



DECLARATIVE SCARCITY AND THE ILLOCUTIONARY ARCHITECTURE OF AUTHORITY IN OMAR SHAHID HAMID'S THE PRISONER

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ABSTRACT

*This research presents that the near total absence of declarative speech acts in Omar Shahid Hamid's *The Prisoner* (2013) as the index of institutional collapse in the novel's representation of the Pakistani security apparatus. The study is anchored upon Vanderveken's (1990) semantic analysis of English performative verbs. The results yield that there are only seventeen declarative illocutionary acts, amounting to 0.14 per cent of the 12,016 illocutionary acts identified across all five categories. Out of the eighty-five Vanderveken's taxonomy of declarative verbs, only eight are utilized in the novel. The entire juridical cluster of the tableau, comprising condemning, adjudicating, acquitting, exonerating, pardoning, forgiving and absolving, is void but for a single instance of sentencing. The nullification cluster, comprising cancelling, annulling, abolishing, revoking, repealing and rescinding, is void in its entirety. The seventeen utilized declaratives concentrate almost wholly in two figures, the Home Minister Pakora and the police inspector general known as Dr. Death, whose performative authority is rooted not in law but respectively in transaction and in lethal force. The article argues that declarative force in the novel has not diminished so much as migrated, detaching itself from the legal institution that should authorize it and reattaching itself to money and to violence.*

Keywords: *speech act theory, declarative illocutionary force, Vanderveken, pragmatic stylistics, Pakistani Anglophone fiction, Omar Shahid Hamid, institutional discourse*

1. Introduction

Speech act criticism of literary texts has been overwhelmingly a criticism of presence. Researches in the tradition usually count what characters do with words, classify the dominant type, and read the dominance as evidence of theme or characterization. The persistent finding across speech act analysis, that assertive predominate and declaratives are rare, has mostly been reported as an unremarkable background fact rather than as an object of analysis in its own right. The current research inverts that emphasis. It takes the rarity of one illocutionary category as its primary datum and argues that in a particular kind of novel this rarity is not a statistical accident but the most precise formal record the text offers of its own political argument.

The novel in question is Omar Shahid Hamid's *The Prisoner* (2013), a crime narrative set in Karachi and written by a serving officer of the Sindh police. Its world is saturated with institutions that exist in order to perform declarations. There are prisons, courts, ministries, a police hierarchy, an army intelligence apparatus and an American consulate. Its plot turns on arrest, detention, isolation, appointment, dismissal and the setting of policy. If any fictional world should generate declarative illocutionary acts in volume, it is this one. Instead, an exhaustive annotation of the novel against Vanderveken's (1990) inventory of English declarative verbs yields seventeen instances in a corpus of 107,034 words. Eight of the eighty-



five declarative verbs Vanderveken analyses are realized. Seven of the seventeen belong to a single politician and five to a single police chief, so that two speakers between them, accounting for slightly over two thousand words of dialogue, produce more than two thirds of the novel's entire stock of world changing utterances.

The argument advanced here is that this deficit is diagnostic. Vanderveken postulates that most declarative illocutionary verbs name declarations require that the speaker occupies a position of authority within an extra-linguistic institution, that the mode of achievement of such declarations anchored in institutional position, and that the corresponding preparatory condition is that the speaker effectively occupies it (Vanderveken, 1990, p. 198). Declarations therefore cannot be performed by force of will. They require a functioning institution to underwrite them. Where an institution has been hollowed out by corruption, where its offices are purchasable and its procedures suspended, the preparatory conditions for its characteristic declarations cannot be satisfied, and the acts simply do not occur. Illocutionary scarcity is what institutional failure looks like at the level of the sentence. Yet the novel does not display a world in which nothing is performatively achieved. Things are decreed, people are appointed, meetings are closed, prisoners are isolated. What has happened is not that declarative force has evaporated but that it has migrated. It has disconnected itself from the juridical institution that ought to house it and connect itself elsewhere, to money in the case of the Home Minister and to lethal force in the case of the police chief. The verbs that survive in the corpus are the verbs of executive fiat, chiefly declaring, decreeing, appointing and authorising. The verbs that vanish are the verbs of law, chiefly acquitting, exonerating, pardoning, absolving, annulling and repealing. A state that can still command but can no longer judge, and above all can no longer forgive or undo, is legible in the distribution of performative verbs before it is legible in plot.

This interpretation intersects with, and offers a formal foundation for, an existing body of political criticism on the novel. Ahmed (2022) examines *The Prisoner* through Mbembe and Agamben and argues that Karachi in the novel establishes a state of exception in which certain lives are condensed disposable. Tabassum et al. (2026) analyze the novel through Althusser's repressive and ideological state apparatuses. Rafique et al. (2024) study the construction of the fundamentalist through the figures of Qari Saif and Akbar Khan. Each of these researches argues, on thematic and ideological grounds, that the novel depicts a state whose legal form has been evacuated by its coercive practice. None of them offers a linguistic mechanism by which that evacuation could be measured. The declarative deficit supplies one. The state of exception, in Agamben's formulation, is a condition in which law is suspended yet remains formally in force. What such a condition should produce, pragmatically, is precisely what this corpus displays, namely a text in which the forms of institutional authority persist in the vocabulary of command while the specifically juridical performatives fall silent.

2. Literature Review

The application of speech act theory to literary discourse has a long and somewhat uneven history, and the foundational contributions to it did not converge on a shared account of literariness. They divided over it, and the division determines what a pragmatic analysis of fictional dialogue is subsequently entitled to assume. Ohmann (1971) initiated the argument by holding that the sentences of a literary work do not carry the illocutionary forces that would ordinarily attach to them, so that literary discourse is constituted by a special fiction-making act



whose normal sincerity and truth conditions are suspended. Searle (1975) reached a related conclusion by a different route, treating the author's utterances as pretended illocutionary acts and thereby appearing to place fiction beyond the reach of ordinary pragmatic description. The two positions are frequently run together, but they locate the anomaly in different places. For Ohmann the force is absent from the utterance itself, whereas for Searle the force is entirely ordinary and it is the performance that is pretended. Searle further separates fictionality from literariness, treating them as distinct concepts, so his account should not be read as a definition of literature. Gorman (2001) has issued a published correction concerning the misattribution of positions to Ohmann in particular, which is a standing caution for any summary of this early phase.

Pratt (1977) rejected the premise on which both accounts rest, arguing that literary discourse is continuous with, rather than parasitic upon, everyday verbal behaviour and that the analytical apparatus of speech act theory therefore applies to it without special dispensation. Her opening chapter demonstrates that the opposition between poetic and ordinary language fails first on its own terms and again when tested against non-literary data, and she draws on Labov's work on the oral narrative of personal experience to establish that aesthetically structured discourse occurs well outside literature. Her conclusion is that the differences between literary and non-literary writing are contextual rather than textual. This is the decisive move for everything that follows, since if literary discourse is continuous with ordinary discourse then the felicity conditions governing everyday illocutionary acts apply to fictional dialogue directly, and the analyst is licensed to treat character utterance as genuine illocutionary activity within its own communicative frame. Petrey (1990) and Miller (2001) develop the wider theoretical consequences of this position.

Applied work on dramatic texts has proceeded on Pratt's assumption rather than on Ohmann's or Searle's, and it has concentrated on how illocutionary force distributes across speakers and turns. Glazov-Corrigan (1994) examines the relation between speech acts and generic difference in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, arguing that generic classification is itself bound up with which acts characters are permitted to perform. Gates (2004) analyses the hazards of performative language in tragic contexts, reading Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* alongside the historical case of Francesco Spiera to show how performative utterance can exceed or betray the intention of the speaker who issues it. Herman (1991) analyses dramatic dialogue through the systematics of turn-taking and extends the approach in *Dramatic Discourse* (1995) across a range of dramatists including Shakespeare, Chekhov, Shaw, Beckett, Osborne and Pinter, with her account of turn management set out separately in Herman (1998). What this body of work collectively establishes is that the sequencing and distribution of acts across turns, rather than their propositional content alone, carries interpretive weight, and that the capacity to perform certain acts at all is an index of a character's standing.

Parallel developments in stylistics supplied the descriptive categories for narrative rather than dramatic text. Leech and Short (1981) set out the taxonomy of speech and thought presentation that distinguishes direct, indirect and free indirect forms and links each to the underlying act being reported, working principally from English fictional prose of the last hundred and fifty years. Semino and Short (2004) subsequently tested and extended that taxonomy across a purpose-built corpus, converting a descriptive scheme into a quantifiable one.



Culpeper (2001) brings pragmatic categories to bear on characterisation directly, and Culpeper, Short and Verdonk (1998) collect the drama-focused work of the period. The consolidation of literary pragmatics as a field has largely vindicated Pratt. Locher and Jucker (2017, 2021) treat fictional texts as cultural artefacts amenable to pragmatic analysis in their own right, distinguishing intradiegetic communication between characters from extradiegetic communication between text and reader and thereby providing a principled basis for analysing character dialogue as genuine illocutionary activity within its own communicative frame.

Within this established framework, an extensive applied literature has accumulated. Salih (2022) analyses illocutionary acts in Dickens's *Hard Times* and finds the five Searlean categories distributed across the major characters in ways that track their narrative functions. Mahmoud (2023) undertakes a corpus-based feminist stylistic study of Annie Ernaux's *The Years*, combining speech act analysis with positioning theory to argue that the frequency profile of the protagonist's utterances contributes materially to the construction of female identity in the text.

Two features of this literature bear directly on the present study. The first is methodological. The overwhelming majority of these studies proceed by purposive sampling. Yuradana (2025) investigates the illocutionary profile of a single character in a single novel. Nuriyah et al. (2026) work from twenty-two selected utterances. Ramadhani et al. (2026) work from fifty. Sampling of this kind is entirely adequate for demonstrating that a category is present and for illustrating its functions, but it is structurally incapable of establishing that a category is absent. A study that examines fifty utterances and finds no declaratives has discovered nothing about the text. Only exhaustive annotation of a full corpus licenses an argument from absence, and exhaustive annotation is rare in this literature. The second feature is substantive. Where these studies do report full distributions, the same pattern recurs with striking regularity. Assertives dominate, directives follow, expressives and commissives trail, and declaratives are either vanishingly rare or entirely absent. Liu et al. (2025) analyze 124 speech acts in the 2024 United States presidential debate and report that declaratives do not occur at all. Anhar et al. (2026) analyze sixty-two utterances from a presidential address on military action and again record zero declaratives, observing that the absence indicates a discourse oriented towards persuasion and legitimization rather than institutional action. Kayode-Iyasere et al. (2023) report declaratives at zero per cent in a Nigerian nomination acceptance speech. The pattern is so consistent that it has acquired the status of a background expectation. That very consistency, however, is what has prevented the pattern from being interrogated. Declarative rarity has been reported as a property of genre, and there the analysis has stopped. What has not been asked is whether the degree and the internal shape of declarative rarity vary meaningfully across texts whose institutional settings differ, and whether such variation can be made to carry interpretive weight. A political speech contains no declaratives because a candidate addressing a rally is not performing institutional acts. That is unremarkable. A novel set inside a prison, a ministry and a police headquarters contain almost none, and that is a finding of a different order. The present research aims to make the second kind of absence analytically productive.

2.1. Declarations and the construction of institutional reality

The theoretical resources for treating declarative scarcity as diagnostic come from the philosophical rather than the applied literature. Austin (1962) distinguished misfires from abuses among infelicities, locating in the first category those failures in which there is no accepted



conventional procedure, or in which the persons or circumstances are inappropriate for the procedure invoked. Searle's (1976) taxonomy subsequently isolated declarations as the category in which successful performance brings about a correspondence between propositional content and reality, giving them their characteristic double direction of fit.

Searle developed the social consequences of this position in *The Construction of Social Reality* (1995) and *Making the Social World* (2010), arguing that institutional reality is created and sustained by status function declarations which impose deontic powers on persons and objects that could not perform the relevant functions by virtue of their physical properties alone. On this account, language is not merely a medium through which institutions are described but the mechanism by which they exist. The account has attracted serious criticism. Hindriks (2013) argues that Searle overstates the role of language relative to collective acceptance and that the notion of a status function declaration obscures more than it clarifies. Hansson Wahlberg (2019) raises independent metaphysical objections to the claim that declarations synchronically create worldly institutional facts. Krifka (2024) offers a formal reconstruction within dynamic semantics, modelling declarations as purely performative updates that enforce an index change on a context set.

What survives these disputes, and what matters for the present study, is the dependence relation running in the other direction. Whatever declarations do to institutions, institutions unambiguously condition declarations. A declaration succeeds only where a recognised procedure exists and the speaker occupies the position the procedure requires. Bourdieu (1991) makes essentially this point against a purely linguistic account of performativity, insisting that the efficacy of authorised speech derives from the socially instituted authority of the speaker rather than from properties of the utterance. Butler (1997) develops a related argument concerning the citational conditions under which performative utterances acquire force. The convergent implication is that where institutional authority is degraded, declarative acts should become both rarer and more concentrated in whichever figures retain effective, as opposed to formal, power. This is a testable prediction, and it is the prediction this study tests.

2.2. Pragmatic stylistics and Pakistani Anglophone fiction

Pragmatic approaches to Pakistani Anglophone writing have expanded considerably in recent years. Fatima et al. (2024) offer a pragma-stylistic reading of Nadeem Aslam's *The Blind Man's Garden*, applying Austin and Searle to selected extracts in order to connect illocutionary structure to theme. Safdar et al. (2025) analyze Tariq Rahman's short story *Bingo* through Searle's five categories and argue that speech acts in the narrative position power relations and shape identity. Iqbal et al. (2025) assemble a purpose-built corpus of contemporary Pakistani English fiction and examine speech acts alongside deixis, discourse markers and hedges, arguing that pragmatic features function as cultural markers encoding rank and civility. Shamsie (2011) provides the broader literary-historical framing within which such work sits, describing a body of writing shaped simultaneously by colonial inheritance, wider Islamic literary world and contemporary geopolitics of violence.

Criticism specifically on *The Prisoner* has been dominated by political rather than linguistic approaches. Ahmed (2022) reads the novel through Foucault, Mbembe, Agamben and Butler, arguing that violence and death operate as means of controlling human bodies and that



the Karachi of the novel embodies a state of exception in which certain lives are deemed unworthy of life and are consequently removed. Tabassum et al. (2026) apply Althusser's account of ideological and repressive state apparatuses, arguing that the novel exposes the ways state institutions justify their authority and reproduce social hierarchy through a combination of persuasion and coercion. Rafique et al. (2024) examine the construction of the jihadi in the novel, distinguishing the fundamentalist militancy of Qari Saif from the worldly and instrumental violence of Akbar Khan. A postmodern Marxist reading published in 2024 approaches the novel through Lefebvre and Soja to analyse the spatial manipulation of Karachi under globalisation.

These studies share a conclusion and a limitation. The conclusion is that *The Prisoner* depicts a state whose legal form has been emptied by its own coercive practice. The limitation is that the evidence adduced for this conclusion is entirely thematic. Characters behave lawlessly, therefore the state is lawless. This is persuasive but circular, since the analytical categories are drawn from the same narrative content they are used to explain. What the political criticism lacks is an independent formal measure, a feature of the text's language that is not simply a restatement of its plot. Declarative distribution supplies exactly this. It is countable, it is derived from an externally specified inventory of verbs rather than from the novel itself, and it makes predictions that could in principle have come out otherwise. To the best of the present author's knowledge, no study has yet examined the illocutionary profile of *The Prisoner*, and none has proposed declarative scarcity as a formal index of institutional collapse in any literary text.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

2.3.1. Vanderveken's semantic analysis of English performative verbs

The analytical instrument used here is the lexical semantics of English illocutionary verbs developed by Vanderveken (1990) in the sixth chapter of *Meaning and Speech Acts, Volume 1*, undertaken with the collaboration of Kenneth MacQueen, and resting on the formal apparatus set out with Searle in *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic* (Searle & Vanderveken, 1985). Vanderveken analyses approximately three hundred English speech act verbs whose meanings incorporate an illocutionary point, describing for each the logical form of the force it names and identifying the components that distinguish it from the primitive of its category.

The choice of Vanderveken rather than Searle's (1976) five-way taxonomy alone is deliberate and consequential. A Searlean analysis can establish that a given utterance is a declaration. It cannot establish which declaration, and it therefore cannot distinguish a decree from an acquittal or an appointment from a pardon. Since the argument of this article depends entirely on which declarative subclasses are realised and which are void, a taxonomy operating at the level of the five categories would be incapable of stating it. Vanderveken's inventory supplies the required granularity. His declarative list runs to eighty-five verbs, each analysed in terms of the specific propositional content, preparatory and mode of achievement conditions that derive it from the primitive *declare*.

The apparatus also supplies the theoretical warrant for reading absence as significant. Vanderveken observes that most declarative illocutionary verbs name declarations that require a position of authority of the speaker in an extra-linguistic institution, that the mode of



achievement of such declarations consists in invoking that institutional position, and that this determines the preparatory condition that the speaker occupies such a position effectively (Vanderveken, 1990, p. 198). He notes further, following Austin, that a large number of declarative performative verbs are related specifically to juridical practices and institutions, citing exonerating, condemning and acquitting. A separate subset, comprising benedictions and curses, requires supernatural rather than institutional powers, and Vanderveken remarks that in these cases one is generally unable to determine effectively whether the declaration has succeeded.

These observations, taken together, entail a straightforward prediction. In a fictional world where the juridical institution is intact, the juridical subset of the declarative tableau should be populated. Where it is not intact, that subset should thin or disappear, and whatever declarative force remains should concentrate in verbs whose preparatory conditions can be satisfied by something other than legal standing. The distribution of declarative subclasses thus functions as a direct probe of which institutions the text represents as operative

The six components of illocutionary force

Vanderveken analyses each illocutionary force into six components, and each is put to use in the analysis that follows.

- The illocutionary point of a declaration is to bring about a state of affairs by representing it as obtained. Declarations are unique in possessing a double direction of fit, since a successful declaration makes the world conform to the words by virtue of representing it as already so conforming. This is the component that makes declarative scarcity interpretable, since a category defined by its capacity to alter institutional reality can only be exercised where institutional reality is stable enough to be altered by speech.
- The mode of achievement specifies the conditions under which the point is attained. For most declarations the mode consists in invoking an institutional position. This is the component that discriminates most sharply among the novel's speakers, since it is precisely the invocation of institutional position that several of them cannot perform and one, a prisoner, performs without occupying any position at all.
- Propositional content conditions restrict what a given force may be about. Vanderveken derives most declarative subclasses from the primitive by adding such conditions. To resign is to renounce one's tenure of a position. To sentence is to impose a penalty presupposing a prior condemnation. To appoint is to name someone to a position carrying authority.
- Preparatory conditions state the presuppositions that must obtain. For declarations the central preparatory condition is that the speaker effectively occupies the relevant institutional position. This is the pressure point of the entire analysis, since a novel about a corrupted state is precisely a novel in which formal occupancy and effective occupancy come apart.
- Sincerity conditions specify the psychological state expressed. Declarations are unusual in that their sincerity conditions are comparatively weak, since a declaration succeeds by



virtue of procedure rather than by virtue of the speaker's belief or intention. This becomes analytically important in the case of the police chief whose decrees succeed while he holds them and cease when his conviction fails.

- Degree of strength measures the intensity with which the point is achieved. Vanderveken derives *decree* from *promulgate* by the addition of incontestable authority, and *dictate* among directives by the highest degree of strength. The presence of high-strength declaratives alongside the absence of ordinary juridical ones is one of the more revealing asymmetries in the data.

2.4. Absence as evidence

A methodological caveat is required before any argument from absence can be sustained. Absence is evidentially weak when the search space is undefined, since a category can always be said to be missing if no one has specified what would count as its presence. The argument here escapes that objection because the search space is externally fixed. Vanderveken's declarative inventory of eighty-five verbs was drawn up on independent semantic grounds, decades before and with no reference to the text under analysis. The annotation therefore asks a determinate question of every clause in the corpus, namely whether it realises any of a closed and pre-specified set of illocutionary forces. A verb that does not appear has been looked for and not found, rather than merely not thought of.

A second caveat concerns the relation between performative verbs and illocutionary acts. Vanderveken is explicit that there is no one-to-one correspondence between the two. Some verbs name kinds or sets of acts rather than forces, forbidding being an ordering not to do something rather than a distinct force. Some verbs, including *deny*, *approve* and *authorize*, are systematically ambiguous across categories. Some, notably *allow* and *renounce*, are hybrid, having non-illocutionary uses as well. The annotation protocol described in section 4 was designed around these complications rather than in ignorance of them, and coding was performed on illocutionary acts rather than on verb tokens, so that an act performed without its naming verb is captured and a verb token used non-illocutionarily is excluded.

3. Methodology

3.1. Corpus

The corpus consists of the complete text of *The Prisoner* (Hamid, 2013), segmented into a narratorial stratum of 56,549 words and a dialogue stratum. Twelve named speakers account for 45,303 words of dialogue, distributed as follows. Akbar Khan speaks 14,202 words, Constantine 13,099, Colonel Tarkeen 6,122, Major Rommel 2,649, Maqsood Mahr 2,170, Pakora 1,488, Wajahat 1,316, Kana 1,200, Hanuman 1,149, Qari Saif 648, Dr. Death 807 and the Inspector General of Prisons 453. A residual category of minor speakers accounts for a further 5,182 words. The narratorial stratum plus the twelve named speakers gives 101,852 words; the full text including minor speakers gives 107,034.

Two denominators are therefore in play, and the distinction matters for the reporting of relative frequencies. Named-speaker analyses are normalised against the individual speaker's own dialogue total. Corpus-level declarative densities are reported against 107,034 words for the



whole text and against 50,485 words for the dialogue stratum alone, the latter being the appropriate denominator for any claim about character speech, since the narrator produces no declaratives and including narration in the denominator would artificially depress the rate.

3.2. Annotation protocol

Annotation proceeded chapter by chapter across the complete text, with no sampling. Every clause was examined for illocutionary force and assigned to one of the five categories, and within the declarative category to a specific Vanderveken subclass where one applied. Four protocol decisions warrant statement. First, the unit of analysis is the illocutionary act rather than the clause, and a single clause may realise more than one act. This convention accounts for the fact that speech act totals exceed clause totals throughout the data, and it follows Vanderveken's observation that certain verbs are systematically ambiguous across illocutionary points, an alert being simultaneously an assertion that danger is imminent and a directive suggestion that the hearer prepare.

Second, the systematically ambiguous verbs were adjudicated by context rather than by form. *Authorize* is treated by Vanderveken as both declarative and directive, being the granting of permission, whose declarative force derives from its mode of achievement. *Approve*, *deny* and *sustain* likewise straddle categories. Each token was coded on the basis of whether the utterance in context invoked an institutional position so as to alter a deontic status, in which case it was coded declarative, or merely permitted, negated or maintained, in which case it was coded to the relevant alternative category.

Third, hybrid verbs with non-illocutionary uses were excluded where the text presents the act as accomplished without speech. Vanderveken's example is instructive, since one may allow something simply by letting it happen. Narratorial reports of permission granted tacitly were not coded as directives, and narratorial reports of status changes occurring without an authorising utterance were not coded as declaratives.

Fourth, conditional and reported declaratives were coded conservatively. An utterance in which a speaker states the conditions under which he would resign is not itself a resignation, and the decision to code such a case is discussed explicitly in section 6.4 rather than being silently absorbed into the totals.

3.3. Normalization and limitations

Relative frequencies are reported as occurrences per thousand words of the relevant denominator. Given the very small absolute counts in the declarative category, densities are reported for orientation only and no inferential statistics are applied. With seventeen observations distributed across twelve speakers, significance testing would be inappropriate and the argument does not depend upon it. The claims advanced are about the presence, absence and lexical shape of a category, and these are matters of exhaustive enumeration rather than of sampling error.

Three limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis is of a single novel and the generalisation to other texts is a hypothesis rather than a result. Illocutionary annotation involves



interpretive judgement at the margins, particularly in the assignment of ambiguous verbs, and a second annotator would produce a somewhat different figure at the level of individual subclasses even if the overall shape proved stable. Finally, the study analyses represented speech in a fictional world and makes no claim about the illocutionary behaviour of actual Pakistani institutions, though the author's professional background lends the representation a documentary interest that lies outside the scope of the present argument.

4. Results

Across the corpus, 12,016 illocutionary acts were identified. Assertives account for 9,724 instances, or 80.93 per cent. Directives account for 1,483, or 12.34 per cent. Expressives account for 715, or 5.95 per cent. Commissives account for 77, or 0.64 per cent. Declaratives account for 17, or 0.14 per cent. The overall shape conforms to the pattern established in the literature reviewed in section 2.1, with assertives predominant and declaratives residual. What distinguishes the present case is the magnitude of the disparity in a text whose setting would predict otherwise. The declarative density across the full corpus is 0.16 occurrences per thousand words. Restricted to the dialogue stratum, where all seventeen instances occur, the density rises to 0.34 per thousand. For comparison, expressives in the dialogue stratum occur at approximately fourteen per thousand words, some forty times more frequently.

4.1. Distribution across speakers

The seventeen declaratives are distributed across five of the twelve named speakers. Pakora, the Home Minister, produces seven. Dr. Death, the police inspector general, produces five. Akbar Khan produces three. Constantine and Colonel Tarkeen produce one each. Major Rommel, Maqsood Mahr, Hanuman, the Inspector General of Prisons, Qari Saif, Wajahat and Kana produce none.

Normalised against individual dialogue totals, the ordering changes and becomes considerably more revealing. Dr. Death records 6.20 declaratives per thousand words, the highest rate in the corpus, from a speaking part of only 807 words. Pakora records 4.70 per thousand from 1,488 words. Akbar Khan records 0.21, Tarkeen 0.16 and Constantine 0.08. The two most voluble characters in the novel, Akbar and Constantine, who between them speak 27,301 words and produce more than four thousand illocutionary acts, generate four declaratives between them. The two least voluble authority figures, who between them speak 2,295 words, generate twelve.

Expressed as a proportion of each speaker's own illocutionary output, the contrast sharpens further. Declaratives constitute 4.0 per cent of Dr. Death's total acts and 2.9 per cent of Pakora's, against 0.15 per cent of Akbar's and 0.05 per cent of Constantine's. The ratio of declarative density between Dr. Death and Constantine exceeds eighty to one.

4.2. Distribution across declarative subclasses

Vanderveken proposed eighty-five declarative verbs analysed by, eight are realised in the corpus. *Declare*, the primitive, accounts for seven instances, produced by Pakora (four), Dr. Death (two) and Akbar (one). *Decree* accounts for two, produced by Tarkeen and Dr. Death. *Appoint* accounts for two, produced by Dr. Death and Pakora. *Rule* accounts for two, produced



by Constantine and Pakora. *Resign*, *sentence*, *close* and *authorize* account for one each, produced respectively by Dr. Death, Pakora, Akbar and Akbar.

The subclasses that do not occur are more informative than those that do, and they do not fail to occur at random. Vanderveken's juridical cluster, running from condemning and sentencing through damning, clearing, acquitting, disculpating and exonerating to pardoning, forgiving and absolving, together with the adjudicative verbs ruling, adjudging and adjudicating, comprises thirteen verbs. Two of these are realised, *rule* twice and *sentence* once. The eleven remaining, comprising every verb of judgment, acquittal and mercy in the inventory, are void.

Vanderveken's nullification cluster, comprising cancelling, annulling, abolishing, abrogating, revoking, repealing, rescinding and retracting, is void in its entirety. So is the legislative cluster with the single exception of decree, since voting, vetoing, enacting, legislating and promulgating do not occur. So is the religious cluster of blessing, cursing, consecrating, baptising and excommunicating. So is the renunciative cluster of renouncing, disclaiming, disowning, repudiating, disavowing, abdicating and abjuring, with the sole exception of the contested instance of resigning. So is the cluster of surrender, comprising yielding, surrendering and capitulating. So is the confirmatory cluster of confirming, sanctioning, ratifying and homologating. So is the nominative cluster of naming, calling, defining, abbreviating and nominating. Reduced to a formula, the corpus retains the declaratives of executive fiat and loses the declaratives of law, of mercy, of reversal, of ratification and of consecration.

5. Discussion

The table displays the quantitative distribution of declarative speech acts across the twelve named speakers in *The Prisoner*. Only seventeen declaratives occur in a corpus of 107,034 words, and merely eight of the twelve probed subcategories are realized at all. The Home Minister, Pakora, produces the highest frequency with seven instances, followed by the police inspector general Dr. Death with five. Akbar Khan registers three, while Constantine and Colonel Tarkeen produce one each. The remaining seven speakers, including Major Rommel, Maqsood Mahr, Hanuman, the IG of Prisons, Qari Saif, Wajahat and Kana, register none whatsoever.

The primitive 'declare' accounts for seven of the seventeen instances and is the only subcategory deployed by more than two speakers. 'Decree', 'appoint' and 'rule' occur twice each, while 'resign', 'sentence', 'close' and 'authorize' occur once. The probed subcategories 'veto', 'pardon', 'bless' and 'curse' are entirely absent, leaving the corpus without any verb of legislative refusal, of mercy or of ritual sanction, despite the presence of ministers, judges, police chiefs and a militant cleric among the speakers.



Speech Act	Constantine	Colonel Tarkeen	Major Rommel	Akbar Khan	Maqsood Mahr	Hanuman	Dr. Death	IG	Qari Saif	Pakora	Wajahat	Kana	Total
Total Words	13,099	6,122	2,649	14,202	2,170	1,149	807	453	648	1,488	1,316	1,200	107,034
declare	0	0	0	1 (0)	0	0	2 (0)	0	0	4 (0)	0	0	7
decree	0	1 (0)	0	0	0	0	1 (0)	0	0	0	0	0	2
resign	0	0	0	0	0	0	1 (0)	0	0	0	0	0	1
appoint	0	0	0	0	0	0	1 (0)	0	0	1 (0)	0	0	2
rule	1 (0)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1 (0)	0	0	2
sentence	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1 (0)	0	0	1
close	0	0	0	1 (0)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
authorize	0	0	0	1 (0)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
veto	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
pardon	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
bless	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
curse	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total Declaratives	1 (0)	1 (0)	0	3 (0)	0	0	5 (0)	0	0	7 (0)	0	0	17 (0)

A conspicuous mismatch exists between spoken volume and declarative frequency. Constantine and Akbar Khan, who together speak 27,301 words, produce four declaratives between them, whereas Dr. Death and Pakora, who together speak only 2,295 words, produce twelve. Normalized against their own dialogue totals, Dr. Death records the highest relative density in the corpus at 6 occurrences per thousand words and Pakora records 5, while the three remaining producers round to 0. Declarative force is therefore concentrated not among the most voluble speakers, nor among those highest in the formal hierarchy, but among the two figures most closely associated with political transaction and extrajudicial violence respectively.

The first question the data raise is whether seventeen declaratives in a novel of this kind is genuinely anomalous or merely conforms to a generic baseline. The literature reviewed above establishes that declarative rarity is common, and a purely quantitative comparison would therefore be inconclusive. The anomaly lies not in the count but in the mismatch between the count and the setting.



Political speeches contain no declaratives because a speaker addressing a crowd is not, in that act, performing institutional business. The absence is explained by the speech situation and requires no further comment. *The Prisoner*, by contrast, is composed almost entirely of scenes in which institutional business is transacted. Its characters run a prison, direct a police force, command an intelligence unit and hold a provincial ministry. They spend the novel arresting, detaining, isolating, promoting, dismissing, transferring and setting policy. Every one of these is, in Vanderveken's terms, a declarative act or the consequence of one. The events occur. What does not occur is their linguistic performance.

This gap between institutional event and illocutionary act is the finding. Prisoners are isolated, but almost never by an utterance that isolates them. Officers are appointed, but the appointment is typically narrated rather than performed. Policy changes, but it changes by fiat rather than by enactment. The novel's institutions are represented as producing effects without producing the speech acts that ought to constitute them, which is a precise description of an institution operating outside its own procedures.

The shape of the residue confirms this reading. If the deficit were a generic artefact of the crime novel, the surviving declaratives should be distributed unsystematically across the tableau. They are not. They cluster in a single semantic region, that of unilateral executive command, and they are absent from every region requiring collegial procedure, legal process or ritual sanction. A state can decree without a legislature, appoint without a commission and declare without a court. It cannot acquit, pardon, annul or ratify without them. The corpus contains exactly the declaratives that a single powerful individual can perform alone, and none of the declaratives that require an institution to be functioning behind him.

5.2. The void juridical cluster

The absence of the juridical subclass is the single most striking feature of the data. *The Prisoner* is a novel of crime, arrest, detention and punishment whose central character has been imprisoned. Vanderveken devotes ten consecutive entries of his declarative analysis to condemning, sentencing, damning, clearing, acquitting, disculpating, exonerating, pardoning, forgiving and absolving. In 107,034 words, one of these ten occurs, once. What this indicates is that the novel's carceral apparatus operates entirely without the illocutionary acts that would make it a legal apparatus. Nobody is condemned, because condemnation would presuppose a procedure of judgment. Nobody is acquitted or exonerated, because acquittal would presuppose the same procedure operating in the opposite direction. Nobody is pardoned, forgiven or absolved, because mercy in Vanderveken's analysis is itself an institutional act requiring the authority to release a person from a debt formally incurred. Imprisonment in the novel is a physical condition maintained by force and negotiation, not a status conferred by a declaration and revocable by another.

The absence of the nullification cluster completes the picture and is arguably more damning still. Nothing in the corpus is cancelled, annulled, abolished, revoked, repealed or rescinded. An institution that cannot revoke its own acts cannot correct itself. The one apparent exception proves instructive. Colonel Tarkeen's single declarative suspends the shoot-to-kill policy that Dr. Death had earlier instituted. In a functioning legal order this act would be a revocation or a repeal, performed by a body competent to undo what another body has done. In



the novel it is coded, correctly, as a *decree*, because it is not an undoing but a countermanding, one unilateral fiat displacing another. Vanderveken derives decreeing from promulgating by the addition of incontestable authority. Two decrees appear in the corpus and they contradict one another, which is to say that the novel contains two incontestable authorities and therefore, strictly, none.

The religious cluster is void, and this bears directly on the characterisation of Qari Saif. Rafique et al. (2024) treat Qari as the novel's representative fundamentalist, and Ahmed (2022) situates such figures within a necropolitical order. The illocutionary evidence adds a specification neither study makes. Qari produces zero declaratives. He never blesses, curses, consecrates or excommunicates, though each of these is available to a cleric and each would be dramatically apt. His authority is discharged entirely through assertives, and through a particular high-strength subset of them, since the utterance attributing an action to the will of God is an assertion of divine sanction rather than a performance of it. Vanderveken notes that benedictions and curses require supernatural powers and that one cannot generally determine whether such declarations have succeeded. Qari's authority is thus doubly unverifiable, resting on assertions whose truth cannot be checked and never converting into declarations whose success could be. Where the novel's state figures have effective power without legal warrant, Qari has claimed warrant without any performative capacity at all, and the contrast is legible in the tableau rather than in the plot.

5.3. Pakora: Declarative authority as convertible currency

Pakora, the Home Minister, produces seven declaratives, more than any other character, from 1,488 words of dialogue. His four instances of *declare*, together with one each of *appoint*, *rule* and *sentence*, constitute the only appearance of the sentencing verb in the corpus and one of only two appearances of the adjudicative *rule*.

His most consequential act concerns Akbar's isolation, an instruction that no representative of any outside agency is to meet the prisoner and that he is to be completely isolated. Formally this is exemplary. The propositional content specifies a change in deontic status, the mode of achievement invokes ministerial position, and the preparatory condition, that Pakora effectively holds the office, is satisfied. The act succeeds immediately and restructures the flow of information on which the remainder of the plot depends. Judged by Vanderveken's criteria it is among the most felicitous declaratives in the novel. What the criteria do not capture, and what the surrounding discourse supplies, is that the institutional position being invoked is itself for sale. Pakora's register is saturated with transaction, and his observation that old enmities can be buried for the right price states the principle openly. His private undertaking to Constantine, offering Akbar's complete reinstatement as a purchasable favour, converts a declarative power of appointment into an item of exchange. The result is a figure whose declarations are perfectly felicitous by the letter of the theory and entirely hollow by its spirit. He satisfies the preparatory condition of occupying the institutional position while treating that position as an asset rather than an office.

This is where the standard account of infelicity proves inadequate to the text and requires supplementation. Austin's misfires cover cases where the procedure does not exist or the speaker is the wrong person. Pakora is the right person and the procedure exists. Nothing in the felicity



conditions registers the fact that the office has been privatised, because felicity conditions were designed to test whether an act comes off, not whether the institution that authorises it retains any purpose beyond enriching its holder. Bourdieu's (1991) insistence that performative efficacy derives from socially instituted authority is closer to the mark, but even that formulation assumes the institution is what confers the authority. In Pakora's case the causal arrow has reversed. The authority confers value on the institution, which he holds because it can be monetised. Declarative power has become currency, and like currency it is fully convertible and entirely indifferent to what it purchases.

5.4. Dr. Death and declarative authority as finality

Dr. Death presents the opposite model and the highest declarative density in the corpus, five acts in 807 words. His profile comprises two instances of *declare*, and one each of *decree*, *appoint* and *resign*. His decree, that any criminal attacking a police officer is to be hunted down and killed, is the most consequential utterance in the novel and the clearest illustration of the article's central claim. Vanderveken derives decreeing from promulgating by the addition of incontestable authority and a public mode of achievement. The act is formally impeccable. It is issued publicly, from a position of command, and it takes effect immediately as a standing rule. What it lacks is any legal ground whatever. No statute authorises it, no court reviews it and no procedure could annul it, as the void nullification cluster confirms. It is a declaration that creates a norm outside law while retaining the full illocutionary form of law.

This is precisely the structure Agamben (1998) describes as the state of exception, in which law is suspended and yet remains in force, and it is where the linguistic analysis contacts the political criticism of Ahmed (2022). Where Ahmed identifies the state of exception thematically, through the disposability of certain lives, the illocutionary evidence locates it in the grammar of a single utterance. The decree has the mode of achievement of law and none of its preparatory conditions. It is not that the state has ceased to speak performatively. It is that its performative speech has become unmoored from the institution that once constrained it, and the constraint is missing precisely at the point where the tableau records no verb of revocation.

Dr. Death's appointment of Akbar illustrates the second feature of this model, which is its personalism. The appointment is grounded in trust rather than in procedure, and Vanderveken observes that appointing names someone to a position of authority and is generally followed by installation. Here there is no installation, because there is no procedure into which an installation could fit. The office exists only in the appointer's confidence in the appointee, which makes it revocable by a change of feeling rather than by an act.

The resignation requires separate treatment and was coded conservatively. What the text presents is a conditional, a statement of the terms on which Dr. Death would resign if not supported. Strictly, a statement of the conditions under which one would perform an act is not the performance of that act, and a purist coding would treat it as a commissive threat rather than a declarative. It has been retained in the declarative count and flagged here because its status is analytically productive rather than despite its being contestable. Dr. Death's only renunciative declarative is held in reserve rather than executed. It functions as leverage. In an institution where appointment and dismissal have become personal rather than procedural, the threat to



vacate an office is more powerful than vacating it, because the office has no existence independent of its holder.

The trajectory completes itself in the novel's most eloquent illocutionary event, which is a silence. Having declared at the parade ground that this is how he deals with criminals and that they are the law, Dr. Death subsequently fails to answer at all when the consequences of the Chandio killing arrive, turning instead to the television remote. The withdrawal is not a retraction, since the tableau records no retraction anywhere in the corpus. It is an abandonment of the illocutionary field. Sincerity conditions for declarations are weak, as noted in section 3.2, since procedure rather than conviction is what makes a declaration succeed. Dr. Death's declarations, however, were never underwritten by procedure. They were underwritten by conviction, and when the conviction fails there is nothing left to hold them up. Authority grounded in finality proves catastrophically brittle, and the contrast with Pakora is exact. Transactional authority is renewable indefinitely because it never depended on belief. Convictional authority collapses the moment belief lapses.

5.5. Akbar Khan and declaratives from inside the cell

Akbar Khan produces three declaratives, one each of *declare*, *close* and *authorize*, from within a prison. This is the most theoretically awkward finding in the data and the most interesting. Vanderveken analyses closing as a declaration performed typically by the person presiding over a meeting or process, and authorising as the granting of permission whose declarative force derives from the speaker declaring, from a position of appropriate authority, that another may exercise power. Both presuppose institutional standing. Akbar has none. He is an imprisoned former officer stripped of rank. Yet both acts succeed. When Akbar informs Major Rommel that they must conclude the meeting, the meeting concludes, and it does so despite the major's superior formal standing and despite the encounter taking place in the prison the major has entered at will. When Akbar tells a subordinate that he will run things on Akbar's behalf and that whatever he says goes, the delegation holds. These are not failed declarations. The preparatory condition is unsatisfied and the act comes off regardless.

This is not adequately described as an infelicity. Austin's framework would classify it as a misfire, an act invoking a procedure by a person not entitled to invoke it, and misfires are supposed to be void. Akbar's are not void; they are effective. The explanation is that the preparatory condition has been satisfied by a different institution from the one the verb nominally invokes. Akbar's network of loyalty, obligation and reciprocal violence is an institution in the relevant sense. It has recognised positions, it confers deontic powers and it enforces them. It is simply not the state. His declaratives therefore do exactly what Searle's (1995, 2010) account says declarations do, which is to create institutional facts, but the institution they create facts within is an extra-legal one that the novel represents as more robust than the legal order surrounding it.

Rafique et al. (2024), who distinguish Akbar's worldly violence from Qari's fundamentalism, the illocutionary data support the distinction and refine it. Qari, who claims transcendent warrant, performs no declarations at all. Akbar, who claims nothing, performs three that succeed. Warrant in this novel is not claimed but exercised, and the tableau registers the difference with a precision that thematic reading cannot match.



5.6. The Constantine and Inspector General anomalies

Two negative results complete the picture. Constantine, the prison superintendent and the novel's second most voluble speaker at 13,099 words, produces a single declarative, an instance of *rule*. The Inspector General of Prisons, who occupies the senior position in the entire carceral hierarchy, produces none at all. Formally, these are the two figures in the novel whose institutional positions most clearly satisfy the preparatory conditions for declarations about imprisonment. They are the officials who ought to be isolating, transferring, releasing and disciplining, and none of these acts appears in their profiles. The Inspector General's illocutionary output consists of fifty-four assertives, fourteen directives, three expressives and one commissive. He administers by assertion and instruction and never once alters a status by speaking.

The anomaly refutes any simple equation of rank with performative power and specifies what the novel replaces that equation with. Declarative capacity in *The Prisoner* correlates not with position in the formal hierarchy but with proximity to the extra-legal network. Pakora and Dr. Death, who produce twelve of the seventeen, are the two figures most deeply implicated in transaction and in extrajudicial violence respectively. Akbar, who produces three, operates entirely outside the state. Constantine, who tries throughout the novel to remain within institutional constraint, produces one. The Inspector General, who is nothing but his office, produces none.

This distribution is the study's dominant claim in its most compressed form. Performative power has not diminished uniformly across the institution. It has drained out of the formal hierarchy and pooled at the points where money and violence enter it. Constantine's near silence in the declarative category is thus not a weakness of characterisation but its most economical expression, since a man who will not trade and will not kill has, in this world, almost nothing he can accomplish by speaking.

5.7. Implications for method

Three implications follow for the wider practice of pragmatic stylistics. The first concerns the evidential status of negative findings. The applied speech act literature reviewed in section 2.1 proceeds almost universally by purposive sampling, and while sampling suffices to demonstrate presence it cannot demonstrate absence. The methodological cost of this convention has not been widely recognised. Exhaustive annotation against an externally specified inventory converts absence from a rhetorical gesture into a datum, and the present study suggests that the yield can be substantial.

The second concerns taxonomic granularity. Had this analysis been conducted with Searle's five categories alone, its central finding would have been unstatable. The claim is not that the novel has few declaratives, which is unremarkable, but that it has a specific pattern of declaratives, retaining executive fiat and losing law, mercy and reversal. Only a subclassified inventory such as Vanderveken's can express a claim of that form, and the relative neglect of his analysis in applied literary pragmatics, where Pietersz et al. (2022) constitute one of the few sustained applications, represents a real loss of descriptive power.



The third concerns the relation between stylistics and political criticism. The readings of Ahmed (2022), Tabassum et al. (2026) and Rafique et al. (2024) reach conclusions congruent with the present analysis by entirely different routes. The value of the illocutionary evidence is that it is independent. Its categories were fixed by Vanderveken in 1990 without reference to Pakistan, to Hamid or to the novel, and the distribution they yield could have come out otherwise. When a formal measure derived from outside a text converges with an interpretation derived from inside it, both are strengthened. This is a role that pragmatic stylistics is unusually well placed to play and that it has not often claimed.

6. Conclusion

The Prisoner contains seventeen declarative illocutionary acts in 107,034 words. Eight of Vanderveken's eighty-five declarative verbs are realised. Every verb of acquittal, pardon, absolution, annulment, revocation and repeal is absent. Twelve of the seventeen instances belong to two speakers whose combined dialogue amounts to under two and a third thousand words, and the novel's most senior prison official produces none at all. This article has argued that these facts constitute a formal record of the novel's political argument, and that they record it more precisely than thematic analysis can. Declarations require functioning institutions, since their mode of achievement consists in invoking an institutional position and their preparatory condition is that the speaker effectively occupies it. Where the institution has been hollowed out, the acts that depend on it do not merely fail. They fall silent. What remains is a residue of unilateral fiat, the declaratives a single powerful individual can perform without anyone else's cooperation, alongside a total void where the collegial, procedural and juridical declaratives ought to be.

The novel therefore stages not the failure of performative language but its migration. Declarative force is still exercised, and exercised effectively, by a minister who treats his office as an asset, by a police chief who decrees killings outside any legal procedure, and by a prisoner whose extra-legal network supplies the standing the state has ceased to confer. Each of these succeeds. The state's own juridical performatives, the ones that would make its violence law rather than merely force, never occur at all. Between Dr. Death's decree, which has the form of law and none of its authority, and the empty rows of the tableau where acquittal and pardon should stand, the novel's account of the Pakistani security apparatus is written in a vocabulary that the plot never has to state. Two lines of further work suggest themselves. The first is comparative. If declarative distribution indexes institutional integrity, then texts representing functioning legal orders should show a populated juridical cluster, and the hypothesis is straightforwardly testable across a wider corpus of institutional fiction. The second is methodological. The argument developed here depends entirely on subclassification, and its extension to the other four illocutionary categories, where similar clusters of realised and void subtypes await description, would test whether absence proves as productive elsewhere as it has proved here.



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