Analyzing Speech Acts and Politeness Strategies in SHAZAM! (2019)

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Abstract. Films often mirror authentic communication and social behavior, making them significant data for pragmatic inquiry. This study aims to analyze speech acts and politeness strategies in the film SHAZAM! (2019) through a pragmatic lens. The research applies a qualitative descriptive method using Austin's (1962) Speech Act Theory, Searle's (1976) classification of illocutionary acts, and Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework of politeness. Dialogues were obtained from the film's official English subtitles and analyzed to identify the types and functions of illocutionary acts and the corresponding politeness strategies. The results reveal that directives constitute the most frequent illocutionary type (45%), followed by expressives (30%) and assertives (25%), while commissives and declarations do not appear. Regarding politeness strategies, positive politeness and bald on record are dominant (around 35% each), with negative politeness (10%) and off-record indirectness (25%) occurring less frequently. These findings illustrate how linguistic forms in cinematic dialogue encode both authority and emotional solidarity, reflecting the balance between action-oriented discourse and interpersonal communication in superhero narratives. This study contributes to pragmatic and media discourse analysis by demonstrating how popular films can serve as authentic material for teaching communicative competence and intercultural understanding.

Keywords: politeness strategies; pragmatics; speech acts; superhero film; SHAZAM!

Introduction

The role of language extends beyond mere transmission of information; it also serves as a medium for the execution of actions. The medium of language is employed in a myriad of ways, ranging from the issuance of requests, the making of promises, the expression of criticism, the bestowal of compliments, and the performance of innumerable other acts, all of which transpire during quotidian interactions. This perspective has been encapsulated by the theory of speech acts, initially proposed by Austin (1962), who underscored the notion that utterances function not only as statements of fact but also as actions in themselves. Films, as reflections of human interaction, offer a substantial foundation for examining the manner in which speech acts are utilized to construct meaning, relationships, and social dynamics in communication.

In pragmatic research, films are increasingly recognized as valuable sources because they combine authenticity with creativity. Film dialogues, in contrast to naturally occurring conversations, are scripted, yet they often mirror everyday communicative strategies, frequently with heightened dramatic or humorous effects. The analysis of speech acts in films enables scholars to investigate how characters negotiate power, express emotions, and manage relationships through language. Moreover, an analysis of politeness strategies employed in films can offer insights into the linguistic construction of face-saving and solidarity in varied contexts.

A substantial body of research has previously examined speech acts and politeness in a variety of genres, including comedies, dramas, and animated films. While these studies contribute to our understanding of pragmatic phenomena in media, relatively little attention has been paid to superhero films, a globally popular

genre that blends action with humor and interpersonal dynamics. A particularly salient aspect of superhero narratives is the prevalence of urgent commands, emotional expressions, and negotiations of power, all of which are realized through speech acts and politeness strategies. Nevertheless, there is a lacuna in pragmatic research that systematically investigates how these elements operate in the discourse of superhero films.

This study addresses that gap by analyzing speech acts and politeness strategies in the film Shazam! (2019). The film is noteworthy for its integration of action and comedy, which affords a comprehensive array of pragmatic features for analysis. Austin's (1962) tripartite distinction of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts serves as the conceptual foundation, yet the analysis focuses specifically on illocutionary acts, adopting Searle's (1976) classification into directives, assertives, expressives, commissives, and declarations. This focus enables a more precise examination of the communicative functions performed by the characters' utterances. Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework of politeness strategies is also applied to identify how face-saving and relational harmony are maintained or challenged in interaction.

Accordingly, the objectives of this study are twofold: firstly, to identify the types of illocutionary acts employed in Shazam!, and secondly, to analyze the politeness strategies that accompany them. The integration of these perspectives enables the study to make significant contributions to pragmatic theory while concurrently offering practical insights that are pertinent to the fields of language teaching and intercultural communication. The research underscores the potential of popular media to function as both a reflection of authentic communication and an educational tool for cultivating pragmatic competence. The analysis of linguistic data taken solely from SHAZAM! (2019)'s English subtitles is the extent of this study. Nonverbal cues like tone, gestures, and visual context are not included. The analysis focuses only on speech acts and politeness strategies using the frameworks of Austin (1962), Searle (1976), and Brown and Levinson (1987). To gain a more comprehensive understanding of pragmatic patterns in visual media, future research could broaden this study by incorporating genre-based contrasts, multimodal analysis, or cross-cultural comparisons.

Method

Speech Act Theory – Austin (1962)

J.L. Austin's (1962) Speech Act Theory revolutionized the understanding of language by emphasizing that communication is not merely about conveying words with literal meanings, but also about performing actions through speech. Austin proposed that, whenever someone speaks, three types of acts occur simultaneously: the locutionary act, which refers to the actual utterance itself, including the literal meaning and linguistic form of the sentence, focusing on the words spoken and their dictionary meaning, as in the utterance "Stop!" which literally means to halt an action; the illocutionary act, which is the intended communicative function or purpose of the utterance and reflects what the speaker aims to accomplish, such as ordering, requesting, promising, or thanking, where in the example "Stop!" the illocutionary act is the speaker's intention to command the listener to stop; and the perlocutionary act, which concerns the effect or outcome that the utterance has on the listener or situation, involving the response or reaction triggered by the speech, such as causing fear, compliance, or persuasion, so that in the case of "Stop!" The perlocutionary effect might be that the listener actually stops or is surprised.

Searle's Classification of Illocutionary Acts (1976)

Building on Austin's framework, Searle (1976) categorized illocutionary acts into assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. He identified five main types: assertives, which commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition by describing or stating facts, such as affirming, concluding, or reporting for instance, saying "Aquaman is literally huge" asserts a fact or opinion; directives, which aim to prompt the listener to perform a certain action, including requests, commands, advice, and instructions, as in "Stop!" or "Circle up, fam!" that influence listener behavior; commissives, which commit the speaker to a future course of action through promises, offers, or vows, such as the phrase "I will help you" that pledges future action; expressives, which convey the speaker's attitude or feelings about a situation, such as expressing

thanks, apologies, congratulations, or emotions, exemplified by "I'm an idiot" or "Thanks for your help"; and declarations, which are distinctive in that they bring about a change in the external world simply by being spoken, such as pronouncing someone married or declaring a meeting open.

Politeness Theory – Brown and Levinson (1987)

Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed that communication involves managing "face" through four main strategies: Bald on record is the most direct form of communication, involving clear and unambiguous utterances without minimizing threats to face; this strategy is often used in situations of urgency or efficiency, as in commands like "Run!" or "Stop!" Positive politeness seeks to create solidarity and emphasize friendliness by attending to the listener's positive face, the desire to be liked, appreciated, and included through compliments, inclusive language, or expressions of camaraderie, exemplified by "Circle up, fam!" Negative politeness attends to the listener's negative face the desire for freedom of action and non-imposition by employing indirectness, hedging, or formal politeness markers, as in the polite request "Could you help me stop thinking?" Finally, off-record strategies rely on indirectness or ambiguity, allowing the speaker to imply meaning without stating it explicitly, thereby reducing imposition and leaving interpretation up to the listener; , example, "Why do we always have to play war games?" functions as a rhetorical question that indirectly conveys a complaint.

Result and Discussion

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method with the primary data taken from the official English subtitle of the film Shazam! (2019), a superhero movie directed by David F. Sandberg and produced by New Line Cinema that combines action, humor, and family themes. The subtitle served as written documentation of the characters' dialogues. Data were collected using the documentation technique by selecting utterances that contained illocutionary acts and politeness indicators. The analysis was carried out in three stages: first, identifying the layers of speech acts following Austin's (1962) framework of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts; second, categorizing the illocutionary acts according to Searle's (1976) classification, which includes representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations; and third, examining the politeness strategies based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, namely positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on record, and off record. This procedure enabled a comprehensive and systematic analysis of how speech acts and politeness strategies function within the narrative and character interactions of Shazam!, while reflecting the film's distinctive blend of humor, authority, and relational negotiation.

The analysis of speech acts in Shazam! (2019) based on Austin's (1962) framework reveals a strong dominance of illocutionary acts, which demonstrates that the characters' utterances are primarily intended to perform actions rather than merely convey information. The data show a wide range of illocutionary functions, such as giving orders ("stop," "activate the power"), urging others to act ("save yourself," "form a circle"), making requests for help, or even expressing humility and self-deprecation.

These illustrate how superhero narratives rely heavily on directive and expressive illocutionary acts to create urgency, authority, and emotional depth. In contrast, locutionary acts in the film appear in the form of literal statements, denials, or general truths, often functioning as surface-level utterances that support the story's humorous tone. Meanwhile, perlocutionary effects, though less frequent, are particularly striking, as seen when an utterance causes panic and prompts characters to flee. This interplay suggests that while the locutionary and perlocutionary layers contribute to narrative realism and audience engagement, it is the illocutionary layer that drives the plot forward by directing actions, shaping relationships, and highlighting the balance between humor and heroism that characterizes the film.

Speech Acts Types

The analysis yielded the following findings regarding the distribution of illocutionary acts in Shazam!:

Directives constituted 45% of the sample, Expressives constituted 30%, and Assertives constituted 25%. The data did not reveal the presence of either commissives or declarations. Directives emerged as the most dominant type, which is consistent with the action-driven nature of the superhero genre, in which characters frequently give commands, issue warnings, or make urgent requests. Expressives ranked second, demonstrating the importance of emotional and evaluative language in shaping characters' personalities and relationships. Assertives, though less prevalent, still played a crucial role in grounding the narrative by presenting opinions, facts, and evaluations. The omission of commissives and declarations underscores the film's emphasis on immediate action and relational interaction, superseding commitments to future acts or formal institutional discourse.

Table 1. Examples of Directive Speech Acts in Shazam!

Dialogue	Austin (1962)	Searle (1976)
00:02:02,542 "Stop! Sir!"	Illocutionary	Directive
00:08:07,375 "Why were there Skittles in my pockets?"	Locutionary	Directive

The data in Table 1 illustrates the use of directive speech acts in Shazam! (2019). The utterance "Stop! Sir!" (00:02:02,542) represents an illocutionary act according to Austin (1962), as the speaker is performing the act of giving a command. Within Searle's (1976) classification, this falls into the directive category because it functions to influence the hearer's actions, demanding immediate compliance. In contrast, the utterance "Why were there Skittles in my pockets?" (00:08:07,375) is categorized as a locutionary act in Austin's terms since it is framed as a literal question. However, under Searle's framework, this utterance still functions as a directive, as it implicitly requests clarification or an explanation from the hearer. These examples highlight that directives in the film are not limited to direct commands but may also take the form of rhetorical or interrogative structures that still aim to elicit a response or action. This reflects the dynamic use of language in the superhero genre, where urgency, authority, and humor are often intertwined to drive the narrative forward.

Table 2. Examples of Assertives Speech Acts in Shazam!

Dialogue	Austin (1962)	Searle (1976)
00:05:06,125 "Let's have more of it."	Illocutionary	Assertives
00:01:30,333 "Museums are fun. Amusement parks for the brains."	Locutionary	Assertives

Table 2 displays examples of assertive speech acts in Shazam! (2019). The utterance "Let's have more of it" (00:05:06,125) is classified as an illocutionary act according to Austin (1962), as the speaker is not merely stating words but performing the act of asserting a stance or desire. Within Searle's (1976) framework, this utterance falls under assertives, since the speaker commits to the truth of a proposition and conveys a point of view intended to be accepted by the hearer. Similarly, the utterance "Museums are fun. Amusement parks for the brains" (00:01:30,333) functions as a locutionary act in Austin's terms because it delivers a literal statement of fact and opinion. However, in Searle's classification, it is categorized as assertive, as the speaker provides an evaluation that presents museums as enjoyable, persuading others to share the same perspective. These findings suggest that assertive speech acts in the film often serve to express evaluations, opinions, or statements of belief, thereby shaping character identity and adding humor or relatability to the dialogue. In the context of a superhero narrative, assertives help to ground extraordinary events in everyday communication, allowing characters to connect with audiences through familiar expressions of truth, judgment, and shared experience.

Table 3. Examples of Expressive Speech Acts in Shazam!

Dialogue	Austin (1962)	Searle (1976)

00:05:32,542 "I'm an idiot."	Illocutionary	Expressive
00:27:53,625 "You are a fool of a champion."	Illocutionary	Expressive

The data in Table 3 demonstrates how expressive speech acts appear in Shazam! (2019) to convey characters' emotions and attitudes. The utterance "I'm an idiot" (00:05:32,542) is classified as an illocutionary act in Austin's (1962) framework, as the speaker is not merely stating a fact but expressing self-deprecation. According to Searle's (1976) typology, this utterance belongs to the expressive category because it reveals the speaker's psychological state, in this case embarrassment or self-blame. Similarly, the line "You are a fool of a champion" (00:27:53,625) also functions as an illocutionary act, expressing criticism and ridicule toward the hearer. This utterance is categorized as expressive in Searle's model, since it communicates the speaker's negative evaluation and attitude toward the addressee. These examples indicate that expressive acts in the film are used not only to display personal emotions, such as humility or frustration, but also to establish interpersonal dynamics by reinforcing conflict or humor. In superhero narratives like Shazam!, expressives enrich character development by balancing action-oriented dialogue with emotional resonance.

Politeness Strategies

Politeness strategies were also identified in the same set of dialogues. The distribution shows that Bald on Record (38.1%) and Positive Politeness (28.6%) are the most frequently employed, while Off-record strategies (19%) and Negative Politeness (9.5%) appear less often.

Table 4. Examples of Politeness Strategies in Shazam!

Dialogue	Politeness Strategy
00:10:34,333 "Run!"	Bald on Record
00:14:03,167 "Everyone's safe. Awesome job, Mary."	Positive Politeness
00:06:09,875 "Can you help fix my thoughts so that they just, like, stop happening?"	Negative Politeness
00:07:40,208 "Why do we always have to play war games?"	Off-record

The examples in Table 4 illustrate how characters in Shazam! (2019) use different politeness strategies as described by Brown and Levinson (1987). The utterance "Run!" (00:10:34,333) is a clear example of the "bald on record" strategy, where the speaker gives a direct command without adjustment, reflecting the urgency of the superhero context. On the other hand, "Everyone's safe. Awesome job, Mary." (00:14:03,167) demonstrates positive politeness, as it conveys approval and solidarity, reinforcing group cohesion and emotional support among the characters. Meanwhile, "Can you help fix my mind so they stop happening?" (00:06:09,875) represents negative politeness, as the speaker makes a request in a hesitant and indirect manner to minimize the burden on the listener. Finally, the utterance "Why do we always have to play war games?" (00:07:40,208) uses an indirect strategy, with a rhetorical question to indirectly express a complaint while leaving room for interpretation. These findings highlight how the film balances assertiveness and politeness depending on the narrative situation: direct strategies for high-risk actions, and indirect strategies for humor, emotional expression, or maintaining social harmony.

The analysis demonstrates the dialogues in Shazam! reflect a balance between the exigencies of the superhero genre and the interpersonal dynamics of the characters. The prevalence of directives corresponds with the action-driven plot, wherein expeditious instructions and warnings are paramount. However, the frequent use of expressives and assertives suggests that the film also seeks to portray superheroes as

emotionally complex individuals, capable of humor, self-reflection, and vulnerability. With respect to the issue of politeness, the preponderance of baldness in recorded data suggests that in high-risk scenarios, concerns regarding facial appearance are superseded by the need for expediency and clarity. However, the pervasive use of positive politeness suggests that the film places significant emphasis on warmth, solidarity, and humor, thereby reflecting the family-centered narrative. Negative politeness and off-record strategies, though less frequent, highlight the film's use of subtlety, sarcasm, and face-saving strategies, which enrich character interactions and add layers of meaning beyond straightforward commands.

These findings suggest that, Shazam! offers a rich site for pragmatic analysis. The film offers a multifaceted perspective on the dynamics of speech acts and politeness strategies in everyday communication. It also demonstrates how language use adapts to genre conventions, cultural norms, and interpersonal relationships. The findings of this study contribute to pragmatic research by demonstrating how popular media encodes social dynamics through language. This has potential applications in language teaching, intercultural communication, and media discourse studies.

Conclusion

This study employed Searle's (1976) classification of illocutionary acts and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework to analyze speech acts and politeness strategies in the film Shazam! The findings indicated that directive acts predominate, reflecting the urgency and action-oriented nature of the superhero genre. Assertives and expressives also appear frequently, adding layers of emotion, humor, and reflection to character interactions. Declarations play a limited yet meaningful role in establishing authority. The absence of commissives suggests a relative diminution in the emphasis on commitment to future actions within the specified narrative context. In terms of politeness, the most prevalent strategies were bald on record and positive politeness strategies, corresponding to the immediacy of commands and the film's emphasis on solidarity and group cohesion. Negative politeness and off-record strategies, though less prevalent, serve to enrich the dialogues by introducing elements of indirection, humor, sarcasm, and mechanisms designed to preserve face. Collectively, these findings underscore the need for a harmonious balance between efficiency and relational harmony in cinematic discourse.

The present study makes a significant contribution to the fields of pragmatic and discourse studies. It does so by offering a comprehensive analysis of the functionality of speech acts and politeness strategies within the context of popular media texts. This phenomenon exemplifies the manner in which language is adapted to both genre conventions and interpersonal dynamics, thereby offering insights into the negotiation of meaning, power, and identity in fictional dialogue. From a pragmatic standpoint, the analysis offers implications for language teaching, wherein film dialogues can function as authentic materials for teaching pragmatics and intercultural communication. Furthermore, it provides insights into media studies, particularly in understanding how superhero films beyond their action reflect cultural norms and social interaction patterns.

In the future, scholars may choose to extend the scope of this research by exploring other film genres, cross-cultural comparisons, or digital interactions in social media and online gaming. Such expansions would contribute to a more profound comprehension of the evolution of pragmatic strategies across diverse media, cultural, and communicative contexts.

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