

A Comparative Study of Chinese and American Political Speech on COVID-19 from the Perspective of Speech Act Theory

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Manuscript received October 6, 2023; revised November 17, 2023; accepted December 28, 2023; published March 15, 2024

Abstract—As crucial instruments of power, political speeches significantly impact individuals' political lives. Utilizing Austin's Speech Act theory as a theoretical framework, this study comparatively analyzes the initial speeches given by the presidents of China and the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic, aiming to uncover the manner in which both presidents convey their political attitudes through illocutionary acts and investigate the value disparities embedded within their speech acts. The results indicate that the Chinese political address related to COVID-19 includes a greater frequency of directive and representative speech, accentuating the significance of summation and guidance while mirroring China's status as a socialist nation that prioritizes its citizens. Conversely, the American discourse features more expressive and directive language, underlining the role of speech in modulating public emotions and articulating the speaker's personal political agenda. This research substantiates and illustrates the practicality of employing Speech Act Theory in political discourse analysis, aiming to enlighten future research within the realm of discourse investigation.

Keywords—political discourse, speech act theory, COVID-19

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the analysis of political discourse within the field of pragmatics. This trend proves highly beneficial for politicians seeking to enhance the reach and impact of their speeches, as well as for the general public looking to uncover the underlying intentions behind these addresses [1]. Consequently, numerous studies have explored various aspects of political discourse. Historically, political discourse analysis can be traced back to Aristotle's politics, where he expounded upon the relationship between politics and language, viewing political discourse as a genre of deliberation. However, earlier investigations often focused primarily on representation rather than action, leaving a significant void in the study of political resources [1].

In 2020, the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic put human lives at risk and challenged solidarity in combating the virus. Consequently, international leaders delivered an extensive array of nationwide speeches for various purposes, revealing underlying aims and intentions. To reassure the public and propose viable measures and policies, the presidents of China and the United States delivered numerous speeches. Among these, the initial political responses are particularly valuable and representative for analysis, as they tend to reflect governmental attitudes and the effectiveness of earlier measures related to mitigation, prevention, and control

efforts. Moreover, the rationality and appropriateness of previous political appeals can be directly and effectively assessed through the content of subsequent political responses. If the initial policy propositions and measures are sound, later political appeals will not refute them, and the media will not criticize the content. Stemming from philosophical examinations of meaning, Speech Act Theory offers a novel perspective for understanding and analyzing political discourse. Thus, within the framework of Speech Act Theory, the present study aims to conduct a critical examination of the initial Chinese and American political speeches addressing COVID-19. This research will first identify similarities and differences in the distribution of speech acts within the speeches. Subsequently, it will summarize and determine the reasons for the distinct illocutionary acts presented. Lastly, a comprehensive understanding of the overall effects of these political addresses will be derived, providing valuable insights for future research on political discourse.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Previous Research on Political Speech Discourse

Political speech has long been studied as a significant type of discourse, with numerous linguists examining its features, textual organization, and lexical choices. Traditionally, researchers have employed two primary approaches to investigate political discourse: the structuralist approach and the critical approach. In the structuralist approach, Wilson (first) sought to identify patterns of language in political speech by adopting the concept of transformation. Chilton conducted extensive studies, revealing that political speakers often employ specific language skills and strategies to construct a favorable image of their party and create a positive environment for its development [2].

Increasingly, linguists have turned to critical discourse analysis to examine the language skills and strategies employed in political speech. Zhu first introduced this theory to political discourse research in China [3]. Zhang explored the stylistic features of political speech at both lexical and syntactic levels, aiming to identify underlying patterns [4]. During the Ukraine crisis, Ingrida Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė conducted a comparative study of US and Russian leaders' political speeches, analyzing their rhetoric to reveal policy intentions and attitudes [5]. Carreon critically examined the Thai Prime Minister's political speeches, analyzing keyword frequencies and discussing underlying motives [6].

Despite the considerable contributions to political speech

research, there are notable limitations. First, the application of Speech Act Theory has been relatively limited, with potential for further expansion. Second, most studies focus on rhetorical structure, stylistics, and critical discourse analysis, examining stylistic features, lexical choices, and speaking skills. However, these approaches often only describe surface-level linguistic features, failing to delve into deeper, hidden aspects of political discourse.

To address these gaps, taking into account the status of China and the United States on the international stage, as well as the very different epidemic prevention situations in the two countries during the epidemic, the current study examines Chinese and American leaders' initial political speeches on COVID-19 employing Speech Act Theory. By systematically and comprehensively analyzing political speech discourse, this research aims to explore new possibilities for the theory's application.

B. Previous Research on Speech Act Theory

Although Austin delineated these two sentence categories in the initial development of his theory and further subdivided performatives into explicit, implicit, and embedded types, he ultimately deemed this framework insufficient for examining sentence performance thoroughly. For example, it could not adequately differentiate between the sentences "The cat is on the mat" and "I tell you that the cat is on the mat." Consequently, Austin abandoned the prior distinction between constatives and performatives and established Speech Act Theory, proposing that when speaking, an individual simultaneously performs three actions: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts.

Following Searle's expansion of Austin's illocutionary acts into five additional categories, numerous scholars have contributed to the discourse surrounding speech acts. Verschueren introduced the notion of a "pragmatic act," asserting that context is indispensable in speech acts [7], while Thomas built upon and re-categorized Austin's Speech Act Theory into four types of performative sentences: metalanguage, formulaic, cooperative, and group performance-based [8]. Significantly, these performative sentences manifest differently across cultural contexts, leading to cross-cultural variations in speech act implementation. Sun examined Searle's speech act classifications from the perspective of the politeness principle, dividing the speech acts' functions into four categories: competition, harmony, cooperation, and conflict [9].

In the late 1970s, Xu became the first researcher to translate Austin's *How to do things with words* into Chinese, providing Chinese scholars with their initial exposure to Western Speech Act Theory. Since then, the theory has garnered considerable attention from experts in various disciplines. Regarding language use, Gu identified certain weaknesses within Austin's classification of performative speech acts [10]. Sun later synthesized the current accomplishments and challenges of Speech Act Theory research in China [11], proposing future avenues for exploration in the realms of literature [12], translation [13], and conversational analysis [14], among others. As evidenced by this cursory review, Speech Act Theory has been extensively applied and advanced in various fields, yet

limited research exists on political discourse analysis through the lens of the theory.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Speech act theory has offered profound insights into the enigmatic nature of linguistic communication, revealing that speaking involves performing actions and necessitates a series of human acts—the most significant of which is the illocutionary act. Building on Austin's work [15], American philosopher-linguist John Searle further divided illocutionary acts into five general categories, remedying perceived shortcomings in Austin's initial theory. Specific acts within each category share the same illocutionary point but possess different strengths [16].

- 1) Representatives, also known as assertives, involve the speaker committing to a particular state of affairs and the truth of the utterance's content. Examples include belief statements, guarantees, and affirmations.
- 2) Directives encompass the speaker's attempts to persuade the listener to perform a desired action, such as requests, advice, invitations, and orders.
- 3) Commissives serve to commit the speaker to a future course of action and create an obligation to perform said action, as demonstrated by promises, offers, guarantees, and threats.
- 4) Expressives' illocutionary function is to convey the speaker's feelings or attitudes toward an existing state of affairs, manifesting in expressions of apology, complaint, gratitude, praise, or blame, among others.
- 5) Declarations successfully establish a correspondence between what is said and reality, as exhibited by announcements, blessings, nominations, resignations, sentences, and the like.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions

The purpose of the current study is to investigate the illocutionary acts behind Chinese President Xi Jinping and American president Donald Trump's first political speeches on COVID-19 under the theoretical framework of the Speech Act Theory. The specific research questions are listed as followed.

- 1) What is the distribution of illocutionary acts of Chinese and American political speeches on COVID-19?
- 2) What are the reasons for the different distribution of illocutionary acts between Chinese and American political speeches on COVID-19?
- 3) What are the different effects achieved by their illocutionary acts between Chinese and American political speeches on COVID-19?

B. Data Collection

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly spread across the globe. Among the various speeches delivered by the global leaders, two relevant speeches have been selected for this study. One is "Speech at the meeting of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China to study the response to the epidemic situation of COVID-19," available on the official website of the Chinese Communist Party Members (<https://www.ccps.gov.cn>). The other is "Remarks by President Trump in Address to the Nation," found on the

official White House website (<https://www.whitehouse.gov>). The total token count for the corpus is 7,193. Detailed information regarding the analyzed political discourses can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. First-time political discourses on COVID-19

No.	Date	President	Title	Token	Sentence
1	03/02/2020	习近平	在中央政治局常委会会议研究应对新型冠状病毒肺炎疫情防控工作时的讲话	5916	137
2	11/03/2020	Donald Trump	Remarks by President Trump in Address to the Nation	1277	75

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Distribution of Illocutionary Acts in Chinese and American Political Speech on COVID-19

Following the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in December 2019, both the Chinese and American presidents expressed concern for their citizens through nationwide speeches. This study focuses on the first speeches from each leader due to their significance and representativeness. An analysis begins with a general description of the distribution of illocutionary acts to identify the main points made and the various premises supporting them. The relationships between major elements are subsequently arranged in a table, represented numerically, and the overall structure is compared from a holistic perspective down to individual components.

1) Distribution of illocutionary acts in Chinese political speech on COVID-19

Based on the definitions of the five illocutionary acts given by Searle and the basis for their classification, this present study classifies a total of 137 sentences of Chinese leader Xi Jinping's speech into five categories of illocutionary acts, and the detailed distribution of each illocutionary act in the speech is demonstrated in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Distribution of illocutionary acts in Chinese political speech on COVID-19

Illocutionary acts	Frequency	Percentage
Representatives	36	26.2%
Directives	99	72.2%
Commissives	0	0%
Expressives	2	1.6%
Declarations	0	0%
Totally	137	100%

As illustrated in the table, among the five speech acts, only representatives, directives, and expressives occurred in the speech, while commissives and declarations were excluded. The most frequent speech act was directives, which appeared 99 times, comprising 72.2% of the total. The second most frequent was representatives, occurring 36 times and constituting 26.2% of the total, followed by expressives, which occurred twice and accounted for 1.6%.

A notable characteristic of the Chinese political speech on COVID-19 is the exceptionally high prevalence of directives throughout the address. Directives were employed nearly a hundred times to communicate ideas and measures pertaining to prevention and control of the COVID-19 pandemic to various authorities and the public. As a socialist nation that

practices democratic centralism, the Communist Party of China is the guiding force behind socialism with Chinese characteristics. Consequently, upholding the Party's centralized and unified leadership system is essential for the Party and the state. Therefore, the central aim of Chinese President Xi Jinping's first speech on COVID-19 was to establish general principles for combating the pandemic, considering social stability and development, fair distribution of medical resources, international social media, and public opinion, as well as overall governance capacity and level. Several general principles proposed by President Xi Jinping to address the COVID-19 pandemic are presented below.

Example 1: 第一，加强对防控工作的统一领导。

Example 2: 第二，维护医疗救治秩序。

In addition to outlining general principles, this address also assumed the responsibility of reflecting on and summarizing past actions and policies related to epidemic control in various areas. Providing specific advice and guidance regarding epidemic prevention at the national level can not only enhance the efficiency of prevention and control efforts but also safeguard the public's right to information through policy disclosure, thereby calming the public and fostering societal stability. For example:

Example 3: 一方面，要继续全面加强防控，在全省范围严格落实早发现、早报告、早隔离、早治疗措施，加强疫情监测，集中救治患者，对所有密切接触人员采取居家医学观察，另一方面，要继续强化防止疫情向外蔓延的措施。

Example 4: 对相关数据和病例资料等，除有法律规定需要保密的外，在做好国家安全工作的条件下，要向我国科技界开放共享，组织临床医学、流行病学、病毒学等方面的专家，研究病毒传播力、毒性等关键特性，尽快拿出切实管用的研究成果。

As the initial phase of the pandemic spanning from late 2019 to March 2020 was essentially under control in China, it was necessary to evaluate and summarize each subsequent phase accordingly. As such, this speech also served as an overview of epidemic prevention outcomes during this trying period. The presentation of epidemic prevention data is a direct effect of the representative illocutionary acts. For example:

Example 5: 总的看，党中央对疫情形势的判断是准确的，各项工作部署是及时的，采取的举措也是有效的。

Example 6: 湖北省特别是武汉市仍然是全国疫情防控的重中之重，其他地方的患者也大多有湖北接触史，稳住了湖北疫情，就稳定了全国大局。

In examining the final illocutionary act of expressives, the primarily instructive and summarizing speech features expressive speech acts twice within the text, both instances of which hold notable roles and significance. The first instance involves an expressive quotation from Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of the World Health Organization, who unabashedly commends China's epidemic prevention measures. By citing the WHO Director-General's endorsement at the outset of the speech, Xi Jinping not only acknowledges the arduous epidemic preparedness efforts undertaken by the Chinese people in recent months,

but also seeks to assuage public anxiety and garner empathy. In doing so, Jinping communicates the practicality and worthiness of the country's ongoing adherence to its epidemic preparedness policy. The second expressive speech act serves to admonish the domestic industry surrounding the consumption of wild animals. While the precise origin of the virus had not yet been definitively attributed to the consumption of wild bats, such behavior posed considerable risks to human health, animal ecosystems, and societal stability. Consequently, the illicit practice of consuming wild animals warrants immediate cessation.

Example 7: 我在会见世界卫生组织总干事谭德塞时，谭德塞表示，中方行动速度之快、规模之大，世所罕见，这是中国的制度优势，有关经验值得其他国家借鉴，相信中国采取的措施将有效控制并最终战胜疫情。

Example 8: 我们早就认识到，食用野生动物风险很大，但“野味产业”依然规模庞大，对公共卫生安全构成了重大隐患。再也不能无动于衷了！

2) Distribution of illocutionary acts in American political speech on COVID-19

Drawing upon Searle's classification of the five illocutionary acts, the current study categorizes a total of 75 sentences from an American political speech addressing the COVID-19 pandemic into the five respective illocutionary act categories. Table 3 below illustrates the detailed distribution of each illocutionary act within the speech.

Table 3. Distribution of illocutionary acts in American political speech on COVID-19

Illocutionary acts	Frequency	Percentage
Representatives	35	46.6%
Directives	15	20%
Commissives	8	10.6%
Expressives	17	22.8%
Declarations	0	0%
Totality	75	100%

As illustrated in the table, out of the five speech acts, only four were observed in the speech: representatives, directives, commissives, and expressives, with the exclusion of declarations. Directives were the most frequent, appearing 35 times and accounting for 46.6%. Expressives were the second most frequent speech act, occurring 17 times (22.8%), followed by representatives with 15 occurrences (20%). Lastly, commissives were documented eight times, comprising 10.6% of the speech acts.

Firstly, an analysis of the data reveals that representatives were the most commonly employed speech acts in U.S. speeches concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. This indicates that the initial U.S. speech was primarily aimed at summarizing past and current prevention efforts from various perspectives, including virus characterization, medical supply distribution, and social functioning. Being the government's first official statement after implementing epidemic prevention measures, the summary not only bolsters government credibility and prestige but also alleviates public anxiety by clarifying the status of epidemic prevention, thus ensuring a smoothly functioning society. Several examples from the speech are provided below.

Example 9: Today, the World Health Organization officially announced that this is a global pandemic.

Example 10: We declared a public health emergency and issued the highest level of travel warning to other countries as the virus spread its horrible infection.

Secondly, it is noteworthy that the speech contains a considerable number of expressive speech acts. These acts convey the speaker's attitude, opinion, and stance on specific events and communicate particular emotions to the listener, often evoking emotional resonance. Within Trump's speech, audiences could discern his confidence in the U.S. epidemic control team, positivity towards U.S. policies and actions, and hope for Americans to overcome the crisis. Amid the early stages of an outbreak, fear typically engulfs society due to limited knowledge about the virus, jeopardizing efforts to combat it. The speech's repeated positive sentiments effectively countered this societal panic. Additionally, they mirrored the distinctive personal speaking style of former U.S. President Donald Trump. Examples can be found below.

Example 11: Our team is the best anywhere in the world.

Example 12: This is the most aggressive and comprehensive effort to confront a foreign virus in modern history.

Lastly, concerning the directives in the speech, as a public address representing the government, it is imperative to ensure the population's health and safety and provide appropriate guidance on disease prevention. The speaker must also clarify epidemic prevention policies to the public and promote their implementation, maximizing the intended prevention effects. For example:

Example 13: In particular, we are strongly advising that nursing homes for the elderly suspend all medically unnecessary visits.

Example 14: Wash your hands, clean often-used surfaces, cover your face and mouth if you sneeze or cough, and most of all, if you are sick or not feeling well, stay home.

Another example of Trump's distinct personal speaking style is his incorporation of commitments in his speeches. Commitment discourse pertains to a speaker's promise to execute specific actions in the future, conveying the speaker's intent to act. Employing commitment discourse can simultaneously enhance the public's favorable perception of US President Trump and serve to soothe public emotions, thereby fostering social stability and development. Examples are provided below.

Example 15: I will never hesitate to take any necessary steps to protect the lives, health, and safety of the American people.

Example 16: I will always put the well-being of America first.

B. Comparison of Different Distribution of Illocutionary Acts

Although both speeches were the first public political addresses on behalf of their respective governments following the epidemic, their foci and target audiences significantly diverge. Firstly, in terms of content selection, an analysis of the distribution of various illocutionary acts reveals that Chinese epidemic speeches emphasize directives and representatives speech acts, accentuating the guidance and summarization roles of the speech. Conversely,

American epidemic speeches chiefly employ representatives and expressives speech acts, demonstrating that the focus lies on reviewing past prevention and control measures and expressing attitudes toward the pandemic. Additionally, while the Chinese COVID-19 speech scarcely features expressives and commissive speech acts, the American counterpart repeatedly includes them.

Secondly, in terms of audience, the American speech directly targets the general public in the United States by elucidating the government's epidemic prevention policies, the outcomes of these measures, the president's stance on the epidemic, and his assurances for the society's future. Meanwhile, the Chinese speech not only clarifies these policies to the public, but also places emphasis on guiding the efforts of relevant departments at all levels. In other words, the audience for the Chinese speech encompasses not only the Chinese public but also pertinent departments across various administrative levels.

C. Effects and Reasons for the Different Distribution of Illocutionary Acts

First and foremost, regarding China's response to the COVID-19 outbreak, the Chinese government promptly implemented effective and efficient measures to combat the virus. They treated COVID-19 as a Class A infectious disease and activated a Level One public health emergency response in all localities. The national economy was temporarily shut down to curb the virus's spread. Under the steadfast and capable leadership of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core, the entire nation mobilized in the battle against COVID-19.

Simultaneously, China's official speeches—characterized by numerous guidance and clarification statements—demonstrate the Chinese government's significant emphasis on epidemic prevention and its profound responsibility towards its citizens [17]. These speeches provide both principled directives to relevant departments at all levels and specific interpretations of epidemic prevention policies for the people. This approach not only showcases the government's authority and professionalism but also its inherent commitment to serving the public. Consequently, this fosters the Chinese government's leadership among its citizenry, fostering unity in the fight against the epidemic.

In contrast, the United States, the world's largest capitalist system, lacks the inherent advantage of swiftly mobilizing national efforts, which the socialist system possesses. Consequently, its appeals for epidemic prevention measures primarily target individual actions [17]. Former President Trump's speeches featured predominantly emotional appeals rather than specific guidance or effective policy interpretations. This characteristic epitomizes the expressive and commissive speech acts employed by the U.S.

These two types of speech acts appearing in the U.S. speeches reduce the level of officiality and formality to a certain extent. In formal political speeches, the speaker typically refrains from excessive self-expression. Conversely, informal personal addresses exhibit more frequent instances of commitment and expression [18]. However, employing these speech acts during the early stages of the outbreak could both alleviate social panic and bolster public support

for President Trump. Consequently, it is evident that political intentions underlie the specific speech acts employed in his speeches. As Trump sought re-election, appealing to the public by showcasing efforts and a positive attitude would enhance his image in the face of the epidemic, thereby preparing for his future political aspirations.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study employs a quantitative and qualitative approach to investigate the distinct distribution of speech acts in Chinese and American political discourse on COVID-19, which is beneficial for understanding and interpreting political discourse while offering a novel perspective to examine the internal structure of speech through the distribution of illocutionary acts. The study addresses three research questions, with results presented below.

Firstly, it was observed that despite the presence of representatives, declaratives, and expressives in both speeches, their specific distribution differed significantly. In the case of China, as a socialist country responsible for the health and safety of its people, Chinese political discourse primarily comprised directives and representatives, which reviewed past epidemic prevention experiences and guided future pandemic control measures. In contrast, the American political speech was characterized by a relatively large number of expressives and commissives of speech acts that served to moderate the audience's emotions to a certain extent while reflecting President Trump's speech style.

Secondly, through the diverse utilization of illocutionary acts and emphasis on content selection, the two speeches ultimately presented different effects. The Chinese president's speech not only targeted the Chinese people and relevant departments at various levels but also the global community, sharing China's experiences and resources while offering general guidance on epidemic prevention. This approach reflects the value of "A Community with a Shared Future for Mankind," promoted by China and demonstrates the nation's responsible role on the international stage. Conversely, the content and target audience of the US president's speech were more narrowly focused on the American people, outlining President Trump's personal efforts in addressing the epidemic and reflecting his political intentions. As a result, the speech's professionalism and authority were diminished. Consequently, analyzing the distribution of speech acts enables the determination of the speech's positioning and underlying intent.

Although Speech Act Theory has been extensively applied in various fields by numerous scholars, its implementation in political speech discourse represents a novel adaptation of this established theory. The validity and feasibility of this approach are largely confirmed through the current study, providing a valuable reference for future investigations in related fields.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Zecong Tang completed the experimental design of this study and the writing of subsequent articles. Yi Zhang gave

guidance to the design of the study and revised the overall content of the article. All authors had approved the final version.

FUNDING

Sponsored by the Practice and Innovation Funds for Graduate Students of Northwestern Polytechnical University (PF2023024).

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