

A Linguistic Analysis of American Presidential Speeches in Divergent Circumstances Premised on Speech Act Theory

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Abstract: Political addresses are always meant to be appealing and reaching out to people. Their most important emotional efficacy is in a way realized by means of the actions performed by the utterances. Hence, this paper employs the Speech Act theories to analyze two momentous speeches addressed both by President George Bush, but under very dissimilar circumstances, one being his inaugural address and the other pertinent to the September 11 Attacks of the day. Thus, it is hopeful of usefully deducing from Pragmatics perspectives some features and norms of political speeches for their communicative functions to be fulfilled.

Keywords: Speech act theory; Speech context; Linguistic analysis

1. Background and Introduction

Speech Acts theories originated with philosopher John Austin and has been enriched by many succeeding scholars. This micro research aims to conclude what categories of speech acts reside in the speeches, their constituent and relation and to make comparisons and assumptions, eventually to draw some conclusion. Consequently, primarily the Speech Act Classification, Direct and Indirect Speech Acts, Speech Events theories are applied. The language data is the inauguration speech on January 20th at Congress Hill and the national televised speech about the 9·11 attacks on September 11th, both by President George Bush. The material selection helps to some extent leave out subjective factors and focus on the communicative intentions of speech acts with relation to the situation. The analysis is both qualitative and quantitative.

2. Research Guide and Statistics

2.1 Language Material Selection and Analysis Methodology

The first manuscript of George Bush's inauguration speech on Jan. 1st, 2001 is coded as Speech A. The second one which he addressed regarding the 9·11 Attacks on Sept. 11th, 2001 is coded as Speech B. After omitting formal regards of etiquette and compound adjacent short clauses pertaining to a same meaning group as a Pragmatics whole, Speech A contains 1571 words in 83 sentences and Speech B contains 597 words in 31 sentences.

2.2 Speech-act analysis of Speech A synchronized with article structure:

Segment 1 (Sentence 1-2): Opening

General Illocutionary Speech Act: Expressive. Show gratitude and honored to be new President-elect.

General Perlocutionary Speech Act: Appear humble and keen to constituents.

Segment 2 (Sentence 3-12): Retrospection

General Illocutionary Speech Act: Assertive and Commissive. Applaud America's rich past and urge to pass it down.

General Perlocutionary Speech Act: Inspire pride and diligence among people.

Segment 3 (Sentence 13-22): General Political Slogan

General Illocutionary Speech Act: Assertive and Commissive. Acknowledge discontent and entails his general solutions and commitments.

General Perlocutionary Speech Act: Appear concerned with and confident in solving dissatisfaction in society.

Segment 4 (Sentence 23-33): Commitment to Civility

General Illocutionary Speech Act: Assertive. Point up and persuade people of the significance.

General Perlocutionary Speech Act: Encourage people to be civil and bear civic duties.

Segment 5 (Sentence 34-47): Commitment to Courage

General Illocutionary Speech Act: Assertive and Commissive. Pledge to ensure national security and social interest.

General Perlocutionary Speech Act: Have people assured and confident about the future under his governance.

Segment 6 (Sentence 48-59): Commitment to Compassion

General Illocutionary Speech Act: Assertive. Explain and stress why sympathize with and help people in need.

General Perlocutionary Speech Act: Reach out to the underprivileged and build connection.

Segment 7 (Sentence 60-77): Point up personal responsibility

General Illocutionary Speech Act: Assertive and Directive. Clarify the significance of personal contribution to society by assuming responsibility; Put forward code of conduct.

General Perlocutionary Speech Act: Motivate and appeal to citizens to fulfill one's own practical and moral duty.

Segment 8 (Sentence 78-83): Concluding Remarks

General Illocutionary Speech Act: Assertive and Commissive; Cite and declare that America will keep up the good work to extend prosperity.

General Perlocutionary Speech Act: Induce patriotism and assurance for a better future amongst people.

Concrete statistics of kinds of speech acts as classified aforementioned are shown in following graphs:

Segment Theme	Sentence Count	Locutionary Act Count & Frequency (Direct Speech Act in Structure)	Illocutionary Act Count & Frequency (Indirect Speech Act in Function)	Segment Theme	Sentence Count	Locutionary Act Count & Frequency (Direct Speech Act in Structure)	Illocutionary Act Count & Frequency (Indirect Speech Act in Function)
Segment 1 Opening	2	2 Expressive (100%)	2 Expressive (100%)	Segment 1 Opening	6	4 Representative (67%), 2 Assertive (33%)	3 Representative (50%), 2 Expressive (33%), 1 Assertive (17%)
Segment 2 Retrospection	10	6 Assertive (60%), 3 Representative (30%), 1 Directive (10%)	7 Assertive (70%), 1 Expressive (10%), 2 Commissive (20%)	Segment 2 Guideline	6	1 Representative (17%), 5 Assertive (83%)	1 Representative (17%), 5 Assertive (83%)
Segment 3 Slogan	10	3 Representative (30%), 1 Expressive (10%), 4 Assertive (40%), 1 Commissive (10%), 1 Directive (10%)	1 Representative (10%), 4 Assertive (40%), 3 Commissive (30%), 1 Expressive (10%), 1 Directive (10%)	Segment 3 Measures	7	3 Representative (43%), 4 Assertive (57%)	3 Representative (43%), 2 Assertive (28%), 2 Commissive (29%)
Segment 4 Civility	11	9 Representative (82%), 1 Expressive (9%), 1 Assertive (9%)	6 Assertive (54%), 4 Representative (37%), 1 Expressive (9%)	Segment 4 Pose	6	2 Representative (33%), 1 Assertive (16%), 1 Commissive (16%), 2 Expressive (33%)	4 Commissive (67%), 2 Expressive (33%)
Segment 5 Courage	14	2 Representative (14%), 3 Assertive (21%), 9 Commissive (65%)	2 Assertive (14%), 2 Directive (14%), 10 Commissive (72%)	Segment 5 Concluding Remark	6	3 Assertive (50%), 2 Expressive (33%), 1 Directive (17%)	2 Assertive (33%), 2 Expressive (33%), 1 Directive (17%), 1 Commissive (17%)
Segment 6 Compassion	12	11 Representative (92%), 1 Commissive (8%)	11 Assertive (92%), 1 Commissive (8%)	Total Sum	31	10 Representative (32%), 15 Assertive (48%), 1 Commissive (3%), 4 Expressive (13%), 1 Directive (3%)	7 Representative (22.6%), 10 Assertive (32.2%), 7 Commissive (22.6%), 6 Expressive (19.4%), 1 Directive (3.2%)
Segment 7 Responsibility	18	7 Representative (39%), 7 Assertive (39%), 2 Commissive (11%), 2 Directive (11%)	14 Assertive (78%), 2 Directive (11%), 2 Commissive (11%)				
Segment 8 Concluding Remark	6	2 Representative (33%), 3 Assertive (50%), 1 Expressive (17%)	1 Representative (17%), 2 Assertive (33%), 2 Commissive (33%), 1 Expressive (17%)				

2.3 Speech-Act Analysis of Speech B Synchronized with Article Structure:

Segment 1 (Sentence 1-6): Opening

General Illocutionary Speech Act: Representative and Assertive. Describe the catastrophic scene and show resolve.

General Perlocutionary Speech Act: Recall the traumatic memories and show support.

Segment 2 (Sentence 7-12): Guideline

General Illocutionary Speech Act: Assertive. Declare expressly America will not be defeated or decline.

General Perlocutionary Speech Act: Help people accept, recuperate, and stay composed.

Segment 3 (Sentence 13-19): Measures

General Illocutionary Speech Act: Assertive and Commissive. Recite the acts taken and confidently pledge to normality.

General Perlocutionary Speech Act: Console and reassure people of hope, relieve anxiety.

Segment 4 (Sentence 20-25): Pose

General Illocutionary Speech Act: Commissive. Proclaim resolve and assurance to bring terrorists to justice with lots of thankful assistance.

General Perlocutionary Speech Act: Appease the terror and rage of the public, reassure confidence.

Segment 5 (Sentence 26-31): Concluding Remark

General Illocutionary Speech Act: Expressive and Commissive. Cite; Convey grief but hope and resolution as well.

General Perlocutionary Speech Act: Reach out to people; Commiserate with those affected; Impart spiritual strength.

Concrete statistics of kinds of speech acts as classified aforementioned are shown in following graphs:

3. Discussion and Analysis

3.1 Analysis of Speech Act Statistics of Speech A

Speech A is the inauguration speech addressed by President Bush.

The most widely used kind of locutionary act is “representative (44.6%)”, followed by “assertive (29%)”. Assertive (Representative) means the speaker is stating a fact, describing, or defining something while in our definition assertive is more subjectively judgmental and has more bearing on the speaker. Basically one is committed to the veracity when making this speech act.

Nevertheless, from the statistics we can see that quite a lot representative locutionary acts are actually assertive in illocutionary speech act, which means that a fair share of the president’s explanation and reasoning is actually not objective description but subjective imbuing. We may assume that it’s because he needs to publicize his notions and ideas to have an impact and influence on the citizens with expectancy that they follow. Apart from representative and presumably for the same attainment, 29% locutionary act is of assertive kind. Together they constitute most of the most common assertive kind of illocutionary act (55.4%), thus make statements, assert, impart and altogether finally have the perlocutionary effect of advocating something or appealing to people.

The commissive kind of locutionary act is mostly seen in Segment 5 exclusively where President Bush proclaims and recites a list of measures his government will get under way to ensure national security and strengthen social welfare system. Some commissive illocutionary acts take on the form not of commissive but of expressive and assertive.

3.2 Analysis of Speech Act Statistics of Speech B

Speech B is the nationally televised speech on 9·11 Attacks addressed by George Bush.

About one-third of the utterances are representative in locutionary act, which mainly describe the scene of catastrophe and relate the measures taken or updates on the incident stated in the beginning of paragraphs. In this text specifically, while some representative locutionary acts bear representative illocutionary force, some are actually commissive acts.

A major part (48%) of the utterances is assertive in the locutionary act. The proportion is especially high (83%) in Segment 2 where the main perlocutionary effect is to help people accept, recuperate, and stay composed by explaining, putting things into perspective. One prominent feature of Speech B is that a fair amount of speech acts are directly linked between the locutionary structure and the illocutionary function. 24 out of 31 utterances are direct speech acts.

3.3 Comparison

Types of locutionary speech acts ranked in descending order:

Speech A: 37 Representative (44.6%), 24 Assertive (29%), 13 Commissive (15.7%), 5 Expressive (6%), 4 Directive (4.7%)

Speech B: 15 Assertive (48%), 10 Representative (32%), 4 Expressive (13%), 1 Commissive (3%), 1 Directive (3%)

Types of illocutionary speech acts ranked in descending order:

Speech A: 46 Assertive (55.4%), 20 Commissive (24.1%), 6 Representative (7.2%), 6 Expressive (7.2%), 5 Directive (6.1%)

Speech B: 10 Assertive (32.2%), 7 Representative (22.6%), 7 Commissive (22.6%), 6 Expressive (19.4%), 1 Directive (3.2%)

Main perlocutionary effect of the whole speech:

Speech A: To stage his political positions and measures, spread political notions and influence, to appeal to people for their patriotism, approval, and participation in an active and civilized social life for mass benefit.

Speech B: To console people for the disaster, settle down the public shock and rage, reassure conviction in getting through and future security.

3.4 Similarities and Dissimilarities Analysis

Both speeches are addressed by President Bush but under very dissimilar circumstances. Aside from their overlap as political speeches, the occasion differs, which determines their divergent communicative purposes.

They both exercise the stating kind of speech act the most. In locutionary sense, Speech A employs more representative utterances (44.6%) than assertive ones (24.1%) for that there is need to relate to the social reality and then present reasoning as instructions which are in the representative form. Though explicit subjective judgements in assertive forms are not used as often to appear more reasonable, they can strongly appeal to the audience and state assured arguments. In Speech A by doing so in an indirect way the addresser can reach out to people and win their trust better. Speech B is an example where more direct assertive acts are needed to reinforce

assurance. Conceivably, in illocutionary sense, on the contrary, Speech A contains more assertive illocutionary intention (55.4%) than Speech B while the latter devotes more to narration. Speech B contains more expressive speech acts, especially in direct ways, than Speech A. This presumably can be attributed to the urgency to show blunt emotional support in terms of the incident.

4. Conclusion

On the basis of the research and analysis above, we may attentively draw some potential assumptions about political speech norms viewed from a Pragmatics perspective:

Assertive (Representative) illocutionary speech act tends to prevail over others since the main perlocutionary aim is to reach out to the audience and impart the notions, political views of the addresser.

Assertive illocutionary speech act is achieved as indirect speech act in many cases presumably to avoid subjectivity and reason better, as illustrated in Speech A which suits its setting.

Assertive locutionary speech act has the distinctive effect of conveying assured arguments and directly imbuing with momentum, as illustrated in Speech B for it fits the communicative need.

In conclusion, just as Pragmatics studies the meaning of utterances in a certain context, speech acts are actions performed by the speaker for more to be communicated (probably then done) than said, the procedure of which is also heavily dependent on its particular context. Context decisively impacts the speech act adoption structure of the speaker as part of their language tactics for communicative intention to be met. Our perception, analysis, distinction of speech acts should all be based on the account of the context.

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