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Research Article

SPEECH ACTS AND CHARACTER CONSTRUCTION IN THE SCHOOL FOR GOOD AND EVIL

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Abstract

Film dialogue is written to reveal who characters are and how they relate to one another, which makes it a productive site for examining how speech acts construct character. Previous studies of The School for Good and Evil (2022) have described speech acts across many characters or focused on a single category, but none has related the full range of illocutionary acts to the film's central opposition between good and evil. This study aimed to identify the types of illocutionary acts used by the three central characters, Sophie, Agatha and the School Master, and to explain how these acts function in constructing character and narrative. A qualitative descriptive design with frequency counts was employed. Utterances with illocutionary force were selected purposively from transcribed dialogue, classified according to Searle's taxonomy, and interpreted in their scene contexts; theory triangulation and peer debriefing with a pragmatics lecturer were used to support trustworthiness. Ninety utterances were identified. Representatives were the most frequent (31.1%), followed by directives (26.7%), expressives (18.9%), commissives (16.7%) and declaratives (6.7%). Representatives voiced characters' beliefs and their challenge to the school's moral system, directives marked moments of conflict and danger, expressives and commissives carried emotional change and loyalty, and declaratives, although rare, enacted institutional decisions that altered characters' status. Each character displayed a distinctive speech act profile: Sophie relied more on expressives and commissives, Agatha on representatives and directives, and the School Master on declaratives. The study shows that speech act profiles can serve as a linguistic index of characterisation and moral positioning in film, and it suggests ways in which film dialogue can be used to develop learners' pragmatic awareness.

Keywords: *Characterisation; Film discourse; Illocutionary acts; Pragmatics; Speech acts*

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INTRODUCTION

Language is not only a means of conveying information but also a way of acting in the world: through words, speakers make claims, give orders, express feelings, commit themselves to future actions and change social realities. This insight lies at the heart of speech

act theory, introduced by Austin (1962) and systematised by Searle (1969, 1976), which holds that every utterance performs an act and that the force of this act depends on the speaker's intention and the context in which it is produced. Speech act analysis therefore offers a way of uncovering what speakers are doing with their words beyond what the words literally say (Bala, 2022; Saifudin, 2019).

Film has become one of the most frequently studied sources of speech act data. Although film dialogue is scripted, it is designed to resemble everyday talk and to be understood by viewers, so it reflects the pragmatic norms of the speech community it represents (Dynel, 2011). At the same time, film dialogue does more than imitate conversation: it is written to reveal who characters are, to build relationships between them and to move the story forward. What characters do with their words is thus a central resource for characterisation, the process through which audiences form impressions of characters from textual cues (Culpeper, 2001).

A growing body of research has applied Searle's taxonomy to films. Studies of *Thor* (Lestari & Hartati, 2020), *Grown Ups* (Marbun & Handayani, 2020), *Enola Holmes* (Karaeng et al., 2024) and *Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom* (Nisa & Naomisa, 2025) consistently report that representatives and directives dominate film dialogue, while declaratives are rare or absent. Other studies have examined conversational implicature in Indonesian films and series (Nawangsih & Surana, 2021; Savitri, 2021) and the role of speech acts in expressing social values and power relations (Yusanti et al., 2025). Film-based speech act analysis has also been shown to have pedagogical value: instruction using film and television clips has been found to improve EFL learners' production of speech acts such as requests and suggestions (Omar & Razı, 2022).

The School for Good *and Evil* (2022), directed by Paul Feig and adapted from Soman Chainani's novel series, offers a particularly rich case. The film follows two friends, Sophie and Agatha, who are taken to a magical school that trains children to become fairy-tale heroes or villains. Against expectations, Sophie, who dreams of becoming a princess, is placed in the School for Evil, while the more reserved Agatha is sent to the School for Good. The film thus stages a moral binary and then questions it through its characters' words and actions, making it a suitable text for examining how speech acts construct character and moral position.

Three studies have already examined this film. Aprilia et al. (2023) described the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts of seventeen characters but did not quantify the categories or relate them to particular characters. Naibaho and Satria (2023) focused only on directive acts and found that asking was the most frequent type. Darma et al. (2025)

analysed how good and evil are represented through word choice, intonation and multimodal elements, without using a speech act taxonomy. None of these studies has related the full range of Searle's categories to the film's central characters and to its opposition between good and evil. This study addresses this gap by examining the speech act profiles of the three central characters, Sophie, Agatha and the School Master, and by interpreting these profiles as resources for characterisation. It addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. What types of illocutionary acts, according to Searle's classification, are used by the central characters in *The School for Good and Evil*, and how frequently do they occur?

RQ2. How do these illocutionary acts function in character interaction and in constructing the characters and the narrative?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speech Act Theory

Pragmatics studies how utterances are produced and interpreted in context, taking into account the physical and social setting and the relationship between speaker and hearer (Bala, 2022). Within pragmatics, speech act theory treats utterances as actions. Austin (1962) distinguished three dimensions of every utterance: the locutionary act, the production of an utterance with a particular sense and reference; the illocutionary act, the act performed in saying something, such as stating, requesting or promising; and the perlocutionary act, the effect the utterance has on the hearer, such as persuading, frightening or comforting. Austin also proposed felicity conditions that must be met for an act to succeed, such as the authority of the speaker in performing a declaration (Safitri et al., 2021).

Searle (1976, 1979) reorganised Austin's insights into a taxonomy of illocutionary acts based primarily on their illocutionary point, the direction of fit between words and world, and the psychological state expressed. Representatives (or assertives) commit the speaker to the truth of a proposition, as in stating, claiming, reporting and concluding; their words-to-world direction of fit means that the words are made to match the world. Directives are attempts to get the hearer to do something, as in ordering, requesting, forbidding and advising, and have a world-to-words direction of fit. Commissives commit the speaker to a future course of action, as in promising, vowing and offering, and also have a world-to-words fit. Expressives express the speaker's psychological state about a state of affairs, as in thanking, apologising, regretting and complaining, and have no direction of fit. Declarations bring

about a change in institutional reality simply by being uttered successfully, as in appointing, expelling or sentencing, and require extra-linguistic institutions and an authorised speaker (Searle, 1976). Table 1 summarises the taxonomy used in this study.

Table 1. Searle's taxonomy of illocutionary acts

Category	Illocutionary point	Direction of fit	Typical verbs
Representative	Commits the speaker to the truth of a proposition	Words-to-world	state, claim, report, conclude, deny
Directive	Attempts to get the hearer to do something	World-to-words	order, request, forbid, advise, warn
Commissive	Commits the speaker to a future action	World-to-words	promise, vow, offer, threaten
Expressive	Expresses the speaker's psychological state	None	thank, apologise, regret, complain, praise
Declarative	Changes institutional reality by being uttered	Both directions	declare, appoint, expel, sentence

Note. Adapted from Searle (1976, 1979).

The interpretation of illocutionary force depends on context. Bala (2022) emphasises that context includes not only the physical setting of an utterance but also the social situation and the relationship between speaker and hearer, while Saifudin (2019) and Safitri et al. (2021) note that the same locution can carry different illocutionary forces depending on who says it, to whom and in what circumstances. For speech act analysis, this means that the analyst must consider the speaker's role, the relationship between the interlocutors and the ongoing activity before assigning an utterance to a category. In institutional settings, such as the school depicted in the film analysed here, the speaker's status is particularly important, because it determines whether acts such as commands and declarations are felicitous.

Searle (1975) also showed that the grammatical form of an utterance does not always match its illocutionary force. In an indirect speech act, a speaker performs one act by way of another, as when a statement such as *It's cold in here* functions as a request to close the window. Indirect speech acts are especially important in film, where characters often express emotions, threats or requests through statements, and where the classification of an utterance must therefore rest on its function in context rather than on its form alone.

Film Discourse and Characterisation

Film discourse has sometimes been dismissed as artificial, but Dynel (2011) argues that it is a legitimate object of linguistic study because it is closely related to everyday language and is deliberately designed to be understood by viewers. She describes film

discourse as operating on two communicative levels: the level of the characters, who address one another, and the level of the viewer, to whom the film crew communicates meanings through the characters' talk. Speech acts in film therefore have a double function: they perform actions within the fictional world, and they communicate information about characters and plot to the audience.

Culpeper (2001) shows that characterisation in drama and other texts relies heavily on such textual cues. Audiences infer characters' traits, intentions and social roles from what characters say and how they say it, including the kinds of acts they typically perform. A character who frequently commands may be perceived as powerful or controlling, while one who frequently apologises or expresses feelings may be perceived as vulnerable or emotionally driven. From this perspective, the distribution of speech act types across a character's dialogue, which this study calls a speech act profile, can serve as a linguistic index of characterisation.

Previous Studies

Previous studies of speech acts in films show a consistent pattern in which representatives and directives dominate. Lestari and Hartati (2020) found 56 representatives and 56 directives in *Thor*, with no declaratives. Karaeng et al. (2024) found that representatives were dominant in *Enola Holmes*, and Nisa and Naomisa (2025) reported that representatives accounted for 60.58% and directives for 24.82% of 137 speech acts in *Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom*, while declaratives accounted for only 2.19%. Marbun and Handayani (2020) similarly found illocutionary acts to be dominant in *Grown Ups*. These findings suggest that film dialogue relies mainly on conveying information and directing action, while declarations require institutional settings that occur less frequently.

Studies of *The School for Good and Evil* have approached the film from different angles. Aprilia et al. (2023) examined the speech acts of seventeen characters using the script and characters' gestures and found that illocutionary acts, especially asking questions and giving commands, were the most prominent. Naibaho and Satria (2023) identified seventeen directive acts, of which asking was the most frequent. Darma et al. (2025) found that the good character's speech was reflective and empathetic while the evil character's speech was short, dramatic and power-oriented, reinforcing moral opposites. Together, these studies show that the film's dialogue is pragmatically rich, but they leave open how the full range of illocutionary acts is distributed among the central characters and how these distributions

contribute to their characterisation and moral positioning. This is the gap the present study addresses.

METHOD

Design. This study employed a qualitative descriptive design supported by frequency counts. A qualitative approach was chosen because the study focuses on interpreting the intentions and functions of utterances in context, while frequency counts were used to describe the distribution of speech act types and to compare characters. Similar designs have been used in pragmatic studies of films and series, which rely on documentation, dialogue transcription and descriptive analysis (Nawangsih & Surana, 2021; Savitri, 2021).

Data source. The data source was the film *The School for Good and Evil* (2022), directed by Paul Feig and released on Netflix. The data were utterances produced by the three central characters: Sophie, Agatha and the School Master. These characters were chosen because they occupy the central positions in the story's moral conflict and produce the widest variety of language functions. Specify the version of the film and the source of the transcript, e.g. the official English subtitles, and the total running time analysed.

Data collection. Data were collected in three stages. First, the film was watched in full to identify scenes containing key interactions among the central characters. Second, the dialogue in these scenes was transcribed and checked against the subtitles. Third, utterances with identifiable illocutionary force were selected purposively as units of analysis, each recorded with the speaker, addressee, scene context and timestamp. State the number of scenes examined and the total number of utterances screened before selection.

Data analysis. Each utterance was classified into one of Searle's (1976) five categories according to its illocutionary point in context rather than its grammatical form, so that indirect speech acts were classified by their function (Searle, 1975). The analysis followed the interactive model of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles et al., 2014). The frequency and percentage of each category were then calculated, overall and for each character, and representative excerpts were interpreted in relation to the scene, the relationship between the characters and the development of the narrative.

Trustworthiness. Theory triangulation was used by comparing the classifications based on Searle's taxonomy with descriptions in other sources on speech act theory (Bala, 2022; Safitri et al., 2021; Saifudin, 2019). The classifications and interpretations were also discussed with a lecturer specialising in pragmatics to reduce subjective bias in determining

the types and functions of speech acts. If the two authors coded the data independently, report the percentage of agreement and how disagreements were resolved.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Distribution of illocutionary acts

Ninety utterances with identifiable illocutionary force were found in the dialogue of the three central characters. All five of Searle's categories occurred. Table 2 presents the distribution with an example of each type, and Figure 1 displays the proportions.

Table 2. Distribution of illocutionary acts in the dialogue of the central characters

Speech act type	Example utterance	Frequency	Percentage
Representative	"This school is not what it seems."	28	31.1%
Directive	"Don't go there, Sophie!"	24	26.7%
Expressive	"Thank you for believing in me."	17	18.9%
Commissive	"I promise I'll find a way to fix this."	15	16.7%
Declarative	"By the power vested in me, you are expelled."	6	6.7%
Total		**90**	**100%**

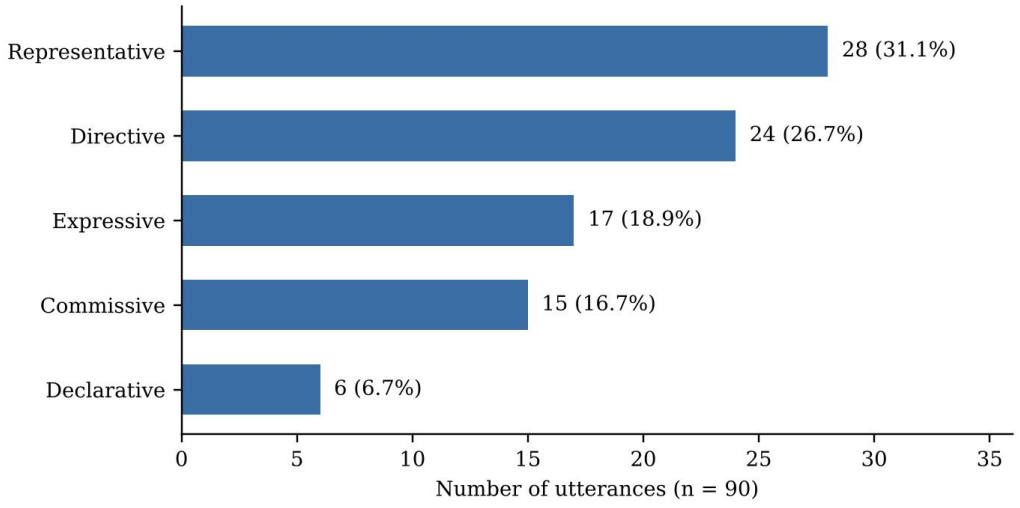


Figure 1. Proportion of illocutionary acts in the dialogue of the central characters (n = 90)

Representatives were the most frequent category, followed closely by directives; together, these two categories accounted for more than half of the utterances (57.8%). Expressives and commissives occurred at similar rates, while declaratives were the least frequent. Table 3 shows how the categories were distributed across the three characters.

Table 3. Distribution of illocutionary acts by character

Character	Rep.	Dir.	Exp.	Com.	Dec.	Total
Sophie	n	n	n	n	n	n
Agatha	n	n	n	n	n	n
The School Master	n	n	n	n	n	n
Total	**28**	**24**	**17**	**15**	**6**	**90**

Note. Rep. = representative; Dir. = directive; Exp. = expressive; Com. = commissive; Dec. = declarative. Complete the counts for each character from the coding data.

Functions of illocutionary acts in character interaction

Representatives: voicing beliefs and challenging the system. Representatives were used mainly to state characters' beliefs about themselves, each other and the school. Many of them did more than describe the world: they contested the school's division of students into good and evil. When Agatha tells Sophie that the school has placed them wrongly, she makes a claim about their identities that indirectly rejects the system's black-and-white view of morality:

Agatha: They got it wrong — we don't belong here. (Excerpt 1, hh:mm:ss)

Although the utterance has the form of a statement, its force in context is also oppositional: by asserting that the system has made a mistake, Agatha positions herself against the institution and sets up the central conflict of the story.

Directives: conflict, danger and control. Directives occurred mainly in scenes of tension, danger or rivalry, where characters ordered, warned or forbade one another. Sophie's directive to keep away from Tedros illustrates how a directive can carry emotional as well as practical force:

Sophie: Stay away from Tedros! (Excerpt 2, hh:mm:ss)

On the surface, the utterance is a prohibition, but in the context of the developing rivalry between the two friends it also expresses jealousy and possessiveness. The perlocutionary effect is to deepen the rift between Sophie and Agatha, which drives the narrative towards confrontation.

Expressives: emotion and identity. Expressives were used to convey gratitude, regret and inner conflict. Some expressives were realised indirectly through statements, as in Sophie's utterance:

Sophie: I was never meant to be evil. (Excerpt 3, hh:mm:ss)

In form, this is a representative claim about Sophie's nature. In context, however, its primary point is to express her distress and her struggle with an identity she cannot accept.

Following Searle's (1975) account of indirect speech acts, the utterance was classified by its function as an expressive. Such cases show that the boundary between categories in film dialogue depends heavily on context.

Commissives: loyalty and commitment. Commissives occurred when characters committed themselves to future action, most often in promises between the two friends. Agatha's promise to help Sophie and find a way to fix their situation, as in the example in Table 2, expresses loyalty and courage and sustains the friendship that the school's division threatens. Commissives thus serve as markers of the characters' bonds, and their fulfilment or violation becomes a source of narrative tension.

Declaratives: institutional power. Declaratives were rare but consequential. They were produced by the figure with institutional authority, who could expel students or transfer them from one school to the other simply by announcing the decision, as in *By the power vested in me, you are expelled*. Because a declaration succeeds only when the speaker has the required authority (Searle, 1976), these utterances index the School Master's power over the students and change their status within the story world.

Speech act profiles of the central characters

The distribution of speech acts also differed between the characters. Sophie used more expressives and commissives, portraying her as emotional and driven by the ambition to change her destiny. Agatha used more representatives and directives, portraying her as rational, outspoken and morally responsible. The School Master was associated mainly with declaratives, reflecting his role as the ruler of the school's system and the maker of decisions that determine the characters' fates.

Discussion

The first research question concerned the types and frequency of illocutionary acts. The dominance of representatives, followed by directives, is consistent with previous film studies (Karaeng et al., 2024; Lestari & Hartati, 2020; Nisa & Naomisa, 2025). However, the proportion of representatives in this film (31.1%) is considerably lower than the 60.58% reported for *Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom* (Nisa & Naomisa, 2025), while expressives and commissives together account for more than a third of the data (35.6%). This more even distribution suggests that the dialogue of *The School for Good and Evil* is oriented not only towards conveying information and directing action but also towards emotion and commitment. This orientation fits a narrative centred on friendship, identity and moral choice

rather than on action alone. The presence of declaratives (6.7%), which were absent in *Thor* (Lestari & Hartati, 2020) and rare in other films, reflects the institutional setting of the story: a school with a ruler whose words can change students' status.

The second research question concerned the functions of these acts. The findings show that speech acts in the film perform actions at two levels, as Dynel (2011) describes. At the level of the characters, representatives contest the school's moral classification, directives express conflict and control, expressives voice emotional change, commissives sustain loyalty, and declaratives enact institutional power. At the level of the viewer, the same utterances communicate who the characters are and how the conflict develops. This dual function supports the view that what characters do with words is a central resource for characterisation (Culpeper, 2001). The speech act profiles of the three characters, Sophie's emotional and committing acts, Agatha's asserting and directing acts and the School Master's declaring acts, allow viewers to infer their personalities, motivations and positions in the moral structure of the story.

These profiles also extend the findings of earlier studies of the same film. Darma et al. (2025) showed that the good and evil characters differ in word choice and intonation; the present study shows that they also differ in the kinds of acts they perform. Notably, the profiles do not map neatly onto the school's labels. Agatha, placed in the School for Good, frequently challenges and commands, while Sophie, placed in the School for Evil, frequently expresses vulnerability and makes promises. The mismatch between the characters' speech act profiles and their assigned schools mirrors the film's central argument that good and evil cannot be assigned by appearance or category. Speech act analysis thus offers a linguistic account of how the film questions the moral binary it sets up.

The findings on directives can also be compared with those of Naibaho and Satria (2023), who examined only directive acts in the same film and found that asking was the most frequent subtype. In the present data, directives among the central characters were concentrated in scenes of conflict and danger and frequently took the form of orders, prohibitions and warnings. The difference is likely to reflect the narrower focus of this study on the three central characters, whose interactions carry the main conflict, compared with the wider range of characters and scenes in earlier studies. It suggests that the function of directives in the film varies with the narrative weight of the interaction: questions dominate everyday exchanges, while commands and prohibitions mark moments in which relationships and moral positions are at stake.

The analysis also highlights the importance of context in classification. Utterances such as *I was never meant to be evil* show that the grammatical form of an utterance does not determine its force, and that film dialogue makes extensive use of indirect speech acts (Searle, 1975). Studies that classify speech acts by form alone may therefore underestimate the role of expressives and overestimate that of representatives. This may partly explain the differences in distribution between this study and earlier film studies, although differences in films, characters and coding procedures also play a role.

Finally, the findings have pedagogical implications. Film clips have been shown to improve EFL learners' production of speech acts (Omar & Razı, 2022), and the scenes analysed here could be used to raise learners' awareness of how the same form can perform different acts in different contexts, and of how speech acts reveal character and relationships. Because the film is popular among young audiences, it may be especially motivating for secondary and university learners in discourse analysis and pragmatics courses. These implications should be interpreted with caution, however, as the study analysed one film and three characters, and the findings describe this particular text rather than film dialogue in general.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the illocutionary acts used by the central characters of *The School for Good and Evil*. In answer to the first research question, all five of Searle's categories were found among 90 utterances, with representatives the most frequent (31.1%), followed by directives (26.7%), expressives (18.9%), commissives (16.7%) and declaratives (6.7%). In answer to the second research question, representatives voiced characters' beliefs and their challenge to the school's moral system, directives marked conflict and danger, expressives and commissives carried emotion and loyalty, and declaratives enacted institutional decisions. The three characters showed distinct speech act profiles that index their personalities and their positions in the story's moral structure.

The main contribution of the study is to show that speech act profiles can serve as a linguistic index of characterisation and moral positioning in film. The mismatch between the characters' profiles and their assigned schools provides a pragmatic account of how the film questions the binary of good and evil. Practically, the findings suggest that film dialogue can be used to develop learners' pragmatic awareness, particularly of indirect speech acts and of the link between language and character.

The study is limited to one film and three characters, and its classifications, although checked through theory triangulation and peer debriefing, involve interpretation. Future research could compare speech act profiles across several films in the same genre, include perlocutionary effects and non-verbal cues more systematically, examine the original novel alongside the film adaptation, and test the use of such film excerpts in pragmatics instruction.

AI USE AND DISCLOSURE

Generative AI (Claude, Anthropic) was used toedit the language, support the literature search and format the article according to the journal template. The authors reviewed and verified all content, including all film excerpts and data, and take full responsibility for the article. Please confirm or revise this statement.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND INFORMED CONSENT

This study analysed a publicly available film and did not involve human participants; ethical approval and informed consent were therefore not required. Short excerpts of dialogue are quoted for the purposes of scholarly analysis.

CRediT AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Naila Diana Maulida: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft.

Iga Putri Wahyu Ningsih: Investigation, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The coded dataset of utterances, including speakers, scene contexts and timestamps, is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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