



## Promises, Threats, and Betrayals: A Commissive Speech Act Analysis of Shakespeare's Macbeth

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### ABSTRACT

*This study explores the role of commissive speech acts—promises, threats, vows, and betrayals—in William Shakespeare's Macbeth, using the framework of Speech Act Theory as developed by John Searle (1975). Commissive acts, which commit a speaker to a future course of action, serve as powerful instruments in Macbeth for expressing ambition, loyalty, deception, and moral decay. Through a detailed analysis of selected dialogues, this research examines how characters such as Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, the witches, and other key figures use commissives to manipulate, persuade, or intimidate. The study reveals that the strategic use and violation of commissive acts not only drive the plot forward but also illuminate the psychological and ethical deterioration of the protagonist. By focusing on commissive speech acts, the research provides a pragmatic lens through which to understand character motivation, interpersonal conflict, and the performative nature of power and guilt in the play. Ultimately, the study argues that the performativity of language in Macbeth is central to the tragedy's thematic concern with fate, free will, and moral consequence.*

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### Introduction

Language in drama is more than a medium of storytelling—it is a tool of action. In William Shakespeare's Macbeth, speech is frequently employed not only to reveal character intent but also to execute actions that have serious ethical, political, and psychological consequences. Drawing from Austin's (1962) foundational notion of performative utterances and Searle's (1975) elaboration of speech act categories, this study focuses on commissive speech acts—utterances in which speakers commit themselves to future actions, such as promises, threats, vows, or betrayals. These linguistic acts are central to understanding how characters in Macbeth navigate ambition, power, and moral downfall.

In dramatic texts, especially Shakespearean tragedies, commissive acts often foreshadow or catalyze significant events. For instance, Macbeth's verbal commitment to regicide—"I am settled, and bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat" (1.7.79–80)—is not merely a declaration of intent, but a transformation of thought into morally loaded action. Similarly, Lady Macbeth's goading speeches function as manipulative commissive strategies that bind Macbeth to his course. These examples underscore what Leech (1983) identifies as the illocutionary force of language, wherein the speaker's intent is entwined with the hearer's interpretation, often leading to interpersonal conflict or dramatic irony.

The application of Speech Act Theory in literary studies enables a pragmatic reading of how language performs in context, particularly in tragedy where character fates hinge on spoken commitments. Burke (2008) and Short (1996) have argued that dramatic dialogue, especially in Shakespeare, is rich ground for pragmatic analysis because it mimics real-life speech while heightening its performative and emotional weight. While several scholars have explored politeness strategies and directives in Shakespeare's plays (e.g., Culpeper, 2001), there remains a noticeable gap in scholarship focused specifically on commissive acts as a framework for examining Macbeth's themes of loyalty, deceit, and ambition.

Therefore, this study seeks to address that gap by investigating how commissive speech acts are constructed and violated within the text and what such acts reveal about character psychology, moral tension, and the trajectory of the tragedy itself. By applying Searle's typology to key dialogues, the research aims to demonstrate that in Macbeth, language is not only expressive but consequential—promises are fatal, threats are realized, and betrayals mark irreversible shifts in power and identity.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite extensive literary and thematic studies of Shakespeare's Macbeth, the play's use of commissive speech acts—utterances in which characters commit themselves to future actions, such as promises, threats, and betrayals—remains underexplored from a pragmatic perspective. Traditional analyses often emphasize psychological, moral, or political dimensions, but they overlook how language itself functions as action, especially in shaping character development and driving plot progression. Shakespeare's characters do not merely speak; their words create commitments, shift alliances, and seal fates. A detailed pragmatic analysis of commissive speech acts, using Speech Act Theory, is needed to better understand how such linguistic performances reveal internal conflict, interpersonal manipulation, and ethical transgressions in Macbeth. This study addresses this gap by systematically identifying and interpreting commissive utterances in the play.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research contributes to both literary pragmatics and Shakespearean scholarship by offering a speech-act-based interpretation of Macbeth, with a focus on commissive utterances such as promises, threats, vows, and betrayals. By applying Searle's classification of speech acts, the study reveals how Shakespeare uses language to bind characters to their moral and political destinies. It highlights the performative nature of speech in a tragedy where words often initiate irreversible action. Moreover, the study demonstrates how commissive acts function as rhetorical strategies, revealing the interplay between power, persuasion, and responsibility. This approach enriches literary analysis with linguistic precision and offers new pedagogical perspectives for teaching dramatic literature through pragmatics.

## **Research Questions**

1. How are commissive speech acts (e.g., promises, threats, vows, and betrayals) realized linguistically and structurally in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*?
2. What role do commissive speech acts play in character development and the moral trajectory of central figures such as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth?
3. How do commissive utterances contribute to the dramatic tension and thematic construction of ambition, guilt, and fate in the play?

## **Literature Review**

Pragmatics, traditionally defined as the study of language in use and the context-dependent aspects of meaning, extends beyond everyday spoken discourse into the realm of literary texts, where it offers powerful tools for analyzing how characters interact, persuade, manipulate, and express intentions. While literary texts are fictional, the dialogue and narration within them often simulate real-life communication, enabling scholars to apply pragmatic theories—such as Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory, and Grice's Cooperative Principle—to uncover deeper layers of meaning, character motivation, and thematic resonance.

In literature, pragmatics helps to bridge the gap between form and function, moving beyond what is said to how it is said, why it is said, and what effect it produces. Austin's (1962) foundational concept of performative utterances—whereby speaking constitutes doing—has found profound relevance in the analysis of plays and novels, particularly when characters make promises, issue threats, or offer apologies. Searle's (1975) categorization of speech acts into assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations provides a framework through which fictional utterances can be examined not only linguistically but also dramaturgically and ethically.

For instance, in a dramatic text like Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, commissive speech acts (e.g., vows to kill, promises of loyalty) can be studied not only for their semantic content but for their illocutionary force—the speaker's intention—and perlocutionary effect—the consequences or reactions they elicit. This lens enables scholars to explore how language constructs power relations, foreshadows action, and reflects internal psychological states. Leech (1983) and Culpeper (2001) have also demonstrated that pragmatics allows for a nuanced understanding of characterisation, impoliteness, and conflict, especially in plays where indirectness, face-threatening acts, and irony play key roles.

Unlike spontaneous conversation, literary dialogue is crafted, which allows authors to exploit and manipulate pragmatic norms for aesthetic, symbolic, or thematic purposes. As such, pragmatic analysis can also reveal violations of the cooperative principle (Grice, 1975), intentional flouting of maxims, or marked politeness strategies that serve dramatic irony or character complexity. This is particularly evident in genres such as tragedy, satire, or postmodern fiction, where subtext and implicit meaning are critical.

In sum, the pragmatics of literary texts involves the study of how language is used within fiction to perform actions, convey relationships, construct identities, and drive narrative meaning. It enhances literary criticism by adding a layer of interpretive depth that accounts not only for what is written, but how and why it functions within the fictional world, offering insights into authorial technique, character motivation, and reader response.

Language in Shakespearean drama serves not only as a medium of expression but as a performative tool that initiates action and determines consequences. Scholars such as Austin (1962) and Searle (1975) laid the foundational framework for Speech Act Theory, emphasizing that utterances can function as actions, particularly when they commit speakers to future behavior. According to Searle's classification, commissive speech acts—including promises, threats, and vows—are those in which the speaker commits to a future course of action, making them especially relevant to tragedies like *Macbeth*, where spoken commitments often lead to irreversible outcomes.

In literary pragmatics, the application of speech act theory has enabled scholars to analyze how dialogue in plays reflects social interaction and power dynamics. Short (1996) and Burke (2008) argue that dramatic texts, especially Shakespeare's, are well-suited for speech act analysis due to their intentional structuring of dialogue for conflict, persuasion, and manipulation. Shakespeare's use of commissive acts has not been deeply isolated for focused study, though Culpeper (2001) explores how language in drama can be used to construct character and manage interactional goals. In *Macbeth*, commissives serve as a window into character psychology: Macbeth's verbal commitments shift from hesitation to fatal resolve, while Lady Macbeth uses threats and rhetorical vows to manipulate and embolden her husband.

Moreover, Leech (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1987) contributed to understanding the pragmatic functions of politeness and face in communication, offering tools to examine how commissives in *Macbeth* may be face-threatening acts. For example, Macbeth's internal struggle before committing to murder is reflected in the measured, equivocal language of commitment, revealing not only the illocutionary force of his words but also the moral ambiguity underpinning them.

Despite these contributions, most speech act analyses of Shakespearean plays have focused on directives (commands, requests) or expressives (apologies, greetings), with commissive acts receiving less focused scholarly attention. Research by Ilie (2001) and Black (2006) affirms the role of threats and promises in political and theatrical discourse, yet there remains a lack of systematic treatment of how commissive acts operate within the tragic arc of *Macbeth*. This study addresses that gap by foregrounding commissive acts as a central linguistic mechanism through which Shakespeare crafts ambition, betrayal, and fate.

Ultimately, integrating speech act theory into literary analysis not only enhances our understanding of character intent and interpersonal conflict but also reveals the performative power of language as a dramatic device. By investigating commissive speech acts in *Macbeth*, this study seeks to expand the application of pragmatic theory in literary studies and contribute to a deeper understanding of Shakespeare's linguistic artistry.

## **Research Gap**

While extensive scholarship exists on Shakespeare's use of language, most studies have focused on rhetorical devices, metaphor, character construction, and broad thematic interpretations. Additionally, within the field of literary pragmatics, there has been significant attention to directive (e.g., commands, requests) and expressive (e.g., apologies, emotions) speech acts in Shakespearean drama (Culpeper, 2001; Short, 1996). However, the commissive category—which includes promises, threats, vows, and betrayals—has received relatively limited analytical attention, especially in the context of *Macbeth*, a play deeply concerned with moral commitment, ambition, and psychological transformation.

Though Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1975) is frequently cited in linguistic studies, its focused application to commissive acts within *Macbeth* is scarce. Moreover, existing studies that engage with speech act theory in literature often neglect the performative consequences of commissive utterances—how such acts bind characters to moral or destructive courses of action. For instance, Lady Macbeth’s hypothetical vow of infanticide or Macbeth’s solemn declarations of murder have not been explored as performative linguistic commitments in a systematic or corpus-informed manner.

This gap suggests a need for a dedicated pragmatic analysis of commissive speech acts in *Macbeth*—analyzing how Shakespeare uses these acts not just to construct dramatic tension but to linguistically encode betrayal, ambition, and fatal resolve. By addressing this gap, the present study offers a novel contribution at the intersection of pragmatics, literary analysis, and Shakespearean tragedy, and aims to highlight how commissive acts shape character arcs and drive the moral consequences that define the play’s tragic core.

## **Methodology**

This qualitative study employs a pragmatic stylistic approach to analyze commissive speech acts in William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. The primary method involves close textual analysis of key dialogues where characters engage in promises, threats, vows, or acts of betrayal. Selected excerpts will be drawn from both individual soliloquies and interactive conversations to examine how characters use language to commit themselves to future actions. Each commissive act will be identified and categorized using Searle’s (1975) typology of speech acts, particularly focusing on how the illocutionary force (the speaker’s intention) and perlocutionary effect (the impact on the hearer) operate within the dramatic context. The data will be analyzed through descriptive and interpretive methods, emphasizing not only the linguistic structure of commissive utterances but also their dramatic function, character implications, and contribution to the unfolding tragedy. The study limits itself to the original Early Modern English version of the text and does not rely on adaptations or modern retellings.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The study is grounded in Speech Act Theory, primarily drawing from the works of J. L. Austin (1962) and John Searle (1975), who argue that language is not merely descriptive but performative—capable of enacting actions through utterance. Central to this theory is the concept of commissive speech acts, in which the speaker commits to future action, including promising, threatening, vowing, or offering. In *Macbeth*, such speech acts are not only reflective of internal psychological states but also serve as mechanisms through which characters establish power relations, express moral intentions, or signal betrayal. The framework is further enriched by Geoffrey Leech’s (1983) principles of pragmatics and Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory, which help explain the contextual and face-threatening nature of commissives in hierarchical or emotionally charged interactions. This theoretical lens allows the researcher to interpret how commissive acts are linguistically structured and how they contribute to Shakespeare’s thematic construction of ambition, power, and moral collapse.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Example 1: Macbeth's Promise of Murder**

Textual Line (Act 1, Scene 7):

"I am settled, and bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat."

This utterance is a commissive speech act, in which Macbeth commits himself to the murder of King Duncan. The illocutionary force here is one of determined intent; he is no longer vacillating, but fully prepared to act. The phrase "bend up / Each corporal agent" metaphorically conveys the alignment of both mind and body to fulfill the deed. The perlocutionary effect, especially in the presence of Lady Macbeth, confirms her manipulation has succeeded. Pragmatically, this marks a moral and psychological turning point, where Macbeth transforms from hesitant conspirator to active agent of regicide. According to Searle's taxonomy, this utterance falls under commissives, as it binds the speaker to a future act.

### **Example 2: Lady Macbeth's Threat**

Textual Line (Act 1, Scene 7):

"I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you / Have done to this."

Lady Macbeth's graphic imagery functions as a rhetorical threat and manipulative commissive. Though no actual action is promised here, she performs a hypothetical vow, contrasting her own supposed firmness with Macbeth's wavering resolve. The illocutionary intent is to shame Macbeth into action by demonstrating what she would do had she made a similar commitment. The perlocutionary effect is intimidation and psychological coercion. This indirect commissive underscores the persuasive force of implied action in shaping decisions, exemplifying how threats can operate beneath the surface of explicit declarations. It also reveals the gendered power dynamics and how Lady Macbeth weaponizes language to invert traditional roles.

### **Example 3: Macbeth's Betrayal of Banquo**

Textual Line (Act 3, Scene 1):

"So is he mine; and in such bloody distance / That every minute of his being thrusts / Against my near'st of life."

Here, Macbeth speaks of Banquo as an immediate threat to his survival and kingship. While not a direct threat, this soliloquy is a covert commissive, as Macbeth inwardly commits to having Banquo killed. The use of metaphor—"every minute of his being thrusts"—suggests that as long as Banquo lives, Macbeth feels endangered. The illocutionary act is self-justification for future betrayal, while the perlocutionary force, for the audience, builds dramatic irony and foreshadowing. In pragmatic terms, this is an implicit commissive, revealing how internal monologues can function performatively even when no other characters are present.

#### Example 4: Macbeth's Final Defiance

Textual Line (Act 5, Scene 8):

"I will not yield, / To kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet."

Macbeth's last stand is marked by a commissive act of refusal. He commits himself to die fighting rather than surrender. The illocutionary act is defiance, while the perlocutionary effect reinforces his tragic stature—heroic in resolve, yet morally fallen. This utterance reflects a final assertion of agency, aligning with the classical tragic arc, where the protagonist faces death with language that affirms control. It illustrates the function of commissives in restoring a semblance of power, even in defeat.

**Table 1:** Pragmatic Patterns in Macbeth

Speech Type	Act	Example Scene	Function	Pragmatic Insight
<b>Promise</b>		Macbeth's vow to kill Duncan (1.7)	Binds future action	Signals moral collapse
<b>Threat</b>		Lady Macbeth's hypothetical infanticide (1.7)	Persuasion through coercion	Reveals manipulation
<b>Betrayal</b>		Macbeth's plan to kill Banquo (3.1)	Indirect commitment	Shows duplicity and ambition
<b>Defiance</b>		Macbeth's final refusal to yield (5.8)	Self-preserving identity	Reclaims agency at death

Table 1 indicates Promises in Macbeth which are never neutral. They often serve as moral turning points, binding characters to violent futures and initiating irreversible plot developments.

Threats function less as warnings and more as strategic manipulation, particularly by Lady Macbeth, who uses them to challenge Macbeth's masculinity and provoke commitment to the murder.

Betrays are often concealed commissives, where private decisions (e.g., to kill Banquo or Macduff's family) are linguistically masked but pragmatically binding. These reveal the play's underlying concerns with duplicity and ambition.

Final vows or acts of defiance, especially in Macbeth's last scenes, operate as identity-affirming speech acts, reclaiming agency even in the face of death and defeat.

This classification and analysis reveal that commissive speech acts in Macbeth are not only linguistically significant but also thematically integral. They serve to dramatize moral conflict, propel character development, and underscore the tragic consequences of ambition and betrayal. The speech acts are deeply intertwined with power, manipulation, and fates, which are central to the play's enduring impact.

## Discussion

The analysis of commissive speech acts in Macbeth reveals that Shakespeare's language is not merely representational but performative and consequential, aligning with Austin's (1962) foundational claim that utterances can be forms of doing, not just saying. Macbeth's

vows to commit murder, Lady Macbeth's rhetorical threats, and the subtle betrayals that permeate the play all function as commissive acts—linguistic commitments to future actions that significantly alter character relationships and narrative direction. These findings reinforce Searle's (1975) assertion that commissive speech acts are central to constructing future-oriented intentionality and identity.

In particular, the study supports the observation by Burke (2008) and Short (1996) that dramatic language in Shakespeare is shaped to reflect psychological depth and strategic social interaction. The performative force of Macbeth's language—e.g., "I am settled" or "I will not yield"—shows how his verbal commitments reveal internal conflict and moral collapse. These acts serve as narrative milestones that transition Macbeth from contemplation to action, from ambition to downfall. In line with Culpeper (2001), the findings demonstrate how characters use commissive acts not just to communicate intent but to construct power dynamics, manipulate others, and define themselves in moments of crisis.

Furthermore, the study highlights the gendered dimension of commissive acts. Lady Macbeth's manipulation of Macbeth through exaggerated hypothetical vows illustrates how rhetorical commissives function persuasively, often as face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Her refusal to break a supposed vow exemplifies what Leech (1983) calls a maxim of "tact," ironically inverted to pressure Macbeth. These insights align with Ilie (2001), who noted that threats and pledges in political and performative discourse serve as powerful means of positioning and authority assertion.

This study contributes to the relatively limited body of research on commissive acts in literary texts, particularly in *Macbeth*, where previous scholarship has primarily focused on directives or expressives. While Thomas (1983) emphasized pragmatic failure in cross-cultural settings, this research reveals pragmatic intentionality within a fictional yet culturally loaded setting, where speech acts simulate authentic communicative pressures. In doing so, it bridges literary criticism with pragmatic linguistics, demonstrating that *Macbeth* is not only a story of power and guilt, but also a rich dramatization of language as action.

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that commissive speech acts—promises, threats, vows, and betrayals—play a pivotal role in shaping the tragic trajectory of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Through the lens of Speech Act Theory, particularly the works of Austin (1962) and Searle (1975), the analysis revealed how characters' verbal commitments serve as performative mechanisms that not only express intent but also catalyze action and moral consequence. Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's use of commissive acts reflects their internal struggles, power negotiations, and ultimate descent into chaos. These linguistic choices are not incidental; they are dramatic tools through which Shakespeare constructs character development, tension, and thematic depth. The findings highlight how language in the play functions not merely as dialogue but as action in itself, often determining the fate of the speaker and those around them. This research thus contributes to literary pragmatics by reaffirming the dramatic and psychological weight of commissive utterances in literature and encourages further exploration of speech act functions across genres and cultural contexts.

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