



IMPLYING MEANING: AN ANALYSIS OF DECLARATIVE UTTERANCES AS INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS

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Info Article	<p>Abstract. <i>The present study aims at examining the use of declarative utterances for implying meaning. This study is qualitative research in which the data are gathered from the subtitle movie “Knight and Day and Day” consisting of declarative sentences. The findings reveal several examples in which declarative utterances are used to imply meaning, suggesting that language has more purpose than simple information exchange. Declarative sentences are not only employed as statements of fact but also as veiled requests or subtle commands. This highlights the dynamic nature of communication, where the intended meaning can differ significantly from the literal words spoken. Listeners cannot just assume that speakers always express themselves literally. Often, the meaning is layered and nuanced, thus requiring the listeners to consider not only the words themselves but also the surrounding contexts. This study suggests that individuals should be aware of the potential meaning implied in speech and seek to understand the speaker’s intended message.</i></p> <p>Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menelaah penggunaan ujaran deklaratif dalam mengimplikasikan makna. Penelitian ini merupakan penelitian kualitatif di mana data dikumpulkan dari subtitle film “Knight and Day” yang berisi kalimat-kalimat deklaratif. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan beberapa contoh yang mana ujaran deklaratif digunakan untuk menyiratkan makna, yang menunjukkan bahwa bahasa memiliki tujuan lebih dari sekadar pertukaran informasi. Kalimat deklaratif tidak hanya digunakan sebagai pernyataan fakta, tetapi juga sebagai permintaan terselubung atau perintah halus. Hal ini menyoroti sifat dinamis komunikasi, yang mana makna yang dimaksudkan dapat berbeda secara signifikan dari kata-kata literal yang diucapkan. Pendengar tidak dapat begitu saja berasumsi bahwa penutur selalu mengekspresikan dirinya secara literal. Sering kali, makna bersifat berlapis dan bernuansa, sehingga mengharuskan pendengar untuk mempertimbangkan tidak hanya kata-kata itu sendiri, tetapi juga konteks yang melingkupinya. Penelitian ini menyarankan agar individu menyadari potensi makna yang tersirat dalam tuturan dan berupaya memahami pesan yang sebenarnya dimaksudkan oleh penutur.</p>
Received :	
18 Juli 2025	
Revised :	
12 Agustus 2025	
Accepted :	
26 Agustus 2025	
Publication :	
30 September 2025	
Keywords:	
<i>Declarative</i>	
<i>Utterance, Implied</i>	
<i>Meaning,</i>	
<i>Literal Meaning,</i>	
<i>Speech Act.</i>	
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INTRODUCTION

Several researchers have explored related aspects of speech acts such as Anjarsari (2011), Dyah (2009), and Rahma (2009). Anjarsari's research (2011) was about the use of speech acts in expressing and responding to criticism found in the subtitles of the movie "The Ugly Truth". Dyah (2009) conducted research about speech acts and communication strategies used by children in Semarang Province. Rahman (2009) investigated five types of illocutionary acts—assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative—and their functions in the subtitles of the movie "Silence". More recently, Dewi et al. (2025) examined grammatical omission in English descriptive texts among second-semester EFL learners, highlighting the crucial role of linguistic accuracy and grammatical forms in shaping meaning. Meanwhile, Muliawan et al. (2025), through their semiotic reading of the Babymonster music video "Stuck in the Middle", demonstrated how signs (icons, indexes, and symbols) convey layers of meaning beyond the literal, enriching our understanding of language as a symbolic system. It is different from the previous studies; the current research focuses specifically on declarative utterances used as indirect speech acts to imply meaning. This is a compelling study area due to the prevalence of indirect speech acts in everyday communication.

Communication is a fundamental human activity, and as Wardhaugh (2006) explains, it often takes the form of speech, utilizing a shared language or code to connect individuals. This process of exchanging information, ideas, and feelings is essential for daily life, allowing people to navigate their social world, build relationships, and collaborate on shared goals (Purwanto et al., 2023). Language, in this context, becomes a crucial tool, empowering individuals to articulate their thoughts, express opinions, formulate arguments, and share their unique perspectives within the broader context of discourse (Fedorenko et al., 2024). This discourse, whether a casual conversation or a formal speech, is a dynamic interplay between speakers and listeners, each playing a vital role in the construction of meaning. In a broader sociopolitical perspective, Darmanto et al., (2025) illustrated how language functions as a form of soft power and cultural diplomacy, shaping international relations through communication, cultural exchange, and symbolic meaning. Wardhaugh (2006) further emphasizes that spoken communication is built upon the foundation of sentences, or more precisely, utterances. These utterances, the actual spoken words, are the vehicles through which people's

thoughts are conveyed. They are the tangible manifestation of our internal mental processes, allowing us to externalize our ideas and share them with others.

The significance of utterances lies in their ability to encapsulate complex thoughts and intentions within a relatively concise form. However, the interpretation of these utterances is not always straightforward. As Yule (2010) suggests, understanding an utterance goes beyond simply decoding the literal meaning of the words. It requires a deeper consideration of the speaker's intended meaning, considering contextual cues, shared knowledge, and the overall communicative situation. This implies that language is not just a system of symbols, but a dynamic tool shaped by the intentions of its users. Aitchison (2003) adds another layer to this understanding, pointing out that speakers, when crafting their utterances, often have a specific effect in mind. They are not simply transmitting information; they are trying to achieve something – to persuade, to request, to command, to entertain. This intended effect can sometimes be achieved through a variety of linguistic means, highlighting the flexibility and creativity inherent in human language use. The speaker's choice of words, sentence structure, and even tone of voice all contribute to the overall impact of the utterance and the speaker's attempt to influence the listener.

The conveyance of meaning in discourse is a complex process, and Aitchison (2003) offers valuable insights through the lens of speech act theory. This theory posits that all utterances are, in essence, actions of some type, going beyond simply transmitting information. Language is not just descriptive; it is also performative. People use language to do things – to make requests, issue commands, offer promises, and even bets. Aitchison (2003) highlights this rich variety of possible speech acts, emphasizing that language is a dynamic tool for interacting with the world and shaping people's relationships with others. A crucial distinction within speech act theory is the division between direct and indirect speech acts. A direct speech act is one where the form of the utterance directly matches its intended function (Verschueren, 1999). The classic example is the command "Go to bed!" Here, the imperative form of the verb clearly signals the speaker's intention to get the listener to go to bed.

In contrast, an indirect speech act uses one form of utterance to perform a different, implied function. "Isn't it past your bedtime?" serves as a prime example. While grammatically a question, its contextual use often makes it function as an indirect command to go to bed. The speaker is not simply asking about the time; he is using the question politely, or perhaps even passive-aggressively, to convey this desire for the

listener to retire for the night. This indirectness allows the speaker to be more subtle, potentially softening the force of the command. Yule (2010) expands upon these ideas, defining speech acts as the actions performed by speakers through their utterances. He emphasizes the diverse range of functions that language can serve, including requesting, commanding, questioning, and informing. These actions are not always explicitly stated; they are often conveyed indirectly, relying on context and shared understanding between the speaker and listener.

Yule (2010) also distinguishes between direct and indirect speech acts, providing further examples. “Did you eat the pizza?” is a direct question, clearly seeking information. “Can you pass the salt?” while phrased as a question about ability, typically functions as an indirect request to pass the salt. The speaker is not genuinely interested in the listener’s physical capacity to pass the salt; he wants the salt. In addition, Aitchison (2003) emphasizes the action-oriented nature of language, arguing that speech acts are fundamentally actions performed through utterances. These utterances, in turn, become vehicles through which speakers communicate their intentions. Aitchison illustrates this with examples such as making requests such as “Could you please pass the salt?”, issuing commands like “Stop right there!”, and making promises, for example “I promise I’ll be there on time.” Essentially, language is not just descriptive; it is also performative.

These examples illustrate how indirect speech acts add layers of meaning and complexity to communication, requiring listeners to go beyond the surface level of the words and interpret the speaker’s intended message within the given context. Austin (1962) delves deeper into the nature of utterances as actions. He contends that simply focusing on the propositional content of an utterance (the literal meaning of the words) is insufficient for understanding its full significance. Instead, he stresses the importance of considering the total situation in which the utterance is produced – the context, the speaker's intentions, the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, and other relevant factors. Austin (1962) argues that this broader view is essential for understanding how utterances can succeed or fail in their intended purpose. He suggests that the traditional distinction between statements which are typically seen as simply true or false and performative utterances which actually do something, like “I hereby pronounce you husband and wife” may be less clear-cut than previously thought. He proposes that all utterances, to some degree, are performative, as they all involve the speaker doing something through language.

In everyday communication, people utilize both direct and indirect speech acts. While direct speech acts present little interpretative difficulty, indirect speech acts require careful attention. Misunderstanding the speaker's intended meaning is a common risk with indirect speech acts, as interpretation depends on literal meaning and context. Yule (2010) provides the example of a lost visitor carrying luggage who stops a passer-by for directions.

- (1) Visitor : Excuse me. Do you know where the Ambassador Hotel is?
 Passer-by : Oh sure, I know where it is. (and walks away)

(Yule, 2010: 134)

This utterance, while perhaps grammatically a statement or a question, is intended by the visitor as an indirect speech act – specifically, a request for directions. The visitor is not simply stating facts about the location or asking a purely informational question. It is implicitly asking for help. He is relying on the passer-by to understand the context of the situation and to recognize the implied request for assistance. However, in this scenario, the passer-by fails to grasp the visitor's intended meaning. He treats the visitor's utterance as a direct speech act, taking it at face value rather than looking for the implied request.

This failure to recognize the indirect speech act leads to a breakdown in communication. The visitor remains lost and frustrated, while the passer-by, perhaps unknowingly, has failed to provide the needed assistance. This situation highlights the crucial role of pragmatic competence in successful communication. Pragmatic competence involves not just knowing the rules of grammar and vocabulary, but also understanding how language is used in context, including the ability to recognize and interpret indirect speech acts. In this scenario, the passer-by lacks the pragmatic competence to understand the visitor's true intentions, leading to miscommunication and a missed opportunity for helpful interaction. The passer-by is essentially treating the visitor's utterance as if it was simply a statement of fact or a direct question, failing to recognize the implied request for directions. Considering the importance of indirect speech acts in everyday communication, the present study investigates their use in a specific context.

METHOD

The research method used in this study is a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. Qualitative research methods are extensively utilized in social science

research due to their effectiveness in obtaining detailed information about the values, opinions, behaviours, and social contexts of specific populations (Mack et al., 2005). Speech acts often involve subjective aspects of the speaker, including identity, attitudes toward language, and social perceptions. Therefore, qualitative methods are considered the most suitable for this study. The descriptive approach in qualitative research tries to details the facts or characteristics of the topic being studied in a systematic, factual, and precise manner (Fitri et al., 2022). Consequently, this approach is necessary to be used in this study, especially in providing a detailed description of the context of indirect speech acts.

The present study utilizes primary data from the subtitles of the movie “Knight and Day”. Primary data is collected directly for specific research purposes. In this case, the data are obtained by watching the movie and reading its subtitles to find declarative utterances. The movie “Knight and Day” was chosen for its popular appeal and the dynamic interactions between its characters, provides a rich source of naturally occurring dialogue that can be analyzed for instances of indirect speech acts. Specifically, this research focuses on declarative utterances employed as indirect speech acts. Declarative sentences, typically used to make statements, can also function as subtle requests, commands, or suggestions, adding layers of meaning to the spoken word. This study aims to analyze these instances of declarative utterances used indirectly, exploring how context, character relationships, and situational factors contribute to their interpretation. Furthermore, this analysis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how viewers interpret and understand implied meaning in communication, highlighting the importance of pragmatic awareness in real conversation between speakers and listeners.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After reviewing the theories related to speech acts from some experts, the current research presents the data from the subtitles of the movie “Knight and Day” and analyzes them. The data used in this research are the dialogue between the characters Roy Miller and June Havens.

(2) Roy Miller : You have a little smudge

(Knight and day, 2010).

The scene unfolds in an airport, where Roy Miller and June Havens briefly collide. June apologizes, and a casual conversation ensues. As Roy is about to depart, he says, “You have a little smudge.” June instinctively checks her reflection in nearby glass. Superficially, the utterance functions as a statement of fact. Yet, given the context and Roy’s tone, the real import is more than informational: it’s an indirect prompt, even a mild command, encouraging June to correct the smudge. Although the literal content of “You have a little smudge” is merely descriptive, the pragmatic effect is directive. Roy’s statement works as an indirect speech act, where the speaker’s intention diverges from the semantic meaning of the utterance (Searle, 1975; Yule, 1996). Contemporary research elaborates further: neurocognitive studies reveal that processing indirect speech activates networks beyond core linguistic areas, involving theory-of-mind and pragmatic skills (Bendtz et al., 2022).

- (3) June Havens : You know, I’m gonna go back and use the restroom
(Knight and day, 2010).

The scene takes place on an airplane, where June is seated in front of Roy. As they engage in conversation, the plane encounters turbulence. Following this, June announces, “You know, I’m gonna go back and use the restroom,” to which Roy responds, “I’ll help you.” Considering the situation—turbulence—it is important to grasp the hidden meaning of June’s statement. Her seemingly simple declaration about going to the restroom functions as more than just informing. It serves as an indirect request, relying on the context to convey her need without expressing it directly. The hidden meaning conveyed by her words is actually, “*Help me, please; I’m going to the restroom,*” acknowledging the disorienting and challenging conditions caused by turbulence. This example demonstrates how context can transform a declarative sentence into an indirect request or command, allowing a speaker to convey her intentions without stating them explicitly (Oktavia et al., 2023). In dynamic communicative environments, context—including physical constraints and situational urgency like turbulence—plays a pivotal role in inferring the illocutionary force of an utterance (Tomasello, 2023).

- (4) June Havens : I’ll be out in Minute
(Knight and day, 2010).

The scene unfolds on the plane, where Roy helps June to the restroom. Just before she enters, June tells Roy, “I’ll be out in a minute.” While this appears to be a straightforward conversational cue, the context gives it a deeper significance. Earlier, June had indirectly requested help in navigating the turbulence to reach the restroom, establishing a cooperative interaction. Thus, when she says, “I’ll be out in a minute,” it functions as an indirect request for Roy to wait patiently. The literal content—an announcement of timing—is overshadowed by a pragmatic layer: a polite appeal that he remains available when she returns. This illustrates how declaratives can operate as indirect requests, shaping speaker–listener dynamics through subtle contextual cues (Sarathy et al., 2020). Sociolinguistic research underscores that such indirection often reflects politeness strategies and relational sensitivity, where the speaker minimizes imposition while signaling expectations (Liaqat et al., 2025). Moreover, empirical studies on indirect speech acts reveal how contextual reasoning and situational awareness guide interpretation, showing that listeners infer intentions based on both linguistic form and environmental cues (Jassim & Joshi, 2025).

- (5) Roy Miller : I think, the less you know the better
(Knight and day, 2010).

The scene takes place on the plane, which is now in a dire emergency. Following the death of all federal agents in Roy’s hands, the plane crashed. When Roy tries to regain control and pulls the plane down, June asks him, “What do you mean waiting for us? Who?” Roy replied with a declarative saying, “I think, the less you know, the better.” However, this seemingly harmless statement has significantly implied meaning and functions more than just sharing information. Roy’s utterance operates as an indirect speech act, in which a statement carries the force of a directive rather than merely informative content. Research in sociolinguistics demonstrates that declarative forms can serve directive purposes when speakers wish to influence conversational flow or exercise control indirectly, using subtler strategies to avoid overt imposition (Susanti et al., 2020). In emergency situations, such indirectness can heighten the speaker’s authority while also framing the utterance as protective, reflecting politeness strategies embedded in high-stakes interaction (Vranjes et al., 2018). Moreover, recent studies emphasize that listeners rely heavily on contextual cues and relational dynamics to infer indirect meanings, especially when declaratives are used to stop further questioning or restrict access to sensitive information (Huang, 2020). Thus, Roy’s statement can be understood not simply as advice, but as a subtle command: “Don’t ask too many

questions.” This illustrates how declarative sentences can be pragmatically employed to regulate conversations and control knowledge in critical scenarios.

(6) June Havens : That’s a truck

(Knight and day, 2010).

The scene remains on the plane as Roy attempts to land on a street. June observes a truck directly in their path and says, “That’s a truck.” While grammatically it is a declarative statement, this utterance functions in the scene’s context as something far more urgent than simple information sharing. Rather than merely pointing out the truck’s existence, June uses the statement to convey a critical warning to Roy. Because of the danger of a collision, June’s speech acts as an indirect speech act, functioning as a warning or urgent request for caution. Research indicates that in high-stakes situations, declarative utterances often shift pragmatically into directive or warning acts, where the urgency of context alters their force (Safdar et al., 2025). Similarly, recent studies emphasize that listeners rely on contextual urgency and shared situational knowledge to reinterpret declaratives as immediate warnings rather than neutral observations (Jassim & Joshi, 2025). The implied meaning behind June’s words, therefore, is not just an observation but a desperate attempt to avoid disaster. This illustrates how context dynamically reshapes meaning, enabling simple-looking statements to carry layers of implied intention.

The examples taken from “Knight and Day” demonstrate how indirect speech acts function not only as stylistic elements but also as strategies for interpersonal management in high-pressure situations. Recent scholarship confirms that speakers often rely on indirectness to preserve face, reduce conflict, or maintain solidarity with interlocutors, especially when contexts are emotionally or socially sensitive (Arundale, 2006). June’s subtle appeals to Roy and Roy’s restrained responses show that pragmatics is not simply about meaning, but about managing relationships through language. The set of data also highlights the importance of contextual salience in shaping interpretation. Without knowledge of turbulence, emergencies, or imminent collision, the utterances would appear literal. Yet with context, they acquire directive and warning force. Current empirical research stresses that listeners draw on both linguistic cues and situational knowledge when reconstructing a speaker’s intended meaning (Katsos & Kissine, 2025). This aligns with how June’s statement “That’s a truck” shifts from observation to urgent warning when danger is present.

In addition, these findings illustrate the cognitive dimension of indirect speech acts. Neuropragmatic studies show that understanding indirect requests or warnings involves theory-of-mind and inferential reasoning, engaging more complex processing than literal statements (Tomasello et al., 2025). This suggests that the characters' rapid interpretation in the film mirrors real-world human cognitive abilities to resolve pragmatic ambiguity under time pressure. Finally, the analysis underscores the pedagogical relevance of studying indirect speech acts. Language learners often struggle to interpret or produce indirect meanings, which can lead to pragmatic failure in intercultural communication. Alawad (2018) recommends incorporating authentic examples from films or real discourse to teach how declaratives may encode requests, warnings, or commands. Thus, this study not only contributes to pragmatic theory but also offers insights for teaching pragmatics through contextualized media data.

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the complexity and flexibility of declarative utterances in natural communication. While declarative sentences are traditionally associated with statements of fact, the analysis demonstrates that they frequently serve indirect functions such as requests, warnings, or commands. This reinforces the notion that language is not only descriptive but also performative, as speakers use it strategically to influence, persuade, or manage interactions. The findings from the movie "Knight and Day" illustrate that the interpretation of utterances is context-dependent, requiring listeners to go beyond literal meaning to capture the speaker's true intentions.

Moreover, the research confirms that indirect speech acts play an essential role in successful communication. Misunderstandings often arise when listeners interpret utterances solely at the surface level, overlooking contextual cues, shared knowledge, or relational dynamics. The examples discussed show how subtle shifts in tone, situation, and urgency can transform seemingly neutral declaratives into powerful communicative tools. This underscores the importance of pragmatic competence—not only understanding words and grammar but also interpreting intention in relation to context. Developing this competence allows individuals to respond appropriately in dynamic interactions, avoiding conflicts and fostering smoother exchanges. In this sense, indirect speech acts serve not only as linguistic phenomena but also as crucial mechanisms for maintaining social harmony.

Finally, the study contributes both theoretical and pedagogical insights. Theoretically, it strengthens the view that utterances are actions shaped by context, aligning with speech act theory's emphasis on the performative dimension of language. Pedagogically, the findings suggest that authentic media such as films can be effective resources for teaching pragmatics, particularly in helping learners identify and interpret indirect meanings. By raising awareness of the layered nature of communication, this research provides a foundation for enhancing intercultural competence and reducing misunderstandings in real-world interactions. Such an approach can equip language learners with the skills to navigate complex communicative environments more effectively. Additionally, the study opens opportunities for educators to design curriculum materials that highlight the interplay between linguistic form, context, and intended meaning.

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