

LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF SPEECH ACTS IN ONLINE COMMUNICATION

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Abstract. The rapid development of digital technologies and social media platforms has significantly transformed human communication, giving rise to new forms of discourse known as online or digital discourse. One of the most important aspects of online communication is the realization of speech acts, which function as fundamental units of interaction. This article explores the linguistic features of speech acts in online communication, focusing on how traditional speech act categories are adapted, transformed, or reinterpreted in digital environments. Using a qualitative discourse-analytical approach, the study examines examples from English-language online platforms such as social media comments, forums, and messaging applications. The findings reveal that online communication exhibits distinctive linguistic characteristics, including brevity, multimodality, indirectness, and pragmatic flexibility, which influence the performance and interpretation of speech acts. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of online discourse from a pragmatic and linguistic perspective.

Keywords: online communication, speech acts, pragmatics, digital discourse, linguistic features

Аннотация. Стремительное развитие цифровых технологий и социальных медиа-платформ существенно трансформировало человеческую коммуникацию, приведя к появлению новых форм дискурса, известных как онлайн- или цифровой дискурс. Одним из ключевых аспектов онлайн-коммуникации является реализация речевых актов, которые выступают в качестве фундаментальных единиц взаимодействия. В данной статье рассматриваются лингвистические особенности речевых актов в онлайн-коммуникации с акцентом на то, каким образом традиционные категории речевых актов адаптируются, трансформируются или переосмысливаются в цифровой среде. Используя качественный дискурсивно-аналитический подход, исследование анализирует примеры с англоязычных онлайн-платформ, таких как комментарии в социальных сетях, форумы и мессенджеры. Полученные результаты показывают, что онлайн-коммуникация характеризуется такими специфическими лингвистическими признаками, как краткость, мультимодальность, косвенность и прагматическая гибкость, которые влияют на реализацию и интерпретацию речевых актов. Исследование способствует более глубокому пониманию онлайн-дискурса с прагматической и лингвистической точек зрения.

Ключевые слова: онлайн-коммуникация, речевые акты, прагматика, цифровой дискурс, лингвистические особенности

Annotatsiya. Raqamli texnologiyalar va ijtimoiy media platformalarining jadal rivojlanishi insoniy muloqotni sezilarli darajada o'zgartirib, onlayn yoki raqamli diskurs deb ataluvchi yangi diskurs shakllarining yuzaga kelishiga sabab bo'ldi. Onlayn muloqotning muhim jihatlaridan biri nutq aktlarining amalga oshirilishi bo'lib, ular o'zaro muloqotning asosiy birliklari sifatida xizmat qiladi. Ushbu maqolada onlayn muloqotda nutq aktlarining lingvistik xususiyatlari o'rganilib, an'anaviy nutq aktlari kategoriyalarining raqamli muhitda qanday moslashishi, transformatsiyalanishi yoki qayta talqin qilinishi tahlil etiladi. Sifatli diskursiv-tahliliy yondashuv asosida tadqiqot ijtimoiy

tarmoqlar izohlari, forumlar va messenjerlar kabi ingliz tilidagi onlayn platformalardan olingan misollarni qamrab oladi. Tadqiqot natijalari onlayn muloqot qisqalik, multimodallik, bilvositalik va pragmatik moslashuvchanlik kabi o'ziga xos lingvistik xususiyatlarga ega ekanini ko'rsatadi hamda ushbu xususiyatlar nutq aktlarining bajarilishi va talqin etilishiga bevosita ta'sir ko'rsatadi. Mazkur tadqiqot onlayn diskursni pragmatik va lingvistik nuqtai nazardan chuqurroq anglashga xizmat qiladi.

Kalit so'zlar: onlayn muloqot, nutq aktlari, pragmatika, raqamli diskurs, lingvistik xususiyatlar

1. Introduction

In recent decades, online communication has become one of the dominant modes of human interaction, fundamentally reshaping the ways individuals exchange information, express attitudes, and construct social relationships. The rapid expansion of digital technologies and the widespread use of social media platforms, instant messaging applications, online forums, and comment sections have created new communicative spaces that transcend geographical and temporal boundaries. These digital environments are characterized by speed, interactivity, multimodality, and global accessibility, which together have contributed to the emergence of new forms of language use and discourse practices.

As communication increasingly shifts from face-to-face interaction to digitally mediated platforms, linguistic research has shown growing interest in how traditional theories of language and communication function within online contexts. Scholars argue that online discourse represents a hybrid mode of communication, combining features of spoken and written language while simultaneously introducing novel linguistic and pragmatic conventions. This hybrid nature challenges established linguistic models and calls for a re-examination of classical theories in light of contemporary digital practices.

One of the most influential theoretical frameworks for analyzing communicative behavior is speech act theory, originally formulated by Austin (1962) and later developed by Searle (1969). Speech act theory conceptualizes language as a form of social action, in which utterances do not merely convey information but actively perform functions such as requesting, apologizing, promising, advising, or asserting. These functions, known as illocutionary acts, are central to understanding how meaning is constructed and negotiated in interaction. Traditionally, speech act research has focused on face-to-face communication, where meaning is supported by paralinguistic and non-verbal cues such as intonation, gestures, facial expressions, and immediate feedback.

However, the realization of speech acts in online communication presents distinct challenges and opportunities that require further scholarly attention. Unlike face-to-face interaction, online communication often lacks physical and prosodic cues, relies on written or semi-written modes, and may occur asynchronously. In such contexts, users must employ alternative linguistic and pragmatic strategies to convey intention, manage politeness, and avoid misinterpretation. The widespread use of digital tools such as emojis, emoticons, hashtags, abbreviations, and unconventional punctuation has become an essential means of compensating for the absence of non-verbal signals and reinforcing illocutionary force.

Furthermore, online communication is shaped by platform-specific conventions and social norms, which influence how speech acts are performed and interpreted. For instance, a directive or criticism expressed in a private message may be perceived differently when posted in a public comment thread. Similarly, expressions of agreement, disagreement, or evaluation often combine textual

elements with visual or symbolic resources, highlighting the multimodal nature of online discourse. These features contribute to the pragmatic flexibility of speech acts and demonstrate the dynamic interaction between linguistic form, technological affordances, and social context.

Against this background, the present article aims to analyze the linguistic features of speech acts in online communication, focusing on how they are structured, expressed, and interpreted in English-language digital discourse. By examining authentic examples from social media platforms, forums, and messaging applications, the study seeks to identify recurring patterns in the realization of speech acts and to explore how digital environments reshape traditional pragmatic categories. The research addresses the following questions:

1. What types of speech acts are most frequently used in online communication?
2. What linguistic features characterize the realization of speech acts in digital contexts?
3. How does online communication influence the pragmatics of speech act interpretation?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute to the growing body of research on online discourse and pragmatics, offering insights into the evolving nature of language use in digital communication. The findings are expected to have implications for discourse analysis, applied linguistics, and intercultural communication studies, particularly in understanding how meaning and social action are negotiated in digitally mediated interaction.

2. Literature Review

Speech act theory originates from Austin's (1962) foundational distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, which marked a significant shift in linguistic and philosophical thought by emphasizing language as a form of action rather than a mere vehicle for conveying information. According to Austin, every utterance simultaneously involves the production of a linguistic expression (locution), the performance of an intended communicative function (illocution), and the achievement of certain effects on the hearer or reader (perlocution). This framework laid the groundwork for subsequent pragmatic studies that seek to explain how meaning is created and interpreted in context.

Building on Austin's work, Searle (1976) proposed a systematic classification of speech acts into five main categories: assertives, which commit the speaker to the truth of a proposition; directives, which attempt to get the hearer to do something; commissives, which commit the speaker to a future course of action; expressives, which convey the speaker's psychological state; and declaratives, which bring about changes in institutional or social reality. Searle's taxonomy has become one of the most widely used models in pragmatic analysis and has been applied across various communicative settings, including political discourse, classroom interaction, and interpersonal communication.

With the emergence of computer-mediated communication (CMC), researchers have increasingly questioned how well traditional speech act models account for language use in digital environments. Scholars generally agree that classical speech act categories remain relevant; however, their realization in online contexts often differs significantly from face-to-face interaction and therefore requires theoretical and methodological adaptation. Crystal (2006) argues that online language represents a hybrid mode that combines characteristics of both written and spoken discourse while also introducing new pragmatic conventions shaped by technology. This hybridity affects how speech acts are formulated, interpreted, and evaluated in digital interaction.

Herring (2004) further emphasizes the importance of technological affordances—such as message length limitations, asynchronous communication, and multimodal resources—in shaping online discourse practices. These affordances influence turn-taking mechanisms, politeness strategies, and the sequential organization of speech acts. For instance, delayed responses in asynchronous communication may alter the perceived force or sincerity of a commissive or directive act, while public visibility on social media platforms may intensify the perlocutionary effects of assertives and expressives.

A growing body of empirical research has focused on the realization of speech acts in specific online genres. Yus (2011), within the framework of cyberpragmatics, examines how pragmatic meaning is constructed in digital interactions and highlights the frequent use of indirect speech acts as a strategy for mitigating face-threatening acts in the absence of non-verbal cues. His work underscores the role of contextual inference and shared digital knowledge in interpreting illocutionary intent.

Similarly, Tagg (2015) investigates speech acts in text messaging and online interpersonal communication, demonstrating that brevity, informality, and ellipsis significantly influence the form and function of directive and expressive acts. According to Tagg, users rely on minimal linguistic forms and shared contextual assumptions to achieve communicative efficiency, often compressing multiple pragmatic functions into a single utterance.

The role of emojis and emoticons has also received considerable attention in recent studies. Dresner and Herring (2010) argue that emojis function as pragmatic markers that modify, reinforce, or clarify illocutionary force rather than simply expressing emotion. In online discourse, these visual elements often compensate for the lack of prosodic and gestural cues, reducing ambiguity and aiding the interpretation of speech acts such as irony, humor, or politeness.

Despite the growing interest in online pragmatics and computer-mediated discourse, existing research often focuses on specific platforms, genres, or individual pragmatic phenomena. There remains a need for more comprehensive analyses that systematically examine the linguistic features distinguishing online speech acts from their offline counterparts. In particular, fewer studies integrate speech act theory with discourse-based linguistic analysis across a range of online contexts. The present study addresses this gap by offering a discourse-based analysis of English online communication, with particular attention to the linguistic realization and pragmatic interpretation of speech acts in digital environments.

3. Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative discourse analysis approach to investigate the realization of speech acts in online communication. This methodological framework is particularly suitable for examining pragmatic phenomena, as it allows for an in-depth analysis of linguistic forms in relation to their contextual and communicative functions. By focusing on naturally occurring language data, the study aims to capture authentic patterns of speech act usage in digital environments.

3.1 Data Collection

The data corpus consists of English-language online interactions collected from publicly accessible digital platforms, including social media comment sections (such as Twitter/X and Instagram), online discussion forums, and excerpts from instant messaging platforms. These platforms were selected due to their widespread use and their representation of diverse communicative settings, ranging from public and semi-public interactions to more conversational exchanges.

The data were collected over a defined time period to ensure consistency and relevance. Only publicly available content was included in the corpus, and no private conversations or restricted-access materials were used. This approach ensures that the data reflect common patterns of online communication while adhering to ethical research standards.

3.2 Data Sampling and Categorization

From the collected corpus, approximately 500 short online utterances were selected based on their relevance to the realization of speech acts. The selection criteria included the presence of clear communicative intent and identifiable illocutionary force, such as requests, evaluations, expressions of emotion, or commitments. Utterances consisting solely of non-linguistic content were excluded unless accompanied by textual elements contributing to pragmatic meaning.

The selected utterances were categorized according to Searle's (1976) speech act taxonomy, namely assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives. This classification provided a systematic framework for analyzing the functional distribution of speech acts across different online contexts and platforms.

3.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis focused on identifying and interpreting the linguistic features that characterize the realization of speech acts in online communication. These features included sentence structure, lexical choice, modality, levels of directness or indirectness, and the use of digital symbols such as emojis, hashtags, abbreviations, and unconventional punctuation. Particular attention was paid to how these elements contribute to the expression of illocutionary force and the management of interpersonal relations in digital discourse.

Each utterance was analyzed in its immediate textual and situational context to account for pragmatic factors influencing interpretation. Where relevant, multimodal elements were considered as integral components of meaning-making rather than as peripheral additions to textual content.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Usernames and identifiable information were anonymized, and no attempt was made to trace utterances back to specific individuals. Sensitive or potentially harmful content was excluded from the analysis. The study focuses on linguistic patterns and discourse practices rather than on individual user behavior, thereby ensuring objectivity, confidentiality, and academic integrity.

By combining qualitative discourse analysis with a well-established pragmatic framework, the methodology provides a robust basis for examining how speech acts are performed and interpreted in online communication.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Types of Speech Acts in Online Communication

The analysis shows that **assertives**, **directives**, and **expressives** are the most frequent speech acts in online discourse. Assertives are commonly used to express opinions, share information, or make evaluations (e.g., *"This update is useless."*). Directives, such as requests and suggestions, often appear in indirect forms (e.g., *"Maybe you could check the link again?"*). Expressives, including expressions of emotions, reactions, and attitudes, are particularly prominent in social media interactions.

Commissives, such as promises or offers, appear less frequently but are still present, especially in customer service or collaborative online environments. Declaratives are rare due to the lack of institutional authority in most online settings.

4.2 Linguistic Features of Online Speech Acts

One of the defining linguistic features of online speech acts is **brevity**. Users tend to produce short, concise utterances, often omitting grammatical elements such as subjects or auxiliary verbs. Despite their reduced form, these utterances effectively perform speech acts due to shared contextual knowledge.

Another key feature is **informality**. Online speech acts frequently employ colloquial vocabulary, contractions, slang, and non-standard spelling. This informality contributes to a conversational tone and facilitates rapid interaction.

Multimodality plays a crucial role in online speech acts. Emojis, GIFs, and punctuation marks often function as pragmatic cues that clarify illocutionary force. For example, a directive accompanied by a smiling emoji may be interpreted as polite rather than commanding. Similarly, capitalization and repeated punctuation can intensify expressives or assertives.

4.3 Indirectness and Pragmatic Flexibility

Online communication exhibits a high degree of **indirectness**, particularly in directives and criticisms. Users often mitigate face-threatening acts by using modal verbs, hedges, or questions. This strategy helps maintain politeness in the absence of non-verbal cues.

Pragmatic flexibility is another significant characteristic. The interpretation of speech acts in online contexts heavily depends on shared norms, platform-specific conventions, and situational context. An utterance may simultaneously perform multiple speech acts, such as expressing an opinion while implicitly requesting agreement.

4.4 Challenges in Speech Act Interpretation

The absence of prosody and body language can lead to ambiguity in online speech acts. Misinterpretations are common, especially when expressive or ironic utterances are involved. To compensate, users employ explicit markers such as emojis, disclaimers, or meta-comments (e.g., “*Just kidding*”).

Asynchronous communication also affects speech act sequencing and responses. Delayed replies may alter the perceived intention or urgency of a directive or commissive, demonstrating the dynamic nature of online pragmatics.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the linguistic features of speech acts in online communication, highlighting how digital environments shape language use and pragmatic meaning. The findings demonstrate that while traditional speech act categories remain applicable, their realization in online discourse is characterized by brevity, informality, multimodality, and pragmatic adaptability.

Online communication encourages indirectness and flexibility, allowing users to negotiate meaning through linguistic and non-linguistic resources. These features reflect the evolving nature of language in digital contexts and underline the importance of studying online discourse within pragmatic frameworks.

Future research may expand this study by incorporating cross-linguistic comparisons or quantitative methods to further explore speech act variation across platforms and cultures.

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