

Illocutionary Acts by Kamala Harris in the 2020 Vice Presidential Debate

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Abstract. An illocutionary act plays a significant role in political discourse, as it reveals the speaker's intentions and persuasive strategies through language. While previous studies have explored illocutionary acts in social media and advertisement, this study focuses on the formal political debate setting, which remain unexplored. This study examines the types of illocutionary acts and their functions in the 2020 United States Vice Presidential Candidate Debate between Senator Kamala Harris and Vice President Mike Pence. This study focuses solely on the utterances delivered by Kamala Harris. A qualitative descriptive method was employed, analyzing Kamala Harris's utterance using Searle (1976) classification to identify the types of illocutionary acts. Based on the results of this study, there are 65 data of illocutionary acts, which can be divided into 33 (51%) assertive acts, 12 (18%) directive acts, 10 (15%) commissive acts, and 10 (15%) expressive acts. This study also found various functions of each act based on the theory of Yule (1996). Assertive acts include functions such as reporting, informing, and asserting; directive acts involve requesting and advising; commissive acts include refusing, promising, and vowing; and expressive acts feature praising, thanking, and condoling. The most frequently used function is reporting, with 9 occurrences (14%), which indicates Kamala Harris's emphasis on presenting factual arguments. The findings highlight how language in political debates is used strategically to establish credibility, convey ideology, and persuade audiences.

Keywords: illocutionary acts; communicative function; political debate kamala harris; types of illocutionary acts

Introduction

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that examines the meaning conveyed by speakers and interpreted by listeners within a specific context (Yule, 1996; Juanda, 2025). According to Cutting (2002) and Leech (1983), understanding pragmatics involves being aware of communicative purposes, social norms, and shared knowledge between speakers and their interlocutors. Mey (2001) adds that pragmatics highlights the implicit meaning in utterances, so that language is not only judged by what is said, but also by the intent that is conveyed. Grundy (2019) supports this by stating that pragmatics examines how speakers perform actions through language in specific contexts, emphasizing that meaning depends not only on the words literally, but also on how, when, and why the words are spoken. In line with this, Austin (1962) emphasizes that language is a form of action, as it enables various communication actions through speech acts, such as ordering, promising, or requesting, which demonstrate that language is a tool for action in society.

Speech acts are a crucial aspect of pragmatics, as their primary focus is on how utterances are used to perform an action and achieve communicative goals (Pratama, 2024; Risnawati et al., 2025).

These actions depend on the speaker's intention and the listener's understanding of that intention within a specific context (Horn & Ward, 2006; Putra & Widiadnya Putri, 2024). As explained by Wahyudiantari (2021) and (Darong 2024), every utterance involves three interrelated types of acts, which correspond with Austin's (1962) classification of speech acts. These concepts involve not only the words spoken but also the actions performed through those words; this is highly dependent on the speaker and the context. Searle (1979) states that an understanding of speech acts is very important because language itself is a form of action, and every utterance contains one type of action that has communicative power. Austin (1962) builds on this concept by dividing speech acts into three related categories: Locutionary act, Illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act.

A locutionary act is the first step in delivering an utterance, in which the speaker produces linguistically meaningful words. In other words, a locutionary act refers to the literal meaning of the utterance itself. Meanwhile, Illocutionary acts reflect the communication intentions that speakers want to achieve through their utterance, such as giving instructions, stating promises, and asking for something. Perlocutionary acts refer to the impact or reaction that the utterance has on the listener, such as encouraging them to do something (Austin, 1962). This theory is critical because each illocutionary act implies locutionary acts and produces perlocutionary effects (Setyaningsih & Rakhmawati, 2025). Understanding the relationship between these types of acts helps to uncover the deeper intentions behind spoken language and the outcomes it produces. Since the process leading to illocutionary acts can be extended in many variations, conducting studies on illocutionary acts becomes an interesting topic for further linguistic study (Austin, 1962). Illocutionary acts are actions performed through speaking that reflect the speaker's intended communicative purpose (Searle, 1976). Searle (1976) classified illocutionary acts into five categories: assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative. This classification helps in identifying how language functions beyond its literal meaning by focusing on the speaker's intention behind an utterance. These acts can be challenging to identify, as their interpretation depends on the speaker's intention, the listener's understanding, and the situational context (Juwita & Inayah, 2021). Illocutionary acts also play an important role in influencing the audience to act or contribute to the discussion (Sudiyono et al., 2023). In political debates, studying illocutionary acts can provide insight into how politicians construct arguments, manage interactions, and position themselves ideologically through their speech.

Political debate is a crucial form of public communication and has a significant impact on people's lives, as they can influence voters' decisions (Benoit, 2014; Yulistiana & Widyastuti, 2022; Renref & Oktoviandry, 2024; Handayani & Wibowo, 2025). They serve as a strategic arena in which candidates not only reveal their policies but also involve in persuasive discourse to shape public opinion and reinforce their political image (Pratika & Simatupang, 2025; Fetzer, 2013). In politics, the use of effective language is very important, and this can be observed in U.S. presidential debates, such as that involving Kamala Harris. Therefore, this study utilizes data from the debate video uploaded on YouTube, entitled "2020 United States Vice Presidential Candidate Debate between Senator Kamala Harris and Vice President Mike Pence," which was held on October 7, 2020, at the University of Utah (PBS NewsHour, 2020). This debate was the only Vice-Presidential debate of the election year, addressing key issues such as COVID-19, healthcare, the economy, climate change, and foreign policy. It was selected as a data source due to its rich examples of illocutionary acts.

This study reviews five previous studies related to illocutionary acts, comprising three journal articles and two theses. Several previous studies have examined illocutionary acts in various forms of communication, including digital media, advertising, and film. A study titled "Illocutionary Acts on Instagram Captions Related to Covid-19 Health Campaign" by Dako & Abdullah (2024) analyzed

Instagram captions with a focus on how representational acts are used to convey persuasive and educative messages. The study "Speech Acts in Donald Trump's Tweets during the 2024 Presidential Campaign" by Simanjuntak et al. (2025) examined Donald Trump's tweets, focusing on the desire to use directive acts to influence public opinion through social media. In the context of advertising, Saputri et al. (2021) conducted a study titled "Illocutionary Acts in Beauty Product Advertisements," analyzing television advertisements and examining the role of assertive acts in establishing credibility and capturing consumer attention. Meanwhile, two other studies in the context of animated films also provide essential engagement. Lestari (2024), in her study entitled "Illocutionary Acts in the Animated Movie the Trolls," as well as Asykin (2021) in "An Analysis of Illocutionary Acts in Ratatouille Animated Movie," examined the dominance of directive and expressive acts examined the dominance of directive and expressive acts used to convey moral messages and build emotional participation with the audience. Although these five studies demonstrate the utilization of illocutionary acts in various media, most of them only examine the types of illocutionary acts without providing an in-depth discussion of their communicative functions within the discourse context. Therefore, a gap remains in understanding the role of illocutionary acts in meaning formation, interactional goals, and audience comprehension, particularly in formal political discourse. This shows that there is a need for further studies that not only focus on the classification of types of illocutionary acts, but also the communicative function of these illocutionary acts.

This study differs from previous studies in that it focuses on formal political debates, a context that involves structured speaking turns, direct rebuttals, and strategic argumentation. In contrast to social media, advertisements, or dialogue in animated films, debates require the use of spontaneous language under pressure, making them a rich context for analyzing illocutionary acts. This study applies Searle's (1976) and Yule's (1996) framework of communicative functions. With this approach, this study aims to explore not only the types of illocutionary acts but also their communicative functions in pragmatics and reveal how language in political debates is used to convey information, persuade, criticize, and form opinionated positions.

Methods

This section provides a comprehensive description of the methodology used in this study, including the study design, data source, data collection procedures, and data analysis techniques. This study used a descriptive qualitative method to analyze the data. Searle (1976) theory was applied to identify the five types of illocutionary acts in Kamala Harris's utterances, while Yule's (1996) classification was used to analyze their communicative functions. The data analysis followed four steps: (1) repeatedly watching the full debate video on the PBS NewsHour YouTube channel; (2) identifying Kamala Harris's utterances containing illocutionary acts; (3) classifying the data based on the five types of illocutionary acts proposed by Searle (1976) such as assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative; and (4) analyzing their communicative functions using theory by Yule (1996). The findings were presented using both formal and informal methods. Formally, the results were organized in tables and percentages to show the frequency of each type of illocutionary act found in Kamala Harris's debate. Informally, the data were explained in a narrative form to describe the function of each illocutionary act. To ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis, the 2020 Vice Presidential Debate was repeatedly watched for a through the dialogue and actions. The data classification and interpretation were carefully double-checked to avoid errors and to accurately reflect the communication strategies used during the debate.

Result and Discussion

Table 1. Types of Illocutionary Acts

Types of Illocutionary Acts	Frequency	Percentage
Assertive	33	51%
Directive	12	18%
Commissive	10	15%
Expressive	10	15%
Total	65	100%

This analysis aims to categorize each utterance as one of Searle's (1976) five types of illocutionary acts and to examine the distribution throughout the 2020 Vice Presidential Debate. Four types were found: assertive, directive, commissive, and expressive, while the declarative was not found, as Harris lacked the institutional authority required to perform such acts. The results are presented in a table with four representative excerpts for each category from the official debate transcript. This categorization highlights both frequency and table of each type and demonstrates how Harris used language strategically to build her arguments.

Based on the table 1, there are 65 utterances categorized into four types of illocutionary acts. The most dominant type is Assertive Acts with 33 occurrences (51%), followed by Directive Acts with 12 occurrences (18%), Commissive 10 occurrences (15%), and Expressive 10 occurrences (15%). The Specific function of the illocutionary act can be seen in the table 2.

Table 2. Functions of Illocutionary Acts

Types of Illocutionary Acts	Function of Illocutionary Act	Percentage
Assertive	Stating (3)	5%
	Claiming (4)	6%
	Describing (5)	8%
	Reporting (9)	14%
	Informing (6)	9%
Directive	Asserting (6)	9%
	Requesting (5)	8%
	Advising (4)	6%
Commissive	Suggesting (3)	5%
	Promising (3)	5%
	Vowing (3)	5%
Expressive	Refusing (4)	6%
	Thanking (2)	3%
	Praising (5)	8%
Total	Condoling (3)	5%
	65	100%

The table above shows a total of 15 communicative functions found across four types of illocutionary acts. The most dominant function is reporting, with 9 occurrences (14%), followed by informing 6 occurrences (9%), and asserting 6 (9%), all of which fall under the assertive category.

Other functions, such as requesting 5 (8%) and advising 4 (6%), are primarily found in directive acts, while refusing 4 (6%) appears as the leading function in commissive acts. The functions that found in expressive acts, such as praising 5 (8%), thanking 2 (3%), and condoling 3 (5%). As the representation of this study, some examples of dialogues containing illocutionary acts will be presented as below:

Assertive

According to Searle (1976), assertive acts are illocutionary acts in which the speaker expresses beliefs or conveys information considered to be true. They include functions such as stating, claiming, describing, reporting, informing, and asserting. In political debates, assertive acts are commonly used to present facts, argue positions, and address assumptions.

Data 1:

Kamala Harris: *"We are looking at **over 30 million people**, who in the last several months, had to file for unemployment."*

Mike Pence: *"At the height, we've already added back 11.6 million jobs because we had a president who cut taxes, rolled back regulation, unleashed American energy..."*

(Harris, 00:07:40 & Pence, 00:32:23)

The above utterance was spoken by Kamala Harris when discussing the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. She stated that "over 30 million people" had filed for unemployment, which literally conveys factual information about the financial condition. However, the intended meaning of this utterance is that Harris is building her image as a vice presidential candidate who cares about the people's fate, who is more competent in dealing with economic problems, and it is also considered an indirect illocutionary act. By mentioning these statistics, she subtly builds her credibility as a more caring leader. This utterance is categorized as an **assertive illocutionary act**, as she expresses something that she believes to be true.

The function of the illocutionary act is **asserting**, as Harris uses facts to shape her argument and build credibility strategically. This function helps her gain the audience's trust by emphasizing truthful, data-based claims. It also reflects a logical and calm approach to confronting opposing views. Through this act, Harris positions herself as a responsible leader who communicates clearly. The act supports her political narrative while reinforcing her integrity.

Data 2:

Mike Pence: *"But I want the American people to know that from the very first day, President Donald Trump has put the health of America first."*

Kamala Harris: *"The president said **it was a hoax**."*

(Pence, 00:06:27 & Harris, 00:06:47)

The above utterance was spoken by Kamala Harris in response to Mike Pence's claim that Donald Trump had prioritized public health from the beginning of the pandemic. Harris replied by saying, "it was a hoax," which literally quotes Trump's past statement. The intended meaning is to attack Trump's credibility and show that he is not worthy of trust in handling the health crisis. This utterance is categorized as an **assertive illocutionary act** because Harris presents a fact, she believes to be true. It is also indirect, as her criticism is implied rather than directly stated.

The function of the illocutionary act is **reporting**, because Harris strategically presents a real quote to invite critical reflection from the audience. By quoting rather than arguing directly, she shifts the burden of judgement to listeners, strengthening her position through implication. This approach maintains credibility while exposing contradiction. The report is used to subtly question the integrity of her opponent's defense. It reflects Harris's rhetorical strategy of letting facts speak louder than claims.

Data 3:

Kamala Harris: "What he'll do with the money is **invest it in the American people.**"

Mike Pence: "We've already added back 11.6 million jobs because we had a president who cut taxes, rolled back regulation, unleashed American energy..."

(Harris, 00:30:08 & Pence, 00:32:23)

The above utterance was spoken by Kamala Harris when discussing about Joe Biden's economic policy during the debate. She said, "invest it in the American people," which literally explains about economic policy. The intended meaning is to shape Joe Biden as a leader who prioritizes the needs of the people and has a more compassionate and effective economic vision than his opponent. This statement serves as a subtle endorsement of Biden's character and leadership qualities. It is categorized as an **assertive illocutionary act**, and specifically an indirect as her promotional intent is implied rather than overt.

The function of this illocutionary act is **informing**, aimed at delivering policy details while indirectly shaping the audience's impression of leadership quality. Harris uses this informative approach to distinguish her candidate's vision without overt confrontation. It positions her as clear and credible, helping to gain public trust through transparency. In this context, informing also serves to guide the audience toward a preferred interpretation. The act supports her boarder persuasive strategy by framing leadership in terms of empathy and action.

Data 4:

Mike Pence: "*Joe Biden wants to raise taxes. Kamala Harris, you and Joe Biden want to raise taxes on day one.*"

Kamala Harris: "*Joe Biden **saved the auto industry**, you voted against it.*"

(Pence, 00:46:43 & Harris, 00:47:24)

The above utterance was spoken by Kamala Harris in response to Mike Pence's criticism of Joe Biden's tax policy. She stated, "saved the auto industry," which literally delivers two factual claims: that Joe Biden helped save the auto industry and that Mike Pence did not support the policy. However, the intended meaning is to defend Biden's position while subtly discrediting Pence's judgement. This utterance aimed at strengthening Biden's public image as a rhetorical contrast between the two candidates. It is categorized as an **assertive illocutionary act** and is also indirect, since the attack on Pence's credibility is implied rather than directly stated.

The function of this illocutionary act is **claiming**, used to frame political contrasts through a confident and value-driven assertion. Harris emphasizes accomplishments to shape audience perception rather than directly criticising her opponent. This rhetorical strategy enables her to take control of the narrative while reinforcing her alignment with successful leadership. This claim also functions as a persuasive tool to highlight credibility through comparison. It strengthens her position

by focusing the debate on measurable results rather than abstract promises.

Directive

Directive acts, according to Searle (1976) are illocutionary acts in which speaker attempts to get the hearer to perform a specific action. They include functions such as requesting, commanding, advising, and suggesting. In formal settings such as political debates, directive acts used to challenge the speaker, appeal for action, and for public responsibility.

Data 5:

Mike Pence: *"But I want the American people to know that from the very first day, President Donald Trump has put the health of America first."*

Kamala Harris: *"Let's talk about respecting the American people."*

(Pence, 00:06:27 & Harris, 00:16:43)

The above utterance was expressed by Kamala Harris in response to Mike Pence's statement regarding the Donald Trump administration's handling of public health. She said, "Let's talk about respecting the American People," which literally an invitation to change the topic. However, the intended meaning is to subtly criticize the government's failure to show genuine concern for the public. Harris positions herself as someone who values the people more, redirecting the conversation to a moral issue. This utterance is categorized as a **directive illocutionary act**, as it aims to influence the direction of the conversation, and it is also indirect, since the deeper criticism is not stated explicitly.

The function of this illocutionary act is **suggesting**, employed to steer the conversation toward ethical concerns without provoking resistance. Harris uses polite and inclusive language to redirect attention, allowing her to reframe the topic without appearing confrontational. This subtle shift invites the audience to reassess the priorities presented by her opponent. The act strengthens her image as a principled leader who values public dignity. Harris tactfully challenges the dominant narrative while maintaining composure through suggestion.

Data 6:

Mike Pence: *"Look, Senator Harris, you're entitled to your opinion, but you're not entitled to your own facts."*

Kamala Harris: *"If you don't mind **letting me finish**, we can then have a conversation, okay?"*

(Pence, 00:34:13 & Harris, 00:34:31)

The above utterance was expressed by Kamala Harris in response to Mike Pence's interruption during the debate. She said, "letting me finish," which literally a polite invitation to continue the discussion in turns. However, the intended meaning is to show ability to defend one's position, as well as to build an image as a leader who is confident and able to maintain authority under pressure. Harris builds an image of a firm and composed leader who maintains control in tense situations through this utterance. As a result, it can be categorized as a **directive illocutionary act** and also an indirect illocutionary act as the real intention is conveyed implicitly through courteous phrasing.

The function of this illocutionary act is **requesting**, used to assert conversational control while maintaining a respectful tone. Harris employs a polite yet firm approach to manage interruptions without escalating conflict. This enhances her authority in the debate while reinforcing norms of

turn-taking. This request highlights her ability to defend her space diplomatically in the face of pressure. It serves to assert equal participation and strengthen her role as a composed communicator.

Data 7:

Mike Pence: *"Joe Biden says democracy is on the ballot, Kamala Harris says justice is on the ballot. But the American people really deserve to know..."*

Kamala Harris: *"You can also go to Joe Biden.com."*

(Pence, 01:21:26 & Harris, 01:24:51)

The above utterance was expressed by Kamala Harris in the context of closing the debate when discussing important issues that will be faced in the election. She said, "go to Joe Biden.com," which literally a suggestion to visit an official campaign website. However, the intended meaning is to reinforce the professional and credible image of the candidate she represents, as well as to ensure that the political message remains in the audience's memory after the debate ends. By inserting a campaign message into a closing remark, Harris takes advantage of the debate's momentum to leave a lasting impression. This utterance is categorized as a **directive illocutionary act** and is also indirect, since the persuasive political intent is implied rather than stated directly.

The function of this illocutionary act is **advising**, used to empower the audience through access to credible information. Harris encourages active civic engagement by guiding voters toward independent evaluation. This advisory move strengthens her campaign's image as trustworthy. It extends the persuasive impact of the debate beyond the immediate context. By offering a clear and actionable step, she reinforces her role as a responsible and forward-thinking communicator.

Data 8:

Mike Pence: *"You know, I respect the fact that Joe Biden spent 47 years in public life..."*

Kamala Harris: *"He interrupted me, and I'd like to just finish, please."*

(Pence, 00:35:58 & Harris, 00:36:02)

The above utterance was expressed by Kamala Harris in a situation where she felt that her speech had been interrupted by Mike Pence. She said "I'd like to just finish," which literally a polite complaint followed by a request to complete her statement. However, the intended meaning is to present herself as a disciplined and respectful leader who upholds fairness in discourse, while criticizing her opponent's behavior subtly without sounding confrontational. This response also serves to strengthen her public image as a composed leader. It is categorized as a **directive illocutionary act** and is considered indirect, as the reprimand is implied through respectful wording rather than being stated directly.

The function of this illocutionary act is **requesting**, serving to reestablish order in the conversation while maintaining respect for the debate format. Harris uses a calm tone to assert her right to speak without coming across as confrontational. This reinforces her ability to navigate interruptions diplomatically. This act also highlights her self-control in a high-pressure environment. It strengthens her image as a poised and authoritative figure. Additionally, it signals fairness and encourages adherence to mutual speaking boundaries.

Commissive

Commissive acts involve the speaker committing to a future action, such as promising, vowing,

and refusing. In political discourse, commissive acts often appear in the form of policy commitments, campaign promises, and future plans (Searle, 1976).

Data 9:

Mike Pence: *"We have five companies in phase three clinical trials, and we're right now producing tens of millions of doses."*

Kamala Harris: *"If public health professionals tell us to take it, I'll be the first in line."*

(Pence, 00:17:36 & Harris, 00:18:05)

The above statement was uttered by Kamala Harris when discussing public confidence in the COVID-19 vaccine. She said, "I'll be the first in line," which literally expresses her willingness to be vaccinated based on expert advice. The intended meaning is to affirm that trust in vaccines should be built on scientific authority rather than political influence. By stating her readiness to be vaccinated, Harris projects herself as a responsible leader who leads by example. In this way, it can be categorized as a **commissive illocutionary act**, and it is direct, since the intention is stated clearly and explicitly.

The function of this illocutionary act is **promising**, intended to foster public trust by aligning personal commitment with scientific authority. Harris uses this promise to reinforce her credibility and convey accountability in a health-related context. This act functions as a model of responsible leadership, especially during a crisis. It also serves to contrast fact-based decision-making with politicized narratives. By making this public commitment, Harris strengthens her connection with voters who prioritize safety and science.

Data 10:

Mike Pence: *"I believe in all my heart that President Donald Trump is going to win this election."*

Kamala Harris: *"We will not let anyone subvert our democracy..."*

(Pence, 01:24:28 & Harris, 01:25:12)

The above utterance was expressed by Kamala Harris in the context of responding to Mike Pence's optimistic statement about Donald Trump's potential election victory. She said, "not let anyone subvert our democracy," which literally conveys a commitment to defending democratic values from harm. The intended meaning is to express strong political determination and assure the public of her role in protecting the legitimacy of the election. This utterance also acts as a form of moral reassurance, signalling solidarity with voters who are concerned about the democratic process. It is categorized as a **commissive illocutionary act**, and it is direct, as the intention to act in defense of democracy is stated explicitly.

The function of this illocutionary act is **vowing**, used to express unwavering dedication to democratic principles. Harris makes a firm moral statement that reinforces her identity as a protector of national integrity. This vow appeals to the audience's sense of justice and collective responsibility. It also strengthens emotional resonance by framing her stance as a matter of principle rather than politics. This act builds long-term credibility by signaling her loyalty to foundational values.

Data 11:

Mike Pence: *"Now with regard to climate change, the climate is changing. But the issue is, what's the cause and what do we do about it? President Trump has made it clear that we're going to continue to listen to the science..."*

Kamala Harris: *"We will reenter the Climate Agreement with pride."*

(Pence, 00:42:43 & Harris, 00:43:08)

The above utterance was expressed by Kamala Harris in response to the issue of climate change and the previous administration's position on the Paris Agreement. She said, "reenter the Climate Agreement with pride," which literally communicates a future commitment to rejoin the global accord. The intended meaning is to emphasize that the administration she represents will restore the United States' global credibility and leadership in addressing climate issues. This statement is a strategic campaign promise aimed at regaining trust among environmentally conscious voters. It can be categorized as a **commissive illocutionary act**, and it is direct because the promise is stated explicitly and with conviction.

The function of this illocutionary act is **promising**, aimed at restoring public confidence in environmental leadership. Harris's commitment signals a shift toward international cooperation and accountability. This act appeals to the environmentally conscious voters by offering a concrete and forward-looking policy stance. It also reinforces her role as a leader attuned to global challenges and willing to take decisive action. She establishes both political responsibility and long-term vision through this promise.

Data 12:

Mike Pence: *"We're right now producing tens of millions of doses... I think it's unconscionable for someone to suggest that we would politicize such an effort."*

Kamala Harris: *"But if Donald Trump tells us that we should take it, I'm not taking it."*

(Pence, 00:17:36 & Harris, 00:18:14)

The above utterance was spoken by Kamala Harris when addressing the issue of the COVID-19 vaccine amid public distrust of political leadership. She said, "I'm not taking it," which literally conveys her refusal to follow medical advice if it comes from a political figure. However, the intended meaning is to criticize the politicization of the COVID-19 vaccine and assert that medical decisions should be based on guidance from health experts, rather than just political pressure or influence. This utterance also strengthens her image as a leader who stands with science and resists politicized narratives. It falls under a **commissive illocutionary act**, and it is direct, since the refusal is expressed clearly and without implication.

The function of this illocutionary act is **refusing**, used to reject politicized influence over personal health decisions. Harris draws a clear line between science and politics, reinforcing her credibility as a rational decision-maker. This refusal also reflects a broader effort to elevate expert authority in public discourse. This act challenges the legitimacy of political messaging that undermines trust in science. It strengthens her stances as a principled leader who prioritizes evidence over allegiance.

Expressive

According to Searle (1976), expressive acts are used to convey the speaker's feelings, attitudes, and emotional responses to specific situations. They include functions such as thanking, praising,

and condoling. In political debates, expressive acts help convey respect, express concern, and foster rapport with the audience.

Data 13:

Mike Pence: *"Joe Biden looked a supporter in the eye and pointed and said, 'I guarantee, I guarantee that we will abolish fossil fuels.'"*

Kamala Harris: *"So, I love talking with Joe about a lot of these issues and Joe."*

(Pence, 00:52:43 & Harris, 00:53:12)

The above utterance was expressed by Kamala Harris in response to Mike Pence's accusations regarding Joe Biden's policies. She said, "I love talking with Joe," which literally expresses her enjoyment in discussing matters with Joe Biden. The intended meaning is to subtly reject Mike Pence's accusation by emphasizing that Biden is a figure who is open to discussion, has a rational view, and can be trusted in managing policies. By expressing her admiration, Harris strengthens their political alignment and presents a united front. As a result, this utterance can be categorized as an **expressive illocutionary act** and is direct, since the emotional intent is clearly and openly conveyed.

The function of this illocutionary act is **praising**, employed to strengthen the image of unity and mutual respect within the political team. Harris uses this expression to build an emotional connection and portray her running mate as relatable and competent. This praise functions as a soft strategy to boost trust without overt campaigning. It reinforces collaborative leadership as a shared value. This act enhances the appeal of the candidate pair through authenticity.

Data 14:

Mike Pence: *"My daughter is a school teacher, and I just want everyone to know — we're with you. We support law enforcement and we will always stand by them. But we also grieve for the loss of George Floyd."*

Kamala Harris: *"I know about your daughter's case, I'm so sorry."*

(Pence, 00:57:38 & Harris, 00:58:00)

The above utterance was delivered by Kamala Harris in response to Mike Pence's statement about his daughter becoming a teacher. She said, "I'm so sorry," which literally expresses sympathy toward the personal story shared during the debate. However, the intended meaning is to build an emotional connection and present herself as a compassionate figure even in a formal political setting. Harris uses this moment to show appreciation for family and to reflect her empathetic values. As a result, this utterance can be categorized as an **expressive illocutionary act**, and it is direct, since the feeling of sympathy is clearly and openly conveyed.

The function of this illocutionary act is **condoling**, used to express empathy and foster a respectful tone within a competitive setting. Harris's gesture softens the atmosphere and highlights her emotional sensitivity. It strengthens her public image as a leader who values both human connection and civility. This type of utterance promotes compassion while signaling maturity in political discourse. It bridges sincerity with professional presence.

Data 15:

Mike Pence: *"I think the American people know that this is a nation of faith, a nation of strength, and a nation that's overcome much."*

Kamala Harris: *"The thought that I'd be sitting here right now would make her*

proud."

(Pence, 00:21:44 & Harris, 00:22:15)

The above utterance was delivered by Kamala Harris in the context of a personal reflection on her life journey and achievements. She said, "make her proud," which literally expresses a belief that her late mother would feel proud of her current position. The intended meaning is to highlight her role as a continuation of the struggles of previous generations and as a symbol of representation for marginalized communities. Harris builds a strong emotional narrative and strengthens her connection with the audience. This utterance can be categorized as an **expressive illocutionary act**, and it is direct, because the feeling of pride and respect is conveyed openly and explicitly.

The function of this illocutionary act is **praising**, aimed at honoring personal legacy while reinforcing cultural and generational values. Harris uses the tribute to create an emotional bond with the audience and emphasize shared experiences of perseverance. This expression elevates her political message by embedding it within a broader narrative of identity and resilience. It also serves to inspire the underrepresented communities through acknowledgment of past struggles. This act deepens her relatability and her strengthens her role as a symbol of progress.

Data 16:

Mike Pence: *"Senator, I want to thank you and Joe Biden for your expressions of genuine concern for the American people..."*

Kamala Harris: **"I appreciate that."**

(Pence, 01:21:46 & Harris, 01:21:49)

The above utterance was expressed by Kamala Harris in response to Mike Pence's expression of gratitude regarding his and Joe Biden's concern for the American people. She said, "I appreciate that," which literally expresses gratitude for her opponent's acknowledgement. The intended meaning is to reinforce her image as a respectful and diplomatic candidate, showing that she can rise above political hostility and embrace civility when appropriate. It also signals Harris's effort to maintain a dignified presence and acknowledge moments of agreement despite ideological differences. This utterance falls under an **expressive illocutionary act**, and it is direct, as the expression of gratitude is conveyed clearly and explicitly.

The function of this illocutionary act is **thanking**, which is used to maintain politeness and show professionalism in a high-stakes political situation. Harris's expression of gratitude demonstrates mutual respect and sets the tone for constructive engagement. It enhances her credibility as a diplomatic and emotionally sensitive communicator. It also softened party divisions and built a relationship with the audience. By demonstrating grace under pressure, Harris reinforced an image of leadership rooted in civility.

Conclusion

Based on the result of this study, it can be concluded that a total of 66 utterances of illocutionary acts were identified in Kamala Harris's utterances during the 2020 United States Vice Presidential Debate. These utterances were classified into four types of illocutionary acts, namely assertive, directive, commissive, and expressive based on Searle (1976) theory. Declarative acts were not found, as political debates do not grant participants the institutional authority required to perform such acts. Among the four types, assertive acts were the most dominant (51%), particularly in the function of reporting (14%), which reflects the speaker's effort to present factual arguments and enhance credibility. This study contributes to the understanding of language use in formal

political settings and contributes to pragmatic studies by highlighting how illocutionary acts function in real-time argumentative interactions. Future studies may expand on this topic by analyzing different political figures and focusing more deeply on the dominant act of assertive to explore their subfunctions in political communication. This study not only examines the use of illocutionary acts by a particular public figure, but also establishes a foundation for future study to compare illocutionary patterns across various public figures. Such comparisons may help reveal distinctive characteristics and communicative intentions within political discourse.

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