

Contextualizing The Role Of Commissive Illocutionary Acts In *Goodfellas Movie*

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the functions of commissive illocutionary acts in *Goodfellas* (1990), with the aims of identifying their types and examining their contextual meanings. The study focuses on character dialogues containing commissive intent, specifically promises, threats, offers, refusals, and swears. The data consist of selected character utterances systematically documented from the film script and scenes through careful note-taking, and they are analyzed using a qualitative descriptive approach. Speech act classification is based on Searle et al.'s (1985) framework, while contextual meaning is interpreted using Holmes's (2013) sociolinguistic model of social dimensions, which accounts for factors such as social distance, relative power, and formality. The integration of sociolinguistic perspectives in pragmatic analysis has been widely recognized as essential for understanding language use in socially embedded contexts (Laba & Wijayanti, 2022; Laba & Narlianti, 2025). A total of five commissive utterances were analyzed, each shaped by distinct contextual and interpersonal factors. The findings show that integrating Holmes's sociolinguistic model provides a deeper understanding of how commissive acts are realized in film discourse, thereby contributing to the study of speech acts in cinematic communication.

Keywords: *Goodfellas*, Commissive Illocutionary Act, Social Dimension, Contextual Meaning

1. Introduction

The analysis of commissive illocutionary acts in this study is grounded in Speech Act Theory, which examines how language functions to commit speakers to future actions, such as making promises, issuing threats, extending offers, expressing refusals, and making swears. Speech acts do not operate in isolation but are shaped by sociocultural and interactional contexts (Austin, 1962; Searle & Vanderveken, 1985). Recent studies in applied linguistics emphasize that sociolinguistic factors play a crucial role in interpreting communicative intent and pragmatic

meaning across different domains, including education, tourism, and media discourse (Laba & Wijayanti, 2022; Laba et al., 2025).

In socially structured contexts, the interpretation and force of commissive acts are influenced by factors such as social distance, relative power, degrees of formality, and communicative intent. Holmes's (2013) model of social dimensions provides a useful framework for capturing these contextual influences. Similar perspectives have been adopted in applied sociolinguistic studies, which demonstrate how language functions as a tool for negotiating authority, identity, and professional roles within institutional and cultural settings (Laba & Narlianti, 2024; Laba, 2025).

The film *Goodfellas* (1990), directed by Martin Scorsese, serves as an effective case study due to its setting within a mafia organization context in which status and power deeply inform the interpretation of speech acts. Throughout the film, characters engage in exchanges featuring promises, threats, offers, refusals, and swears that reflect and reinforce the internal power structure of the criminal enterprise. This study examines these instances to uncover the contextual meanings encoded in each commissive act, assessing how factors such as social proximity, rank, communicative formality, and functional purpose shape their interpretation. The mafia context provides a fertile ground for investigating how such speech acts derive their meaning not only from their linguistic content but also from the complex interplay of interpersonal and organizational dynamics.

2. Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative methodology to enable an in-depth analysis based on systematic documentation of data. Qualitative approaches are particularly suitable for sociopragmatic research, as they allow researchers to interpret meaning in relation to social context, speaker intention, and power relations (Holmes, 2013; Laba & Narlianti, 2025). The integration of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics has been shown to enhance analytical depth in studies examining contextualized language use (Laba et al., 2025).

These commissive acts often occur in scenes marked by strong interpersonal dynamics, where factors such as social status, relational proximity, and communicative intent shape their meaning. Key scenes containing commissive utterances were systematically identified and analyzed in terms of both their speech act types and the social dimensions in which they occur. The film's realistic and nuanced dialogue makes it a suitable corpus for examining the realization of commissive illocutionary acts within structured social contexts.

Data collection was conducted using the documentation method, enabling a systematic review of relevant scenes within the film. A note-taking technique was employed to extract and record each instance of commissive illocutionary usage. All data were transcribed and analyzed

using the theoretical frameworks established earlier in the study. The findings were presented descriptively, utilizing narrative explanations rather than formal coding.

The analysis followed an informal, text-based approach, guided by Searle and Vanderveken's (1985) categorization of commissive acts. Each identified utterance was highlighted through formatting, specifically, bolding, and categorized by its speech act type. Subsequently, the study applied Holmes's model to explore the associated social dimensions of each commissive utterance, offering a detailed contextual interpretation based on status relationships, social distance, formality, and communicative intent.

3. Findings and Discussion

Based on the data analyzed through the framework of Searle and Vanderveken's speech act theory, the study identified ten utterances that fall under the five core categories of commissive illocutionary acts: promise, threat, offer, refusal, and swear. The analysis not only classifies each utterance according to its illocutionary type but also explores the specific conversational contexts in which these acts occur. In addition, this section examines the contextual meanings embedded within the commissive utterances, as shaped by their situational and relational dynamics. The examples presented illustrate how the theoretical models introduced earlier are applied to the analysis. The findings indicate that commissive illocutionary acts in *Goodfellas* are not merely linguistic realizations of intent but are deeply embedded in social hierarchies and power relations. This supports previous sociolinguistic and applied linguistic research emphasizing that pragmatic meaning emerges from the interaction between language, social structure, and cultural norms (Holmes, 2013; Laba & Wijayanti, 2022; Laba, 2025).

A. Promise

As defined by Searle et al. (1985), a promise is a fundamental type of commissive illocutionary act in which the speaker commits to performing a specific future action for the benefit of the hearer. This commitment creates an obligation—either explicit or implicit—that fosters trust and reliability within the interaction. For example, an utterance such as “I promise to call you back later” signals a clear intention to fulfill a future action, thereby reinforcing the speaker's dependability in the listener's perception.

Data 1

00:18:19-00:18:37

Frenchy : Piece of cake. Don't worry about the alarms. I just got to get the key.
Henry : No problems?
Frenchy : **I will take care of it.**

This interaction takes place during a discussion between Frenchy and Henry regarding the logistics of an upcoming airport robbery. Frenchy, tasked with securing access and neutralizing the alarm system, reassures Henry with the statement, “I will take care of it.” This response addresses Henry’s expressed concern, signifying that Frenchy is committing himself to managing a vital component of the operation. The utterance exemplifies a commissive illocutionary act, specifically, a promise, under the framework proposed by (Searle et al., 1985), wherein the speaker binds themselves to a future course of action intended to benefit the listener. Frenchy’s words demonstrate his genuine intention and serve to relieve Henry’s anxiety, thereby meeting the key conditions of a promise.

Drawing on (Holmes, 2013) model of social dimensions, the nuanced meaning of this promise can be interpreted through several contextual variables. First, in terms of social distance, Frenchy and Henry exhibit a close-knit rapport, grounded in their longstanding membership within the same criminal network, which facilitates a relaxed, informal mode of interaction. Second, the status dimension indicates a modest power imbalance. However, both operate within the same organization, Henry’s elevated rank, bolstered by his stronger ties to the leadership, positions him as a figure of greater authority. Frenchy’s promise thus functions as an expression of loyalty toward someone higher in the chain of command. Third, the exchange occurs within a context of low formality, evident in informal expressions like “piece of cake.” Finally, the utterance holds high referential but minimal affective value: it primarily conveys information rather than emotion. Taken together, Frenchy’s commissive act embodies a pledge of allegiance shaped by interpersonal closeness, hierarchical dynamics, and an informal communicative context, all of which underscore their shared responsibility within the organizational structure.

B. Threat

A threat represents a specific form of commissive illocutionary act in which the speaker commits to performing an action that the listener would perceive as harmful or unpleasant. As outlined by Searle and Vanderveken (1985, pp. 192–197), threats differ from promises in that they aim to coerce or intimidate the hearer by attaching a negative consequence to the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of a particular condition. Importantly, the speaker’s intention in a threat is conditional and contingent on the hearer’s behavior. For instance, the statement, “If you don’t complete the report, I’ll have to fire you,” exemplifies a threat by leveraging a punitive outcome to motivate compliance.

Data 2

00:07:12-00:07:24

Tuddy : You deliver mail to his house?

Mailman : Yeah.

Tuddy : From now on, any letter from school to his house comes directly here.
Understand?

Tuddy : **Another letter from school goes to that kid's house... in the oven you will go head first.**

The scene unfolds when Henry's parents discover, through a letter, that he has been skipping school due to his growing involvement in organized crime. Furious, they demand he cease his activities. Henry, visibly upset, informs Tuddy, a senior figure in the criminal group, about the situation. Tuddy reacts by confronting the mailman responsible for delivering the incriminating letter and issues a menacing warning: "Another letter from school goes to that kid's house... in the oven you will go, head first." This statement qualifies as a threat within Searle and Vanderveken's framework, as it signals a conditional future action (violence) if the mailman continues to deliver school letters to Henry's residence. The utterance demonstrates Tuddy's genuine commitment to the threat, intensified by the physical act of grabbing the mailman, enhancing its credibility and impact. Accordingly, this example constitutes a commissive act in the form of a threat, designed to instill fear and assert dominance.

(Holmes, 2013) social dimensions model provides further insight into the contextual significance of this threat. The interaction reveals a significant social distance between Tuddy and the mailman, as indicated by Tuddy's question, "You deliver mail to his house?" suggesting a lack of prior acquaintance. On the status scale, the gap is pronounced. Tuddy belongs to a powerful and feared criminal organization, whereas the mailman occupies a routine, civilian role. This disparity allows for the conversation's informal nature, despite the serious tone, which is made acceptable due to Tuddy's superior social position. The utterance is high in both referential and affective meaning; it conveys a clear directive and consequence while also expressing intense emotion and hostility. Ultimately, Tuddy's commissive threat is shaped by considerable social distance and status inequality, and its informality and emotional charge reinforce his authority and control over the encounter.

C. Offer

(Searle et al., 1985) describe an offer as a type of commissive illocutionary act in which the speaker signals a conditional willingness to carry out a future action, depending on whether the hearer accepts. Offers are typically extended with the intention of providing a potential benefit to the listener. For instance, the statement, "Would you like me to help you?" expresses a readiness to act, contingent upon the hearer's acceptance.

Data 3

00:33:11-00:33:37

Nightclub waiter	: Henry, nice to see you. How are you?
Henry	: Im good, where's Anthony?
Nightclub waiter	: Anthony, right in the front. Anything you need, let me know.
Henry	: Thanks a lot. I appreciate it.

This exchange takes place as Henry visits a familiar nightclub to meet someone. Upon his arrival, he is greeted warmly by the head waiter, who shows deference and respect by saying, “Anything you need, let me know.” According to the criteria established by (Searle et al., 1985), this expression functions as a commissive illocutionary act in the form of an offer. The phrase “let me know” communicates the speaker’s readiness to act if requested, and the offer is oriented toward benefiting Henry, should he choose to take it up.

Analyzed through the lens of (Holmes, 2013) social dimensions model, the contextual interpretation of this offer is shaped by several sociolinguistic factors. First, the interaction suggests a low level of social distance between the waiter and Henry, indicated by the familiar and friendly greeting, “Henry, nice to see you. How are you?” implying previous encounters and a degree of familiarity. However, despite this interpersonal closeness, there remains a noticeable disparity in status. Henry’s affiliation with a powerful mafia organization elevates his social standing considerably above that of the waiter, who occupies a service role. This hierarchy subtly influences the level of formality in the exchange, although the language is casual, the waiter’s tone reflects underlying respect and deference. The utterance also demonstrates high referential function, as it explicitly offers help, alongside moderate affective function, reflecting politeness and courteous regard for Henry’s elevated position. In summary, the waiter’s statement operates as an offer grounded in a power-acknowledging yet familiar context, shaped by low social distance, high status difference, moderate formality, and a respectful communicative style.

D. Refusal

(Searle et al., 1985) classify refusal as a type of commissive illocutionary act wherein the speaker commits to not performing a proposed future action. This form of speech act is marked by the speaker’s deliberate rejection of a suggestion, invitation, or request, signifying a firm intention not to comply. For example, the phrase “I refuse to participate in the event” demonstrates a negative commitment to abstain from the action, thus fulfilling the criteria of a commissive act in the form of refusal.

Data 4

01:24:50-01:25:09

Henry : We're on our own. Forget everybody else. Forget Paulie.

Henry : As long as he is on parole, he doesn't want anybody doing anything.

Karen : **I can't do it.**

Henry : Yes, you can. All I need is for you to bring me this stuff.

Henry : A guy from Pittsburgh will help me move it. In a month, we will be fine. We won't need anybody.

This scene unfolds while Henry is incarcerated, following the mafia's arrest for criminal activities. During his time in prison, Henry covertly initiates a drug-selling operation to sustain himself financially, bypassing the authority of his mafia superiors. As his influence outside the prison walls diminishes, he grows increasingly anxious and pressures his wife, Karen, to smuggle narcotics on his behalf. In response to his request, Karen, overcome with fear and hesitation, firmly replies, "I can't do it." Based on the framework provided by (Searle et al., 1985), this statement constitutes a commissive illocutionary act in the form of refusal. Her utterance clearly indicates her unwillingness to comply, affirming a personal decision not to participate in Henry's illicit scheme.

Applying (Holmes, 2013) social dimensions framework, the contextual interpretation of Karen's refusal is influenced by several social factors. First, the social distance between the two is minimal, as they are a married couple, which suggests a deeply personal and intimate bond. However, despite their emotional closeness, a power imbalance is evident. Henry holds greater authority within the relationship, particularly given his dominant personality and criminal involvement. Karen's refusal challenges this dynamic, showing that intimacy does not preclude resistance when personal boundaries are crossed. The interaction is informal in tone, reflecting their domestic relationship. In terms of function, Karen's refusal carries low referential value, as it lacks detailed justification, but it has a strong affective function, as it conveys emotional tension, fear, and internal conflict. Ultimately, her refusal represents an emotionally charged act of defiance, shaped by a close personal bond, uneven status, informal setting, and high emotional expression.

E. Swear

(Searle et al., 1985) identify swearing in the commissive sense as a form of illocutionary act in which the speaker communicates a deep and genuine commitment to a future course of action. What differentiates a swear from a standard promise is the invocation of a sacred or personally significant entity, which reinforces the speaker's sincerity and seriousness of the commitment. An example such as "I swear on my children I'll stay clean from now on" illustrates how emotional weight and solemn intent are central to this speech act.

Data 9

02:07:32-02:07:48

Henry : Paulie, I'm really sorry. I don't know what else to say. I know I fucked up.
Paul : Yeah, you fucked up.

Henry : But I'm all right now. I can be trusted now.

Henry : **I'm clean. On my kids, I'm clean.**

This moment occurs shortly after Henry's release from prison, following his arrest for drug dealing. Struggling to regain control over his life, Henry approaches Paulie, his former mentor, for support. However, Paulie remains guarded, having lost trust in Henry due to his betrayal. In an effort to rebuild that trust, Henry says, "I'm clean. On my kids, I'm clean." According to Searle and Vanderveken's (1985) taxonomy, this utterance qualifies as a commissive illocutionary act in the form of a swear. While it stops short of explicitly stating a promise about future behavior, Henry's reference to "my kids" invokes a deeply personal and sacred association, emphasizing his sincerity and appealing to Paul's trust. This intensifies the emotional force of the claim and distinguishes it from a simple promise, marking it as a solemn assurance.

Using Holmes' (2013) model of social dimensions, the context of this study is shaped by several key relational variables. Henry and Paulie share a longstanding, close relationship, resulting in low social distance. Nonetheless, a significant status imbalance exists: Paulie occupies a higher rank within the criminal hierarchy, while Henry, due to his misconduct, has diminished in credibility. This status disparity frames the power dynamic, where Henry is clearly in a subordinate position, seeking redemption. The interaction occurs in an informal setting, as shown by the casual tone and explicit language. In terms of function, the utterance carries both high referential and affective weight. It serves to assert a factual claim while simultaneously expressing emotional desperation and sincerity, especially through the phrase "On my kids."

Thus, Henry's statement functions as a powerful act of swearing, shaped by emotional vulnerability, a close interpersonal bond, a distinct status gap, and a strong expressive tone within an informal exchange.

4. Conclusion

The analysis identified five types of commissive acts—promises, threats, offers, refusals, and swears—each functioning as a strategic linguistic resource through which characters express intentions, negotiate power, and manage interpersonal relationships within the film's mafia setting.

The application of social dimensions such as social distance, relative status, formality, and communicative function revealed how contextual factors shape the realization and

interpretation of commissive acts, particularly in hierarchically structured interactions. Overall, this study contributes to pragmatic and film discourse analysis by demonstrating how commissive speech acts operate within complex social environments, thereby enhancing understanding of language use in cinematic dialogue.

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