

Power Play In Political Discourse: Speech Act Strategies In BBC Hardtalk Interviews

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Abstract. This study examines the use of speech acts in the BBC HARDtalk political interview with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and their pragmatic functions. The study aims to identify the types of speech acts used in a political interview context. This research applies Searle's (1979) classification of speech acts, namely representative, commissive, directive, expressive, and declarative. A descriptive qualitative method is employed, with data taken from the official transcript of the BBC HARDtalk interview broadcast on February 23, 2017. The data are analyzed through observation and classification of the interviewee's utterances. The findings show that representative speech acts are the most dominant type, with 41 utterances (87%), mainly used to state facts, provide explanations, and give clarification. Commissive speech acts appear in 4 utterances (9%), while directive and expressive speech acts each appear in 1 utterance (2%). Declarative speech acts are not found in the data. These findings indicate that speech acts function as language strategies to maintain credibility, build public image, and control interaction in political interviews.

Keywords: bbc hardtalk, political interview, pragmatics, pragmatic analysis, speech acts

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

As a core aspect of human life, language serves more than a communicative purpose; it enables individuals to articulate their thoughts, establish social bonds, and embody the cultural values of their communities Yule (1996). Through language, people convey ideas, emotions, and intentions that shape how they understand themselves and others. As Lun (2020) explains, language serves as a symbolic system through which culture is both represented and transmitted. Every utterance is influenced by the norms and values of the society in which it occurs. Therefore, language and culture are inseparable because the use of language always reflects social and cultural awareness. To understand how language functions effectively across different contexts and cultural backgrounds, it is essential to study pragmatics as the branch of linguistics that examines meaning in context.

In the field of linguistics, pragmatics plays a crucial role in understanding language beyond its structural form. Pragmatics focuses on meaning in relation to context, considering what speakers intend to communicate and how listeners interpret it. Yule (1996) defines pragmatics as the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker and interpreted by a listener. This means that communication involves more than grammar and vocabulary; it depends on shared knowledge, social context, and the speaker's purpose. Pragmatics emphasizes how people use language in real situations, taking into account who they are speaking to, where the interaction occurs, and why the message is being delivered (Farinde & Oyedokun-Alli, 2020).

Within pragmatics, one of the most influential frameworks is Speech Act Theory, proposed by White (1963) and developed by Loar & Searle (1982). White argued that when people speak, they are not

only saying something but also doing something through their words. For example, when a person apologizes or promises, they perform an action through their utterance. Loar & Searle further refined this theory by classifying speech acts into five categories: representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. Each type represents a particular function and reflects the speaker's communicative intention. This theory highlights that language is not merely used to describe the world but to perform actions that have real effects in social interactions.

Speech Act Theory is highly relevant to the study of political communication. Politicians use language strategically to achieve specific goals, such as persuading the public, defending policies, maintaining authority, and shaping their image. Political speech is therefore a form of action that serves social and ideological purposes. Joullié et al. (2021) describes discourse as a site of power and struggle, where every linguistic choice can influence how people perceive authority and truth. Politicians often employ linguistic strategies such as justification, denial, or commitment to align their messages with their political interests. Studying speech acts in this context allows researchers to understand how political figures use language to perform actions that sustain power and legitimacy.

Among the many sources of political discourse, BBC HARDtalk provides a valuable site for pragmatic analysis. The program is well known for its confrontational interview style and direct questioning of prominent political figures. Unlike formal speeches that are carefully prepared, HARDtalk features spontaneous dialogue that reveals the authentic linguistic behavior of interviewees. The interaction between interviewer and interviewee often contains various types of speech acts, including defense, justification, evasion, and assertion. Furthermore, the show uses Standard British English and provides accessible transcripts, making it an appropriate and reliable data source for linguistic analysis.

This study focuses on the interview with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, broadcast on BBC HARDtalk on 23 February 2017. During this interview, PM Lee was questioned about Singapore's political system, press freedom, and democratic principles. His responses demonstrate how a political leader employs language strategically to balance rational argumentation and politeness while managing face and authority. The official transcript of this episode ensures the accuracy and credibility of the data. Although the interview was conducted in 2017, it remains highly relevant because it illustrates enduring patterns of political communication that transcend specific time frames.

In political communication, it is common for politicians to avoid giving direct answers during interviews. Instead of answering questions clearly, they often rephrase questions or change the topic based on their communicative goals. This behavior shows that politicians use pragmatic strategies to maintain credibility, control the interaction, and protect their public image. By examining these strategies using Speech Act Theory, this study explores how language functions as both a persuasive and defensive tool in political communication, especially in the BBC HARDtalk interview with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Ultimately, this research highlights that speech acts are not only theoretical constructs but also practical tools that shape interaction and meaning in social life. By exploring how speech acts are used in political interviews, this study emphasizes the connection between language, context, and power. Understanding these pragmatic mechanisms provides valuable insights into the ways politicians use words to perform actions, manage impressions, and construct authority in the public sphere.

The problem in this research arises from the observation that political interviews involve more than the exchange of information. Politicians often employ indirectness, justification, and reframing to maintain authority and credibility in public discourse. These linguistic strategies can be analyzed using Speech Act Theory to uncover their communicative intentions and pragmatic functions.

Based on these considerations, the problems of this research are formulated in the following questions:

1. What types of speech acts are performed by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in the BBC HARDtalk interview?
2. What pragmatic functions do the speech acts serve in the political context of the interview?

This research is limited to the analysis of speech acts used by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong during his interview on BBC HARDtalk, which was broadcast on 23 February 2017. The data of the study consists of the utterances spoken by PM Lee throughout the interview, as transcribed from the official BBC source. The interviewer's questions are included only as contextual references to support the interpretation of the speech acts but are not analyzed as primary data.

The analysis focuses on identifying and classifying the speech acts according to Loar & Searle's (1982) classification, which includes representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. Each utterance produced by the interviewee will be examined to determine its illocutionary force and communicative purpose within the interaction. The study also investigates how these speech acts function pragmatically in relation to the political context, particularly how they reflect authority, politeness, and image management.

This study does not aim to evaluate the political content or ideological stance of PM Lee's responses. Instead, it focuses solely on the linguistic and pragmatic aspects of his language use. Although the interview was conducted in 2017, it remains relevant because the patterns of speech acts and pragmatic strategies observed in this discourse are representative of broader communicative practices in political interviews.

This study is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of linguistics, particularly in the study of pragmatics and political discourse. The significance of this research can be viewed from two perspectives, namely theoretical significance and practical significance.

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the development of pragmatic studies by applying Speech Act Theory to authentic political discourse. By analyzing how Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong performs speech acts during the BBC HARDtalk interview, this study offers empirical evidence on how illocutionary acts function in spontaneous and institutional communication. It also expands the application of Loar & Searle's (1982) framework by demonstrating how different types of speech acts operate under conditions of social pressure and power negotiation. The findings are

expected to enrich the understanding of how language functions as a form of action within the realm of political interaction.

From a practical perspective, this study is expected to serve as a valuable reference for students, educators, and researchers who are interested in linguistic and pragmatic analysis. It provides insight into how political figures use language strategically to manage face, construct credibility, and influence audiences in public communication. Furthermore, the study may help readers develop a critical awareness of how language operates in political contexts, encouraging them to interpret political discourse not only in terms of content but also in terms of communicative function.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Pragmatics

Language is not only a system of forms but also a means of performing actions and expressing intentions in context. Meaning in communication therefore, depends not only on grammar and vocabulary but also on the relationship between speakers, hearers, and situations (Yule, 1996). Pragmatics studies how meaning is interpreted through context, intention, and interaction.

Yule (1996) explains that pragmatics concerns how speakers communicate intended meanings and how listeners interpret them in context. Similarly, Levinson (1983) defines pragmatics as the study of the relationship between language and context necessary for understanding utterances. These perspectives show that interpretation relies on participants, shared knowledge, and social expectations.

Thomas (2014) describes pragmatics as meaning-in-interaction and distinguishes two orientations: sociopragmatics, which concerns social norms and power relations, and pragmalinguistics, which concerns linguistic choices used to express meaning. Grundy (2013) further argues that pragmatic competence enables speakers to adjust language according to roles and interactional expectations.

Pragmatics connects language with action and intention, it is especially relevant to political discourse, where language functions to persuade, negotiate, and manage power (Gusthini et al., 2018; Rahmawati, 2021). Within this framework, speech act theory becomes central because it explains how utterances function as actions such as asserting, requesting, or promising (Searle, 1979). Therefore, this study adopts speech act theory as its main pragmatic framework for analyzing political interviews.

Speech Acts

Human communication involves performing actions through language, such as requesting, thanking, or promising. This idea forms the basis of Speech Act Theory, introduced by Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* and later developed systematically by Searle (1979).

Austin (1963) explains that every utterance contains three levels: the locutionary act, or producing a meaningful expression; the illocutionary act, or the intended function such as asserting or ordering; and the perlocutionary act, or the effect on the hearer, such as persuading or motivating. These levels show that utterances carry both linguistic meaning and communicative force.

Searle (1979) emphasizes the illocutionary act and classifies speech acts into five categories: representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. Representatives convey beliefs or information, directives attempt to influence behavior, commissives commit speakers to future actions, expressives reveal psychological states, and declarations create social changes through language. In political discourse, directives and commissives are often used to mobilize audiences and demonstrate commitment (Alam, 2023; Larasati et al., 2020).

Speech Act Theory highlights that meaning depends on intention and context rather than linguistic form alone. Thomas (2014) notes that speech acts succeed only when supported by social norms and situational expectations. These requirements, known as felicity conditions, determine whether an utterance functions effectively as a particular act (Edmondson, House, & Kádár, 2023).

In political communication, speech acts are important because politicians use language to justify actions, persuade audiences, and maintain authority. Therefore, speech act analysis helps explain how language operates as social action in institutional settings.

Political Discourse and Power

Language plays a central role in politics because it is through language that power is exercised, maintained, and challenged. Political discourse refers to language used by politicians and institutions to achieve ideological and persuasive goals (van Dijk, 2012).

Fairclough (2020) argues that political discourse reflects power relations because discourse functions as social practice that shapes and reinforces ideology. Through strategies such as framing and implication, political actors justify authority and influence public interpretation. Similarly, Dedaić (2004) views political discourse as strategic communication designed to persuade, manipulate, and establish credibility.

From a pragmatic perspective, political discourse reveals how speech acts function as tools of persuasion and authority (Sbisà, 2023). Fowler (2013) also notes that linguistic features such as modality and lexical choice influence how ideology and authority are represented. These perspectives are relevant to the present study because they explain how speech acts help political figures maintain credibility and manage power in interaction.

Previous studies show that assertives, directives, and commissives are frequently used in political speeches and debates to project commitment and influence audiences (Ashfira & Hardjanto, 2021; Gusthini et al., 2018). Research on Indonesian presidential speeches also demonstrates how representatives and commissives are used to build legitimacy and trust (Rahmawati, 2021).

Political interviews make these dynamics more visible because politicians must respond spontaneously under pressure. Studies on interviews show that speech acts and facework strategies are used to defend positions and manage interpersonal relations in real time (Ngasini et al., 2021). Therefore, analyzing speech acts in BBC HARDtalk interviews helps explain how politicians negotiate meaning, authority, and public perception in institutional communication.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive design. The research focuses on analyzing how speech acts are used by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in a BBC HARDtalk interview. A qualitative approach is chosen because the data consist of spoken language and require interpretation based on context and meaning. Speech Act Theory proposed by Searle's (1979) is used as the main framework to identify and classify the types of speech acts found in the interview. The analysis aims to describe the speech act patterns and explain their functions in political communication.

The unit of analysis in this study is each utterance produced by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong during the BBC HARDtalk interview broadcast on 23 February 2017. An utterance is defined as a complete response that carries a clear communicative intention.

The data for this study are taken from a BBC HARDtalk interview with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, accessed via YouTube, consisting of his utterances as authentic political discourse in a formal setting. The data are collected by accessing the video, transcribing the Prime Minister's utterances (with the interviewer's questions included for context), and reviewing the transcript for accuracy before analysis. The analysis involves identifying each utterance as a unit of analysis, classifying it based on Searle's (1979) speech act categories, and interpreting its function in political communication, particularly in managing meaning, credibility, and interaction during the interview.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings of the study based on the analysis of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's utterances in a BBC HARDtalk interview. The findings are organized to show the overall distribution of speech act types and to identify which categories appear most frequently in the data.

Distribution of Speech Act Types

From a total of 47 utterances produced by the interviewee, representative speech acts appear as the most dominant type. These utterances are primarily used to state facts, explain situations, clarify positions, and provide assessments in response to the interviewer's questions. The high frequency of this category suggests that the interviewee relies heavily on informative and explanatory statements rather than on directive or expressive language.

Other types of speech acts occur in significantly smaller numbers. Commissive speech acts are identified in several instances where the interviewee expresses commitment or willingness related to future actions or policy positions. Directive and expressive speech acts are rare, indicating that the interviewee seldom issues instructions or openly expresses personal feelings during the interview. This pattern reflects the formal and institutional nature of the interview setting.

Table 1. Distribution of Speech Acts Types

Speech Acts	Frekuensi	Title
Representative	41	87%
Commissive	4	9%
Directive	1	2%

Expressive	1	2%
Declaration	0	0%
Total	47	100%

The table shows that representative speech acts appear most often in the interview. This pattern is consistent with the nature of political news interviews, where interviewees are expected to explain policies, justify positions, clarify previous statements, and provide assessments of ongoing events (Clayman & Heritage 2002). In this context, representatives allow the speaker to place information, interpretations, and institutional positions on record without committing prematurely to future actions.

Commissive speech acts appear far less frequently, reflecting the political risk associated with explicit commitments in a live interview. When they do occur, they tend to be carefully framed and conditional, signalling willingness or intention while preserving flexibility. Directive speech acts are rare, with only one clear instance identified in the data. This scarcity suggests that the interviewee avoids instructing or overtly guiding the interviewer or audience, preferring instead to influence interpretation indirectly through explanation and framing. Expressive speech acts are also minimal, appearing only once in the corpus. This low frequency aligns with the expectation that overt displays of personal emotion are constrained in high-stakes political interviews, where authority and composure are valued. No declarative speech acts were identified, which is unsurprising given that institutional changes or formal acts are not typically performed within a broadcast interview setting (Clayman & Heritage 2002).

Commissive, Directive, and Expressive Speech Acts

In addition to representative speech acts, the findings also show the presence of commissive, directive, and expressive speech acts, although these occur less frequently. Out of 47 utterances analyzed, four are classified as commissive, one as a directive, and one as an expressive speech act. This indicates that these categories are used selectively during the interview.

Commissive speech acts appear when the interviewee expresses commitment or intention regarding future actions or policy positions. Although limited in number, these utterances are important because they signal responsibility and future commitment in response to the interviewer’s questions. Meanwhile, directive speech acts are very rare, with only one instance identified, suggesting that the interviewee prefers explanation and clarification rather than directly influencing the interviewer’s actions. Similarly, expressive speech acts occur minimally, indicating that explicit emotional expression is not a dominant feature of the interviewee’s communication style. Overall, the interview is characterized more by informational and evaluative statements than by emotional or directive language.

Representative Speech Acts

Representative speech acts emerged as the dominant category in the interview, indicating that the speaker relied primarily on explanation, clarification, and interpretation rather than emotional expression or direct persuasion. Through these utterances, the speaker consistently positioned himself as a rational and analytical actor who framed political and economic issues in terms of institutional

realities, strategic interests, and observable conditions. This dominance reflects a communication strategy centered on credibility, stability, and diplomatic caution.

One important characteristic of the representative acts is their function as explanatory grounding. The speaker frequently presented factual descriptions about trade, globalization, international law, and diplomatic relations in order to establish a stable framework for interpreting the discussion. Economic indicators, institutional affiliations, and historical relationships were repeatedly used to support arguments and reinforce legitimacy. Rather than presenting opinions as personal preferences, the speaker framed them as conclusions derived from structural realities and long-standing policy considerations. This strategy encouraged the audience to interpret sensitive issues through a lens of pragmatism and institutional logic.

Another major function of representative speech acts was interpretive control. In several moments, the speaker clarified prior statements, corrected paraphrases, and carefully distinguished between description and endorsement. This indicates that representative acts were not limited to delivering information; they also operated as tools for managing public understanding and preventing misinterpretation. By emphasizing precision in wording and contextual explanation, the speaker maintained authority over how his positions were represented within the interaction. This was especially important in a confrontational interview setting where statements could easily be reframed or politicized.

Representative acts also played a central role in diplomatic balancing. The speaker repeatedly described relationships between states, international organizations, and major powers in measured and symmetrical terms. Sensitive issues were framed as matters requiring careful management rather than emotional reaction. Even when discussing tensions or uncertainties, the language remained restrained and analytical. This pattern demonstrates how representative speech acts allowed the speaker to communicate concern and evaluation without escalating conflict or reducing diplomatic flexibility.

Overall, the dominance of representative speech acts reveals that the interview functioned primarily as a space for controlled explanation and strategic interpretation. The speaker relied on factuality, institutional reasoning, and measured evaluation to project competence, maintain neutrality, and stabilize meaning under political pressure.

Commissive Speech Acts

Commissive speech acts appeared less frequently than representatives, yet they carried significant strategic importance because they involved commitments regarding future action or policy continuity. The findings show that these commissive acts were consistently cautious, conditional, and carefully limited in scope. This pattern reflects the political risks associated with making public commitments in a high-pressure interview context.

A key characteristic of the commissive acts was the use of conditional framing. Commitments were rarely expressed as unconditional promises; instead, they were tied to external circumstances such as multilateral agreement, institutional readiness, or changes in public attitudes. This allowed the speaker to project decisiveness and openness while still preserving flexibility. By attaching

commitments to shared processes and broader conditions, responsibility was distributed across institutions and other actors rather than concentrated solely on the speaker or government.

Another important finding is that commissive acts often functioned as reassurance mechanisms. When discussing trade agreements, negotiations, or institutional reforms, the speaker used commitments to signal continuity, preparedness, and willingness to cooperate. These utterances demonstrated that the government remained engaged and responsive to international developments. At the same time, the cautious wording prevented the commitments from becoming politically risky or overly restrictive. This balance between firmness and flexibility was a consistent feature of the commissive category.

The findings also show that commissive speech acts were not always oriented toward change. In some cases, the speaker committed to maintaining an existing policy position until broader social conditions evolved. This type of commitment is significant because it demonstrates that continuity itself can function as a political stance. By framing policy maintenance as dependent on societal attitudes rather than governmental reluctance, the speaker shifted responsibility outward and presented restraint as prudence rather than resistance to reform.

The commissive speech acts in the interview reveal a communication strategy focused on controlled commitment. The speaker demonstrated willingness to act and cooperate, but always within carefully defined limits. This approach enabled the projection of confidence and reliability while minimizing exposure to future political vulnerability.

Directive Speech Acts

Directive speech acts were the least frequent category identified in the interview, which highlights the speaker's preference for explanation and interpretation over direct instruction. The scarcity of directives is significant because it reflects an effort to avoid appearing authoritarian, defensive, or overly confrontational in a politically sensitive setting. When directives did occur, they were highly mitigated and strategically framed.

The findings show that the directive function was primarily used to manage evaluation rather than to command behavior directly. Instead of issuing explicit instructions, the speaker subtly guided the interviewer and audience toward caution, patience, and evidence-based judgment. This indirect approach reduced the interpersonal tension that might arise from overt commands while still allowing the speaker to influence how issues should be interpreted.

Another important characteristic of the directive acts was mitigation. The speaker frequently used personal and conditional phrasing that softened the directive force of the utterance. This linguistic strategy minimized face threat and maintained a cooperative tone within the interaction. Although the statements appeared personal on the surface, their pragmatic effect extended to the audience by shaping the appropriate way to respond to uncertain political situations.

Directive acts also functioned as tools of agenda management. In moments where the interviewer attempted to push for immediate judgments or definitive positions, the speaker redirected attention toward observation, evidence, and procedural caution. This prevented the interaction from forcing premature conclusions and allowed the speaker to maintain flexibility. The directive category

therefore reveals how influence in political interviews can operate indirectly through the regulation of interpretive timing rather than through explicit commands.

Expressive Speech Acts

Expressive speech acts appeared only minimally in the interview, which indicates that emotional expression was carefully controlled throughout the interaction. The limited presence of expressives reflects the formal and policy-oriented nature of the interview, where the speaker consistently prioritized rational explanation and institutional positioning over personal emotion.

The findings show that expressive language was reserved primarily for interactional closure rather than substantive political discussion. Expressions of appreciation or courtesy functioned to maintain professionalism and mutual respect after prolonged moments of disagreement and pressure. Rather than serving argumentative purposes, expressive acts operated at the interpersonal level to restore cooperative footing at the conclusion of the exchange.

Another important observation is that the rarity of expressive acts reinforced the speaker's public image of composure and control. By minimizing emotional language during discussions of sensitive political issues, the speaker projected calmness, restraint, and diplomatic discipline. This communicative style supported the broader pattern observed across the interview, where factuality and institutional reasoning consistently outweighed emotional appeal.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that representative speech acts are the most dominant type used by the interviewee. These speech acts are mainly employed to explain policies, clarify positions, describe situations, and respond to challenging questions from the interviewer. This dominance indicates that in a political interview context, the interviewee prioritizes providing information and rational explanations rather than giving instructions or expressing personal emotions.

Commissive speech acts appear in a limited number and are used to express conditional commitment toward possible future actions. Directive and expressive speech acts are very rare, while declarative speech acts are not found in the data. This pattern reflects the formal and institutional nature of political interviews, where caution, credibility, and authority are highly maintained.

The study concludes that speech acts play an important role in political interviews as strategic tools for managing meaning, defending positions, and maintaining public image. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong uses speech acts carefully to balance clarity, diplomacy, and authority in responding to confrontational questions.

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