

## Speech Acts in Selected Political Speeches

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### Abstract

*The study investigates the role of language in the communication and interpretation of intentions by examining selected political speeches of John Kerry in his Presidential Campaign in 2004 and George Bush- Inaugural address in 2001 since they have the same purposes as pieces of discourse with specific goals. Hence, the study focused on the pragmatic functions of locution, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts of the speeches.*

*Twenty sentences were selected from the two speeches. The findings show that the overall relative frequency percentages for the selected speeches are: commissive 40%, assertive 35%, directive 20%, and expressive 5%. The results show that Kerry relied more on sentences that performed commissive acts than other speech acts since he committed to some future actions, and he promised to make the world fit the words. Bush used sentences with assertive acts more than other speech acts since the assertive has a truth value which can only enhance the effect of the asserted proposition. Hence, the data are characterized by a preponderance of commissive, assertive and directive acts that are mostly used as mobilization strategies, especially in political campaigns, where candidates need to persuade their listeners to win elections.*

*Politicians communicate directly with the general public in order to convince them of their programs or ideas. Usually, the speakers would promote themselves and talk about their potency to be good leader with all their goals to convince the hearer. In this area, the speech act analysis of political speeches provides the understanding that political leaders perform various acts through their speeches. The revelation of the dominance of Speech Acts is a reflection of the purpose of political speeches which is to influence, persuade, impress, convince, and even deceive the populace.*

**Keywords:** Speech Acts Theory, Political Discourse, Political Speeches.

## **Introduction**

Political language deals with the use of power to organize people's minds and opinions. It is an instrument used to control society in general. Speech is heard by a lot of people, every person has different interpretations that can influence the success of the candidates. Political speech can be seen as a means of establishing and maintaining social relationships, expressing feelings, and selling ideas, policies and programmes in any society. In the pragmatics aspect, this means Speech Act Theory; speech act performed by particular word often depends on the speaker's intention and the context in which the word is uttered.

Some scholars have examined the communicative strategies employed in political processes and the role of the media in the dissemination of political messages. In a related work, Rudyk (2007) examines power relations in Bush's union speech. The speech which focuses on the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic levels of manipulations, studies the abuse of power in the US- Iraqi war and its effects on the recipients. Pu (2007) investigates the development of linguistic and rhetorical strategies in Bush's speech at Tsinghua University, China.

This paper presents a speech acts analysis of two political speeches in the presidential campaign. It tries to find the meaning of utterances based on the context of the speaker.

## **Political Discourse**

Many studies of political discourse deal with the language of professional politicians and political institutions, some of which are discourse-analytical. (Chilton 2004: 14).

Political discourse is identified by its actors or authors, viz., politicians. Politicians in this sense are the group of people who are being paid for their (political) activities, and who are being elected or appointed as the central players in politics. But we therefore should also include the various recipients in political communicative events, such as the public, the people, and citizens. All these groups and individuals, as well as their organizations and institutions, may take part in the political process, and many of them are actively involved in political discourse. (Van Dijk 1997: 13).

The organization of public life around style-oriented service and consumer activities has also shaped conceptions of political representations. It may therefore not come as a surprise that politicians themselves have adopted a more personalized rhetoric of choice and lifestyle values to communicate their political messages to citizens. (Simpson and Mayr 2010: 42-3).

Political discourse is not only about stating public propositions. It is about politics. It is about doing things with words. Words are used to affect the political body. Lexical items not only may be selected because of official criteria of decorum, but also because they effectively emphasize political attitudes and opinions, manipulate public opinion, manufacture political consent, or legitimate political power. The same may be true for the pragmatic management of speech acts and interactional- self-presentation. In other words, may be the structures of political discourse are seldom exclusive, but

typical and effective discourse in political contexts may well have preferred structures and strategies that are functional in the adequate accomplishment of political actions in political contexts.

Studies on presidential speeches as an aspect of political discourse have been from wide range of perspectives. Undoubtedly, political discourse has been a major domain of language use that has attracted the interests of researchers for a long while. This is because political discourse is a complex human activity that deserves critical study particularly because of its central place in the organization and management of society.

The paper reveals the effectiveness of discourse tact in ensuring that speech acts force is achieved in discourse.

### **Political Speeches**

In political speeches, ideas and ideologies need to be conveyed through language so that they are agreed upon by the receivers as well as by others who may read or hear parts of the speech afterwards in the media. Words and expressions are used or omitted to affect meaning in different ways. Moreover, political speeches are composed by a team of professional speech writers who are educated in the use of persuasive language. A political speech is not necessarily a success because of a correctness of truth; rather it may be a matter of presenting arguments. (Bread 2000:18).

Several speeches are made to address the people before election; these speeches could also be referred to Pre- election special addresses especially at rally and campaign. A political speech serves as a text, as an output and as a process which may be spoken or written.

Pragmatics is seen as the study of language use in particular communicative contexts or situations of necessity, this would take cognizance of the message being communicated or the speech act being performed; the participants involved; their intention, knowledge of the world and the impact of these on their interactions; what they have taken for granted as part of the context; the deductions they make on the basis of the context; what is implied by what is said or left unsaid; etc. (Leech 1983:20, Watson and Hill 1993:146, and Thomas 1995:7).

Most politicians are unaware of the fact that there is a link between what is said, what is meant, and the action conveyed by what is said. In the study of political speeches, one major theory that has been affective and adequate for analysis is the speech act theory.

### **Speech Acts Theory**

The study of meaning as an enterprise in language study has attracted a lot of enquiries from various language experts. So far, two major directions have been distinguished; these are semantics and pragmatics. Although, these perspectives are different, they are complementary. Semantics as a branch of linguistics has been defined as “the study of meaning”. According to Yule (1996: 114), in semantic analysis, there is always an attempt to focus on what the words conventionally mean. Thus, Semantics

studies the conventional meaning conveyed by the use of words, phrases and sentences of a language. Pragmatics, on the other hand, is often described as the study of language in use. The difference, however, is that “while in semantic analysis, there is an attempt to focus on what the words conventionally mean, pragmatic analysis focuses on what a speaker might want the words to mean on a particular occasion.” (Grundy 2000: 33).

Central to Pragmatics is Speech Acts Theory. It is a tool to interpret the meaning and function of words in different speech situations. It concerns itself with the symbolism of words. The difference between a meaningful string of words and meaningless ones, the truth value or falsity of utterances, and the function to which language can be put.

Speech is premised on the fact that people perform various actions through the use of words and when utterances are made, a particular act is performed; this is called Speech Act. Speech Acts according to Austin (1962) fall into three classes, which are: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. A locutionary act is an act of saying something; that is, the act of producing an utterance. Illocutionary acts are the core of any theory of speech acts. Illocutionary act is identified by the explicit performative. That is, the conventional force achieved in the saying of that utterance. This is realized, according to Austin (1962) as the successful realization of the speaker’s intention, which for Searle (1969) is a product of the listener’s interpretation.

The perlocutionary act is the effect or influence on the feelings, thoughts or actions of the listener/ hearer. Perlocutionary acts could be inspiring, persuading, consoling, etc. it brings about an effect upon the beliefs, attitudes or behaviors of the addressee.

Hence, Searle (1969) categorizes the illocutionary acts into five classes:

- 1- Assertives: Commit speakers to the truth of the expressed proposition, e.g. stating, claiming, reporting, announcing, etc.
- 2- Directives: these are statements that compel or make another person’s action fit the propositional element. It is usually used to give order thereby causing the hearer to take a particular action, request, command or advice.
- 3- Commissives: Commit speakers to some future actions, e.g. promising, offering, swearing, etc. to do something.
- 4- Expressives: Count as the expression of some psychological state, e.g. thinking, apologizing, congratulating, etc.
- 5- Declaratives: These statements are used to say something and make it so, such as pronouncing someone guilty, resigning, dismissing, accepting, declaring a war, etc.

We adopt Searle’s classification for the purpose of analysis.

Political communication involves a focus on meaning, the understanding of which is largely a function of reaching the illocutionary force of a speaker’s utterances. Politicians articulate a lot of intentions in their speeches: they inform, inspire, assure, accuse, promise, direct, suggest, apologize, disagree, criticize, etc. this underscores the relevance of Speech Act Theory to our data analysis. This application

of the Speech Act Theory in the analysis will allow – in- depth research into the linguistic features that have been explored by the speaker to inculcate meaning into the formal linguistic properties of the selected speeches.

### Objectives of the Study

The research attempts in general terms the analysis of the selected political speeches within the theory of Speech Acts. Thus, the research is meant to identify the speech act features of the selected speeches, to analyze the features in relation to the contexts in which the speeches were presented, and to determine how the identified features project the message in the speeches.

### Research Methodology

In this research, two political speeches were selected of John Kerry from the 2004 Presidential Campaign about *The Economy and Middle Class Families* and the second is George W. Bush speech – *Inaugural address* in 2001. The selected speeches were downloaded from the internet and analyzed to show the speech acts performed in the course delivering the speeches.

The linguistic approach adopted is based on the linguistic framework of Speech Acts Theory of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969).

The selected speeches vary in length and number of sentences. We, therefore extracted specific portions from the speeches, ten sentences were selected. In the course of analysis, the two speeches selected are labeled **A** and **B**. The number of sentences in the extracted portion are ten; therefore, we have **A** → 10 and **B** → 10. This was done in order to make the analysis clear and easy to understand. The calculation of the percentages of the speech acts in a speech is made so as to make interpretation of the tables clear and empirical.

### Speech Acts Analysis of Kerry's Speech (A)

A1

#### Locution

*Today, I've got a message for that woman and every other middle- class American struggling to build a better life for their family: I've got yours too.*

Illocutionary act: Assertive (reporting).

Expected Perlocutionary effect: Hopefulness.

A2

#### Locution

*Time and time again, George Bush has proven that he's stubborn, out of touch, and unwilling to change course.*

Illocutionary act: Assertive (stating).

Perlocutionary effect: Loss of confidence.

A3

Locution

*Middle class families deserve a new choice, and one month from today, they'll have one.*

Illocutionary act: Commissive (promising).

Perlocutionary effect: Encouragement and hopefulness.

A4

Locution

*That's what I stand for, that's who I've fought for, and if you give me the chance, that's where I'll lead this nation as your president.*

Illocutionary act: Directive (requesting).

Perlocutionary effect: Encouragement.

A5

Locution

*Our plan starts by offering a new choice on jobs.*

Illocutionary act: Commissive (promising).

Perlocutionary act: Happiness and hopefulness.

A6

Locution

*We will offer after school opportunities to another 2 million children, so your kids have a safe place to go while you work.*

Illocutionary act: Commissive (offering and promising).

Perlocutionary act: Encouragement and hopefulness.

A7

Locution

*We can fight for the middle class with my plan to finally make America energy independent of Mideast oil.*

Illocutionary act: Directive (appealing).

Perlocutionary effect: Inspiring.

A8

Locution

*But today, for too many families, the dream is harder to reach because of decisions made by the administration.*

Illocutionary act: Assertive (stating).

Perlocutionary act: Loss of confidence.

A9

Locution

*We choose health care that works for all Americans- that lowers the cost to business, lowers the premiums for families, and makes health care affordable and accessible to everyone.*

Illocutionary act: Commissive (offering).

Perlocutionary effect: Hopefulness and happiness.

A10

Locution

*We will help Americans meet demands at home at work by expanding family and medical leave.*

Illocutionary act: Commissive (promising).

Perlocutionary effect: Hopefulness and excitement.

**Speech Acts Analysis of George Bush's Speech (B)**

B1

Locution

*I am honored and humbled to stand here, where so many of America's leaders have come before me, and so many will follow.*

Illocutionary act: Assertive (stating).

Perlocutionary effect: Excitement.

B2

Locution

*And we are confident in principles that unite and lead us onward.*

Illocutionary act: Assertive (stating, announcing).

Perlocutionary effect: Hopefulness.

B3

Locution

*As I begin, I thank President Clinton for his service to our nation.*

Illocutionary act: Expressive (thanking).

Perlocutionary effect: Cheerfulness and happiness.

B4

Locution

*Today, we affirm a new commitment to live out our nation's promise through civility, courage, compassion and character.*

Illocutionary act: Assertive (claiming).

Perlocutionary effect: Hopefulness and encouragement.

B5

Locution

*The enemies of liberty and our country should make no mistakes: America remains engaged in the world by history and by choice, shaping a balance of power that favors freedom.*

Illocutionary act: Directive (claiming).

Perlocutionary effect: Determining and encouraging.

B6

Locution

*America, at its best, is a place where personal responsibility is valued and expected.*

Illocutionary act: Assertive (stating).

Perlocutionary effect: Cheerfulness and excitement.

B7

Locution

*Never tiring, never yielding, never finishing, we renew that purpose today, to make our country more just and generous, to affirm the dignity of our lives and every life.*

Illocutionary act: Commissive (promising).

Perlocutionary effect: Encouragement and hopefulness.

B8

Locution

*We will build our defenses beyond challenge, lest weakness invite challenge.*

Illocutionary act: Commissive (promising).

Perlocutionary effect: Hopefulness.

B9

Locution

*I ask you to seek a common good beyond your comfort; to defend needed reforms against easy attacks; to serve your nation, beginning with your neighbor.*

Illocutionary act: Directive (requesting, demanding).

Perlocutionary effect: Inspiring and encouragement.

B10

Locution

*We will reform social security and Medicare, sparing our children from struggles we have the power to prevent.*

Illocutionary act: Commissive (promising).

Perlocutionary effect: Hopefulness and encouragement.



**Table (1) Illocutionary Acts of Speech (A).**

Illocutionary Acts	Frequency	Percentage
Commissive	5	50%
Assertive	3	30%
Directive	2	20%

**Table (2) Illocutionary Acts of Speech (B).**

Illocutionary Acts	Frequency	Percentage
Assertive	4	40%
Commissive	3	30%
Directive	2	20%
Expressive	1	10%

**Table (3) Summary of Tables (1) and (2).**

Illocutionary Acts	Frequency	Percentage
Commissive	8	40%
Assertive	7	35%
Directive	4	20%
Expressive	1	5%

### Findings and Discussion

Language is a powerful weapon in getting to the political thoughts and ideologies of politicians, hence the language use of Kerry and Bush is studied through the two selected speeches in order to get to their thoughts. The Speech Act Theory was applied with the five categories of Searle's (1969). It was discovered from Kerry's speech that he had used sentences that are commissive as they have a total percentage 50% while 30% are assertive and 20% are directive. Kerry had used mainly commissive speech acts in his presidential campaign to commit himself to some future action. Commissives are promises, threat, refusals, and pledges, and they can be performed by the speaker. In using the commissive, the speaker undertakes to make the world fit the words (via the speaker).

The assertive in Bush's speech are 40%, that is to say Bush used language to state, maintain, inform, and announce by asserting his authority. 30% are commissives, 20% are directives, and 10% are expressive speech act.

From the overall relative frequency percentages tables that 40% of the total sentences are commissives, followed by assertive acts with 35%, while directives have 20% and expressive have 5%. It is found that commissive speech acts are identified more than other types of speech acts in the selected political speeches. Here we find out that the two speakers promise and challenge their hearers to show that they are committed to the task of rebuilding their nation.

### **Conclusion**

The study has examined selected political speeches as pieces of discourse with specific goals. The identification of speech acts types in speeches go a long way in ascribing meanings to such speeches. In other words, the speech acts bring to the fore meaning in speeches. As observed, in the process or act of saying something; other speech acts are performed. The speech acts in a work portray the personality of the speaker.

The analysis of the two speeches reveals that Kerry's speech is characterized by the use of commissive speech acts, especially in political campaign where it is essential for candidates to persuade their listeners towards a desired goal of winning elections. In Bush's speech, the use of assertive speech acts have a truth value which commits the speaker to the truth of the expressed propositions and consequently provide whatever motivation and/ or justification. The Speech Act Theory as a framework in the analysis of the selected speeches enables us to explore the language use of political leaders.

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