
A Pragmatic Analysis of Speech Acts in Barack Obama's 2009 and 2013 Inaugural Speeches

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Abstract

This study examines the speech acts found in Barack Obama's inaugural addresses of 2009 and 2013 through the lens of Searle's (1969) classification of illocutionary acts. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach, thirty sentences were selected from the official transcripts—fifteen from each speech—and analyzed. The utterances were classified into assertive, directives, commissive, expressive, and declarations, with particular focus on their rhetorical functions. The analysis reveals that commissive and assertive are the most prominent features of Obama's inaugural discourse, illustrating his commitment to future actions and his reinforcement of American ideals. Directives function as appeals for collective responsibility, while expressive are relatively rare and mainly used to express gratitude and unity. Declarations occur only occasionally, largely restricted to the ceremonial oath. A comparison of the two addresses indicates a shift in emphasis: the 2009 speech relies more heavily on commissive of reassurance and rebuilding during crisis, whereas the 2013 speech foregrounds assertive and directives that highlight national values and call for shared responsibility. Overall, the study demonstrates how speech act analysis uncovers the ways political leaders use language to persuade, inspire, and establish authority.

Keywords: Speech Act Theory, Searle (1969), Pragmatics, Political Discourse, Inaugural Speeches.

Introduction

Political language functions as a tool of power, shaping public thought and opinion. It serves as a medium through which leaders influence and direct society, addressing broad audiences whose differing interpretations can significantly impact political success. Speeches, in this context, are not only vehicles for conveying policies, programs, and ideas but also for building and sustaining social connections while expressing values and emotions. From a pragmatic standpoint, such discourse can be examined through Speech Act Theory, as the meaning and force of an utterance largely depend on the speaker's intention and the situational context in which it is produced.

Scholars have long examined the communicative strategies employed in political processes and the role of language in shaping public perception. For instance, Rudyk (2007) analyzed power relations in President Bush's State of the Union address, focusing on semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic strategies of manipulation during the US–Iraq war. Similarly, Pu (2007) studied the rhetorical and linguistic strategies in Bush's speech at Tsinghua University, China, highlighting the interplay of persuasion and cultural diplomacy.

Building on such works, this paper presents a pragmatic analysis of Barack Obama's 2009 and 2013 inaugural speeches through the lens of Speech Act Theory. The study seeks to uncover how Obama's utterances, when categorized as assertives, directives, commissive, expressive, and declarations, reflect his rhetorical strategies as a leader. By doing so, it aims to show how inaugural discourse functions not only as ceremonial expression but also as a pragmatic tool of persuasion and leadership.

Political Discourse

Political discourse has been widely studied as a specialized use of language by professional politicians and political institutions, often analyzed from discourse-analytical and pragmatic perspectives (Chilton 2004). It is generally identified by its actors—politicians who are elected or appointed to positions of authority—but it also involves recipients, namely the citizens and audiences who interpret and respond to political messages (Van Dijk 1997). The interaction between speakers and listeners makes political discourse a dynamic process in which meaning is shaped by both intention and reception.

In contemporary contexts, political discourse has evolved into a more personalized form of rhetoric, where politicians adopt the language of lifestyle values and choice to connect with the public (Simpson and Mayr 2010). This illustrates how

political communication goes beyond mere policy statements; it is fundamentally about “doing things with words.” Through lexical and rhetorical choices, politicians express attitudes, mobilize support, manufacture consent, and legitimize their power. From a pragmatic standpoint, political discourse is a fertile ground for speech act analysis, since utterances are rarely neutral but perform specific actions such as asserting, promising, or directing. Inaugural speeches, in particular, represent a rich example of political discourse because they combine ceremonial ritual with persuasive strategies. Barack Obama’s inaugural addresses of 2009 and 2013 exemplify this dual function, as they employ a variety of speech acts to inspire citizens, affirm shared values, and project his leadership vision.

Political Speeches

In political discourse, ideas and ideologies are conveyed through deliberately crafted language designed to secure acceptance from audiences and to be reshaped by later interpretations in media outlets. The selection or omission of particular words and expressions is a strategic process aimed at constructing meanings that correspond with the speaker’s political objectives. As Beard (2000:18) notes, the success of a political speech is not necessarily determined by the truth of its content but by the persuasiveness of its arguments. Political leaders often rely on professional speechwriters who are trained in the use of rhetorical and persuasive strategies to craft messages that resonate with the public.

Political speeches appear in various forms, from campaign rallies to inaugural addresses. Among these, inaugurals represent a distinct genre of political discourse, combining both ceremonial significance and persuasive intent. They formally open a presidential term, reinforce shared national values, and articulate the leader’s vision for the nation’s future. Barack Obama’s inaugural speeches of 2009 and 2013 illustrate this dual purpose: while ceremonial in nature, they also seek to persuade the public of his commitment to change, unity, and shared responsibility.

From a pragmatic perspective, political speeches are fertile ground for Speech Act Theory. Pragmatics studies language use in context, considering the message being communicated, the participants involved, their intentions, and the implications of what is said or left unsaid (Leech 1983; Watson and Hill 1993; Thomas 1995). Political leaders are not always conscious of the pragmatic connection between the literal content of their words, the intended meaning, and the actions those words accomplish. Consequently, Speech Act Theory provides a valuable framework for the analysis of political speeches, as it demonstrates how utterances operate as actions—whether asserting, promising, directing, or expressing.

Speech Act Theory

The study of meaning in language has traditionally been examined from two perspectives: semantics and pragmatics. Semantics concerns itself with the conventional or literal meanings of words, phrases, and sentences, whereas pragmatics explores how meaning is influenced by context and shaped by the intentions of the speaker. As Grundy (2000:33) explains, semantic analysis is concerned with what words conventionally mean, whereas pragmatic analysis focuses on what a speaker intends them to mean on a particular occasion.

Speech act is a language process where the speaker not only says, but also does something through speech. So, a speech is not only a representation of meaning, but also contains power. In addition, Rahardi (2005) also states that speech act is a concrete manifestation of language functions, which is the basis of pragmatic analysis. Austin (1962:94-107) divides speech acts into three kinds of acts, namely locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary acts. Locutionary acts are the act of saying something, illocutionary acts are the acts of doing something, whereas perlocutionary acts are the act of affecting someone.

At the core of pragmatics lies Speech Act Theory, which examines how utterances function as actions. Whenever individuals speak, they are not merely producing sequences of words but are simultaneously performing acts such as asserting, promising, or requesting. Austin (1962) originally distinguished between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, but it was Searle (1969) who provided a more detailed classification of illocutionary acts into five categories:

1. **Assertives** – commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition (e.g., stating, reporting, announcing).
2. **Directives** – attempt to get the hearer to do something (e.g., requesting, advising, commanding).
3. **Commissives** – commit the speaker to a future action (e.g., promising, offering, vowing).
4. **Expressives** – express the speaker's psychological state or attitude (e.g., thanking, congratulating, apologizing).
5. **Declarations** – change the external situation through the utterance itself (e.g., swearing in, declaring war, appointing).

This research applies Searle's (1969) classification as its analytical framework. Political communication is particularly abundant in speech acts, since politicians often use language to inform, inspire, reassure, accuse, promise, or direct their

audiences. Inaugural addresses are especially noteworthy as they blend ceremonial tradition with persuasive intent. Examining Obama's 2009 and 2013 inaugural speeches through the lens of Speech Act Theory therefore illustrates how he uses language to pledge future actions, reinforce national values, and encourage citizens toward collective responsibility.

Objectives of the Study

The study broadly seeks to analyze the selected political speeches through the framework of Speech Act Theory. Specifically, it aims to identify the speech act types present in the speeches, examine them in relation to the contexts in which they were delivered, and determine how these acts contribute to conveying and projecting the overall message of the discourse.

Research Methodology

In this research, two political speeches were selected: Barack Obama's inaugural address delivered in January 2009 and his second inaugural address delivered in January 2013. The official transcripts of the speeches were obtained from the White House archives and analyzed to identify the speech acts performed. The linguistic approach adopted is based on Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory, which classifies illocutionary acts into assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations.

Since the two speeches vary in length and structure, specific portions were extracted for systematic analysis. Fifteen sentences were selected from each speech, making a total of thirty sentences for examination. For clarity of reference, the 2009 inaugural speech is labeled A and the 2013 inaugural speech is labeled B. Each sentence was analyzed qualitatively to determine its illocutionary force and was then categorized under one of Searle's five classifications. The results are presented in tables to show the distribution of speech act types across both speeches, followed by a descriptive interpretation of their rhetorical significance.

Speech Acts in Obama's 2009 Inaugural Speech

A1. *"My fellow citizens: I stand here today humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust you've bestowed, mindful of the sacrifices borne by our ancestors."*

Speech Act Type: Expressive

Function: Obama expresses gratitude and humility, acknowledging the trust of the people and sacrifices of past generations.

A2. *"That we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood."*

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: States the reality of the national crisis, affirming shared awareness among citizens.

A3. *"Today I say to you that the challenges we face are real."*

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Reinforces the seriousness of the challenges, emphasizing truth and urgency.

A4. *"On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord."*

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Declares the collective choice of values, aligning the audience with positive ideals.

A5. *"The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit, to choose our better history... that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness."*

Speech Act Type: Directive

Function: Urges citizens to recommit to shared ideals of equality, freedom, and collective progress.

A6. *"In reaffirming the greatness of our nation, we understand that greatness is never a given; it must be earned."*

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Affirms the principle that national greatness comes through effort and responsibility.

A7. *"Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America."*

Speech Act Type: Directive

Function: Calls the audience to action, stressing collective responsibility to rebuild the nation.

A8. *"We will build the roads and bridges, the electric grids and digital lines that feed our commerce and bind us together."*

Speech Act Type: Commissive

Function: Commits to specific future actions in infrastructure development.

A9. *"We will restore science to its rightful place, and wield technology's wonders to raise health care's quality and lower its cost."*

Speech Act Type: Commissive

Function: Promises policy reforms in science and healthcare, demonstrating commitment to progress.

A10. *"What the cynics fail to understand is that the ground has shifted beneath them, that the stale political arguments that have consumed us for so long no longer apply."*

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Asserts a new political reality and dismisses outdated arguments.

A11. *"The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works—whether it helps families find jobs, care they can afford, and a retirement that is dignified."*

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Frames a principle of governance, asserting a pragmatic standard for government effectiveness.

A12. *"Know that America is a friend of each nation, and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity."*

Speech Act Type: Declarative

Function: Proclaims America's diplomatic stance, positioning the nation as a global partner for peace.

A13. *"We will not apologize for our way of life, nor will we waver in its defense."*

Speech Act Type: Commissive

Function: Commits to defending American values and lifestyle against external threats.

A14. *"Know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist."*

Speech Act Type: Directive + Commissive

Function: Warns authoritarian leaders (directive) while promising conditional cooperation (commissive).

A15. *"What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility—a recognition that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world."*

Speech Act Type: Directive

Function: Urges Americans to embrace responsibility and fulfill duties at personal, national, and global levels.

Speech Acts in Obama's 2013 Inaugural Speech

B1. *"Each time we gather to inaugurate a President we bear witness to the enduring strength of our Constitution."*

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Affirms continuity of American democracy through the Constitution.

B2. *"Today we continue a never-ending journey to bridge the meaning of those words with the realities of our time."*

Speech Act Type: Commissive

Function: Commits the nation to fulfilling the ideals of equality and liberty in present challenges.

B3. “And for more than two hundred years, we have.”

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Declares America’s historical commitment to its founding creed.

B4. “Together, we resolved that a great nation must care for the vulnerable, and protect its people from life’s worst hazards and misfortune.”

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: States a shared principle of collective responsibility.

B5. “But we have always understood that when times change, so must we.”

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Emphasizes adaptability as a national value.

B6. “Now, more than ever, we must do these things together, as one nation and one people.”

Speech Act Type: Directive

Function: Urges unity and collective action to face new challenges.

B7. “My fellow Americans, we are made for this moment, and we will seize it—so long as we seize it together.”

Speech Act Type: Commissive

Function: Commits to action and inspires the audience to share responsibility.

B8. “We, the people, still believe that every citizen deserves a basic measure of security and dignity.”

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Declares belief in equality and social justice as guiding principles.

B9. “We will respond to the threat of climate change, knowing that the failure to do so would betray our children and future generations.”

Speech Act Type: Commissive

Function: Promises action against climate change, appealing to moral responsibility.

B10. “America will remain the anchor of strong alliances in every corner of the globe.”

Speech Act Type: Commissive

Function: Commits the U.S. to maintaining global partnerships.

B11. “We, the people, declare today that the most evident of truths—that all of us are created equal—is the star that guides us still.”

Speech Act Type: Declarative

Function: Proclaims equality as a timeless national principle.

B12. “It is now our generation’s task to carry on what those pioneers began.”

Speech Act Type: Directive

Function: Calls on citizens to continue the work of past generations.

B13. “We must act, knowing that our work will be imperfect.”

Speech Act Type: Directive

Function: Urges immediate action despite challenges or limitations.

B14. “You and I, as citizens, have the power to set this country’s course.”

Speech Act Type: Assertive

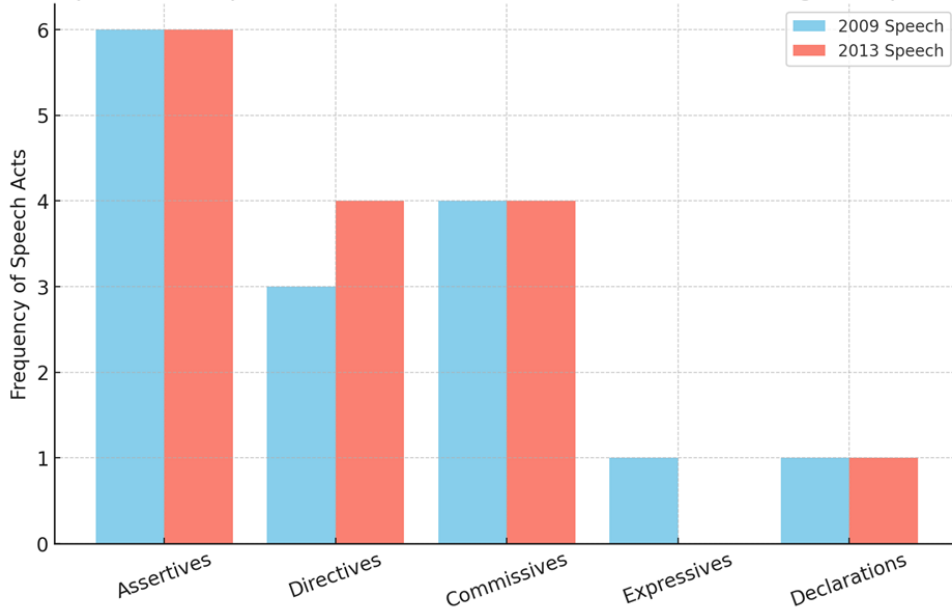
Function: Affirms the role of citizens in shaping the nation’s future.

B15. “Let us, each of us, now embrace with solemn duty and awesome joy what is our lasting birthright.”

Speech Act Type: Directive

Function: Invites Americans to embrace freedom and responsibility as their national heritage.

Comparison of Speech Acts in Obama’s 2009 and 2013 Inaugural Speeches



No.	Speech Act Type	2009 Inaugural (A1–A15)	2013 Inaugural (B1–B15)	Observations
1	Assertives	A2, A3, A4, A6, A10, A11 Total: 6	B1, B3, B4, B5, B8, B14 Total: 6	Assertives are equally dominant in both speeches, showing Obama's emphasis on affirming truths, values, and national realities.
2	Directives	A5, A7, A15 Total: 3	B6, B12, B13, B15 Total: 4	Slightly more directives in 2013, reflecting stronger calls for unity, action, and shared responsibility.
3	Commissives	A8, A9, A13, A14 Total: 4	B2, B7, B9, B10 Total: 4	Commissives are balanced, showing promises in both speeches; 2009 focuses on rebuilding America, while 2013 emphasizes global leadership and climate action.
4	Expressives	A1 Total: 1	– Total=0	Expressives appear only in 2009, where Obama opens with gratitude and humility.
5	Declarations	A12 Total=1	B11 Total=1	One in each speech: 2009 declares friendship to other nations; 2013 declares equality as a guiding truth.

Findings and Discussion

Language serves as a powerful instrument for shaping political ideology, and this study explored Barack Obama's use of speech acts in his 2009 and 2013 inaugural addresses through the lens of Searle's (1969) framework. A total of thirty sentences were examined—fifteen from each speech—and categorized into assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations.

The analysis of the 2009 inaugural speech revealed that assertives were most frequent, representing 40% of the selected sentences, followed by commissives (27%), directives (20%), expressives (7%), and declarations (6%). This pattern suggests that Obama relied heavily on asserting truths and reaffirming shared national values, while also pledging future actions such as rebuilding infrastructure and defending American principles. The small presence of expressives highlighted his humility and gratitude at the outset of his presidency.

In contrast, the 2013 address displayed a slightly different distribution: assertives again made up 40%, commissives 27%, directives 27%, and declarations 6%, while expressives were absent. Here, Obama placed stronger emphasis on directives, urging citizens toward unity, shared responsibility, and immediate action on issues including climate change and equality. Commissives remained central, reflecting promises of continued domestic reform and global leadership.

When the two speeches are considered together, assertives and commissives dominate at 40% and 27% respectively, with directives showing a notable presence at 23%, declarations at 7%, and expressives at only 3%. These results indicate that Obama consistently balanced assertives to affirm truths and values with commissives to commit to future action, while his second inaugural speech placed greater weight on directives as a means of mobilizing collective responsibility.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Obama employed speech acts not merely to fulfill the ceremonial role of the inaugural address, but also to persuade, inspire, and reinforce his authority as a national leader. Identifying these speech act types provides insight into the rhetorical strategies embedded in his discourse. The analysis shows that Obama's inaugural rhetoric is largely characterized by assertives and commissives: in 2009, promises of reform and rebuilding reassured a nation in crisis, while in 2013, assertives and directives reinforced American values and called for joint action in addressing pressing national and global challenges. Speech Act

Theory thus proves to be an effective framework for uncovering the ways in which Obama strategically used language to construct meaning and engage his audience.

Conclusion

This study analyzed Barack Obama's 2009 and 2013 inaugural speeches as instances of political discourse with clear rhetorical purposes. Identifying the types of speech acts employed in these speeches provides a deeper understanding of how meaning is constructed and how rhetorical strategies operate. In political communication, the simple act of speaking performs multiple functions simultaneously, and these functions reveal how leaders use language to persuade, inspire, and reinforce their authority.

The findings show that Obama's rhetoric is shaped primarily by assertive and commissive speech acts. In the 2009 address, commissives such as promises of reform and rebuilding emphasized his commitment to future action and reassured the public during a period of crisis. By contrast, the 2013 address relied more heavily on assertives and directives, highlighting enduring national values while calling for unity and shared responsibility in confronting both domestic and global challenges. Overall, the application of Speech Act Theory has proven effective in demonstrating how Obama strategically used language to construct meaning, mobilize citizens, and consolidate his leadership role.

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