



Constructing Meaning in Computer-Mediated Communication: A Speech Act Perspective

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Abstract

This study investigates how speech acts function in online communication, particularly in the absence of non-verbal cues such as tone of voice, gestures, and facial expressions. Adopting the framework of speech act theory by Austin and Searle, the research explores how users perform communicative actions like requesting, apologizing, and asserting using only text and platform-specific tools. Employing a qualitative approach, this research analyzes messages from online platforms to identify types of speech acts and strategies users apply to ensure their intent is understood. The findings reveal that users adapt language and utilize emojis, timing, punctuation, and politeness strategies to construct meaning and maintain interactional harmony. The study concludes that pragmatic competence and contextual awareness are critical to effective digital interaction. The implications of these findings highlight the importance of integrating digital pragmatics into language education, user training, and platform design to enhance the quality of online communication in various social and professional settings.

Keywords: *Speech Acts; Digital Communication; Computer-Mediated Interaction*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana tindak tutur berfungsi dalam komunikasi daring, khususnya dalam ketiadaan isyarat nonverbal seperti intonasi, gerakan, dan ekspresi wajah. Dengan menggunakan teori tindak tutur dari Austin dan Searle, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana pengguna melakukan tindakan komunikatif seperti permintaan, permintaan maaf, dan penegasan hanya dengan teks dan fitur spesifik platform. Pendekatan kualitatif digunakan untuk menganalisis pesan dari berbagai platform online guna mengidentifikasi jenis-jenis tindak tutur dan strategi yang digunakan pengguna agar maksud mereka dapat dipahami. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pengguna menyesuaikan bahasa dan menggunakan emoji, waktu respon, tanda baca, serta strategi kesantunan untuk membangun makna dan menjaga keharmonisan interaksi. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa kompetensi pragmatik dan kesadaran kontekstual sangat penting untuk komunikasi digital yang efektif. Implikasi dari penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya mengintegrasikan kajian pragmatik digital ke dalam pembelajaran bahasa, pelatihan pengguna, dan pengembangan platform agar komunikasi daring di berbagai konteks sosial dan profesional menjadi lebih efektif dan bermakna.

Kata Kunci: *Tindak Tutur; Komunikasi Digital; Interaksi Mediasi Komputer*

INTRODUCTION

Digital communication has fundamentally reshaped the way individuals interact across platforms and contexts. The rapid proliferation of social media, messaging applications, and online forums has introduced new modes of communication that are immediate, asynchronous, and predominantly text-based. These developments offer notable advantages, such as global reach and instantaneous message delivery. However, they also pose distinct challenges—chief among them is the absence of non-verbal cues like tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures that are critical for interpreting communicative intent.

In traditional face-to-face settings, such cues serve as essential tools in helping interlocutors decode the meaning behind an utterance. In contrast, computer-mediated communication (CMC) relies almost entirely on linguistic input, supplemented only by optional visual elements such as emojis, GIFs, or typographical features. This reliance on limited channels of expression raises important questions about how speech acts—such as apologizing, requesting, or commanding—are performed and interpreted in digital environments. Miscommunication can easily occur when a message lacks sufficient contextual information to clarify the speaker's intent.

Speech Act Theory, originally introduced by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1976), provides a valuable framework for understanding language as a form of action. According to this theory, utterances do not merely convey information but also perform functions. Speech acts are categorized into several types, including directives (e.g., commands, requests), expressives (e.g., apologies, gratitude), commissives (e.g., promises), assertives (e.g., declarations of fact), and declarations (e.g., official announcements). In digital contexts, the efficacy of these acts hinges on the speaker's ability to encode their intentions clearly and the recipient's capacity to interpret them accurately.

Previous research on digital pragmatics has sought to address these phenomena. Studies by Herring (2001), Crystal (2006), and more recently Yusri and Taqdir (2025) have shown that users adapt to CMC environments by incorporating various paralinguistic strategies—such as emoticons, unconventional punctuation, and typographical emphasis—to approximate tone and emotion. Nevertheless, much of this research has been platform-specific or focused on particular user groups. There remains a gap in understanding how these pragmatic strategies function across diverse digital contexts and communication genres, especially when stripped of conventional non-verbal cues.

This study aims to fill that gap by examining the types of speech acts prevalent in digital communication and identifying the linguistic and visual strategies users employ to perform them effectively. By analyzing how meaning is constructed, conveyed, and negotiated in the absence of face-to-

face contextual features, this paper seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of communication in online environments. The findings are expected to provide insight into the pragmatic adaptability of users and the evolving nature of interaction in the digital age.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method with a case study approach to explore how speech acts are performed and interpreted in digital communication. The data consist of purposively selected communication exchanges from various online platforms, including WhatsApp group chats, Instagram comment threads, and online discussion forums. The selection of participants was based on their active engagement and observable use of diverse speech acts in digital contexts. Ethical considerations were addressed by anonymizing participants' identities and obtaining informal consent prior to data collection.

The unit of analysis comprises utterances that reflect speech acts within computer-mediated communication (CMC). These include not only the textual content but also contextual elements such as emojis, punctuation, message timing, and interactional sequencing. Data were collected using documentation techniques, primarily through screenshots and annotated message threads. The analysis process followed several stages: data reduction to isolate relevant utterances, categorization of speech acts based on Searle's (1976) taxonomy, contextual interpretation using Herring's (2001) CMC framework, and pragmatic analysis to uncover meaning construction strategies.

This methodological design integrates both linguistic and multimodal dimensions to reveal how digital users perform social actions through text and supplementary visual cues. It also examines how individual identity, cultural background, generational patterns, and group dynamics influence pragmatic choices in online interaction. The combination of theoretical grounding and empirical data allows the study to offer insights into how users strategically manage meaning, maintain relational harmony, and co-construct evolving norms within digital discourse communities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals five major findings. First, participants demonstrated distinct communication styles corresponding with specific speech acts. Some favored directive speech acts to issue commands or requests, reflecting a goal-oriented style. Others employed commissive acts to promise actions and express future intentions. Expressive acts were commonly used to show gratitude, apology, or emotional response. Assertive acts allowed participants to share knowledge and opinions, while declarative acts were used to mark official changes in group dynamics. These styles align

closely with users' personality traits, social roles in the group, and the purpose of interaction.

Second, the functions of these speech acts were tailored to the digital context. Directive acts were often softened with politeness markers or embedded in questions to appear less imposing (e.g., "Could you send the file when you're free?"). Commissive acts were found in commitments such as "I'll submit this by tonight," used to foster trust and accountability. Expressive acts helped smooth conflicts or show alignment, for example through messages like "Sorry I missed that" or "Thank you, that means a lot." Assertives were typically used to share opinions or feedback, while declaratives marked administrative changes such as "Meeting is postponed to Friday." The study confirms that even in online settings, users actively perform social functions through strategic use of language.

Third, users employed a range of strategies to construct meaning and avoid ambiguity. Emojis played a central role not just in emotional expression, but also in disambiguating intent. A smile emoji could soften a complaint, while a thumbs-up could signal agreement or closure. Punctuation choices such as ellipses or multiple exclamations added affective cues. The timing of responses also shaped interpretation; a long delay could be seen as disinterest, offense, or simply busyness, depending on relational context. Users often included clarifying remarks like "no offense" or "just kidding" to mitigate face-threatening acts. Some even layered images, stickers, or memes to reinforce meaning beyond words.

Fourth, context significantly influenced speech act interpretation. Platform norms played a vital role—WhatsApp allowed for informal and fast exchanges, while email or learning management systems (LMS) fostered formal, restrained tone. The nature of the relationship also mattered. Close friends could be direct and humorous, while communication with superiors or strangers typically involved indirectness, hedging, and formality. Topics also influenced formality and emotion; casual plans led to expressive and assertive acts, while project discussions triggered more directives and commissives. These findings emphasize that pragmatics is inseparable from context.

Fifth, users faced challenges such as misinterpretation due to lack of tone, delay in feedback, and cultural differences in emoji or idiom use. Adaptations included using explanatory follow-ups (e.g., "what I meant was...") or combining multiple modalities (text, emoji, image). Younger users showed more creativity with digital expressions, while older users tended to rely on more traditional sentence structure. These adaptations underline the evolving literacy demands in digital communication.

Another important dimension observed in this study is the influence of individual user identity and cultural background on the construction of speech acts. Participants who shared the same cultural values or norms

tended to interpret and respond to speech acts more harmoniously, whereas those with differing cultural assumptions often required more explicit clarification. For instance, expressions of politeness in one language may appear too formal or distant in another. Emojis and digital stickers were also used differently based on regional norms; a symbol considered friendly in one country might carry different connotations elsewhere. This highlights the need for intercultural awareness in global digital communication.

Additionally, generational differences shaped the way participants used digital tools to support speech acts. Younger users often incorporated abbreviations, internet slang, and rapidly evolving meme culture into their messaging. Their use of language was dynamic and visually oriented, integrating TikTok references or viral catchphrases to express agreement, sarcasm, or critique. Older users tended to maintain more structured sentence forms, conventional punctuation, and avoided ambiguous shorthand. Despite these stylistic differences, all participants shared the goal of ensuring their messages were interpreted accurately and respectfully.

Participants also reflected metacognitive awareness in their digital communication. Some voluntarily explained the intent behind their messages, especially when context was limited or the topic was sensitive. Statements such as “not being rude, just honest” or “I’m saying this with respect” were used to preface potentially face-threatening speech acts. This suggests that users are not only intuitively aware of speech act implications but also strategically manage their language to preserve relationships.

The integration of multimodality was particularly prominent in complex exchanges. Instead of relying solely on text, participants sometimes used voice notes, screenshots, or short videos to supplement their written messages. These additional modes added clarity and enriched the communicative context. For example, sending a screenshot of an error message while requesting help clarified the directive act, reducing the need for lengthy explanations.

From an interactional perspective, the timing and sequencing of digital speech acts also contributed to meaning-making. In group chats, sequential positioning of replies created a thread of responses that built upon one another. When users failed to respond to a message, the omission itself could be interpreted as avoidance or disapproval, indicating the social weight of silence in digital spaces. Conversely, a quick reaction—such as a thumbs-up—served as a minimal but meaningful response that signaled acknowledgment or acceptance.

In educational and workplace contexts, the analysis found that assertive and declarative acts were often more prominent. Students used assertives to express opinions during group discussions, while teachers or managers relied on declarations to announce rules or schedule changes. These professional exchanges often required higher precision, and users

employed formal structures and reduced reliance on emojis or informal markers. The shift in tone and structure between personal and professional online communication revealed how platform expectations and power dynamics influence speech act performance.

Lastly, this study observed that users not only adjusted their communication based on context but also consciously negotiated norms and etiquette over time. Newcomers in a group adapted to the group's communication style, mimicking others' phrasing or emoji use. Over time, the group developed a shared understanding of how to interpret specific words or signals. This co-construction of pragmatic norms highlights the evolving and negotiated nature of digital discourse communities.

Moreover, the temporal dimension of online interaction adds complexity to speech act interpretation. Unlike synchronous face-to-face dialogue, many digital conversations are asynchronous, with time lags between responses. This affects how speech acts are sequenced and understood. A delayed response to a question might be interpreted differently depending on the platform, context, and relationship between participants. In professional environments, such delays may be interpreted as negligence or low commitment, while among close friends, they are often excused or ignored. The elasticity of time in digital platforms contributes to a flexible yet ambiguous interactional space.

One of the more nuanced findings concerns how humor functions as a speech act strategy. Participants frequently used sarcasm, irony, and satire to communicate dissent, alignment, or critique in subtle ways. These forms often rely on shared context or cultural references. For example, one participant used a viral meme format to reject a proposal jokingly, which was immediately understood by others in the group. However, in intercultural communication or among less familiar groups, such humor may be misinterpreted. Thus, humor serves as both a bonding mechanism and a potential site for miscommunication.

The data also reveal that speech act performance is often scaffolded by platform-specific affordances. On Instagram, for instance, comment threads are typically short and visible to a broader audience, leading users to prefer brief expressives (e.g., "Beautiful!", "Wow!") or indirect directives (e.g., tagging someone to draw their attention). On WhatsApp or Telegram, longer messages, sequential replies, and multimedia are more common, allowing for more elaborate speech acts. These affordances shape not only what people say, but how they say it—and how it is understood.

Finally, the role of identity construction through speech acts emerged as a key theme. Digital communication is not merely transactional but also performative: users craft and project aspects of their identity through language choices. For instance, some participants consistently used formal structures and polite directives to construct a professional persona, even in

casual group chats. Others employed playful expressives and hyperbole to establish a humorous or light-hearted identity. This strategic identity work demonstrates that digital language is not only about conveying meaning, but also about negotiating roles, relationships, and self-presentation.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study affirms that the digital space is not devoid of pragmatic richness but instead offers a dynamic environment for speech act realization. Users actively construct meaning through intentional choices in wording, structure, timing, and multimodal cues. They draw from shared norms, personal experiences, and platform affordances to manage social interactions, express identities, and navigate relational dynamics. By extending speech act theory into the digital realm, this research enriches the understanding of language use beyond traditional spoken or written contexts. The evidence presented suggests that effective communication in online settings is grounded not only in grammatical accuracy but in pragmatic sensitivity and adaptive strategy.

This study also contributes to applied linguistics by offering insights into how digital language is produced and interpreted across social and generational lines. It shows that technology not only changes the medium of communication but also reshapes language behavior itself. Speech acts in online platforms reveal evolving forms of politeness, indirectness, and expression shaped by digital constraints and affordances. Educators are encouraged to include digital pragmatics in language curricula to prepare students for the nuances of online interaction. Lessons that explore emoji use, politeness in chat, or miscommunication in texting can foster better digital citizenship. Meanwhile, software developers and platform designers should consider enhancing tools that support clear intent and user-friendly feedback—for example, contextual emoji recommendations or tone-check features.

Finally, future research may explore how speech acts evolve in emerging communication environments such as virtual reality spaces, AI chat interfaces, or multilingual online communities. Understanding speech acts in these contexts can offer broader insights into the future of human interaction and communication competence in the digital age.

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