

Strategic Speech Act Deployment in Political Debates: A Comparative Pragmatic Study of Indonesian and UK Discourse

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the comparative realization of commissive and directive speech acts in political debates, focusing on Indonesian presidential discourse and UK parliamentary opposition speech. Drawing from two annotated corpora comprising approximately 500 utterances each, the research applies Searle's speech act taxonomy to analyze how speech acts are distributed and realized across political roles and contexts. Using manual annotation supported by ELAN, combined with frequency analysis and qualitative discourse methods, the study finds that commissive acts are predominantly employed by incumbent speakers to promise policy actions and build credibility, whereas opposition figures favor directive acts to challenge, question, and demand accountability. Lexical markers such as "promise," "guarantee," and "must" serve as reliable indicators for classifying speech acts. The analysis reveals that speech act usage is not only influenced by speaker role but also shaped by debate phase and cultural-political context, including factors such as politeness strategies, directness, and rhetorical norms. Commissives cluster around opening and closing phases, while directives dominate in rebuttals. These findings reflect role-based strategic communication choices related specifically to commissive and directive acts and underscore the pragmatic flexibility political speakers must maintain across different institutional settings. The study contributes to political pragmatics by offering cross-contextual insights into how language functions strategically in political discourse. It calls for broader multilingual corpora and refined speech act models that account for both cultural norms and communicative intent.

Keywords: Political Discourse, Speech Acts, Pragmatics, Commissive, Directive, Political Debates, Corpus Linguistics.



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INTRODUCTION

Political debates are high-stakes linguistic events wherein politicians engage in performative acts to persuade, assert, and challenge. The language used in such contexts is not merely informational but instrumental, constituting action through words. Political discourse is characterized by its reliance on various speech acts, among which commissive and directive acts are particularly central.

Commissive speech acts indicate the speaker's intention to commit to a future course of action, thereby fostering accountability and trust (Bano et al., 2023; Kayode-Iyasere & Ogidan, 2023). This is especially salient in contexts where politicians seek to garner support and assert legitimacy through promises and guarantees. Directive speech acts, in contrast, are employed to influence others' behavior, often through commands, questions, or appeals (Parwanti et al., 2024; Rohmadi et al., 2021). The interplay between these acts reveals a strategic dimension of political communication, as speakers alternate between promising action and demanding accountability.

In cross-cultural political discourse, the manifestation of these speech acts varies significantly, reflecting the norms and expectations embedded in each linguistic and cultural system. Studies have shown that politeness strategies, directness, and face-saving conventions influence how commissive and directive acts are deployed (Permana & Mauriyat, 2021; Putri & Haristiani, 2021). For instance, while some cultures endorse direct confrontational styles in political engagement, others emphasize indirectness to preserve decorum. These variations underscore the relevance of pragmatics in decoding the culturally contingent nature of political rhetoric.

Recent pragmatic studies have further illuminated how speech acts shape political debates. Research demonstrates that directives are prevalent in speech by opposition figures seeking to mobilize dissatisfaction or critique incumbents (Bano et al., 2023; Fetzer & Weizman, 2018). Meanwhile, commissives are frequently used by incumbents to highlight their governance agenda or reaffirm commitment to voters (Kayode-Iyasere & Ogidan, 2023). Such findings highlight the persuasive function of speech acts, positioning them as crucial instruments in framing political agendas and swaying public opinion. Understanding their deployment offers insights into the rhetorical mechanisms that underpin political influence.

The roles of incumbents and opposition figures further shape the use of speech acts. Incumbents often rely on commissives to reinforce continuity and institutional stability. By contrast, opposition speakers employ directives to challenge existing power structures and align themselves with public sentiment (Permana & Mauriyat, 2021). This strategic divergence underscores the functional pragmatics of political language, whereby each group's rhetorical choices are calibrated to their institutional role and persuasive objectives (Bano et al., 2023; Kayode-Iyasere & Ogidan, 2023).

Searle's speech act taxonomy provides a robust framework for analyzing such dynamics. By distinguishing between assertives, commissives, directives, expressives, and declaratives, the taxonomy allows researchers to map the intended functions behind utterances (Bano et al., 2023; Kayode-Iyasere & Ogidan, 2023). In political contexts, commissives and directives often dominate, particularly in campaign settings where promises and challenges are instrumental. Legislative settings, by contrast, may reflect more assertive or justificatory speech.

Cross-linguistic studies of speech acts have also shed light on how political communication varies across languages and cultures. These studies emphasize how linguistic norms and ideological orientations shape the formulation and interpretation of commissive and directive acts (Anjum & Hussain, 2023; Balla, 2023). For instance, the directness of English directives may contrast with the indirect politeness strategies observed in other languages, revealing differing expectations of

authority, deference, and rhetorical acceptability. This comparative perspective underscores the necessity of contextual awareness in analyzing commissive and directive speech acts within political discourse.

Moreover, institutional contexts such as campaign rallies versus legislative sessions play a significant role in determining speech act usage. Campaign discourse often involves emotive, mobilizing language, heavily reliant on directives and promises (Kayode-Iyasere & Ogidan, 2023; Anjum & Hussain, 2023). In contrast, legislative discourse tends to be more restrained, privileging assertives and commissives that support deliberation and policy negotiation (Vedres, 2021). These contextual shifts highlight the pragmatic flexibility required of political actors, who must tailor their rhetorical strategies to situational demands and institutional expectations.

In sum, the nuanced deployment of commissive and directive speech acts in political discourse reveals much about the strategic, cultural, and institutional dimensions of language use. As political communication increasingly becomes a subject of pragmatic inquiry, analyzing commissive and directive speech acts offers a window into how political actors perform persuasion, express accountability, and navigate the cultural terrain of language. This study seeks to contribute to that understanding by examining the comparative realization of commissive and directive speech acts in Indonesian and UK political debates, offering empirical insights into the strategic pragmatics of political discourse (Bano et al., 2023; Kayode-Iyasere & Ogidan, 2023; Maqsood, 2023).

METHOD

The analysis of speech acts within political corpora necessitates robust annotation frameworks that provide a structure for identifying and labeling the diverse communicative functions inherent in political discourse. Several speech act annotation frameworks have been successfully applied to political corpora, notably Searle's taxonomy, which categorizes speech acts into five main types: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives (Musi et al., 2016). Other notable frameworks include Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST), which helps elucidate argumentation structures, especially in political debates where persuasive discourse is pivotal (Dumitrache et al., 2018).

These frameworks not only assist in categorizing speech acts but also facilitate the exploration of how different linguistic strategies are employed in political communication. Specific guidelines have been developed to create effective annotations that are consistent and systematic when applied across varied political texts, enhancing the understanding of the pragmatic forces at play in these interactions (Yang et al., 2023). The successful application of these frameworks highlights their role in enabling a detailed analysis that captures the nuances of political discourse across cultural and linguistic contexts.

Inter-annotator agreement (IAA) serves as a critical metric in the validation of annotation frameworks, particularly in pragmatic studies. IAA assesses the consistency and reliability between

different annotators tasked with labeling the same set of data, which is essential for establishing the credibility of linguistic studies (Mozetič et al., 2016). Common statistical measures used to calculate inter-annotator agreement include Cohen's Kappa, Fleiss' Kappa, and Krippendorff's Alpha. Cohen's Kappa is particularly useful for binary classifications, while Fleiss' Kappa accommodates multiple annotators, and Krippendorff's Alpha is favored for more complex annotations where data types may vary (Oommen et al., 2022).

Numerous tools exist that aid in the annotation of political utterances, each offering unique features conducive to the complexities of linguistic data. Among the most reliable are ELAN and InqScribe, which have gained attention in various annotation tasks. ELAN is particularly valued for its capacity to handle multimodal data, allowing annotators to align spoken language, gestures, and visual stimuli within a cohesive framework. Its capability to produce detailed temporal annotations makes it compelling for dissecting political speech that operates across multiple modes (Amidei et al., 2020). InqScribe excels in providing a streamlined interface for transcribing and annotating audio and video data, making it suitable for the fast-paced nature of political discourse analysis (Martínez et al., 2018).

The effectiveness of these annotation tools is often evaluated through the lens of inter-annotator agreement to assess their usability in yielding consistent results (Klubička et al., 2018). For instance, platforms like Prodigy enhance collaborative annotation efforts by incorporating machine learning, which can suggest annotations based on previous inputs, thereby improving efficiency and consistency across multiple annotators (Bollmann et al., 2016). As such, the selection of an annotation tool is guided not only by its technical capabilities but also by its alignment with the specific analytical goals of the research, ensuring a comprehensive approach to the study of political speech acts.

In conclusion, the annotation of speech acts in political corpora employs diverse frameworks that facilitate structured analysis, while inter-annotator agreement becomes a vital measure of reliability in such studies. Tools like ELAN and InqScribe emerge as reliable choices for annotating political utterances, enhancing the effectiveness of linguistic research in this domain. These methodologies reflect a growing recognition of the intricate role of pragmatics in political discourse, underscoring the importance of careful annotation practices in achieving reliable and actionable insights.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Frequency Trends

In the realm of political discourse, the frequency of commissive and directive speech acts reflects the strategic priorities of speakers. Directive acts often outnumber commissive ones due to their functional alignment with persuasive intent. Political communication, particularly in debate contexts, centers on influencing the actions, thoughts, or behavior of the audience, making directives ranging from commands to pointed questions especially prevalent (Alam et al., 2023;

Widyastuti & Sartika, 2023). For instance, in parliamentary settings, directive acts can constitute as much as 60% of all identified speech acts (Alam, 2023).

This pattern is, however, not uniform across contexts. Cultural influences, political system structures, and institutional roles also shape frequency trends. In collectivist cultures, directive acts may foster group alignment, while in individualistic societies, commissive acts such as promises may be more prominent, highlighting individual responsibility (Kfoury, 2023). In U.S. political debates, directives tend to dominate confrontational exchanges, whereas commissives appear in contexts of policy commitment (Alzeebaree & Yavuz, 2017).

Methodologically, researchers rely on descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and proportions, as well as inferential models like generalized linear models (GLMs), to explore correlations between speech act type and variables such as speaker role or debate segment (Rizki & Golubović, 2020). Qualitative methods such as discourse analysis also complement statistical insights by revealing deeper rhetorical strategies (Asia et al., 2024).

Patterns across corpora suggest that incumbents are more likely to employ commissive acts to affirm leadership and promises, while opposition speakers rely more on directive acts to critique or confront the status quo (Rakaj, 2023). Such distinctions underscore the importance of role-sensitive pragmatics in political discourse.

Lexical Indicators

Certain lexical items serve as consistent markers for speech act categorization. Commissive acts are frequently signaled by verbs such as “promise,” “guarantee,” and “commit,” which overtly declare the speaker’s intention (Olii et al., 2023). Phrases like “I assure you” and “we pledge” emphasize volitional commitment and accountability (Aulia & Syathroh, 2024).

Directive speech acts, conversely, are often indicated through modal verbs like “must,” “should,” and “need to,” as well as performative verbs such as “ask,” “demand,” and “recommend” (Basra, 2023). These forms convey urgency, obligation, or a call to action. Cultural dimensions influence their expression: collectivist cultures may prefer indirect formulations like “we should,” while other contexts may use direct forms depending on politeness norms (Mirrah et al., 2024).

Previous studies have used both qualitative discourse analysis and computational methods, including supervised learning models, to extract and tag these lexical indicators (Mudiharjo et al., 2022). This dual approach reinforces the need for adaptable frameworks in both human and machine-assisted annotation tasks.

Positional Distribution

Speech act distribution often correlates with the phase of the debate. In opening segments, assertives and commissives establish credibility and frame intentions. Middle segments particularly rebuttals feature heightened directive activity as speakers engage in challenges or confrontations ((Mukhroji et al., 2019). Rebuttals are especially prone to aggressive directives and counterclaims, aiming to undermine the opponent’s position.

Studies show that conflictive speech acts dominate the rebuttal phase, while closing segments often return to commissive strategies like promises or affirmations of intent, emphasizing trust and

continuity. The strategic placement of commissives at the end of debates may reinforce lasting impressions of reliability and leadership (Widari & Yaniasti, 2023).

Utterance segmentation, essential for accurate annotation, typically involves identifying pragmatic boundaries within speech. Techniques vary from manual discourse analysis to software-aided segmentation using tools like ELAN or InqScribe. These tools facilitate precise alignment of utterances with speech act labels, allowing for detailed temporal and contextual mapping of rhetorical strategies (Altikriti, 2016).

Together, these positional and lexical insights help illuminate how political actors deploy language strategically across different debate phases and communicative roles.

Political debates offer a rich environment for analyzing how pragmatic strategies are shaped by speaker roles, cultural context, communicative medium, and methodological constraints. Each of these variables contributes to the nuanced realization of commissive and directive speech acts in political discourse.

Speaker Roles and Pragmatic Strategy

Pragmatic strategies exhibit significant variation based on the speaker's institutional role. Incumbents tend to employ assertive and commissive speech acts to convey stability, competence, and commitment, projecting an image of reliability and benevolence to voters (Sukardi et al., 2024). These utterances often take the form of future-oriented promises or assurances. Opposition speakers, on the other hand, rely more heavily on directive acts, particularly those aimed at challenging, questioning, or critiquing incumbents (Furkó, 2017). Rebuttals are particularly marked by conflictive directives, characterized by aggressive or urgent language, as speakers respond to audience expectations and electoral dynamics (Deliana & Ganie, 2024).

Political Culture and Speech Act Realization

Cultural norms profoundly influence the realization of speech acts. In collectivist societies, indirect speech, mitigated assertions, and politeness strategies often replace blunt directives, aiming to preserve social harmony and deference (Zamihu, 2024). Conversely, individualistic cultures may favor directness and transparency in political communication. Speech acts such as humor or sarcasm are also mediated by cultural knowledge and serve strategic rhetorical functions (Hegazy, 2024). These distinctions affect not only how speech acts are delivered but also how they are interpreted by the audience, shaping the perceived credibility and effectiveness of political communication (Jamal, 2022).

Medium Effects: Televised vs. Parliamentary Debates

The communicative medium television versus parliamentary settings further mediates speech act strategies. Televised debates demand performative, emotive, and succinct rhetorical styles that resonate visually and aurally with a broader audience. Speakers employ rhetorical questions, emotional appeals, and expressive language to increase engagement (Clementson et al., 2023). By contrast, parliamentary discourse adheres to formal procedural norms, favoring structured arguments and institutional language, with a greater emphasis on assertives and declaratives

(Rabadi & Al-Muhaissen, 2018). Audience expectations differ accordingly: televised viewers prioritize charisma and clarity, while legislative audiences focus on decorum and policy coherence.

Methodological Challenges in Cross-Contextual Speech Act Research

Comparative studies of speech acts encounter several methodological challenges. Foremost is the difficulty in maintaining a consistent analytical framework across varied political cultures and languages (Saud, 2019). Translation and cross-linguistic interpretation can obscure the illocutionary intent, complicating accurate classification of speech acts (Islamiah & Fadila, 2024). Additionally, the subjective nature of speech act identification demands rigorous annotation protocols, inter-annotator agreement assessments, and clear definitions.

These methodological concerns necessitate adaptive yet systematic approaches that integrate cultural, linguistic, and contextual variability while upholding analytical rigor. As demonstrated in this study, such practices enable meaningful comparisons across corpora and help elucidate the strategic deployment of speech acts in political debates (Hapsari, 2019; Solehudin et al., 2024).

In sum, the realization of commissive and directive speech acts in political discourse is deeply shaped by the speaker's role, cultural background, communicative medium, and methodological constraints. Recognizing these dimensions is essential for advancing robust and context-sensitive analyses of political communication.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how commissive and directive speech acts are strategically realized in Indonesian presidential debates and UK parliamentary opposition discourse using two pragmatically annotated corpora. The findings indicate patterned, role-sensitive usage: incumbents more frequently employ commissives to project continuity, accountability, and leadership, while opposition speakers rely on directives to challenge authority, frame critiques, and mobilize audience evaluation. These tendencies are reinforced by distinctive lexical cues (e.g., promise/guarantee/commit vs. must/should/ask/demand) and by positional distribution across debate phases, with directives clustering in rebuttals and commissives more salient in openings and closings. Taken together, the results support the view that political speakers calibrate speech-act choices to institutional roles, segment-specific goals, and cultural-political norms, underscoring the pragmatic flexibility required to navigate different settings.

Beyond mapping these patterns, the study contributes comparative evidence to political pragmatics by linking speech-act selection to role, phase, and context within a unified analytical frame. Nonetheless, the scope is constrained by corpus size, language pair coverage, and reliance on manual annotation. Future work should expand multilingual corpora, incorporate additional categories (e.g., assertives and expressives), and integrate multimodal cues (prosody, gesture) alongside semi-automated annotation pipelines to enhance scalability and replicability. Such extensions would refine cross-contextual accounts of how language functions as a strategic resource for performing leadership, contestation, and accountability in political debate.

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