

## POWER AND IDENTITY: SPEECH ACTS AND CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE 2024 BIDEN-TRUMP PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

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### Abstract

*Political debates carry ideological underpinnings which can be dissected through critical evaluation. The current study relied on the analysis of the debate between two US presidential candidates namely Donald Trump and Joe Biden during elections 2024. The focus of the study was to identify the most frequently used speech acts in political discourse as well as to explore how did political leaders use performative utterances to shape their narratives. The researchers analyzed the transcript of the debate through the framework of speech act theory and critical discourse analysis (CDA). The study utilized qualitative research paradigm along with content analysis approach. The data, the transcript of the debate, were collected from the archives of political debate of US Presidents. The analysis of the data revealed that the discourse had 60 assertive, 12 directives, 16 commissive, 15 expressive, and 7 declarative statements. The data also revealed that the two presidential candidates used language beyond policy production to construct subjects, maintain difference, create a 'we' or 'they', mobilize pride, and strengthen power.*

**Keywords:** Political discourse, speech act theory, performative, critical discourse analysis

### INTRODUCTION

As the primary means by which individuals negotiate meaning, create common standards, and exercise different kinds of power and influence, communication is the cornerstone of social and political relationships. Language is an active and dynamic tool that shapes reality, creates social worlds, and frames our perception of the world around us. It is not just a passive means of transmitting information or facts. Certain phrasings are intrinsically performative, meaning that by using them, speakers enact or bring about specific social realities and conditions rather than merely reporting or describing current events, according to J.L. Austin's (1962) groundbreaking Speech Act Theory. Because of this performativity, language becomes a tool for social action, with the ability to create agreements, approve choices, and modify connections. Analyzing how people and groups interact, establish authority, negotiate identities, and bring about significant change in their social and political environments thus requires an understanding of this performative aspect of language. Furthermore, this viewpoint emphasizes the complex ways in which discourse affects public opinion, shapes power relations, and either upholds or undermines preexisting systems of resistance and dominance.

The foundation of language use in political discourse is performativity, where leaders' speech acts create narratives, strengthen power, and shape public opinion (Austin, 1962; Butler,

1997). Politicians use language as a tool to legitimize authority and rally support, actively shaping reality through well-crafted statements rather than just describing it. States of emergency and similar announcements serve as legal and social performances that enact political realities by turning intangible threats into situations that can be taken action on and eliciting tangible reactions from the public and institutions (Searle, 1969; Bach & Harnish, 1979). These proclamations frequently function to strengthen authority, defend drastic measures, and redraw the parameters of appropriate conduct. In a similar vein, electoral promises are performative commitments that establish standards for accountability, set expectations for the public, and influence the relationship between representatives and constituents. They also serve as benchmarks for future actions (Mansbridge, 2009; Przeworski, Stokes & Manin, 1999). Political language is thus constitutive rather than merely communicative, constantly constructing the social and political order through performative acts.

The relationship between speech acts and politics is a complex area within linguistic and political studies, with theorists like Austin and Searle providing insights into their mechanisms and nature. However, their application to political language is more critical. Political communication is complex, involving power relations, ideological frameworks, and temporal contexts. This complexity necessitates a deeper understanding of how performative utterances function within societal relations, shaping power structures and social conventions. Kasper's (2006) work addresses these interactions, bridging the gap between theoretical speech act frameworks and their practical implications in political contexts. The study of speech acts in politics, cultural differences, public opinion shaping, and historical political speeches is also explored. To this end, this study aims at exploring the performative aspect of political rhetoric, analyzing the data through the principles of speech act theory. The research focuses on speeches, statements, and other public communication of famous political figures and analyzes them to reveal how all language is persuasive, authoritative, performative, and imbued with power. It helps to analyze how the speech acts provide means of weaving political stories, gaining support, and providing reasons for an action.

While speech act theory has been extensively applied to literature and daily communication, its implications for political power remain underexplored (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). The gap lies in understanding how performative utterances construct authority, legitimize actions, and influence collective decision-making (Fairclough, 2001). The research study argues that the concept of speech acts in political discourse is pertinent more than ever before due to the current globalized and media-influenced world (Castells, 2009). Such speeches, debates, and statements are not only limited to physical forms but can, in fact, reach the social and mass media with a simplicity that allows them to be commented on and shared (Couldry, 2012; Habermas, 1989). This wide dissemination in turn boosts their performative value, enabling political narratives to get their messages across to the audiences in ways that would mean different things to different audiences (Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 2006). Interrelated political discourses produced by means of speech activities are the defining basis for ideologies, events, and policies (Wodak, 2009). The current research aims to analyze a political debate between two US presidential candidates during the 2024 elections.

### **Research Objectives**

- To identify the most frequently used speech acts in political discourse.
- To explore how political leaders use performative utterances to shape narratives.

### **Research Questions**

1. What types of speech acts are predominantly used in political discourse?
2. How do performative utterances construct political authority and legitimacy?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This study helps us gain a better understanding of performativity, discourse analysis, speech actions, and their link to political context. The study of speech acts in political discourse has grown in popularity in recent years, as scholars seek to understand how language, power, and persuasion interact in political situations. Scholars have begun paying closer attention to how political leaders and other important figures use language strategically to negotiate power, legitimize authority, and guide collective behavior. This literature review explores the important contributions to the issue by assessing the application of speech act theory to political communication, as well as its implications for understanding the dynamics of political influence and decision making.

### Speech act theory

Austin (1962) propounded the speech act theory in his book *How to Do Things with Words*. The theory highlights the role of speech acts in the actions of life. According to this theory, speech is used to deliver certain messages on a daily basis, most especially in politics, when the political speaker intends to convey anything. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online (n.d.) defines the word speech as “a talk, especially a formal one about a particular subject, given to a group of people.” Likewise, Oxford Dictionary (n.d.) has defined speech as the “power of expression by voice; the use of vocalization in communication; or a part of discourse.” Austin (1962) claims that when uttering a sentence, one produces three acts: a locutionary, an illocutionary, and a perlocutionary act. ‘Performing’ a locutionary act ... is roughly equivalent to uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference, which is again equivalent to meaning in the traditional sense. Second, we said that we also perform illocutionary acts such as informing, ordering, warning, undertaking, etc., i.e., utterances which have a certain conventional force. Thirdly, we may also perform perlocutionary acts: what we bring about or achieve by saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring and even, say, surprising or misleading’. (p. 108)

Austin was the one who first proposed the idea of performatives. The word performative has been derived from “perform”, the usual verb with the noun “action”; according to Austin (1962, p. 6), “it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action—it is not normally thought of as just saying something.” Another important issue related to speech acts is that people do not produce utterances without purpose. So, the second element is known as the illocutionary act. Lodge and colleagues (1997, p. 168) define the illocutionary act as “the act of making a promise, a threat, or even a statement, by virtue of producing an utterance.” The importance of social conventions in any utterance is emphasized by many linguists. A speaker’s illocutionary act is defined as “the act viewed in terms of the utterance’s significance within a conventional system of social interaction,” according to Hurford et al. (2007, p. 273). It is possible to consider the illocutionary act as reflecting the speaker’s original intention while making the statement.

The speech act of persuasion has been used in various fields of research inclusive of politics, marketing, etc. According to the area of persuasion literature, Mojgan Yarahmadi and Narges Olfati (2011) did research on the persuasive speech act in relation to literature through analyzing the play, “The Seagull”, authored by Anton Chekhov. Using the speech act analysis, the researchers were able to uncover the motives, intentions, etc., of the characters of this play. Exploring the area of persuasion in marketing discourse, Shamal Ahmed Hama Aziz and Sara Kamal Othman (2020) conducted a pragmatic study to find the persuasive speech acts in social media in marketing discourse, such as posts on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube videos. They find that marketers use assertive speech acts to persuade their customers and at the same time avoid commitment. Moreover, they find that using commissive speech acts is not promising or guaranteeing because it can be denied. Abdulrahman Alkhirbash (2016)

investigates the speech acts as persuasive devices in selected speeches of Dr Mahathir Mohammed (the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia) by adopting a rhetorical analysis on these speeches to identify how the P.M. employed speech acts to persuade his audience to accept or perform a specific action. The study finds that “directive and assertive speech acts were used as persuasive devices to influence his audience and attain persuasion.

### **Political discourse**

Politicians are the individuals who deliver political speeches. In this context, politicians perform political speech actions. They hold key positions in the political system. Besides politicians, we should also incorporate the public, people, and citizens, among other receivers, in political communicative events. All of these people and groups, along with their institutions and organizations, may participate in politics, and many of them actively engage in political debate (Van Dijk, 1997, p. 13). Ideas and ideologies must be made clear through language in political speeches for the recipients and other people who might read or hear portions of the speech later in the media to accept them. Expressions and words are employed or left out in various ways to influence meaning. Also, a group of qualified speechwriters who have received training in persuasive language are trained to create political speeches. According to Bread (2000), a political speech may succeed or fail based on the arguments made rather than the accuracy of the facts.

Suwandi (2013) examined five addresses that Barack Obama delivered off and on. The researcher discovered 3 occurrences of the performative form of promising utterance (8%) and 36 instances of the constative form (92%). Intentions such as reaffirming (3%), persuading (3%), offering (5%), assuring (43%), and affirming (46%) were revealed by additional study. Furthermore, Pudjilestari's (2012) three types of phrases were identified by "Promising utterances in some manuscripts": declarative, imperative, and interrogative sentences. A speaker may produce an utterance for five reasons: to command, assure, request, confirm, and describe. They may also do so for eight reasons: responsibility, hope, rage, relationship, affection, teasing, attention, and misunderstanding.

Although speech act theory's theoretical foundations are well-established, little is known about how it might be applied to political contexts. Instead of focusing on the performative features of political discourse, the mostly work done by researchers only addresses its descriptive aspects. By investigating how specific political speech actions serve as performative utterances, influencing society narratives and establishing authority, this study aims to bridge this gap.

### **Research Design**

The current research study utilized qualitative research design. The researchers purposefully chose the debate between former US presidents during the election 2024 as the primary source for this study due to its extensive use of dialogues, which present a suitable context for exploring the concept of illocutionary speech acts. The interactions of both speakers provide a broad range of speech acts to analyze. This research adopts Searle's (1969) theory of speech acts as the theoretical framework for the analysis of illocutionary speech acts in the selected debate between two speakers. Developed by Searle (1969), this theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the communicative intentions and effects of utterances. This research also adopts Fairclough's (2001) three-dimensional model.

Searle's (1969) theory of speech acts posits that speech acts can be categorized into five main illocutionary types: assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative. Assertive involve making statements about the world, directives are acts that aim to influence the behavior of others, commissive commit the speaker to future actions, expressive convey the speaker's psychological state or attitude, and declaratives bring about changes in the world by means of the utterance itself. By applying Searle's theory, this research aims to classify and



analyze the illocutionary speech acts found in selected text. It provides a framework for understanding the speaker's communicative intentions and the effects of their speech act on the public. Searle's theory will guide the identification, categorization, and analysis of illocutionary speech acts in the debate. By utilizing this framework, the research aims to deepen the understanding of the linguistic and pragmatic aspects of speaker utterances and contribute to the broader field of linguistic studies by applying a well-established theoretical framework to the analysis of speech acts.

Norman Fairclough designed his model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to let researchers analyze linguistic relationships with social power as well as social organizational systems. The method consists of three interconnected elements that include the written language and interaction systems alongside social construct systems. Social practice examines the community-wide factors that produce communication when people use texts. The third level evaluates how social systems affect language and how language shapes these organizational frameworks. Discourse practices exist to maintain social inequality or they work toward resisting established power imbalances in our society. Through his model Fairclough shows how language sustains or revolutionizes power dynamics between people during social activities. (Fairclough, 1995).

The researchers collected the data, i.e., the transcript of the political debate between Joe Biden (former) and Donald Trump (current) Presidents of the United States of America, from the archive of political debate of US presidents in official transcripts and media recording. The debate was organized during geographical and political electoral campaigns. CNN telecast the debate on June 28, 2024, in Georgia. The study employed qualitative approach to identify, count, categorize, and interpret speech acts. The analysis delved into the underlying messages and ideas conveyed through the speakers' dialogues. The researchers explored different themes in light of the third dimension of Fairclough's (2001) CDA model and analyzed the impact of these themes.

### Analysis and Discussion

To identify the most frequently used speech acts in the debate between the two US presidential candidates the researchers analyzed the data quantitatively as well as qualitatively. The findings are as follows:

**Table 1**

**Speech acts in the debate between US presidential candidates**

Speech Acts	Sub-type	Definition	Numbers	Frequency
Assertive	Observation/Fact	Statements that describe the world as the speaker believes it to be true	60	54.5%
	Claiming			
	Demanding			
	Complaining			
	Telling			
Directive	Advising	Utterances that seek to make the hearer perform an action	12	10.9%
	Ordering			
	Pleading			
	Recommending			
Commissive	Asking	Intention of the speaker to do something in future	16	14.5%
	Promising			
	Swearing			
Expressive	Offering	Statements that express the speaker's attitudes and emotions	15	13.6%
	Thanking			
	Praising			
	Disappointment			

Congratulation			
Declarative	Determine Release Declare	Sentences which alter roles within the external physical environment	7 6.3%

Table 1 reveals that assertive statements—those conveying observations, facts, claims, demands, complaints, or simple information—are by far the most frequent, accounting for 54.5% (60 instances) of all utterances, which highlights a strong communicative focus on describing or asserting the world as understood by the speaker. Commissive speech acts, which involve promises, offers, or intentions for future action, are the next most common at 14.5% (16 instances), followed by expressive acts such as thanking, praising, or expressing disappointment at 13.6% (15 instances). Directive acts, like advising or ordering, are less prevalent at 10.9% (12 instances), and declarative acts, which alter roles or the external environment, are the least common at just 6.3% (7 instances), indicating that direct commands and performative statements play a relatively minor role in the examined data. According to Mayer (2009) assertive sentences are statements which may be considered as true or false. These can be complaining, boasting, stating, telling, and demanding. Some of the assertive statements are as follows:

*"We are the most admired country in the world." (Biden)*

*"The middle class has been devastated by you." (Biden)*

*"The general got fired because he was no good." (Trump)*

*"I've never seen such anger in our country before." (Trump)*

*"The Paris Accord was going to cost us a trillion dollars." (Trump)*

The statements represented above are taken as examples of assertive speech acts. These examples included further divisions of assertive, which are fact, claiming, telling and complaining. According to speech act theory, the major aspect of assertive is that it reports a situation, which may be considered as a fact, observation or even a belief. This is because these statements bear information that can either be genuine or counterfeit. For instance, when somebody states that we are the most admired country in the world, you may test the truthfulness of such a statement. That is why even such statements as *'I've never seen such anger in our country before'* or *'The Paris Accord was going to cost us a trillion dollars'* can be considered factual statements.

According to (Grundy, 2000; Huang, 2007), directive speech acts are utterances that are intended to make someone do some act. Such as advising, asking, ordering, pleading etc.

*"Look it up." (Biden)*

*"Will you name tonight one specific step that you're willing to take to keep Social Security solvent?" (Biden)*

*"Did you fire anybody?" (Trump)*

*"Did anybody get fired for allowing 18 million people, many from prisons, and many from mental institutions?" (Trump)*

*"Will you take your minute?" (Biden)*

These can be regarded as the directive speech acts because these statements are characterized by attempts of the speaker to address to the listener certain requests to perform specific actions. Directive speech acts include ordering, where the speaker assumes authority and offers an order or an instruction to a listener; threatening, where the speaker threatens the listener to do something; and inviting, where the speaker invites the interlocutor to do something. For example, *look it up* is imperatively demanding something in the form of *Will*

*you name tonight one specific step that you're willing to take to keep Social Security solvent?* is a question form asking for information or a response. Likewise, examples of embedded questions and directives are *Did you fire anybody? And did anybody get fired for allowing 18 million people, many from prisons, many from mental institutions?* Finally, *will you take your minute?* is an illeism meaning do this in one or some minutes polite?

According to Rustono (1999) commissive speech acts are those utterances that bind the speaker to carry out what is stated in the speech. Promise, swear, threaten, vow, and offer are different forms of commissive acts.

*"If I'm given another four years, I will be the best." (Trump)*

*"We will have cut pollution in half by 2035." (Biden)*

*"We're moving in directions that are going to significantly change the elements of the cause of pollution." (Biden)*

Because these statements imply a promise or guarantee to do something in the future, they are considered commissive speech acts. Commissive in the Speech Act Theory refers to communication in which the speaker commits himself or herself to doing something, showing intention and so on. For instance, when saying, *If I'm given another chance, I promise to do this*, or *If I have four more years, I will be the best*. In the same way, too, the pledge *We will have cut pollution in half by 2035* puts forward a guarantee to achieve certain environmental goals in a definite time span. Finally, the business-orientated statement *We are going in directions that are going to substantially alter the components of the source of pollution* keeps an assurance of future action towards controlling pollution ongoing. Every one of these statements represents a definite willingness or assurance from the speaker to perform certain actions, which is the factor that most defines commissive speech activities.

According to Ilie and Norrick (2018) expressive speech shows the psychological attitude of the speaker in a specific situation, such as apologizing, thanking, praising, congratulating, blaming, forgiving and condolences.

*"I've never seen such anger in our country before." (Trump)*

*"The most embarrassing moment in the history of our country." (Trump)*

*"Nobody wants to screw around with us." (Biden)*

The given statements qualify as expressive speech acts according to speech act theory. Speech act theory defines expressive statements as messages which reveal emotional responses of speakers through their expression towards specific situations or events while using words to express joy, anger, sadness or frustration. Through the first statement the speaker reveals their emotional shock about the unprecedented national anger which exists in their country. The sentence confesses surprise through disbelief, thus exposing the speaker's emotional condition instead of presenting facts or constructing arguments. In the second statement the speaker describes a moment that stands as the nation's most humiliating episode in its entire history. This emotional response arises when the nation experiences embarrassment with the situation so significant that it details its critical impact. *These threats don't find any supporters*; although it presents a defensive stance, it also demonstrates pride together with frustration within challenging situations. Through this statement the speaker displays their frustration and determination alongside their hostile perspective of those individuals they view as adversaries. The sentences concentrate on how the speaker emotionally responds to specific situations through expressive discourse because they display anger together with embarrassment and defiant behavior.

According to Yule (1996) a declarative speech is an act in which speaker creates a new thing or changes status via utterance. These include conditions such as dismiss, surrender, release, exclude, determine and, appoint.

*"I fired Comey because he was no good." (Trump)*

*"I ended [the Paris Accord] because I didn't want to waste that money."(Trump)*

*"I told you before – and, by the way, when I said 'suckers and losers,' he said – he acknowledged after it that he fired that general."(Biden)*

*"You'd pay a price for it, but they were no good."(Trump)*

These statements are declarative speech acts because they produce an effect within the real world by means of being said, typically through acts of declaration or assertion, or by acts of decision-making. In speech act theory, the declarative typically involves the use of a power point where the speaker who is uttering the given speech has power in order to be effective. Just like this, the following utterances involve decisions to change the status of an object or a situation: *I ended [the Paris Accord] because I didn't want to waste that money.* The following are declarative statements because they involve the speaker's ability to do things and make choices, which alters reality through mere assertion of the words.

The third dimension of Fairclough's (2001) CDA framework lays focus on the social dimension, which deals with the observation of how power, ideology and relations among people are represented in language. From this point of view the text can uncover certain subtexts which are associated with the social process, authoritative patterns and formation of subjectivity. The data, i.e., the text of the debate, have been analyzed as under:

### **Power and Authority**

Both the speakers, during the debate, attempted to establish their power and authority. Trump takes the position of an expert who is confident about his right to decide in the capacities that imply *I will have him out very quickly, as soon as I take office.* He further established his authority when he said *I ended (the Paris Accord) because I didn't want to waste that money.* Likewise, Biden too tried to show power and authority by saying *we are the most admired country in the world.*

### **National identity and Patriotism**

Patriotism appears to be a regular feature of the debate, where emphasis is placed on rebuilding the powers of the country, e.g., *we are the strongest country in the world; we're going to make it great again.* The focus is on defense from outsider countries, e.g., *China is going to own us, and Russia took a lot of land from Bush.*

### **Us vs Them**

Differences are evident between the group 'us', which includes followers, friends and supporters of the speaker, and the group 'them' that may include rivals or opponents in government, other countries, or leaders. This division is seen in such expressions easily: *we are the strongest country in the world, they're killing us as a country, and he's a Manchurian Candidate.*

### **Anti-elite Sentiments**

The speaker (Trump) takes a populist's point of view – portrays him as the only hope for working people against political/military leadership, e.g., *this is a seriously failing nation, the single largest regulation cut in history.* This gives us an impression that the speaker (Trump) does not trust any of the elite and presents himself as the kind of guy who will 'fix' the system.

### **Social and Economic Inequality**

Concerning questions of inequality within the economy based on export and import and military budget, the speaker (Biden) says things like *we have the largest deficit with China, and the deficit was left from the embarrassing failure of the previous administration of President Trump.* The text portrays the country's economic problem as a failure of leadership and external forces seeking to control the country.



## CONCLUSION

The study reaffirms the importance of speech acts in political discourse to show how language goes beyond communication to perform social and political realities. This paper presented a new speech act taxonomy that captures different types of cooperation and conflict communication in political debates. Far from the traditions based on Austin's (1960s) Speech Act Theory and its further evolution, the research focuses on assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative acts used by political leaders to establish control over narratives and mobilize people. The work's key findings reveal that leaders employ language to do more than just produce policies; they also use it for the purposes of constructing particular kinds of subjects, for maintaining difference, for producing a 'we' that can be opposed to a 'they', and for mobilizing pride in nation or hatred of elites. These are important for building legitimacy and strengthening power.

The study conducted on a 2024 political debate between Joe Biden and Donald Trump shows varied frequency in using the speech act to assert, describe the economy and elicit an emotional response from the audience. The most common strategies used were assertive in form, probably due to the frequency with which people need to state claims and justify decisions. The research design acknowledges certain limitations, such as the subjective nature of qualitative analysis and the potential for researcher bias. The sample selection may not encompass every instance of illocutionary speech act, and the analysis is limited to the content of the selected text rather than considering external factors or authorial intent.

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