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THE PRAGMATIC DIMENSION OF SETTLEMENT AGREEMENTS IN SULTAN KUDARAT: AN ANALYSIS OF ILLOCUTIONARY ACTS IN LEGAL DISCOURSE

Ivan T. Barroga, PhD (c)
Danilo G. Baradillo, PhD, FRIREs

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the pragmatic dimension of Maguindanaon settlement agreements in Sultan Kudarat through the lens of Searle's Illocutionary Act Theory. Using a qualitative descriptive design and discourse analysis, the research analyzed land, marriage, and financial settlement agreements to identify how illocutionary acts are linguistically realized and what pragmatic functions they serve in legitimizing and enforcing agreements. The findings revealed that assertive acts grounded agreements in factual truths such as land boundaries, dowry payments, and repayment schedules, thereby ensuring transparency and eliminating ambiguity. Directive acts regulated conduct through explicit instructions, prohibitions, and conditional obligations, transforming agreements into binding instruments of compliance. Commissive acts established accountability by embedding promises and future commitments, while expressive acts humanized settlements by acknowledging emotions, fostering reconciliation, and restoring dignity. Declarative acts emerged as the most authoritative, creating binding legal and social realities through the pronouncements of elders, barangay officials, and Shariah courts. These pragmatic features demonstrate that settlement agreements in Sultan Kudarat function not only as juridical documents but also as cultural and social artifacts. They embody the interplay of law, culture, and religion, sustaining justice, peace, and communal harmony through the performative power of language.

KEYWORDS: *Pragmatics, Speech Act Theory, Settlement Agreements, Maguindanaon, Sultan Kudarat*

INTRODUCTION

Settlement agreements are legally binding instruments designed to resolve disputes by outlining mutually accepted terms, thereby preventing the escalation of conflicts into prolonged litigation or violence. In the context of discourse studies, the pragmatic dimension of these agreements reveals how meaning is constructed through the communicative functions of language. Anchored on Searle's Speech Act Theory, pragmatic analysis emphasizes the illocutionary force of utterances: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives that establish authority, enforce obligations, and facilitate reconciliation. Recent scholarship has underscored that legal discourse is not merely descriptive but performative, transforming words into binding social and institutional realities (Krifka, 2024). Despite their importance, the pragmatic dimension of settlement agreements is often overlooked in legal and cultural research, particularly in contexts where customary and religious traditions intersect with formal law.

Globally, studies on legal pragmatics demonstrate that speech acts are central to institutional authority and dispute resolution. For instance, Kone (2020) showed how UN treaties rely on assertives to establish shared truths and declaratives to enact binding international commitments, highlighting the universality of performative language in legal texts. Restorative justice research in Europe has also revealed that expressives such as apologies and acknowledgments promote psychological healing and compliance (Nascimento et al., 2022).

In the Philippines, the legal system operates within a hybrid framework that blends state law, customary practice, and religious authority. Research on the Barangay Justice System (BJS) highlights the importance of pragmatically precise agreements, especially those containing clear directives and commissives, in fostering community satisfaction and compliance (Ordoñez & Ordoñez, 2025). Studies on Muslim communities in Mindanao emphasize the cultural embedding of settlement documents, such as the Sama practice of *sulat pasa*, which demonstrates how locally recognized declaratives and commissives enact marital status changes (Sabal, 2024).

In Sultan Kudarat, settlement agreements play a crucial role in resolving disputes among Maguindanaon communities, often mediated by elders, barangay officials, and Shari'ah courts, embodying not only legal terms but also cultural values (Abas, 2021; Alon, 2022; Pandi, 2023). Existing literature has examined settlement agreements as legal, cultural, or social documents, but few studies have systematically analyzed their pragmatic features through the lens of Speech Act Theory. This gap underscores the need for a discourse-centered study that situates settlement

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agreements as both legal instruments and pragmatic performances of justice. Hence, this study situates settlement agreements within the broader interplay of law, culture, and communal practice.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How are Searle's illocutionary linguistically realized in Maguindanaon settlement agreements in Sultan Kudarat?
2, What pragmatic functions do illocutionary acts serve in legitimizing and enforcing settlement agreements in Sultan Kudarat?
3. In what ways do the pragmatic dimensions of settlement agreements reflect the intersection of Maguindanaon legal and cultural context?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent Philippine studies emphasize that settlement agreements are performative instruments that resolve disputes through illocutionary acts. These acts, analyzed through Searle's framework, reveal how agreements function to assert rights, direct obligations, commit parties, express values, and declare new social realities. Mindanao, with its long history of conflict and hybrid legal culture, provides fertile ground for studying these pragmatic dimensions (Isla, 2023).

Isla (2023) shows that major Mindanao peace accords rely primarily on assertives to anchor authority, followed by directives and commissives, while expressives and declaratives are less common. The study highlights that the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) embeds clauses such as "The Parties affirm" and "shall establish," which transform the text into a non-human agent shaping compliance. Assertive clauses in the CAB also recognize Bangsamoro identity and affirm autonomy, legitimizing the peace process by addressing historical grievances.

The Bangsamoro Government (2024) further reports that the CAB became a symbol of inclusivity and recognition of dignity, strengthening its moral and political legitimacy. Isla (2023) identifies directives such as commands to implement transition mechanisms and create a normalization program, which mandate compliance, while commissives, including pledges to disarm or amend laws, foster accountability by binding parties to promises. Together, these acts make peace agreements executable and enforceable.

Jumalon et al. (2018) describe how barangay dispute settlement in Sarangani begins with a prayer led by mediators, an expressive act that invokes sincerity and respect. Mediators then use directives to enforce courtesy and regulate language choice so that participants understand proceedings. These practices demonstrate how cultural values and formal procedures converge in grassroots dispute resolution.

Furthermore, Jumalon et al. (2018) explain that settlements conclude with a handshake and a closing prayer, performative acts that publicly signal forgiveness and acceptance. Mediators also follow up with counseling visits, which function as commissive-like acts ensuring parties comply with agreements and maintain peace.

Balisong and Madrunio (2025) show that Cordillera peace pacts resemble Mindanao's local compacts by combining legal jargon with indigenous language. Code-mixing, coinages, and simple syntax produce hybrid legal documents that reflect culture while maintaining legal authority. This style bridges formal and customary law, strengthening both compliance and legitimacy.

Geneva Call (2024) documents how Bangsamoro authorities codified rido (clan feud) norms into formal guidelines aligned with Islamic and tribal values. Combatants accepted the code because it resonated with cultural and religious beliefs, leading to reduced violence. Agreements grounded in customary norms therefore gain legitimacy and compliance.

Ragandang (2022) emphasizes that peace processes in the Bangsamoro succeed when youth and community leaders are included. Integrating local participation ensures that pragmatic features of agreements reflect cultural expectations while reinforcing legal authority. This approach makes agreements more sustainable and widely accepted.

Isla (2023), Jumalon et al. (2018), Balisong and Madrunio (2025), Geneva Call (2024), and Ragandang (2022) collectively demonstrate that settlement agreements in Mindanao are more than legal texts. Illocutionary acts legitimize authority, mandate compliance, and foster reconciliation, while rituals, hybrid discourse, and customary values embed agreements in community life. The literature consistently shows that blending legal authority with cultural practices strengthens both legitimacy and durability of peace agreements.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive design that uses discourse analysis to examine the pragmatic dimension of settlement agreements in Sultan Kudarat. A qualitative approach is suitable for exploring meaning embedded in texts and uncovering how language functions within its social and cultural context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The descriptive element enables the researcher to systematically map the presence of speech acts without altering or imposing categories beyond the scope of Searle's Illocutionary Act Theory. In this way, the design is anchored in pragmatics while remaining flexible to the specific sociolinguistic and cultural realities of Maguindanaon settlement agreements.

Data Collection

The data consists of 51 settlement agreements drawn purposively from barangay offices, Shari'ah courts, and community elders in Sultan Kudarat. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that documents reflected various dispute contexts, including land, marriage, and financial obligations. This sampling strategy is

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appropriate in qualitative research because it deliberately selects information-rich cases that illuminate the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2015). Each document was catalogued, anonymized, and organized to establish a manageable corpus for systematic analysis. The inclusion of English translations allows for examining the pragmatic dimension in both local and translated forms.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved close reading of the agreements and coding utterances into Searle's five categories of illocutionary acts. Each clause or excerpt was examined for linguistic markers such as performative verbs, modal auxiliaries, and formulaic expressions that indicate illocutionary force. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach provided guidance in coding systematically, allowing themes of authority, compliance, and reconciliation to emerge. This ensured that the analysis was both grounded in the text and reflective of broader pragmatic functions.In addition to coding, the study employed discourse analysis to interpret the context in which illocutionary acts occurred. Gee (2014) emphasized that discourse analysis requires looking beyond words to examine how language enacts social relationships and cultural values.

Validity and Reliability

Validity in qualitative research depends on the credibility and trustworthiness of findings, which in this study was enhanced through triangulation by cross-checking interpretations with literature on peace agreements and customary law in Mindanao, as well as with insights from legal and linguistic experts. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define credibility as the process of establishing confidence in the truth of findings, pursued here through careful verification of coding, consultation with practitioners, and peer debriefing with linguistics faculty that provided external checks on interpretation. Reliability was strengthened by maintaining a transparent audit trail of coding procedures and analytic decisions, consistent with Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2019) view that dependability arises from systematic documentation that allows others to trace the analytic process. Each step of data handling, from transcription and coding to theme generation, was documented to ensure procedural consistency, thereby grounding interpretations in systematic analysis rather than idiosyncratic judgment.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical rigor was ensured by obtaining permission from barangay officials, Shari'ah courts, and community leaders before accessing the settlement agreements. Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasize that ethical research requires respecting participants' rights, protecting confidentiality, and honoring cultural sensitivities. Accordingly, all personal identifiers were removed, and pseudonyms were used to preserve anonymity. Community leaders were consulted regarding the proper handling of documents, given their role as custodians of both legal and cultural knowledge.

Special attention was given to cultural sensitivity in dealing with Maguindanaon settlement agreements, which function as instruments of both law and peace. Flick (2018) reminds researchers that ethical considerations extend beyond legal compliance to respect for cultural traditions. The researcher ensured that the sacred and communal nature of these texts was recognized, avoiding any interpretation that might misrepresent community practices. This ethical stance underscores the dual role of settlement agreements as legal contracts and cultural artifacts of reconciliation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Assertive Illocutionary Act

The analysis revealed that assertive illocutionary acts form the backbone of Maguindanaon settlement agreements, as they consistently establish factual conditions and shared understandings between disputing parties. These acts were linguistically realized through statements affirming ownership, timelines, responsibilities, and conditions of agreements. For instance, in a land settlement (SA-LS16), the assertion of a right of way—"2 meters on one side and 1 meter on the other side"—legitimized the arrangement as a factual compromise witnessed by community leaders. Similarly, in SA-LS17, the agreement specifying that cultivation would begin on September 20, 2024, reflects a definitive commitment to truth that both parties accept as binding. These examples show that assertives are not merely descriptive but operate as truth-anchored declarations that transform private agreements into publicly recognized realities.

Across marriage and financial settlement agreements, assertives likewise functioned to document factual commitments and validate compliance. In SA-MS1, the formal declaration that dowry was fully paid and separation achieved peacefully established a recorded truth that dissolved marital ties. Meanwhile, in SA-FO1, the statement that the agreement was "fully accepted" and carried out "in the name of Allah" anchored the obligation in both religious and communal legitimacy. The recurrence of assertives across domains demonstrates their role as pragmatic instruments of transparency, trust, and accountability, ensuring that disputes are resolved on the basis of mutually affirmed truths.

Directive Illocutionary Act

The findings indicated that directive illocutionary acts are central to regulating behavior and ensuring compliance in Maguindanaon settlement agreements. These acts were expressed through instructions, prohibitions, and conditional obligations that clearly outlined the duties of the parties. In SA-LS17, the stipulation that a tenant must provide one-fourth of the harvest to the landowner after every cropping serves as a direct command that institutionalizes recurring obligations. Likewise, in SA-LS4, the prohibition against anyone outside the specified family making claims to the land operates as a directive to the broader community, preventing disputes by preemptively restricting actions. These examples illustrate how directives go beyond recording terms; they function as binding rules of conduct, guiding the future actions of parties and the community.

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Marriage and financial agreements similarly incorporated directive acts as instruments of deterrence and accountability. For example, SA-MS19 imposed a ₱120,000 fine before reconciliation could occur in the event of future disputes, establishing a mandatory sequence of action that couples must follow. In SA-FO1, the debtor was instructed to repay in five monthly installments beginning on a specific date, transforming repayment into an enforceable schedule. Such directives do not merely request cooperation; they mandate compliance through explicit instructions, penalties, and timelines. This demonstrates that directive acts pragmatically transform settlement agreements into proactive mechanisms of governance, ensuring that obligations are both clear and enforceable within the Maguindanaon community.

Commissive Illocutionary Act

The analysis revealed that commissive illocutionary acts are vital to establishing accountability and future-oriented obligations in Maguindanaon settlement agreements. These acts were expressed through promises, guarantees, and pledges that bound one party to specific actions. In SA-LS9, the statement "there will be no objection" if the land is redeemed during the crop season served as a formal assurance that safeguarded the rights of one party against future disputes. Similarly, in SA-FO4, the explicit promise to repay the agreed amount on February 24, 2025, exemplifies how commissives transform intentions into binding commitments. These commitments, recorded in writing and witnessed by elders, reflect the pragmatic role of commissives in converting individual responsibility into socially enforceable obligations.

In marital settlements, commissives were also central to conflict resolution by requiring parties to commit to behavioral change or restitution. In SA-MS7, the husband's promise to abandon vices such as gambling and womanizing illustrates how commissives were used not only to repair relationships but also to establish moral accountability, reinforced by the penalty of ₱60,000 if broken. Similarly, in financial agreements like SA-FO1, acknowledgments of debt and apologies for delay carried commissive force by embedding responsibility within both legal and cultural expectations. These findings show that commissive acts are pragmatic tools for restoring trust, ensuring restitution, and reinforcing social harmony, since they transform personal commitments into public vows that the community can uphold.

Expressive Illocutionary Act

The analysis found that expressive illocutionary acts play a crucial role in embedding emotional and relational dimensions within Maguindanaon settlement agreements. These acts were evident in statements of apology, gratitude, reconciliation, and goodwill that complemented the technical aspects of dispute resolution. For example, in SA-FO1, the debtor's acknowledgment of his debt and apology for the delay extended beyond legal obligation to express remorse and humility, thereby restoring interpersonal respect. In land agreements such as SA-LS4, the use of "Wassalam" at the end of the document functioned as a collective expression of peace and goodwill, signaling closure and reconciliation. These findings demonstrate that expressives ensure settlements are not only legally binding but also emotionally meaningful, reaffirming social harmony alongside contractual obligations.

In marital agreements, expressive acts often surfaced in the language of reconciliation and renewed commitment. In SA-MS13, the repetition of "reconcile" underscored the emotional effort invested by both parties and their families to restore peace. This explicit recognition of emotional states—relief, remorse, and hope—added depth to the settlement process, ensuring that agreements addressed both material disputes and psychological healing. The pragmatic function of expressives lies in their ability to validate emotions, foster sincerity, and reinforce communal values of respect and peace, making them indispensable to the effectiveness of settlement agreements in Maguindanaon society.

Declarative Illocutionary Act

The analysis highlighted that declarative illocutionary acts are the most authoritative elements in Maguindanaon settlement agreements, as they bring about immediate changes in legal and social realities. These acts were observed when elders, barangay officials, or Shariah courts officially declared new statuses or conditions, such as dissolving marriages, finalizing land ownership, or confirming financial obligations. For instance, in SA-LS15, the Provincial Shariah Trial Court's declaration that the land in question did not belong to the claimant—and the imposition of a ₱5,000 fine—transformed the dispute into a legally binding resolution. Similarly, in SA-MS1, the statement that the marriage "has been officially dissolved" was not descriptive but performative, enacting separation with the force of law and communal recognition. These findings show that declaratives function pragmatically as powerful linguistic tools that enact justice, confer rights, and resolve disputes through authoritative speech.

Declarative acts were also common in financial settlements, where they legitimized agreements and formalized obligations. In SA-FO1, the phrase "this settlement agreement is hereby accepted as effective from today" exemplifies how declaratives transform negotiations into enforceable social contracts. The involvement of witnesses and religious invocations further amplified their binding force, embedding the declarations within both communal and spiritual authority. The pragmatic role of declaratives, therefore, lies in their capacity to convert spoken or written words into binding institutional realities, ensuring compliance and recognition within the Maguindanaon community.

Pragmatic Roles in Legitimizing Agreements, Ensuring Compliance, and Fostering Reconciliation Among Disputing Parties

The analysis revealed that the pragmatic roles of illocutionary acts in Maguindanaon settlement agreements extend beyond their surface linguistic functions. Each act—assertive, directive,

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commissive, expressive, and declarative—served as a mechanism that legitimized agreements, ensured compliance, or facilitated reconciliation. These speech acts did not operate in isolation; rather, they intersected to transform disputes into enforceable resolutions that blended legal, cultural, and spiritual authority. The results underscore how language itself functions as an instrument of governance, justice, and social restoration within Sultan Kudarat's multilingual and multicultural context.

Assertive acts pragmatically functioned to legitimize agreements by anchoring them in factual truth. By stating clear arrangements about land boundaries, repayment schedules, or marital conditions, assertives provided a foundation of transparency. For instance, the declaration in SA-LS17 that farming would commence on September 20, 2024, transformed an oral consensus into an official fact. In marriage settlements, assertives such as confirming the full payment of dowry (SA-MS1) not only legitimized the agreement but also eliminated ambiguity, making disputes less likely to resurface. Thus, assertives played a vital role in ensuring that agreements were grounded in verifiable truths recognized by all parties.

Directive acts were crucial in ensuring compliance and regulating future behavior. These were pragmatically employed through instructions, prohibitions, and conditional obligations. For example, in SA-LS4, the prohibition against outsiders making claims to land strictly controlled community behavior, reinforcing respect for ownership. Similarly, financial agreements like SA-FO1 specified repayment timelines, transforming obligations into enforceable rules of conduct. By explicitly guiding actions, directives operated as preventive mechanisms that deterred noncompliance, thereby sustaining order and accountability.

Commissive acts pragmatically established accountability by binding parties to future commitments. Promises to repay debts, vows to change behavior, or guarantees not to obstruct agreements shifted responsibility into the future. In SA-MS7, the husband's promise to abandon vices was a commissive act reinforced by a penalty clause, showing how cultural and legal accountability converge. Likewise, in SA-FO4, the explicit promise to settle debts on a fixed date transformed personal intent into a social and legal obligation. These commissives reinforced trust, as the parties were not only making commitments but were also held accountable by witnesses and community leaders, thus strengthening mutual reliability.

Expressive acts played a key pragmatic role in fostering reconciliation and restoring emotional balance. They allowed disputing parties to express remorse, gratitude, or goodwill, thereby humanizing the settlement process. For instance, the apology embedded in SA-FO1 added an emotional dimension to debt repayment, reinforcing sincerity and humility. In SA-MS13, the repetition of "reconcile" emphasized the emotional investment of both parties and their families in restoring harmony. Such expressives bridged the gap between legal resolution and psychological healing, highlighting that reconciliation in Maguindanaon culture requires not only compliance with rules but also the restoration of social and emotional bonds.

Declarative acts were the strongest pragmatic tools for enforcement, as they created new legal and social realities. Through the authority of elders, barangay officials, or Shariah courts, declaratives enacted decisions that immediately altered rights and obligations. In SA-LS15, the Shariah court's declaration resolved a land dispute by officially recognizing ownership and imposing a fine, demonstrating how declaratives convert words into binding law. Similarly, financial settlements like SA-FO2 formally declared obligations as accepted, making compliance not optional but mandatory. These declaratives reinforced the institutional and communal authority of settlement agreements, giving them the force of law and tradition.

Taken together, the results show that the pragmatic dimension of settlement agreements reflects a synergistic interplay of speech acts. Assertives legitimize facts, directives impose behavioral rules, commissives ensure accountability, expressives foster reconciliation, and declaratives enforce binding realities. Collectively, they transform settlement agreements into holistic instruments of dispute resolution that operate at legal, cultural, and emotional levels. This layered pragmatic function illustrates how settlement agreements in Sultan Kudarat are not just legal documents but also performative acts of justice, peace, and cultural continuity, sustaining order and reinforcing communal trust.

The Interplay of Legal Authority, Cultural Values, and Communal Practices in Maguindanaon Society

The analysis revealed that the pragmatic features of Maguindanaon settlement agreements are deeply embedded in the intersection of legal authority, cultural traditions, and communal practices. Each illocutionary act—assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative—functions not only as a linguistic mechanism but also as a reflection of how law, culture, and community converge in resolving disputes. This interplay highlights that settlement agreements in Sultan Kudarat are not purely legal instruments; they are also cultural artifacts and social contracts that reinforce both state and indigenous systems of authority.

The findings demonstrated that legal authority is constructed and sustained through pragmatic acts, particularly declaratives and assertives. Declaratives such as court rulings (SA-LS15) or official dissolution of marriages (SA-MS1) enacted immediate legal realities, legitimized by state-recognized institutions. Assertives, meanwhile, grounded agreements in verifiable truths—such as payment of dowry or acknowledgment of debt—serving as evidence of compliance. These pragmatic features illustrate how language itself becomes a legal force, ensuring that agreements hold weight both in community settings and, when necessary, in formal legal arenas.

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Cultural values such as maratabat (honor), hiya (shame), and kapamagasikampo (peacebuilding) were evident in the pragmatic functions of expressives and commissives. Expressives, like apologies and reconciliatory statements (SA-FO1, SA-MS13), demonstrated humility and a desire to restore relationships, values central to Maguindanaon identity. Commissives, such as vows to change behavior or promises to repay, reflected the cultural expectation that one's word is binding and that failure to fulfill promises brings shame to the family. These acts underscore how settlement agreements are not just about resolving disputes but about protecting cultural integrity and preserving social harmony. Directives reflected the pragmatic interplay of communal authority and traditional governance structures. Prohibitions and obligations, such as those in SA-LS4 and SA-MS19, not only compelled individual compliance but also instructed the community at large about acceptable conduct. By embedding explicit fines, restrictions, and behavioral guidelines, directives reinforced shared values of discipline, respect, and accountability. Their pragmatic role illustrates how Maguindanaon leaders use language to regulate social behavior, aligning personal obligations with communal expectations.

The presence of elders, barangay officials, and religious leaders as witnesses highlighted the pragmatic function of settlement agreements as collective social acts. Their participation reinforced the legitimacy of speech acts—assertives became truths because elders witnessed them, commissives became binding because leaders recorded them, and declaratives gained force because officials enacted them. This indicates that the authority of language in settlement agreements is inseparable from the authority of those who validate it, showing the cultural importance of community figures in dispute resolution.

Religion also surfaced as a powerful dimension in the pragmatic features of agreements, particularly through expressives and declaratives. References to Allah, as in SA-FO1, imbued agreements with spiritual authority, transforming them into moral as well as legal obligations. By invoking divine accountability, parties affirmed not only compliance with social norms but also with Islamic principles of honesty, restitution, and forgiveness. This religious dimension demonstrates how pragmatic acts in settlement agreements draw legitimacy from both earthly authority and spiritual commitment, ensuring deeper adherence among disputants.

In sum, the pragmatic features of settlement agreements reflect a fusion of legal, cultural, and communal systems. Legal authority ensures enforceability, cultural values sustain honor and reconciliation, and communal practices validate agreements through collective witnessing. Together, they transform settlement agreements into instruments that uphold peace, regulate behavior, and preserve cultural identity. The interplay of these dimensions illustrates that in Maguindanaon society, dispute resolution is not simply a matter of legal settlement but a holistic process that integrates justice, culture, and community.

Taken together, the pragmatic features of settlement agreements reveal a fusion of law, culture, and community. Assertives provide legitimacy, directives ensure compliance, commissives build accountability, expressives foster reconciliation, and declaratives enact binding realities. Collectively, they demonstrate that Maguindanaon settlement agreements are not only legal instruments but also cultural texts and social practices. Their pragmatic dimension reflects the unique interplay of authority, values, and communal validation in Sultan Kudarat, highlighting the performative power of language in sustaining peace and justice.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study highlight how assertive and declarative illocutionary acts serve as the backbone of settlement agreements in Sultan Kudarat by establishing factual legitimacy and enacting binding realities. Assertives legitimize agreements by affirming truths such as land boundaries, dowry payments, or debt acknowledgment, while declaratives transform these truths into enforceable legal and social states through authoritative pronouncements. This pattern resonates with Kone's (2020) analysis of United Nations treaties, where assertives and declaratives were identified as fundamental pragmatic devices that convert linguistic propositions into institutional facts, underscoring how language itself confers legality and permanence in formal agreements.

The performative force of declaratives in Maguindanaon settlements becomes evident in cases where elders or Shari'ah courts declare marriages dissolved, debts binding, or land disputes resolved. These utterances do not merely record decisions but bring about new social realities that are immediately recognized by the community. Krifka (2024) explains this phenomenon as "performative updates," in which utterances modify not just the shared information but the very institutional status of participants. Such an insight helps to explain why declaratives in Maguindanaon settlement agreements carry immediate enforceability, as they pragmatically reconfigure the rights and obligations of disputants through linguistic performance.

Another prominent finding is the central role of directives and commissives in structuring compliance and accountability. Directives impose behavioral restrictions and obligations—such as prohibiting outsiders from land claims or requiring scheduled debt repayments—while commissives bind individuals to promises that ensure future conduct. Cheng (2023) similarly demonstrates how legal discourse worldwide distributes power through pragmatic mechanisms, especially directives and commissives, which ritualize authority and regulate compliance within judicial and quasi-judicial contexts. This suggests that Maguindanaon settlement agreements draw from a universal pragmatic logic of law, where language regulates conduct as effectively as institutional enforcement.

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Settlement agreements also derive strength from the cultural practice of communal witnessing by elders, barangay officials, and religious leaders. Their validation transforms private arrangements into public commitments recognized by the broader community. This practice parallels findings in peacebuilding research in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region, where youth inclusion and community participation in agreements were shown to reinforce legitimacy and durability. Ragandang (2022) argues that peace processes in the Bangsamoro become sustainable when decisions are embedded within community structures, a point that reflects how Maguindanaon settlements rely on social authority to ensure long-term acceptance.

Marriage settlement agreements illustrate how declaratives and commissives reshape family relations by formally enacting separations or reaffirming obligations. This dynamic mirrors the Sama community's practice of *sulat pasa* in Tawi-Tawi, where customary divorce documents operate as performative instruments of family law. Sabal (2024) demonstrates that these documents not only dissolve marriages but also preserve cultural authority by embedding local values into the legal process. Such parallels show that Maguindanaon settlements are part of a broader Philippine pattern where customary documents act as binding tools that balance cultural integrity and legal enforceability.

The pragmatic force of directives and commissives in financial agreements, particularly in outlining repayment schedules with exact amounts and dates, reflects the logic of the Barangay Justice System (BJS). Ordoñez and Ordoñez (2025) report that community satisfaction with BJS is highest when settlements contain unambiguous, time-bound instructions, as clarity fosters compliance and trust. The similarity suggests that Maguindanaon agreements are consistent with national-level conciliation practices, where directive precision and commissive promises create pragmatic infrastructures that sustain fairness and accountability.

Finally, expressive acts such as apologies, blessings, and reconciliatory language emerged as indispensable in fostering emotional closure and restoring dignity. These linguistic features bridge the gap between legal obligation and psychological healing, ensuring that disputants not only comply but also reconcile. Nascimento et al. (2022) confirm that restorative justice practices incorporating apologies and acknowledgments significantly improve victims' psychological outcomes and promote durable compliance. Similarly, Jonas-van Dijk et al. (2022) highlight the positive impact of expressive participation in mediation for offenders. These findings affirm that expressives in Maguindanaon settlements are not ornamental but pragmatic levers for reconciliation, enabling both legal resolution and emotional repair.

Taken together, these insights advance both linguistic and socio-legal scholarship by showing how settlement agreements in Sultan Kudarat exemplify the interplay of **pragmatic functions, cultural norms, and institutional authority**. They also provide practical implications for strengthening the Barangay Justice System and community-based conciliation, highlighting the importance of clarity, cultural legitimacy, and emotional repair. Ultimately, the pragmatic dimension of these documents confirms that language is not only a medium of dispute resolution but also a vital mechanism for sustaining justice, peace, and cultural identity in Maguindanaon society.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that Searle's illocutionary acts are linguistically realized in Maguindanaon settlement agreements through structured patterns of assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives. Assertives anchored agreements in factual truth, such as confirming land boundaries, dowry payments, or debt acknowledgment, while directives regulated conduct by imposing prohibitions, obligations, and penalties. Commissives manifested as binding promises that created accountability, expressives humanized settlements through apologies and reconciliatory statements, and declaratives enacted binding realities by dissolving marriages, confirming ownership, or formalizing debts. These findings demonstrate that settlement agreements are more than records of consensus; they are pragmatic texts where language actively creates, legitimizes, and enforces social order.

The pragmatic functions of these speech acts underscore their critical role in legitimizing and enforcing agreements. Assertives provided transparency and eliminated ambiguity, directives imposed compliance through clear behavioral rules, and commissives established accountability by binding disputants to promises. Expressives ensured reconciliation by validating emotions and restoring dignity, while declaratives conferred institutional legitimacy by transforming words into enforceable realities. Collectively, these pragmatic roles transformed settlement agreements into governance instruments that not only regulate behavior but also restore peace, ensuring that disputes are resolved with both legal certainty and cultural resonance.

The findings also highlight the deep intersection between pragmatic functions and Maguindanaon legal and cultural contexts. Legal authority was reinforced through declaratives and assertives that carried the weight of Shariah courts, barangay officials, and elders, while cultural values of maratabat (honor), hiya (shame), and kapamagasikampo (peacebuilding) were evident in the commissives and expressives that safeguarded relationships and promoted reconciliation. Religious invocations further strengthened legitimacy by grounding agreements in spiritual accountability, aligning compliance with both divine principles and social norms. This intersection illustrates that settlement agreements function as hybrid instruments, bridging formal law with customary practices and communal values.

In sum, the pragmatic dimension of Maguindanaon settlement agreements illustrates the performative power of language in sustaining justice and peace within Sultan Kudarat. The interplay of illocutionary acts demonstrates how legal, cultural, and

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spiritual systems converge to produce documents that are simultaneously juridical, social, and cultural artifacts. These agreements not only resolve disputes but also preserve communal harmony, reinforce collective identity, and institutionalize cultural values through the force of language. The study contributes to understanding settlement agreements as vital instruments of socio-legal practice, showing how pragmatics operates at the heart of governance, reconciliation, and cultural continuity in Maguindanaon society.

Recommendations

1. Agreements may include clearer assertive statements on boundaries, payments, or obligations to reduce ambiguity and strengthen legitimacy. Future studies could look at similar practices in other communities.
2. Including simple directives with timelines, conditions, or prohibitions can help guide parties toward compliance. Researchers may further explore how directives prevent recurring disputes.
3. Commissive acts, such as promises to repay or reform, can foster accountability and trust. Future work may examine how these commitments influence long-term harmony.
4. Expressive acts like apologies or blessings may be emphasized to promote emotional closure and social healing. Future studies might assess their role in sustaining peaceful relationships.
5. Declarative clauses can help formalize new realities in land, marriage, or financial cases. Further research could compare their use in other indigenous and formal legal settings.
6. Settlement agreements reflect law, culture, and religion working together. Future studies may extend this analysis to other Mindanaoan or Southeast Asian contexts.

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