

Shaping Illocutionary Force through Pragmatic Markers in Nosedive (Black Mirror, 2016)

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Abstract: Although speech acts and pragmatic markers are both central to meaning-making in interaction, most previous research has examined them separately, leaving a gap in understanding how they function together to shape illocutionary force in socially sensitive communication. This study addresses that gap by exploring how pragmatic markers shape the illocutionary force of speech acts in Nosedive (Black Mirror, 2016), a fictional context in which a social rating system intensifies the pressure on speakers to manage politeness, image, and interpersonal approval. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, 178 utterances were purposively selected from the episode transcript and analyzed using Searle's (1969, 1979) speech act classification and Fraser's (1996) pragmatic marker framework. The findings show that discourse markers are the most dominant category, appearing through markers such as well, but, so, I mean, and you know to organize discourse, signal contrast, and elaborate meaning, while commentary markers such as just, sorry, um, and uh soften the force of utterances and reduce face-threatening acts. Parallel markers signal interpersonal stance, and basic markers signal illocutionary force directly through performative expressions. This study contributes to pragmatic studies by showing that pragmatic markers do not merely organize discourse but also actively adjust the perceived force of speech acts in socially evaluative interaction.

Keywords: illocutionary force, Nosedive, pragmatic markers, speech acts

INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a tool for exchanging information but also a means of performing social actions. According to Austin (1962), utterances function as actions through which speakers express intentions, manage relationships, and construct social identity. In other words, whenever people speak, they are not only transferring information; they are also actively doing something, whether making a request, expressing a feeling, or building a relationship. In real-life communication, meaning is not always conveyed directly, as speakers often rely on indirect expressions shaped by context, interpersonal goals, and social expectations (Yule, 1996), particularly in socially sensitive situations where individuals tend

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to avoid face-threatening acts and maintain a positive social image (Brown & Levinson, 1987). One important linguistic element in this process is the use of pragmatic markers, which help shape how an utterance is understood without changing its propositional meaning. This indicates that meaning in communication is carried not only by the words themselves but also by the subtle linguistic signals that surround them. Despite their subtle nature, pragmatic markers play a crucial role in modifying the illocutionary force of speech acts, particularly in socially constrained communication (Khoirotusyarifah et al., 2025; Tanduk, 2023; Kecskes, 2014).

Previous studies have examined speech acts and pragmatic markers as key components of meaning in interaction, though largely as separate phenomena. Searle (1969, 1979) classified speech acts and introduced the concept of indirect speech acts, while Fraser (1996) expanded discourse markers into the broader category of pragmatic markers, arguing that some markers serve to soften illocutionary force rather than solely organize discourse. In the area of audiovisual discourse, Dynel (2011) demonstrates that scripted dialogue in film and television reflects patterns of real-life communication and can therefore serve as valid pragmatic data. Building on this, Runadi and Simatupang (2022) examined *Nosedive* through the lens of referring expressions, Galiano (2024) confirmed that pragmatic markers are a fundamental feature of film dialogue, and Tantucci and Galiano (2022) showed that illocutionary mitigation in film dialogue is systematically influenced by social distance between characters. Cheng et al. (2023) similarly found that mitigation markers moderate illocutionary force in sensitive communicative contexts, although their data come from therapeutic rather than scripted dialogue.

Despite these contributions, existing studies tend to examine speech acts and pragmatic markers as separate phenomena rather than as interconnected elements: Runadi and Simatupang (2022) focus on referential meaning rather than illocutionary force, Galiano (2024) is concerned with cross-linguistic distribution rather than the relationship between markers and speech acts, and Cheng et al. (2023) do not examine scripted dialogue or apply Fraser's (1996) framework. As a result, the interaction between speech acts and pragmatic markers in shaping illocutionary force in socially sensitive contexts remains underexplored.

Nosedive is particularly relevant for addressing this gap because its fictional social rating system intensifies the need for characters to manage face, politeness, and social acceptability through carefully selected linguistic forms. Every utterance carries the risk of affecting how a character is rated by others, making the episode a concentrated site of socially sensitive communication. In conducting this study, the researchers follow Aulawi et al.'s (2018) view that research methodology generally includes the determination of research methods and data types, data sources, data collection techniques, and data analysis procedures, all of which are elaborated in the following section.

This study, therefore, aims to integrate Speech Act Theory and pragmatic marker analysis to examine how meaning is constructed and negotiated under social pressure in *Nosedive* (Black Mirror, 2016), guided by the following research questions: (1) What types of speech acts appear in the selected dialogues of *Nosedive*? (2) What types of pragmatic markers are used in the dialogues? and (3) How do pragmatic markers shape or modify the illocutionary force of the speech acts? The novelty of this research lies in its integrated

approach, unlike previous studies that treat these elements separately or analyze Nosedive primarily from sociocultural perspectives. This study provides a systematic micro-linguistic analysis of how pragmatic markers function as strategic tools for modifying illocutionary force under social pressure, contributing a new analytical lens to both pragmatics and media discourse studies.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, which is suitable for exploring meaning and interpretation within context rather than measuring variables quantitatively (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A descriptive approach was used to systematically explain linguistic patterns and pragmatic functions rather than to generalize quantitatively.

The data source was the transcribed dialogue from Nosedive, an episode of *Black Mirror* (2016), selected because it portrays a socially evaluative environment that strongly shapes characters' communicative behavior. Scripted dialogue was used rather than naturally occurring conversation because it provides a clear, structured, and observable context of interaction, allowing for more focused and systematic pragmatic analysis. As Dynel (2011) argues, scripted dialogue in film and television reflects patterns of real-life communication, particularly in emotionally and socially sensitive situations, and can therefore serve as valid pragmatic data. Following Widdowson (1978), spoken discourse from audiovisual media can serve as valid linguistic data when analyzed as language use rather than as a cinematic product. In this study, the analysis focuses exclusively on the verbal transcript of the characters' utterances, not on visual scenes, narrative structure, or cinematic elements.

Data were collected by repeatedly watching the episode, consulting the official transcript, and cross-checking it with the audio to ensure accuracy. The analytical procedure followed six systematic steps: (1) the transcript was read and segmented into individual utterances; (2) utterances containing pragmatic markers were identified; (3) each utterance was classified based on Fraser's (1996) pragmatic marker categories of basic markers, commentary markers, parallel markers, and discourse markers; (4) the speech act type of each utterance was identified using Searle's (1969, 1979) classification; (5) the function of each marker in modifying the illocutionary force was interpreted contextually; and (6) representative examples were selected for presentation in the findings. This procedure yielded a total of 178 utterances containing pragmatic markers relevant to the research questions. As the complete dataset is too extensive to present in full, representative examples are reported in the findings section to illustrate the most salient patterns in each category, while the complete dataset was retained and used as the basis for all analytical claims made in this study. The findings are presented descriptively in tabular form, showing each utterance alongside its identified marker, followed by analytical explanations of how pragmatic markers modify the illocutionary force of the speech acts in context.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study based on the analysis of the full dialogue transcript of Nosedive (Black Mirror, 2016). A total of 178 utterances were identified as containing pragmatic markers relevant to the research questions. As shown in Table 1, the data are distributed unevenly across the four categories proposed by Fraser (1996), with discourse markers accounting for the largest share of the data (47.8%), followed by commentary markers (18.5%) and basic and parallel markers in equal proportion (16.9% each). Representative examples from each category are presented in Tables 2 through 5 to illustrate the most salient patterns, while the complete dataset of 178 utterances was used throughout the analysis. In terms of speech act types, the data are realized predominantly through assertive, expressive, commissive, and directive acts.

A declarative speech act appears once in the full transcript, in the wedding vow "*Do you, Naomi Jayne Blestow, take this man to be your husband...*"; however, this utterance was excluded from the analysis because it contains no pragmatic marker and is a fixed ceremonial formula rather than a spontaneous, socially negotiated utterance. This absence is itself revealing: unlike the other speech acts in the data, which are shaped and modified by pragmatic markers as speakers navigate social risk, the declarative wedding vow requires no such mitigation because its illocutionary force is institutionally guaranteed rather than interactionally negotiated.

Table 1. Frequency of Pragmatic Marker Types

Pragmatic marker type	Frequency	Percentage
Basic markers	30	16.9%
Commentary markers	33	18.5%
Parallel markers	30	16.9%
Discourse markers	85	47.8%
Total	178	100%

A. Basic markers

Basic markers are performative expressions that directly signal the illocutionary force of a speech act. As shown in Table 2, basic markers in Nosedive mostly appear through markers such as *sorry*, *I'm so sorry*, *thank you*, *I appreciate*, *I love*, *love you*, *I swear*, and *I will not let you down*, most of which realize expressive speech acts and, in some cases, commissive speech acts such as promises of commitment.

Table 2. Basic Markers

Timestamp	Utterance	Marker	Speech Act Type	Function
00:02:59	"Sorry, that was my sister"	<i>Sorry</i>	Expressive	Performs an apology directly
00:07:32	"Thank you. Thank you"	<i>Thank you</i>	Expressive	Performs gratitude directly
00:20:04	"Nay-Nay, I will not let you down."	<i>I will not let you</i>	Commissive	Performs a commitment directly
00:20:31	"Love you, Lay."	<i>Love you</i>	Expressive	Performs affection directly
00:57:00	"I love you, Nay-Nay! I've always loved you!"	<i>I love you, I've always loved</i>	Expressive	Performs affection and emotional disclosure directly

These expressions are classified as basic markers because they explicitly name the illocutionary act being performed; the speaker does not merely imply what they are doing but signals it directly through the utterance itself, without requiring further inference from the listener. For instance, the utterance *"I will not let you down"* functions as a commissive speech act in which the marker itself constitutes the act of promising, while *"I love you, Nay-Nay"* functions as an expressive act in which the marker directly performs the affective disclosure. Although basic markers are among the less frequent categories (16.9%), they are concentrated in emotionally charged moments, reflecting the social pressure in Nosedive in which characters are expected to perform positive social emotions explicitly to maintain their ratings.

B. Commentary markers

Commentary markers provide a comment on the basic message without changing its propositional content. As shown in Table 3, commentary markers account for 18.5% of the data and appear through markers such as *just*, *sorry*, *um*, *uh*, *please*, *actually*, *probably*, *clearly*, *I was just trying to*, *that's temporary*, and *I do not mean that how it sounds*. Unlike basic markers, commentary markers do not perform the speech act itself but instead modify how an underlying assertive or expressive act is delivered or perceived; for example, *"I was just trying to-*" mitigates an assertive act by reducing the speaker's apparent responsibility for the action described, while *"that's temporary"* softens a negative assertion by reframing it as non-permanent.

Table 3. Commentary Markers

Timestamp	Utterance	Marker	Speech Act Type	Function
00:12:08	"Couple of a minor dings there. You cut someone off in traffic? Oh, just a workplace thing."	<i>Just</i>	Assertive	Minimizes the seriousness of stated fact
00:17:34	"Oh, Lace, could I just say I am so happy to see your face?"	<i>Could I just say</i>	Expressive	Softens the directness of an emotional expression
00:29:00	"I'm sorry. It's just--"	<i>I'm sorry, just</i>	Expressive	Mitigates an apology and hedges the explanation that follows
00:29:21	"Oh, no, no. I was just trying to--"	<i>I was just trying to</i>	Assertive	Reduces the speaker's responsibility for the action described
00:46:20	"Oh, no, that's temporary! That's temporary."	<i>That's temporary</i>	Assertive	Softens a negative fact by framing it as non-permanent

These markers are categorized as commentary precisely because they do not alter what is being said; instead, they shape how it is meant to be taken, signaling the speaker's awareness of social evaluation. This pattern suggests that speakers in Nosedive are highly

aware of how their words may be evaluated and therefore consistently use these markers to soften or qualify their speech.

C. Parallel markers

Parallel markers signal messages that are in addition to the basic message. As shown in Table 4, parallel markers account for 16.9% of the data and appear through markers such as *Nay-Nay*, *Ches*, *Hannah*, *Sir*, *ma'am*, *Chuck*, *everybody*, *God*, *Jesus*, *Jesus Christ*, *Damn it*, *Oh God*, *Look*, and *Sweetheart*. These markers typically accompany expressive acts, as in "*Damn it!*", which expresses frustration independently of any propositional content, although they can also accompany directive acts, as in "*God, just fucking help me!*", where the vocative-like exclamation intensifies the urgency of the request.

Table 4. Parallel Markers

Timestamp	Utterance	Marker	Speech Act Type	Function
00:17:28	"Oh, my God! Nay-Nay, how are you?"	<i>Nay-Nay</i>	Expressive	Signals addressee and affective closeness
00:29:03	"God, just fucking help me!"	<i>God</i>	Directive	Expresses emotional urgency alongside the request
00:31:53	"Damn it!"	<i>Damn it</i>	Expressive	Expresses frustration independent of propositional content
00:42:03	"Look, you had something with your life."	<i>Look</i>	Assertive	Directs listener's attention before the statement
00:43:36	"Sweetheart."	<i>Sweetheart</i>	Expressive	Signals affective stance toward the addressee

The distinction between parallel and commentary markers lies in the fact that they carry a separate but simultaneous communicative function: they do not modify the basic message but run alongside it, adding interpersonal or social meaning that the basic message alone does not convey. Interestingly, many of these markers appear at moments when characters are no longer able to maintain the carefully managed social performance expected of them, which shows that parallel markers tend to emerge precisely when the pressure of social evaluation becomes too great to sustain.

D. Discourse markers

Discourse markers are the most dominant category in the data, accounting for nearly half of all identified utterances (47.8%) and signal the relationship between the current utterance and the previous discourse. Unlike the other three categories, discourse markers do not primarily express the speaker's emotion, stance, or identity; instead, they function to organize and connect stretches of discourse, guiding the listener in understanding how one utterance relates to what has come before or what follows.

Table 5. Discourse Markers

Timestamp	Utterance	Marker	Speech Act Type	Function
00:05:53	"Well, good luck."	<i>Well</i>	Expressive	Signals a shift from prior topic before the well-wish

00:19:20	"I know we haven't kept in touch as much as I'd have liked and that is totally my fault, but this is a big day."	<i>And, but</i>	Assertive	Elaborates and contrasts to soften the preceding admission
00:42:19	"You know, I mean, I'm still fighting for that."	<i>You know, I mean</i>	Assertive	Signals shared understanding and clarifies the claim
00:47:09	"So it was just about numbers for you?"	<i>So</i>	Directive	Draws an inferential conclusion framed as a question
00:53:01	"I mean, I tried sometimes to expand our range a little and talk about climate change, but she found that kind of boring so..."	<i>I mean, and, but, so</i>	Assertive	Elaborates, contrasts, and draws an inference within a single turn

As shown in Table 5, discourse markers in *Nosedive* appear through markers such as *well*, *but*, *so*, *and*, *I mean*, *you know*, *like*, *anyway*, *so anyways*, and *right*, which function to add or clarify information, signal opposition or qualification of a previous statement, draw inference from previous discourse, or shift the conversation in a different direction. These markers most frequently accompany assertive speech acts, as in "*I mean, I tried sometimes to expand our range a little and talk about climate change, but she found that kind of boring so...*", where multiple discourse markers combine within a single turn to elaborate, contrast, and draw an inference simultaneously. This is particularly evident in markers such as *you know*, which Romero-Trillo (2023) identifies as carrying significant interpersonal and pragmatic functions that go beyond mere discourse organization, serving instead as signals of the speaker's stance and awareness of the listener's presence in the conversation. The overwhelming dominance of these markers across the entire transcript suggests that speakers in *Nosedive* rely heavily on them to manage the structure and flow of conversation, especially when navigating socially sensitive situations, a finding consistent with Schifffrin's (1987) view that discourse markers function as sequentially dependent elements that organize discourse and guide interpretation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that pragmatic markers play an important role in shaping the illocutionary force of speech acts in socially sensitive interaction. The communicative patterns in *Nosedive* are not accidental but reflect a careful and strategic use of language driven by social pressure. This is most evident in the dominance of discourse markers across the full transcript, and this dominance is not incidental either: in a world where every utterance is rated, speaking is never simply about exchanging information; it is also a performance that must be managed in real time.

Discourse markers such as *well*, *so*, and *I mean* allow speakers to pause, hedge, and reframe their utterances before committing to a particular stance, functioning as a kind of safety mechanism against the immediate social consequences of speaking carelessly. The repeated use of mitigation markers to soften utterances further suggests that speakers are constantly managing how their words are received by others, not merely as a matter of politeness but as a direct strategy for protecting their rating, their image, and their sense of

social belonging. This is in line with Thaler's (2012) argument that mitigation functions as a modification of illocutionary force, meaning that speakers do not simply choose softer words but actively reshape the communicative weight of their utterances to manage social risk.

From the perspective of Austin (1962), speech acts are not merely statements but actions that carry social meaning. The findings of this study build on this idea by showing that the force of these actions is not fixed but can be shaped through the use of pragmatic markers, which means that illocutionary force is flexible rather than determined by grammatical form alone. This aligns with Sbisà's (2001) view that illocutionary force operates in degrees rather than as a fixed property of utterances, further confirming that the force of a speech act can be strengthened or weakened depending on the linguistic strategies that accompany it. Based on Searle's (1969, 1979) classification, speech acts can be performed in indirect and varied ways, and what is particularly interesting in this study is that the meaning of an utterance shifts significantly depending on the pragmatic markers that accompany it. In *Nosedive*, this flexibility is not a neutral linguistic feature but a necessity: because every interaction carries a rating consequence, speakers cannot afford to let their words be interpreted as too blunt, too demanding, or too negative, and pragmatic markers become the primary tool through which this risk is managed. An utterance, for example, may come across less as a strong or direct statement and more as a careful and softened expression when used together with hedging or mitigation markers, which shows that what an utterance does in a conversation cannot always be read from its form alone. In *Nosedive*, it must also be read as an act of social self-presentation.

It is also worth noting that the four categories of pragmatic markers do not function in isolation; in many utterances, multiple markers from different categories appear simultaneously, working together to shape the overall illocutionary force of the speech act. For example, in the utterance "*I mean, I tried sometimes to expand our range a little and talk about climate change, but she found that kind of boring so...*", discourse markers (*I mean, and, but, so*) combine to elaborate, contrast, and draw an inference within a single turn. This layering of pragmatic markers suggests that illocutionary force in *Nosedive* is rarely shaped by a single linguistic strategy alone but is instead the product of multiple simultaneous markers working in coordination, a finding that further supports Fraser's (1996) view that pragmatic markers are fundamentally relational, signaling connections between parts of discourse rather than adding propositional meaning independently. This layering effect is particularly significant in a socially evaluative environment: a single softening marker may not be sufficient to neutralize the risk of a face-threatening utterance, so speakers stack multiple markers together to maximize the chance that their words will be received favorably.

A comparison with previous studies reveals both similarities and differences. Like Cheng et al. (2023), who found that mitigation markers help soften illocutionary force and manage relationships between speakers, this study finds the same pattern, though in a different setting. Unlike Cheng et al. (2023), whose data come from real therapeutic conversations, this study shows that the same linguistic strategies appear in scripted fictional dialogue in which characters are being publicly rated, suggesting that the use of softening language is a broader human response to social pressure rather than something confined to

one type of interaction. While Galiano (2024) confirms that pragmatic markers are a key feature of film dialogue, this study takes this finding a step further by examining how these markers specifically change the force of speech acts in a context where every utterance carries quantifiable social stakes. Compared to Runadi and Simatupang (2022), who studied *Nosedive* through the lens of referring expressions, this study looks at a different but related aspect of the same episode, showing that meaning is built not only through word choice but also through the pragmatic markers that shape how speech acts are carried out and understood.

In the context of *Nosedive*, these patterns point to a social environment in which people are highly aware of how they are being judged by others. This is consistent with Brown and Levinson's (1987) work on face-threatening acts and Cutting and Fordyce's (2020) view on the role of indirectness in sensitive communication. What this study adds, however, is the recognition that in *Nosedive*, face management is no longer just an interpersonal courtesy; it is a quantified, transactional necessity, since every utterance is immediately converted into a rating that has tangible social and material consequences. In this sense, language in *Nosedive* is never neutral; it functions as a form of social self-presentation in which pragmatic markers serve as the primary instruments through which speakers calibrate how they wish to be perceived and rated.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the analysis of *Nosedive* itself. For pragmatics research, this study suggests that future analyses of speech acts should routinely consider the pragmatic markers that co-occur with them, since the force of an utterance cannot be fully understood without accounting for the linguistic signals that surround it. For language educators, these findings highlight the importance of teaching pragmatic markers not as isolated vocabulary items but as strategic communicative tools that shape how meaning is negotiated in interaction. For media discourse studies, this study demonstrates that scripted fictional dialogue is not only a valid but also a particularly revealing source of pragmatic data, especially when the fictional world itself foregrounds the social consequences of language use. Therefore, this study contributes to the field of pragmatics by showing that speech acts and pragmatic markers work together rather than separately in shaping meaning, especially in situations where social approval functions as a measurable and ever-present stake.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how pragmatic markers shape the illocutionary force of speech acts in socially sensitive interaction in *Nosedive* (Black Mirror, 2016). The findings confirm that speech acts in the selected dialogues are predominantly realized through assertive, expressive, commissive, and directive forms; that pragmatic markers modify illocutionary force by softening, contrasting, elaborating, and organizing meaning without changing propositional content; and that these markers function as strategic linguistic tools through which speakers manage social pressure and maintain interpersonal harmony. In other words, the force of a speech act is not determined by grammatical form alone but is actively shaped by the pragmatic markers that accompany it.

These findings contribute to research in pragmatics by demonstrating that speech acts and pragmatic markers are not separate phenomena but work together to construct meaning, particularly in socially evaluative contexts such as Nosedive. Pedagogically, the findings suggest that pragmatic markers should be taught not only as conversational fillers but also as meaningful linguistic devices that influence politeness, indirectness, and interpersonal positioning, offering learners practical insight into how illocutionary force is negotiated in real communicative settings.

This study is limited to a single episode of Black Mirror and focuses exclusively on verbal expressions, meaning that the findings cannot be generalized to all forms of interaction or audiovisual discourse. Future studies are recommended to examine larger datasets across multiple episodes or different audiovisual media, investigate nonverbal aspects of communication such as intonation and gestures, and explore pragmatic markers across different cultural or social contexts to enable broader comparisons of linguistic strategies in managing interpersonal relationships and social evaluation.

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