Illocutionary Acts Found In Barack Obama's Interview With Jimmy Kimmel Live Show

Putu Asrini[1], Luh Putu Laksminy[2], I Nyoman Tri Ediwan[3]

[1]English Literature, Udayana University, Denpasar, Indonesia,
asriniputu07@gmail.com
[2]English Literature, Udayana University, Denpasar, Indonesia,
putu_laksminy@unud.ac.id
[3]English Literature, Udayana University, Denpasar, Indonesia,
tri_ediwan@unud.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that examines how meaning is shaped through language use within specific contexts involving speakers and listeners. Central to this field is speech act theory, which explains how utterances perform actions and create social meaning. This study analyzes the types and functions of illocutionary acts used in an interview between Jimmy Fallon and former U.S. President Barack Obama, illustrating how pragmatic strategies operate in media interaction. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, the analysis is based on Searle's (1976) classification of illocutionary acts. Data were gathered through documentation and note-taking. The findings reveal three dominant illocutionary acts: representatives, directives, and expressives. Representatives convey beliefs or statements of fact, directives seek to influence the listener through questions or suggestions, and expressives communicate emotions or evaluations. Overall, the study shows how these illocutionary acts contribute to communicative intent, reflect interpersonal dynamics, and highlight the interactional styles of both interviewer and interviewee.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis, Illocutionary Acts, Pragmatics, Searle's Theory, Speech Acts

1. Introduction

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that examines how meaning is shaped by the context in which language is used. As Yule (1996) emphasizes, pragmatics focuses on the meaning intended by the speaker and how that meaning is interpreted by the listener, rather than solely on grammatical form. Similarly, Levinson (1983) defines pragmatics as the study of the relationship between language and context, particularly how this relationship is encoded in linguistic

structure. Thus, pragmatics underscores the crucial role of context in uncovering the intended meaning of an utterance. One central phenomenon within pragmatics is speech acts—communicative actions performed through language—which allow speakers not only to convey information but also to carry out actions such as requesting, apologizing, or promising. The analysis of speech acts is therefore significant, as it reveals communicative intentions and highlights the social functions of language in everyday interactions.

Speech acts are connected to linguistic expressions that function as actions when spoken by someone. At the beginning, Austin (1962), an English philosopher, made the first introduction to the concept of speech acts. He points out that when someone utters a sentence, it is part of the performance of an action (Austin, 1962). It suggests that when someone speaks, they are not only saying words, but also performing an action. Austin (1962) further classifies speech acts into three main types based on how language functions in communication. The first is locutionary acts, which refer to an action that produces spoken expressions literally with specific forms and meanings. This involves stating something using words that carry a specific meaning and authority. The second type is illocutionary acts, which are the actions performed in saying something through speaking. This type is considered the main idea of speech act theory because it highlights what the speaker does when speaking. Lastly, perlocutionary acts focus on the speech's effects on the listener, such as influencing their thoughts or actions. These three types are connected and commonly happen simultaneously in communication, making speech a powerful tool for expressing ideas, performing actions, and initiating responses.

Searle (1976) developed the speech acts theory proposed by Austin (1962) and classified illocutionary acts into five main categories based on their communicative functions. First, representative acts convey information that the speaker believes to be true. Second, directive acts are used by the speaker to encourage the listener to do something. Third, Commissive acts express the speaker's promise or commitment to carry out a future action. Fourth, expressive acts express the speaker's psychological or emotional attitude toward a particular situation. Lastly, declarative acts are utterances that directly change the state or social reality of something, just by saying it (Searle, 1976). These three types are connected and commonly happen simultaneously in communication, making speech a powerful tool for expressing ideas, performing actions, and initiating responses. These five categories illustrate how language conveys information and has various functions in social interaction. Each type is separated based on the speaker's intent and the social context in which the utterance occurs, highlighting language's action-oriented power in everyday communication.

Numerous scholars have explored the analysis of speech acts in various contexts. Diffani et al. (2023) conducted a prior study that analyzed illocutionary speech acts found in Aespa's speech delivered at the United Nations. The study aimed to classify the types of speech acts and examine the function of each. The study identified 18 utterances categorized under illocutionary acts, which fall into four types according to Searle's classification: representative, directive, expressive, and commissive. Permana et al. (2021) conducted a study focusing on the political speech of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Their research examined the application of speech acts within political discourse, especially highlighting the types used by political leaders and their communicative roles. The results indicated that assertive acts appeared most frequently, with

commissive and directive acts following in occurrence. In addition, Haucsa et al. (2020) carried out a study that examined illocutionary speech acts within an interview involving Tom Cruise. The study aimed to determine the types and communicative functions of illocutionary acts employed by the interviewer and the interviewee. The findings revealed the presence of four categories of speech acts in the dialogue: representative, commissive, directive, and expressive. In addition, the similarity between the three previous and current studies lies in their use of interview data and their focus on analyzing illocutionary acts. However, the distinction of this study is found in the data source, as it examines explicitly conversations from Barack Obama's interview on the Jimmy Kimmel Live show, which is an interview that has not been analyzed in the previous studies.

This study focuses on Barack Obama's conversation featured on the widely viewed American talk show *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, accessible via YouTube. As the 44th President of the United States (2009–2017) and the first African American to hold the office, Obama remains a highly influential public figure whose media appearances attract global attention. The episode titled "Jimmy Kimmel Asks President Barack Obama About His Daily Life," aired on March 13, 2015, was selected as the primary data source due to both the show's international popularity and Obama's strong public presence.

The study employs Searle's (1976) classification of five illocutionary act types as its theoretical framework. Its goal is to identify and categorize the illocutionary acts used by both the interviewer and the interviewee, as well as to analyze the communicative functions these acts serve within the interaction.

Based on this background, the research questions are formulated as follows:

1. What types of illocutionary acts appear in the conversation between Jimmy Kimmel and Barack Obama?
2. What communicative functions do these illocutionary acts serve within the context of the interview?

.

2. Methods

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the types and functions of illocutionary acts found in the verbal exchanges between Jimmy Kimmel and Barack Obama. As Creswell (2014) states, qualitative research aims to understand and interpret the meaning individuals or groups assign to social or human phenomena. Thus, this approach is appropriate for examining verbal expressions, particularly in relation to the context and circumstances in which the conversation takes place.

The data were collected using the documentation method, which involved obtaining and reviewing the transcript of the interview between Jimmy Kimmel and Barack Obama on *Jimmy Kimmel Live*. A note-taking technique was employed to identify and record utterances containing illocutionary acts relevant to the research focus. The primary instruments used in this study were the interview transcript and an analytical checklist based on Searle's (1976) classification of illocutionary acts.

This study involves several steps in analyzing the data. First, the interview conversations will be transcribed by watching the video from the YouTube channel, followed by collecting the

relevant utterances for analysis. Second, the utterances containing illocutionary acts based on Searle's (1976) classification will be identified and examined to determine their pragmatic function. Third, document and note each finding by presenting the original utterance, the identified type of illocutionary acts, and their corresponding pragmatic function. Finally, the analysis is concluded by summarizing the types of illocutionary acts found and their pragmatic functions within the conversation.

3. Findings and Discussion

In this section, the analysis of illocutionary acts found in the conversation data will be presented, followed by a brief explanation of the communicative function of each type of illocutionary act according to Searle's theory (1976). This analysis is conducted to determine the categories of illocutionary acts used and to interpret the meaning conveyed within the specific context of the conversation.

The data is divided into five categories of illocutionary acts according to Searle (1976). Based on the findings, three types of illocutionary acts are identified: representative, directive, and expressive. Each of the types will be presented as follows:

1. Representative

Data (1)
Jimmy: "You are allowed to go in the refrigerator on your own."
(Jimmy Kimmel Live, 2015, 00:19)

Sentence (Data 1) illustrates a moment in which the interviewer expresses his continued amusement at previously needing permission to access something as simple as a home refrigerator. Although delivered humorously, the utterance conveys a statement the speaker believes to be true. According to Searle (1976), representatives are speech acts in which the speaker commits to the truth of a proposition. In this instance, the interviewer asserts what he perceives as an accurate reflection of the interviewee's past situation, making the utterance a representative act.

The sentence also carries an implicit directive meaning, as the interviewer frames the idea of freely opening a refrigerator as something the interviewee should now be able to do without restriction. This humor underscores how ordinary "freedoms," such as accessing one's own refrigerator, felt exceptional to the interviewee due to the high degree of security and control surrounding his life during the presidency.

Data (2)

Obama: "I cannot drive. I mean, I am able to drive."
(Jimmy Kimmel Live, 2015, 00:34)

Sentence in data (2) expresses a situation when the interviewee responds to a question given by the interviewer regarding his experience as a driver. He started by saying that he *"cannot drive"* and then clarified that he could, but it might not be allowed by his role or

protocol. Therefore, he delivered two factual propositions: *"I cannot drive,"* meaning that he cannot drive socially or protocol-wise, and *"I am able to drive,"* meaning that he can drive in person. It is a representative because it expresses a propositional truth about his ability. Nevertheless, the statement emphasizes the distinction between capability and expected social norms. This aligns with Searle's (1976) explanation that representative acts involve the speaker performing to the honesty of the conveyed proposition. Therefore, the interviewee is telling the truth about himself that he can drive, but explains it in a casual tone while slightly insinuating how his freedom is restricted in his position, because although he can technically drive, in practice, he is not allowed to drive himself because he is the President.

Data (3)

Jimmy: "They call you Renegade, right, because you are tooling around in an electric car topping speed of 30m hour."
(Jimmy Kimmel Live, 2015, 01:28)

Sentence in data (3) expresses a situation where the interviewer is pointing to the Secret Service code name *"Renegade"* for the interviewee and trying to satirize that the activity of driving an electric car at low speed is not "rebellious". In general, the interviewer came up with a joking factual statement, saying that the name "Renegade" does not match the slow driving style of the electric car. This utterance can be categorized as a representative act, as Searle (1976) outlines representative as a statement in which the speaker affirms the precise truth of the verbalism. It presents a proposition combined with teasing, by stating something factual (a codename, speed of a car), but with a sense of humor, creating a contrast between the name and the reality. Therefore, this is a form of sharing information that the interviewer believes to be true about a situation or behaviour, as well as to build a relaxed and friendly vibe in the conversation, which makes it a typical part of talk show humour.

Data (4)

Obama: "Everything is there in the basement. I did not know I showed up, I said, 'You know I think I have got a loose cap', 'sir, here we are'."
(Jimmy Kimmel Live, 2015, 01:50)

Sentence in data (4) expresses a situation when the interviewee explains how the household staff is very responsive in handling his needs, even for small things like a broken faucet cap. In addition, this statement reflects a representative speech act, as it conveys the speaker's belief in the reliability of the services provided to him, for instance, the immediate availability and preparedness of all necessities. Searle (1976) notes that representation involves the speaker's dedication to the proposition's truthfulness. Therefore, the interviewee shared his experiences, representing how everything had been prepared for him. This form of delivering factual information, as well as making a humorous comment about the efficiency of the service system. The phrase, *"Sir, here we are,"* can allude to the President's highly organized life, where all the needs are immediately fulfilled even before being requested.

Data (5)

Obama: "Well, see this is a California thing because you guys are always getting Sun, yeah, in the East Coast you do not mind losing that hour because that is a signal that spring is here." (Jimmy Kimmel Live, 2015, 02:18)

Data (5) describes a situation in which the interviewee responds to the interviewer's question about daylight-saving time. He mentioned that the daylight-saving time perception differs from region to region in the US. The interviewee offers a propositional and informative explanation, showing why some people (e.g., on the East Coast) do not care about the time change. This utterance falls under representative speech acts, conveying a factual statement or opinion grounded in the speaker's perspective. This aligns with Searle's (1976) idea that representation involves the speaker affirming the proposition's reliability. Therefore, the interviewee shared the public's perspective on daylight saving time. It is a general commentary on the conditions, as well as sharing his point of view. Its function is to provide a reasonable answer to the previous question of why there is no need to abolish daylight saving.

2. Directives

Data (6)

Jimmy: "So when you are at home, can you, like, can you run down to the kitchen in your underpants in the middle of the night if you are hungry?"
(Jimmy Kimmel Live, 2015, 00:01)

Data (6) expresses a situation where the interviewer casually jokes with the interviewee, and he asks if the interviewee has the same freedom at home as ordinary people. The interviewer asked about facts and investigated the extent of the interviewee's personal autonomy at home. This corresponds to directive speech acts, which, according to Searle (1976), are defined as the speaker's attempts to prompt the listener to carry out a particular action. It is also an indirect question because it seems normal, but it encourages the interviewee to explain the social system or boundaries that apply in their home. Therefore, this sentence form is an indirect question that asks for information. Its function is to invite the interviewee to share his life changes funnily and humorously, and to build a friendly talk show atmosphere through hyperbolic questions.

Data (7)

Jimmy: "You do not know if there is someone in the kitchen at all times, like if you wanted a sandwich in the night, would you have to wake someone up?"
(Jimmy Kimmel Live, 2015, 00:08)

Data (7) expresses a situation where the interviewer is asking a question not just to know the facts, but also to express his confusion and curiosity about the home service system being discussed. Rather than making a direct request, the speaker would like more clarification or elaboration. This aligns with the nature of directive speech, which involves doing actions, which,

as Searle (1976) defined, require the speaker's intent to encourage the listener to act. In this context, the indirect question functions as a request for information concerning the interviewee's level of personal freedom at home. Although in the form of a question, this sentence aims to ask for clarification from the interviewee about the home service system and provokes a personal response from him that can lead to an interesting story.

Data (8)

Jimmy: "Will you get rid of daylight-saving time or at least get rid of the part where we have to wake up earlier? You can leave the other one."
(Jimmy Kimmel Live, 2015, 02:06)

Data (8) expresses a situation where the interviewer asks the interviewee about the possibility of removing daylight saving time, especially the part where people have to wake up earlier. The context is casual and humorous, but there is an implication of asking for a policy change. The interviewer uses an indirect question, *"Will you get rid of..."* as a request or suggestion. This utterance can be categorized as a directive speech act, as it encourages the interviewee to reflect on or potentially carry out a specific action. In line with Searle's (1976) definition, a directive is a speech act in which the speaker tries to influence the listener to accomplish a particular task. Therefore, although it is impossible to ask the interviewee to abolish daylight saving time since it is beyond his authority, the interviewer expressed an indirect hope or request to remove the policy.

3. Expressive

Data (9)

Obama: "I would not wake somebody up to have a sandwich."
(Jimmy Kimmel Live, 2015, 00:17)

Data (9) describes a situation in which the interviewee talks about his attitude towards a specific condition, which is not bothering others for his own needs. Thus, the utterance can be identified as an expressive speech act, conveying the speaker's internal psychological state or emotional reaction toward a particular situation. This aligns with Searle's (1976) classification, which defines speech acts as acts expressing the speaker's feelings, attitudes, or emotions as determined by the sincerity condition rooted in the act. Therefore, it provides a direct and causal answer to the previous question, and emphasizes whether the interviewee is expressing his perspective or stating his attitude, that he does not want to bother others for something trivial.

Data (10)

Obama: "Now it has been a while. It has been a while; it has been a while. I won't lie about that."

(Jimmy Kimmel Live, 2015, 00:29)

Data (10) describes a situation in which the interviewee responds to the previous question about the last time he cooked for himself. He admitted that it had been long since he had done so. Therefore, the interviewee confessed honestly by repeating *"It has been a while"* three times. This shows both emphasis and honesty. The phrase, *"I won't lie about that,"* confirms that he is not embarrassed to acknowledge it. This is an example of an expressive speech act, expressing the speaker's genuine emotional response regarding his situation. It also reflects personal and subjective feelings. As Searle (1976) stated, this action makes the speaker express a psychological state consistent with the speech's sincerity. Therefore, the interviewee confessed honestly that it had been a long time since he last cooked. Furthermore, *"I won't lie about that"* strengthens the idea of admitting or confession.

4. Conclusion

This study examines the types and functions of illocutionary acts, as outlined in Searle's theory, within the interview between Jimmy Kimmel as the interviewer and Barack Obama as the interviewee on the *Jimmy Kimmel Live* show. The findings indicate that representative acts are the most frequently used, followed by directive and expressive acts. The analysis also reveals that in informal interview settings, language serves not only to convey information but also to build rapport, shape public image, and create relatability through humor.

This study is limited by the small dataset and its focus on a single interview episode. Therefore, future research is encouraged to expand the scope by analyzing multiple interviews, comparing different public figures, or examining various media platforms. Such studies would provide a broader understanding of how speech acts operate in pragmatic discourse and contribute to interpersonal communication in public settings.

5. References

Austin, J. L. (1962). How to do things with words. Oxford: Clarendon Press

Creswell, J. W. (2014). Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches (4th ed., p. 4). SAGE Publications.

Diffani, H., & Harisna, H. (2023). An Analysis of Illocutionary Acts Found in Aespa Speech at The United Nation. ELTICS (English Language Teaching and English Linguistics) JOURNAL, 8(2), pp. 57–68.

Haucsa, G. M., Satriani, I. W., & Agustina, D. (2020). Illocutionary Speech Acts Analysis in Tom Cruise's Interview. Academic Journal PERSPECTIVE: Language, Education and Literature, 8(1), pp. 11–19.

Jimmy Kimmel Live. (2015). Jimmy Kimmel Asks President Barack Obama About His Daily Life [Video]. Available at: https://youtu.be/QmPLGt5rd_k?si=M0OvfG1Xt7jF7njP (Accessed on 25 June 2024)

Levinson, S. C. (1983). Pragmatics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.