

From Assertion to Action: Illocutionary Speech Acts in Biden's Rhetoric of Pandemic Resilience

Galuh Fitriana Sakti¹, Gunawan Gunawan², David Tombeng³, Bayu Andika Prasatyo^{4*}

^{1 2 4} English Department, STBA Technocrat, Indonesia

³ Universitas Indraprasta PGRI, Indonesia

Corresponding Author:

Bayu Andika Prasatyo^{4*}

bayuandikaprasatyo@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates the strategic deployment of illocutionary speech acts in President Joe Biden's address commemorating the first anniversary of the COVID-19 shutdown. Through a qualitative pragmatic analysis, we examine how presidential rhetoric functions during national crises to inform, reassure, and mobilize public response. The research categorizes utterances from Biden's speech according to Searle's (1969) taxonomy of illocutionary acts: assertives, commissives, directives, expressives, and declaratives. Analysis of the official transcript from the White House website reveals a strategic distribution of speech acts with assertives dominating the discourse, followed by commissives and expressives, directives, and declaratives. This distribution reflects Biden's rhetorical priorities: establishing factual authority through assertives, building trust through balanced commitment (commissives) and emotional connection (expressives), while carefully limiting authoritative commands (directives) and institutional pronouncements (declaratives). The findings demonstrate how presidential crisis communication strategically balances informational transparency with emotional resonance to foster public compliance and national unity. This study contributes to our understanding of political pragmatics by illuminating how speech act distribution serves as a deliberate rhetorical strategy in pandemic discourse, with implications for crisis communication theory and political speech writing practice. Future research should consider analyzing illocutionary acts in a broader range of political speeches across different contexts and cultures to better understand how public figures use language to influence public perception and policy support.

Keywords/Kata Kunci: *speech act, illocutionary speech act, pragmatic analysis*

Introduction

Language is essential to human existence because it serves as a means of communicating ideas, feelings, and thoughts from the speaker to the listener through gestures, noises, or symbols for a variety of purposes. One definition of language is the technique for human communication that involves using words in an ordered and traditional manner, whether spoken or written (Larasati et al., 2020). Two different forms of communication exist, non-verbal, which uses body language, eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, signals, and general appearances made by the speaker to the hearer; and verbal, which uses words as the elements in delivering messages. According to Bonvillain (2020) the main purpose of language is to convey information. It means that the hearer needs to establish the communication's context to understand the speaker's

intended meaning. message that the speaker wishes to get across is what matters most in a speech act (Haucsa et al., 2020). It implies that language use results in the production of an action as well as a sentence. As a result, the hearer comprehends the speaker's message. According to (Searle, 1969), speech acts can be classified into three categories: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. The first type of speech is called locutionary, which is defined as the speaker's intended meaning performed; the second type is called illocutionary or illocution; the third type is called perlocutionary or perlocution, which is defined as the performance affected by the performance.

Leaders are required to make speeches all the time to boost the morale and spirit of their people. In the realm of presidential speeches, where speech acts are magnified on the grand stage of political discourse, presidential addresses, with their blend of rhetoric, persuasion, and policy pronouncements, serve as rich terrain for analyzing the performative dimensions of language. In the political arena, communication is not merely a matter of exchanging words; it is also a matter of influencing opinions and shaping public perception (Prasatyo & Gustary, 2024). From the solemn promises of inauguration speeches to the impassioned calls for action in times of crisis, presidential rhetoric exemplifies the transformative power of speech acts in shaping public opinion and mobilizing collective action.

Joe Biden was selected as the US president on January 20, 2021. This year was not an easy year to have a new president since the US was dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Since Biden's election as president, according to the COVID timeline compiled by CDC (Central of Disease Control), on January 21 the Biden Administration announced the National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response.

On March 11, Joe Biden, in his remarks on the first anniversary of COVID-19, Biden gave a memory of how dark life of his country during the pandemic, but there were still many positive sides that could be grateful for. Biden also invited his citizens to think positively that they can go through this pandemic together by endeavoring the vaccine, health protocol, and economic stability. His speech is powerful and believed to have a big impact on American citizens. The researchers believe that illocutionary acts occur within the speech. So, the writer believes that it is important to analyze speech acts contained in Biden's speech, particularly illocutionary acts because they play an important role in studying the hidden meanings in Joe Biden's speech to avoid misunderstanding of the speech.

Yule (quoted in (Haucsa et al., 2020) defines pragmatics as the examination of meaning communicated by a speaker or writer and comprehended by a listener or hearer (Atusaadah & Zuindra, 2022). Moreover, (Nur et al., 2024) suggest that pragmatics is the study of language usage, particularly the interplay between language and situation. The speaker endeavors to convey the significance inherent in the statement when communicating thoughts to others. Since that time, the listener has been anticipated to precisely understand and react to the speaker's expectations. Furthermore, pragmatics examines the utilization of language by individuals, as stated by Mey (quoted in (Haucsa et al., 2020) his work "Pragmatics: an Introduction." This study examines how individuals' linguistic choices in communication influence the perceptions of listeners or readers, as shaped by societal conditions. Pragmatics is the examination of the deliberate meaning a speaker communicates within the context of their discourse, as seen by the definitions and examples provided above. It examines linguistic usage patterns and the underlying reasons behind those trends.

As a field of linguistics, pragmatics encompasses a wide range of concepts, including implicature, deixis, presupposition, cooperative principle, and speech actions. Speech is

crucial as it seeks to communicate a message to the intended recipient, both directly or indirectly (Hasanah, 2024). As previously mentioned, speech acts fall under the purview of pragmatics; hence, studying a speech act entail studying the utterance as well, as statements made by the speaker, frequently in the form of orders, warnings, promises, greetings, apologies, persuasion, requests, congratulations, cautions, or advice. These actions referred to as speech act. The capacity to comprehend the fundamental aspects of a speaker's message is significantly more crucial in language usage. A deficiency in understanding the communicative principles governing speech production might result in communication failure (Prasatyo et al., 2023). Consequently, the illocutionary act is a crucial element in effective linguistic communication. Giyatmi et al., (2021) define an illocutionary act as any action performed by an individual while speaking. The speaker's intention aimed at the hearer constitutes the illocutionary force of this act. Illocutionary acts pertain to the speaker's intent in communicating with the listener. Searle's theory (1969) as cited in (Gustary, 2022) classified illocutionary acts into five categories: directives, expressives, declaratives, assertives, and commissives. represent a state of affairs: assertions, statements, claims, hypotheses, descriptions, and suggestions. A representative can generally be characterized as true or false and express the speaker's belief. Directives express the speaker's desire to get the addressee to carry out an action or to do something: commands. Request, challenging, invitations, entreaties, dare, ordering, defying. Commissive expresses the speaker's intention or commits the speaker to some future action: promising, pledging vows, offer, refusal, and threat. Expressive indicate the psychological state, attitude, or speaker's emotions, including thanking, apologizing, congratulating, deploring, welcoming, blaming, praising, condolences, thanksgiving, and greeting. While, declarative (declaration) is about the state of affairs they name such as blessing, firings, resigning, baptism, arrest, dismissing, christening, naming, sentencing, marriages, and declaring mistrial.

A plethora of research has delved into pragmatics analysis in rhetoric text. (Triana Sinaga et al., 2024) discussed Joe Biden's 2024 presidential speech by emphasizing the types of illocutionary acts that Joe Biden employed during his 2024 presidential address. They discovered that Joe Biden employed four distinct illocutionary act functions in his speech: collaborative type utterances, competitive type utterances, convivial type utterances, and conflictive type utterances. This suggests that Joe Biden's speech contains a greater number of collaborative speech acts, including assertive, reporting, proclaiming, and providing instructions.

While (Supiah Cahyati, 2024a) shown the categories of the illocutionary act employed in Joe Biden's speech, as well as the dominant utterances employed in the speech. The results indicate that four illocutionary acts are employed. They are assertive, declarative, directive, and expressive. Subsequently, the dominant illocutionary act employed in Joe Biden's speech is Expressive, and the intended outcome of his speech is to communicate an interior state to the audience. Furthermore, Joe Biden employed a low level of directive, which denotes that the speaker's responsibility is to instruct the audience to take a specific action or progress toward a specific objective.

Another compelling research was conducted by Romadhon (2021). He utilized the descriptive qualitative method to showcase President Joe Biden's speech at the White House in the United States, with the objective of identifying the effects and communication functions of the illocutionary act. The data revealed that the illocutionary act and perlocutionary act contained the following types of communication functions: assertives

(boast, assert, claim, state, diagnose, complain, and conclude), directives (commands, orders, advice, suggest, and request), expressives (thanks, and feeling), commissives (promising), and declarations (declaration). Then, in the perlocutionary act, there are seven anticipated responses from the speaker to the audience. The data of victims who perished from the coronavirus-19 and the impact of the virus are discussed by President Joe Biden. Then, the speaker provides the audience with motivation to get through this pandemic successfully. In the meantime, President Joe Biden's speech in the White House, USA, was effective and elicited responses from the audience.

Despite extensive study on illocutionary acts in political speeches, including those by Joe Biden, a significant gap persists in the systematic analysis of these acts in his presentation marking the anniversary of the COVID-19 shutdown. Previous studies have frequently concentrated on diverse speeches, utilized distinct classification frameworks, or highlighted particular roles such as collaborative or expressive activities. These studies, though informative, fail to comprehensively represent the variety and distribution of illocutionary acts within the framework of a crisis-oriented presidential address, especially one intended to inform and unify the public amid a national emergency. Furthermore, there is an absence of research regarding the collective functioning of these speech acts in attaining the communicative objectives of reassurance, motivation, and policy communication during this critical juncture. This study aims to examine the different illocutionary acts present in President Joe Biden's speech commemorating the anniversary of the COVID-19 shutdown. The research specifically seeks to categorize the speech's utterances according to Searle's five classifications: directions, expressives, declaratives, assertives, and commissives, and to examine the distribution of these acts within the address. The primary research question for this study is: What types of illocutionary acts are present in President Joe Biden's speech on the anniversary of the COVID-19 shutdown, and how are these acts distributed among the five established categories? By addressing this question, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the pragmatic strategies employed in presidential crisis communication.

Method

The data in this study are elaborated descriptively, and it is classified as qualitative research. Qualitative research is the determining factor in the design of the study, as it allows for a comprehensive and in-depth examination of the data that has been collected. The explanation will be predicated on the facts that have been collected. As Prasatyo & Gustary, (2024) posited that qualitative research entails the collection of descriptive data from the written and spoken words of individuals, as well as observed behaviors, in order to investigate human intricacies, including communication comprehension. The researchers intend to assess Joe Biden's speech on March 11, 2021, which coincides with the anniversary of the COVID-19 closure. To commemorate the one-year anniversary of the COVID-19 closure. The speech was excerpted from President Biden's remarks on the anniversary of the Covid-19 shutdown in 2021. The transcript was considered reliable due to its publication on an official website that was owned by the White House Governor.

Results and Dissscussion

The classification of five categories of illocutionary act performed by Joe Biden's Rhetoric of pandemic Resilience

Based on the data analysis, the researchers analyzed the illocutionary speech act in Biden's Rhetoric of Pandemic Resilience performed by Joe Biden speech delivered on the anniversary of COVID-19.

Table 1. The distribution of Illocutionary Speech Act

No	Illocutionary acts	Total	Percentage
1	Assertive	15	30%
2	Commissive	11	22%
3	Directive	8	16%
4	Expressive	11	22%
5	Declarative	5	10%
	Total	50	100%

The data shows that the most performed speech act to the least one in Joe Biden's speech is: assertive (30%), commissive (22%), expressive (22%), directive (16%), and declarative (10%). Here, the assertive speech act was categorized as the most performed speech in the speech. In the speech delivered on the Anniversary of the COVID-19 shutdown, Joe Biden tended to inform, describe, and claim to convey his utterance to give a statement of facts or to describe things that he believed to be true. In the middle of the pandemic, Biden as the president of America, is responsible for sharing every information and situation regarding the latest update on COVID-19 response strategy. Every utterance that was delivered by Biden would be a reference information for the public. He needs to show his people his ability to deal with the current situation by stating facts and things that he believes to be true to strengthen the trust of people. This is one of the reasons that the assertive speech act is the most performed in his speech.

Assertive (Representative)

Representative is the utterance that the speaker believes to be true. This type of action includes stating, informing, describing, complaining, claiming, boasting, asserting. In this study, 15 utterances were found by the writers and categorized into representative speech acts. Here are some of the utterances.

*"Finding light in the darkness is a very American thing to do.
In fact, it may be the most American thing we do. And that's
what we've done."*

This sentence can be categorized as an assertive act of claiming. Joe Biden claims that the US is a state that is always capable of finding good things even in the worst situation. This utterance is conveyed directly during his speech. He tells the audience while he is delivering his speech.

*"We've been sending vaccines to hundreds of community health
centers all across America, located in underserved areas"*

This utterance is classified as an assertive act of describing or reporting. Joe Biden reports that his administration had been sending vaccines to hundreds of

community health centers even in the areas that were underserved. Joe Biden describes it directly in front of the people of America.

The findings of this study align with those of Romadhon (2021), who similarly recognized forceful acts as significant in Biden's crisis-related remarks, emphasizing their function in educating and inspiring the audience. Likewise, (Triana Sinaga et al., 2024) discovered that collaborative speech acts, encompassing assertives, were commonly utilized by Biden to report, declare, and issue directives during his 2024 presidential address. These studies together highlight the planned implementation of assertive actions to cultivate public trust and cohesion during national crises.

Commissive

The category of commissive includes a promise, vow, threat, refusal, and guarantee (Gea, 2020). Language has a dimension of context – dimensions of content (messages) and relationships. The message can be the same, but the meaning changes when the context changes. This change brings our understanding to various meanings, such as denotative meanings, connotative meanings, grammatical meanings, associative meanings, and other meanings. 11 utterances were found by the writers which are categorized into commissive. Here are some of the utterances:

"First, tonight, I'm announcing that I will direct all states, tribes, and territories to make all adults – people 18 and over – eligible to be vaccinated no later than May 1"

This sentence can be classified as commissive of vowing. Joe Biden said *"I will direct..."*, which shows that he promised something to his people during the speech. Joe Biden vows it directly in front of the American people in his speech.

"...I promise I will do everything in my power, I will not relent until we beat this virus, ..."

This sentence is classified as a commissive of promising. Joe Biden promises his people that he will do everything that he can do to face the pandemic.

Directive

The directive speech act is the speech act intended by the speaker so that the speech partner acts according to what is stated in the speech. A directive speech act is performed in the form of commanding, asking, ordering, requesting, inviting, suggesting, or forbidding (Larasati et al., 2020). The indicator of directive utterance is an action taken by the speech partner after hearing the utterance. In this analysis, 8 utterances were found by the writers and were categorized into directives. Here are the examples of the analysis.

"...but I need you, the American people. I need you, I need every American to do their part. And that's not hyperbole, I need you."

The sentence is categorized as the directive of asking or requesting. Joe Biden asks all Americans to as how the government wants them to do to beat the pandemic. The words *"I need you.."* show that the speech is classified as requesting something. Joe Biden delivers his speech directly and asks the Americans to do what they have to do.

"So my message to you is this: Listen to Dr. Fauci, one of the most distinguished and trusted in the world"

The utterance can be classified as a directive of commanding. Joe Biden asked all Americans to listen, to follow, what was mentioned by Dr. Fauci as the chief medical advisor at that period.

Expressive

Expressive is an utterance that can show the speaker's feelings by using words. This utterance includes the expression of thanking, welcoming, condoling, apologizing, regretting, praising, and congratulating (Tanjung, 2021). 11 utterances were found by the writer and categorized into expressive categories. Here are some of the utterances.

"A collective suffering. A collective sacrifice. A year filled with the loss of life – and the loss of living for all of us."

The utterance above belongs to the expression of condoling from Joe Biden to the audience. He expresses sorrow to the audience who had lost their family during the pandemic.

"And thank God we're making some real progress now"

This sentence is categorized as expressive of thanking. The word "thank God" indicates a greeting from the president to the people of America that finally his administration has real progress to be shown to the people.

The balance of commissive and expressive acts in the present study corroborates the assertion, as expressed by (Nur et al., 2024) and Mey (in (Haucsa et al., 2020) that efficacious political communication during crises necessitates the integration of factual information with commitments to action and empathetic involvement. The comparatively diminished occurrence of directions and declaratives corresponds with (Supiah Cahyati, 2024b) assertion that Biden typically eschews explicitly instructive or authoritative discourse, preferring inclusive and inspiring language instead.

Nevertheless, the present findings contrast with those of (Supiah Cahyati, 2024a) who indicated that expressive behaviors predominated in Biden's speech, implying a heightened focus on conveying the speaker's interior state and emotional resonance. Conversely, our analysis identifies expressive acts as the third most prevalent category, following assertives and commissives. This disparity might be ascribed to the particular setting and communicative aims of the COVID-19 shutdown anniversary address, which emphasized

transparency, reassurance, and policy communication rather than emotional expression.

Declarative

Declarative speech acts are speech intended by the speaker to create something new. Included in this type of speech are speeches intended to impress, decide, cancel, prohibit, grant, allow, classify, lift, and forgive. In this analysis, the writer found 5 utterances. Here are some of the utterances:

"That's why I'm using every power I have as President of the United States to put us on a war footing to get the job done. It sounds like hyperbole, but I mean it: a war footing"

In this speech, Joe Biden tried to declare to the people of America that America is ready to fight any situation that happens in America including the pandemic that still lingers at that time.

"But as I stand here tonight, we're proving once again something I have said time and time again that they're probably tired of hearing me say it. ... It's never, ever a good bet to bet against the American people. America is coming back"

The utterance is categorized as declarative or declaring. This utterance implicitly shows that Joe Biden tried to impress the American people by showing his power as a president to say that America will come back stronger than ever after the pandemic.

This study is founded on (Searle, 1969)'s classification of illocutionary acts, which underscores the fact that assertive acts are designed to represent states of affairs and convey the speaker's belief, frequently through statements, claims, and descriptions. The communicative objectives of crisis leadership, which prioritize informing the public, establishing credibility, and providing clear updates, are theoretically consistent with the preponderance of assertive acts in Biden's speech. This corroborates the claims of Bonvillian (2020) and (Haucsa et al., 2020) that the primary purpose of language in these contexts is to ensure that the audience comprehends the speaker's intended meaning.

Conclusion

An illocutionary act is anything that an individual does when they talk. The speaker's deliberate coordination with the listener is the illocutionary constraint in this act. In this research, the differences in categories of illocutionary acts were found. There are 15 utterances as assertive, 11 utterances as commissive, 8 utterances as directive, 11 utterances as expressive, and 5 utterances as declarative. These five categories support each other in conveying a message conveyed by Joe Biden so that the public can understand the purpose of Joe Biden's speech. The most used speech act in Biden's speech was Assertive. One reason the assertive speech act is dominant is that the purpose of his speech was to inform, describe, and claim about things that had been done in facing the pandemic situation. His utterances contain facts and things he believes to be true to gain people's trust in his actions.

These findings confirm prior research highlighting the importance of forceful and collaborative speech actions in political discourse during crises, while also revealing subtle variations in the use of expressives and directions based on the context and aims of the speech. The comparatively diminished frequency of instructions and declaratives in Biden's talk indicates a calculated rhetorical approach aimed at eschewing authoritarian overtones, while emphasizing inclusive and inspirational language.

This study enhances the comprehension of illocutionary acts as pragmatic instruments that influence public perception, galvanize collective action, and strengthen policy communication in national emergencies. The findings highlight the essential function of aggressive and supportive speech acts in fostering public trust and adherence. Future study should broaden this analysis to encompass a wider array of political speeches and cultural contexts, as well as examine the reception and impact of these speech acts on varied audiences. By doing so, scholars and practitioners can further clarify the dynamic interaction between language, leadership, and societal resilience during crises.

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