

An Analysis of Illocutionary Acts on Oprah Winfrey's Commencement Speech at Harvard

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Abstract

Speech act is the study in the pragmatics field which focuses in studying words which words are being seen as a tool to present information and carrying the action. This research used descriptive qualitative method as it aimed to analyze and describe the type and the most dominant illocutionary acts on Oprah Winfrey's Commencement Speech at Harvard. The data was analyzed based on Searle theory. The whole illocutionary act performed by Oprah Winfrey could be summarized as follows: 6 (15,4%) of representative/assertive, 5 (12,8%) of commissive, 14 (35,9%) of expressive, 13 (33,3 %) of expressive, 1 (2.6%) and of declarative. From the findings, it showed that directive is the most frequent type of act used by the speaker as in commencement speech the speaker will tend to give advices to the hearers.

Keywords : Pragmatics; Speech Act; Illocutionary acts

1. Introduction

One of the basic needs of human in living within the society is interaction. People interact with others to build the community and relationship. In order to build the relationship with others, people need to exchange their ideas and knowledge through communication. As McFarland (1958) said that communication is a process where meanings are being perceived and understanding is understood by humans. when people communicate with others, they do not only expect the listeners to pay attention to them, but further they expect the listeners to use their mind and sense to understand what they are trying to convey. In conveying their idea, they need the symbols or signals utilizing their sense which already understood among people, this signals and symbols frequently called as language. By using language, they could convey their thoughts to others, and also get the responses from the community or people they talk to.

According to Wibowo (2001:3), language is a system of symbols that are meaningful and articulate sound (generated by said tool) that are arbitrary and conventional, which is used as a means of communication by a group of men to give birth to feelings and thoughts. By the definition given, we know that language is the main tool to commute the ideas. Another definition comes from Gimson (1980) which stated that language is a system of conventionalized signals used for communication by whole community. The definition also supported the idea that language is important for the community to

convert their thought into form of words which can be delivered to others in order to build the relationship.

There are several branches of linguistics to study the use of language, one of them is pragmatics which has special bond with how language is used in the interactional context. Yule (1996: 3) has cited that Pragmatics deals with the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker or a writer and interpreted by a listener or reader. It concludes that pragmatics not only deals with what word means, but also deals with what speaker means. In conclusion, pragmatic is the study of the aspects of meaning and language that are dependent on the speaker, the addressee, and other features of the context of utterances. So, in studying pragmatic we do not only focus on the words delivered by the speaker, but also how the speaker behaves in delivering the words.

Realizing the phenomenon, some linguists like John L. Austin and Searle and experts start to pay attention to the broader meaning of an utterances delivered by the speakers. The study that commonly appears is speech act. The speech act theory enables us to explain the words uttered by speakers rather than merely describe some of their most significance features. For an example, when someone says, "I will be the winner in the next contest". By hearing that sentence, we grasp the words' meaning but at the same time we also trying to find the intention of the speaker by saying so, the intention could be a promise, prediction, or a threat.

Speech act firstly introduced by Oxford Philosopher John L. Austin in his book *How to Do Things with Words* (published posthumously from William James Lecture in 1962). Through the book, Austin presented a new framework of analyzing meaning (correlation between language principle and its meaning), the situation where the speaker says something to the hearer, they do not only deliver utterances, but also do something in which to support their intention to the hearer. In several college which summarized to this book, Austin depicted the concept of act. In the latter part of William James lecture, Austin introduces the concept of Locutionary, Illocutionary, and Perlocutionary act (1962). The definition of those three concepts of act can be illustrated as follows:

1.1 *Locutionary Act*

It is including the act of pronouncing sounds, the act of uttering words or sentence according to the rules of the language they are belong, and the acts of uttering a sentence with sense and more or less definite reference.

1.2 *Illocutionary Act*

The acts attributed to the effect of uttering a sentence. Austin says that in uttering a sentence the speakers having a certain force to convey a particular intention to the hearer.

1.3 *Perlocutionary Act*

The acts in which the speakers longing a certain respond of the words or sentence they deliver from the hearer.

Based on the classification of the speech act above, Austin distinguishes illocutionary acts into five categories:

- Verdictives (in which a speaker gives a verdict, e.g. acquitting and diagnosing),
- Exercitives (in which speakers exercise powers, rights or influence, e.g. excommunicating and resigning),
- Commissives (in which speakers commit themselves to causes or courses of action, e.g. promising and betting),
- Behabitives (concerning attitudes and social behavior, e.g. apologizing and toasting), and
- Expositives (in which speakers clarify how their utterances fit into lines of reasoning, e.g., postulating and defining).

But later, Austin's categories of illocutionary act were countered by his students, J.R. Searle. Searle (1976:10) criticized that Austin's methodology has no clear principle of classification and because there is a persistent confusion between illocutionary acts and illocutionary verbs, there is a great deal of overlap from one category to another and a great deal of heterogeneity within some of the categories.

By criticizing Austin, Searle offered a new classification of Illocutionary speech act, as follows:

1. **Representatives/assertive:** They contain a certain statement about the world. Representative conveys someone's belief that some proposition is true. e.g. describing, claiming, concluding...
Example: "No one makes a better cake than me"
2. **Directives:** They direct the hearer towards doing something; e.g. ordering, asking, requesting, advising...
Example: "Could you close the window?"
3. **Commissives:** Speaker commits himself to doing something to some future course e.g. promising, threatening, offering...
Example: "I'm going to Paris tomorrow"
4. **Expressives:** They express how the speaker feels about a certain situation; e.g. thanking, apologising, welcoming...
Example: Saying "Excuse me" when stepping on a person's toe. (Mey 2001, 165)
5. **Declarations:** The point of which is to bring something about in the world e.g. christening, marrying, firing
Example: "You're (hereby) fired."

There are several studies done using the new categories of Speech Act by Searle (1976), as examples; "An Analysis of Illocutionary Acts Performed by Alisha in EnglishClass101 Youtube Channel" by Fadhilah (2020) which aimed reveal the types, the function, and the dominant types of illocutionary acts used by Alisha in EnglishClass101. The study is descriptive qualitative method which used content analysis to analyze the data. The data were taken from utterances in monologue by the Alisha in EnglishClass101 YouTube channel. The result of the study showed that there are three kinds of illocutionary acts used Alisha in EnglishClass101 YouTube channel, they are representatives (102 data), directives (70 data) and expressive (45 data). Thus, the dominant type of illocutionary acts is representative. While for the function, there are three types of functions, namely collaborative, competitive, and convivial.

Another study done by Hariati, Pulungan, and Husein in 2020 with the title "Illocutionary Acts in Jack Ma's Inspiring Speech in His Graduation at The University

of Hongkong". Their research was a descriptive qualitative research that was aimed to find the types of illocutionary act performed by Jack Ma's speech in his graduation at the University of Hongkong. The findings showed that there are 7 types of illocutionary acts found. Those are 0 (0%) for declarative, 58 (62 %) for assertive, 11 (12 %) for expressive, 3 (3 %) for directive, 11 (12 %) for commissive, 4 (4 %) for assertive expressive and 7 (7 %) for assertive directive. As it can be seen, the most dominant type which was used is assertive.

From those two previous researches, the writers interested to find another subject to be studied using speech act theory proposed by Searle (1976). Among various types of communication, the writers decided to choose speech as the subject because in speech the speakers tend to be more organized in delivering their idea. The researcher chose Oprah Winfrey's Harvard commencement speech in 2013 to be the subject of the study. She has always been known as a successful public figure which host a talk show, become a media entrepreneur promoting education, civic engagement, and charities. Oprah Winfrey's style in building the conversation which often described as compassionate, empathetic and ultimately uplifting makes her being depicted as one of the most expressive, motivating, and loving communicators people have ever listened to. Her amazing communication skill makes her often called to give commencement speech. One of her commencement speeches happened in Harvard which being the subject of this study.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1 Research Question

Based on the background above, here we conclude the research questions for this study:

- What are the illocutionary acts types used by Oprah in her commencement speech at Harvard?
- What is the illocutionary act type which frequently used by Oprah in her commencement speech at Harvard?

2.2 Objectives Of The Study.

Based on the research questions above, the objectives of the study are:

- Identifying illocutionary acts type which are implied by Oprah in her commencement speech at Harvard.
- Finding the frequently used type of illocutionary acts which are implied by Oprah in her commencement speech at Harvard.

This research is aimed to analyze and describe the illocutionary acts types and the frequent illocutionary acts type used by Oprah Winfrey on Harvard commencement speech in 2013, the descriptive qualitative method is applied to conduct this research. According to Vanderstoep and Johnston (2008), qualitative research helps the researcher gain a deeper understanding. Thus, it become the suitable method for this research.

The research data are the utterances of Oprah Winfrey on her commencement speech at Harvard in 2013 that indicate illocutionary acts. The duration of the speech is 28

minutes and 51 seconds. The data source of this research is the speech transcripts taken from <https://singjupost.com/>, a trusted web that has many accurate transcripts on inspiring stories, famous speeches and educational talks video.

The researchers took some steps in collecting the data, those are downloading and watching the video, reading the transcript, and taking some notes. While for the data analysis, the steps are identifying illocutionary acts types that are used in the speech, classifying illocutionary acts types that are uttered, describing and interpreting the data with the aim to answer the formulation of the problems, counting the frequent Illocutionary act used in the speech, drawing conclusion

3. Result And Discussion

3.1 *The Illocutionary Act Types Used by Oprah Winfrey on her Commencement Speech at Harvard*

The findings in this research are concerned to five types of illocutionary acts performed by Oprah Winfrey on her Commencement Speech at Harvard. They types are classified by Searle into five categories. Those are representative/assertive, directive, expressive, commissive, and declarative.

Based on the video which has been analyzed by the researcher, it is found that there were 39 illocutionary acts performed Oprah Winfrey on her Commencement Speech at Harvard. The data findings could be seen below:

3.2 *Representative/assertive*

Assertive is the illocutionary act which is used by the speaker to express what they believe to be the case or not and commits to the speaker truth. It shows the truth condition of the meaning of the utterance. Kreidler (2002:183) explained representative is used by the speakers to express what they know or believe as it deals with facts. The researcher found 15,4 % or 6 assertive acts during the speech. Here are some sentences that we decide belong to assertive:

1. *Not too many little girls from rural Mississippi have made it all the way here to Cambridge.*

In the sentence, the speaker expresses what she believes about the condition in in her environment. And it's a general fact that mostly American believe. The characteristic matched with illocutionary act type assertive.

2. *But then I realized that you don't have to necessarily go to Harvard to have a driven obsessive Type A personality. But it helps.*

Through the sentence, the speaker expresses the general truth that believed by many people that going to Harvard is not the only way to make people become successful, but it really helps a lot.

3.3 Commissive

Commissive is used to commit the speaker in future action (Searle, 1969:64). Commissive could be found in promise form. That is why it reveals the intention of the speaker. It also has a goal to commit the speaker to carry out action or bring about some states of affairs. The sentences that include in commissive are sentence of promises, refusal, and pledges. The researcher found 12,8 % or 5 commissive acts during the speech. Here are some sentences that we decide belong to assertive.

Based on the data analysis, the data of commissive can be seen as follows:

1. ***I'm going to address my remarks to anybody who has ever felt inferior or felt disadvantaged, felt screwed by life, this is a speech for the Quad.***

By saying that sentence, the speaker commit herself to some future action where the action she is going to address her speech today for some certain people. In condition where the speakers commit themselves to some future actions, Searle categorize it as Commissive.

2. ***This is pretty good. I would like to be a journalist. I want to make a difference.***

Again, by uttered that sentence, the speaker shows her attention to be a journalist in the future. She commits to herself to a certain idea in the future which is belongs to Commissive.

3.4 Directives

The speaker attempts to make the hearer to do something. E.g.: advising, asking, begging, challenging, commanding, recommending, requesting, and suggesting. The researcher found 35,9 % or 14 directive acts during the speech. Here are some sentences that we decide belong to assertive:

1. ***Extend yourself in kindness to other human beings wherever you can.***

Through the sentence the speaker intends the hearer to the certain action she said. And the condition match with the illocutionary act type directive.

2. ***So, the question is, what are we going to do about it? Really, what are you going to do about it?***

By saying that, the speaker challenges the hearer about the things that they are going to do related to some issues that appear in the society. And this context is suitable with the directive type.

3.5 Expressive

Expressive utterance is used to show sincerity like excuses and sympathy. Searle (1969:63) states that expressive can be described through how the speaker feels about a state of affairs. It shows the attitude of the speaker as well as the emotions towards the proposition. The example of expressive utterances are the ones which express pleasure, pain, likes, dislike, joy, and sorrow, such as thanking, congratulating, pardoning, blaming, praising, condoling. The researcher found 33,3 % or 13 expressive acts during the speech. The data of expressive can be seen as follows:

1. ***thank you for allowing me to be a part of the conclusion of this chapter of your lives and the commencement of your next chapter...***

In the sentence, the speaker expresses her thought about how thankful she is to be invited to give commencement speech to the Harvard graduate. According to Searle's theory, the state where the speakers express their feeling towards a certain situation belong to assertive.

2. *Congratulations Class of 2013. Congratulations to your family and friends. Good luck and thank you for listening.*

Through the sentence, the speaker congratulates the graduate. And again, it shows her own feeling towards the situation. And as the first sentence, it belongs to assertive.

3.6 Declarative

The illocutionary act type that can change world by the utterance which is being produced is declarative. The change of word here refers to any kind of situation. It can refer to the change of one's status or the ownership of something. The examples of this type are resigning, dismissing, christening, naming, excommunicating, appointing, sentencing. The researcher found 2,6 % or 1 declarative acts during the speech. Here are some sentences that we decide belong to Declarative:

1. *So, one year later after launching OWN, nearly every media outlet had proclaimed that my new venture was a flop. Not just a flop, but a big bold flop they call it.*

Oprah retells the experience she had about her new program which with one sentence, it could totally change her life. The sentence Oprah delivered on her commencement speech was said by some media outlets which have a power to drive society's concern about a certain condition. And by released the news, it change Oprah condition where the society no longer admire her shows.

Table 1. The Frequent Illocutionary Acts Types Used by Oprah Winfrey on Her Commencement Speech at Harvard

NO	ILLOCUTIONARY ACTS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1	Representatives/Assertives	6	15,4%
2	Commissives	5	12,8%
3	Directives	14	35,9%
4	Expressives	13	33,3%
5	Declaratives	1	2,6%
	TOTAL	39	100%

As it can be seen from the table above, directive is the most dominant type used by Oprah Winfrey. It is because the event was a graduation ceremony where she was being asked to give a commencement speech. In commencement speech, the speaker will tend to give advices to the hearer about how they must continue to live their life after graduation, and the kind of act which intent the hearer to do something is directive.

The result of this research is in contrast with the study done by Puji Hariati, Anni Holila Pulungan, and Rahmad Husein in 2020 titled "Illocutionary Acts in Jack Ma's Inspiring Speech in His Graduation at The University of Hongkong", which assertive became the most dominant type used by Jack Ma. This result may happen because the main intention of Jack Ma's commencement speech is to make the hearers realize that they have to change the education system to be more concerned on competition of

creativity, imagination, learning, and independent thinking instead of just pass the knowledge to the students. He told his story that began his carrier with a very innovative way to support his intention. When he talked about his own experience, the type of speech act must be assertive which has characteristics depicted something relate to a certain condition in the environment. In the other hand, Oprah tend to support and motivate the hearer to face their future by carrying their title as Harvard alumni, that's why the result showed she used a lot of directive which has characteristic to suggest the hearer's to do something relates to their

4 Conclusions

After analyzing the data, we found 5 types of illocutionary acts such: 6 (15,4%) for representative/assertive, 5 (12,8%) for commissive, 14 (35,9%) for directive, 13 (33,3 %) for expressive, 1 (2.6%) for declarative. Based on the transcript, the researchers found that the dominant types of Illocutionary act that found on the speech is Directive. In commencement speech, the speaker will mostly give advices to the hearer about how they must live their life after graduation. The act which intent the hearer to do something is directive. Therefore, the type of illocutionary act which frequently used By Oprah Winfrey in this research is directive.

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APPENDIX

Video: <https://youtu.be/-54zUwySKCg>

Transcript: <https://singjupost.com/oprah-winfrey-speech-at-harvard-commencement-2013-full-transcript/?singlepage=1>