of declaration in this movie.

Data 8
MAX   : **I apologies for my own dark thoughts**
BAXTER : Not dark at all.

The utterance in bold above is an expressive speech act. It is shown by Max expressing his regret or remorse for having thought that Godwin Baxter might be raising Bella to be his mistress. Max acknowledges his *"dark thoughts"* which likely reflect his concern or jealousy about Baxter's influence over Bella.

Data 9
ALFIE :You hated the baby and called it 'the monster'.
BELLA : I see. I have noticed a lack of maternal instinct.
ALFIE : And yet **I am happy to have you home.**

The utterance *"I am happy to have you home"* above is an expressive speech act because Alfi is expressing his happiness upon Bella's return, after having believed she was gone for a long time, including after her apparent suicide. His statement reveals a mixture of joy and relief at having her back.

Data 10
BELLA : **I am so tired or maybe just my spirit is.**

The utterance above is an expressive speech act. It shows Bella expressing her exhaustion, likely to stem from the emotional toll of seeing the poor people at the Alexandria hotel. She feels a deep sense of helplessness because she could not do anything for them, which affected her not only physically but also emotionally. Her words reflect a sense of inner weariness and spiritual fatigue, highlighting the emotional burden she is carrying.

3.5 Directive

In Poor Things movie directive speech act consists of 43 utterances. The data shown below was an example of the use of declaration in this movie.

Data 11
MAX   : Bella
*BELLA   : **Kill it***

The utterance *"Kill it"* is a directive speech act because she is instructing Max to take a specific action, which is to kill a frog that he caught. Bella's goal here is to persuade or command Max to perform the action of killing the frog, which fits perfectly with the concept of directive speech act by Yule (1996) in which the speaker's goal is to persuade another person to do something.

Data 12

*SWINEY   : **Bella a moment in my office***

The data above is a directive speech act because Swiney's goal is to get Bella to take an action which is to meet her in her office. The utterance *"Bella, a moment in my office"* occurs after Bella defies Swiney by asserting her independence and her right to choose her own partner.

4.   DISCUSSION

This study sets out to explore how speech acts are employed in the 2023 film *Poor Things* as tools of communication, identity formation, and narrative development. By analyzing the dialogue of the film using Yule's (1996) five categories of speech acts, the research reveals not only the linguistic structures at play but also the deeper communicative strategies embedded in cinematic storytelling.

The findings show that representative speech acts are the most frequently used in the film, comprising 84 of the 242 identified utterances. These acts reflect the characters' efforts to express beliefs, observations, or judgments about their world. Expressive and directive acts are also common, indicating the emotional and interpersonal dynamics that shape much of the film's character interactions. Commissive acts appear in several pivotal scenes, especially those that involve promises or commitments. Declarative acts, though limited to only two instances, mark critical turning points in the narrative where characters redefine social roles and realities, especially Bella Baxter, who transitions from passive to agentive through her speech.

These results are consistent with earlier studies that applied speech act theory to film discourse. For example, Tutuarima et al. (2018) observed that in London Has Fallen, representative and directive acts were dominant, suggesting a similar reliance on belief expression and character influence in action-oriented narratives. However, *Poor Things* stands out due to the high presence of expressive speech acts, which signals a stronger emphasis on emotional depth and psychological complexity. This aligns with Birner's (2012) assertion that pragmatics, especially speech act use, can reflect not only what characters do with language, but who they are and how they change.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study supports Yule's (1996) categorization as a useful lens for analyzing spoken discourse in fictional contexts. It also reinforces the idea that speech acts serve more than functional roles, they are integral to shaping identity and agency in narrative contexts. Compared to Austin's (1962) original model, which emphasized action and consequence, this study illustrates how speech acts also reflect internal character transformation, particularly in Bella's journey toward self-definition and empowerment.

The implications of this research are twofold. First, it underscores the value of applying pragmatic analysis to film, offering a new perspective for understanding how language is used not only to tell a story but to perform social and psychological functions. Educators and researchers can adopt similar

methods to teach pragmatic competence through the media. Second, it provides insight into how speech act patterns can reflect broader themes such as feminism, autonomy, and identity within cinematic texts, making it relevant for interdisciplinary studies in language, literature, and cultural discourse.

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. The analysis is confined to a single film and focuses solely on the main characters' utterances. The subjective nature of categorizing speech acts based on context may also introduce interpretation bias. Moreover, the absence of inter-coder validation limits the reliability of data classification. Future research could expand the scope by including multiple films from different genres, incorporating cross-cultural perspectives, or comparing male and female speech act patterns to uncover gendered pragmatic strategies.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the use of speech acts in the film Poor Things (2023) through the lens of pragmatics, particularly using Yule's (1996) five-fold classification: representative, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative acts. The analysis of 242 utterances from the film revealed that representative speech acts were the most dominant, followed by expressive and directive acts, while commissive and declarative acts were less frequent but still significant. These findings reflect how language in cinematic discourse not only serves to communicate ideas but also constructs character identity, emotional depth, and narrative progression. The results show that the film's characters, especially the protagonist Bella Baxter, use language to assert beliefs, express emotions, make decisions, and ultimately reshape their social realities. The scarcity of declarative speech acts, for instance, underlines their dramatic importance in the film, often signaling moments of transformation and agency. In this way, speech acts in Poor Things are not just linguistic units but narrative instruments that reveal character development and thematic depth. This study contributes to the growing body of research on pragmatics in media discourse by illustrating how speech act theory can be applied to film analysis. It offers insights not only for linguists but also for educators and researchers in film, literature, and discourse studies. However, the study is limited by its single film focus and subjective categorization process. Future research could benefit from broader comparative analyses across genres, cultures, or character roles to further understand the dynamic role of speech acts in cinematic storytelling. Ultimately, this research affirms that the study of speech acts provides a meaningful framework for analyzing how language functions as a performative and transformative force within film narratives.

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