

Illocutionary Speech Acts in Luis von Ahn’s TED Talk on Addictive Learning as Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the types of illocutionary speech acts contained in Luis von Ahn's TED Talk entitled “How to Make Learning as Addictive as Social Media.” Using a qualitative descriptive method and content analysis, the data were taken from the official transcript and classified based on Searle's theory. The results showed four types of illocutionary acts: assertive, directive, expressive, and commissive. The most dominant type is assertive, with subtypes including informing, reporting, stating, and asserting. Other subtypes found include advising, commanding, praising, commenting, and committing, reflecting the speaker's attempt to emotionally engage the audience and encourage action. These findings demonstrate the strategic use of speech acts by speakers to convey ideas effectively.

Keywords: *Illocutionary act; Pragmatics; Speech act.*

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital age, communication is no longer limited to in-person interactions but has expanded to various multimedia platforms where language is used to inform, persuade, and build emotional engagement with a global audience. Social media, online videos, and public speeches are becoming key means for individuals and institutions to effectively convey ideas.

Language plays an important role in everyday life, not only as a tool to speak or exchange information, but also as a means to convey thoughts, express emotions, build relationships, and influence others. The meaning of what we say is often not only contained in the words themselves, but also shaped by the situation, the relationship between speakers, as well as shared knowledge. Therefore, the study of meaning in context is important in understanding how language functions in everyday communication Yule (2010).

One of the main concepts in pragmatics is speech act theory, which views speaking as an action. Whenever a person speaks, he or she not only conveys words, but also does something: asks, promises, invites, warns, or expresses feelings. Of the various types of speech acts, illocutionary acts have the most central role because they reveal the speaker's intention behind the utterance. Searle in Febriana (2024) divides illocutionary speech acts into five categories: assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative framework is still widely used in linguistic studies today.

This framework has been applied in various oral discourse studies. For example, Rahmawati (2021) found that characters in the movie *Crazy Rich Asians* use expressive speech acts such as thanks and apologies to show politeness and emotional closeness. Meanwhile, Ismani and Effendi (2022) showed that the animated film *Up* is filled with directive speech acts in the form of requests, instructions, and orders between characters. In addition, Mardiani and Leviani (2022) analyzed speech acts in the novel *Pride and Prejudice* and found that representative speech acts, such as stating and informing, were the most dominant, reflecting the characters' beliefs and shaping the development of the story. These findings show how linguistic actions shape relationships between characters and drive the storyline.

Along with the increasing use of digital platforms such as YouTube, speech acts have also become an important part of communication that reaches a global audience. One prominent form is the TED Talk presentation, which combines informative content with persuasive and emotional delivery, making it a rich source to analyze. One example is Luis von Ahn's “How to Make Learning as Addictive as Social Media” presentation, where he not only presented innovative ideas but also used different types of speech acts to connect with the audience and convey his message effectively.

However, although a number of studies have examined speech acts in films or fictional dialogues, research specifically analyzing how speech acts are utilized in public educational speeches on digital platforms remains relatively limited. Addressing this gap, this study aims to investigate the pragmatic strategies employed by Luis von Ahn in his TED Talk, “*How to Make Learning as Addictive as Social Media*.” Specifically, this research seeks to identify the various types of illocutionary acts present in his discourse and determine which category is most dominantly utilized. By examining these linguistic choices, this study argues that von Ahn's specific configuration of speech acts serves as a strategic mechanism to inform, persuade, and construct emotional engagement with a diverse global audience.

METHODS

Subjects of Research

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design to systematically describe and interpret linguistic phenomena within their natural context. This approach is selected to provide a deep understanding of the speaker's pragmatic choices without relying on statistical quantification. The subject of the research is the oral discourse delivered by Luis Von Ahn in his TED Talk titled “*How to Make Learning as Addictive as Social Media*” (2024). The analysis focuses specifically on the

utterances produced by the speaker to identify the underlying illocutionary forces.

Instruments

In accordance with qualitative inquiry traditions, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data gathering, identification, and interpretation. To support the analysis, a verbatim transcription of the speech was utilized as a secondary document, allowing for a precise examination of the speech acts. Additionally, the analysis was guided by Searle’s (2019) theoretical framework of illocutionary acts, which functioned as the analytical rubric for classification.

Data Collection

The data collection process involved an iterative viewing of the video to ensure accuracy, followed by a manual transcription of the speech. The data were subsequently analyzed through the following steps: (1) Identification: Isolating specific utterances that carry illocutionary force; (2) Classification: Categorizing the utterances based on Searle’s (2019) taxonomy: *assertives*, *directives*, *commissives*, *expressives*, and *declaratives*; and (3) Interpretation: Analyzing the linguistic form and intended function of each utterance within its specific context to determine the speaker's communicative intent.

To ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the findings, investigator triangulation was applied, involving peer and expert review of the data classification. The final analysis determines the dominant speech act types and their role in engaging the global audience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Description of Illocutionary Speech Acts in Luis Von Ahn’s TED Talk

The data analyzed in this study were obtained from Luis Von Ahn's TED talk entitled “How to Make Learning as Addictive as Social Media.” The focus of this analysis was to identify and classify illocutionary acts based on Searle's classification. The utterances in the speech were segmented and interpreted contextually to determine their illocutionary force. Each utterance was then classified into one of five types of speech acts: representative, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative. The frequency of each type of speech act was recorded and summarized in the following table to provide a clearer picture of the speaker's communicative intent throughout the speech.

Table 1. Description of Illocutionary Speech Acts in Luis Von Ahn’s TED Talk

No	Sentence	Innocutionary Act	Subtype	Description
1	“Let this sink in...”	Directive	Advising	Directing listeners to reflect.
2	“I was fortunate that I received...”	Expressive	Thanking	Expressing gratitude or positive emotions.

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3	“This is what I want to talk to you about today...”	Commissive	Committing	Stating intentions or commitments to discuss a topic.
4	“We decided that the best subject to start with was teaching foreign languages.”	Commissive	Committing	Stating decisions and commitments to start something.
5	“So I like that.”	Expressive	Complimenting	Expressing positive feelings or attitudes toward an idea or event.
6	“Which is great.”	Expressive	Praising	Positive assessment, expressing admiration.
7	“If you really want...”	Directive	Suggesting	Implicit invitations or suggestions in the form of assumptions.
8	“To deliver education..., you have to make it accessible..., and you have to make it so people want to actually learn.”	Directive	Advising	Giving advice and guidance on the conditions for successful education.
9	“What we’ve done is that we’ve used the same psychological techniques that apps like TikTok... use to keep people engaged.”	Assertive	Reporting	Stating what the speaker and his team have done.
10	“We use them to keep people engaged but with education.”	Assertive	Stating	Stating information/claims about the use of certain techniques.
11	“One of the most powerful ones is the notion of a streak.”	Assertive	Asserting	Express confidence in the effectiveness of the streak feature.
12	“Come back every day.”	Directive	Commanding	Give direct commands, encouraging listeners to take action.
13	“The reason people come back every day is because...”	Assertive	Informing	Explain the causes of user behavior based on observation.
14	“Streaks get people to come back to study every day.”	Assertive	Reporting	State the effects of the feature on user motivation.
15	“We have over three million daily active	Assertive	Reporting	Present statistical data to reinforce claims.

	users that have a streak longer than 365.”			
16	“But we’re fun, hey, we’re fun.”	Expressive	Boasting	Express pride in oneself/the product.
17	“I hope for a future in which screen time is not a bad thing.”	Commissive	Committing	Expressing personal hopes for the future.
18	“Notifications can be really spammy..., but... people want to be reminded to learn.”	Assertive	Stating	Sharing observations and evaluations regarding the use of notifications.
19	“We have a very sophisticated AI system that basically chooses when to send the notification...”	Assertive	Informing	Providing information about the AI system used.
20	“It’s funny.”	Expressive	Commenting	Expressing personal feelings about something considered funny.
21	“We actually stop sending notifications after seven days of inactivity.”	Assertive	Informing	Providing information about the rules of the notification delivery system.
22	“When you’re learning something, you get meaning out of it.”	Assertive	Informing	Conveying general facts about the learning process.
23	“My hope is that I know we can do this.”	Commissive	Committing	Expressing expectations and beliefs about joint actions.
24	“I beg you”	Directive	Begging	Strong requests (appeals).
25	“Do your language lessons today.”	Directive	Commanding	Direct commands to act.

Based on the data listed in the table, Table 2 shows a summary of the types of illocutionary acts found in Luis Von Ahn's TED talk, “*How to Make Learning as Social as Social Media*.” Of the total 25 utterances identified, the most frequently occurring type was assertive utterances with 10 utterances, followed by directive utterances with 6 utterances, expressive utterances with 5 utterances, and commissive utterances with 4 utterances. It should be noted that declarative utterances were not found in the data.

Table 2. Recapitulation of the Distribution of Illocutionary Speech Acts

Type of Illocutionary Act	Number of Occurrences
Assertive	10
Directive	6
Expressive	5
Commissive	4
Declarative	0
Total	25

Types of Illocutionary Acts Found in Luis von Ahn's TED Talk

1. Assertive

Assertive is a type of illocutionary act, according to Searle, that speakers use to state something that is believed to be true. This type of utterance includes actions such as stating, informing, reporting, and explaining. The purpose is to convey information, strengthen arguments, or show the speaker's belief in the content of the statement.

a. Informing

Utterance: *"We actually stop sending notifications after seven days of inactivity."* (08.20)

This sentence falls under the informing subtype, as the speaker conveys factual information about how the Duolingo app works. The speaker directly explains the time limit for sending notifications. The function of this utterance is to enhance transparency regarding the app's mechanisms and build the speaker's credibility as someone who understands the technical aspects of the product they represent.

b. Reporting

Utterance: *"We have over three million daily active users that have a streak longer than 365."* (06.50)

This utterance is a reporting type, as it conveys factual statistical data. The speaker uses the number of daily active users to support the claim of the app's success and effectiveness. The purpose of this speech act is to convince the audience that the platform has proven to be popular and consistently used, which demonstrates the success of the gamification-based learning strategy.

c. Stating

Utterance: *"One of the most powerful ones is the notion of a streak."* (6.11)

This sentence is a form of assertive with a stating subtype, because the speaker directly conveys a statement about the effectiveness of one of the main features in the Duolingo application, namely, streak. In this context, Luis Von Ahn is not conveying statistical data or personal experience, but emphasizing a concept that is believed to be important in encouraging user

engagement. This statement is informative and shows the speaker's belief in the feature's role in shaping learning habits. The function of this sentence is to reinforce the argument that the success of an educational app depends not only on the subject matter but also on how the app can sustain user motivation. By stating this explicitly, the speaker builds a foundation of thought that modern educational design should consider psychological and motivational aspects.

2. Directive

A directive is a speech act that aims to encourage the listener to take action, either directly (by ordering) or indirectly (by suggesting or requesting). In this TED Talk, Luis uses directives to raise awareness, encourage reflective action, and motivate language learning. This speech act creates active engagement between the speaker and the audience.

a. Advising

Utterance: *“Let this sink in.” (0.22)*

In this part of the talk, Luis uses a short but impactful phrase to encourage the audience to take a moment and reflect on what he has just said. Instead of simply stating facts and moving on, he invites the audience to internalize the idea. This shows that the speaker is not just informing but also prompting the audience to think critically. It functions as a subtle form of advice, aiming to deepen understanding and personal engagement with the message.

b. Commanding

Utterance: *“Do your language lessons today.” (11.43)*

This sentence comes at the end of the presentation and serves as a clear and direct call to action. Luis urges his listeners to not just listen, but to apply what they've learned by actually using Duolingo. It reflects the commanding subtype because it explicitly tells the audience what to do next. The intention behind this utterance is to motivate real behavior change, reinforcing the message that learning can and should be a daily habit.

3. Expressive

Expressive speech acts are used to convey the speaker's emotional attitude toward a situation, such as pride, joy, humor, or approval. In the context of a presentation, expressive speech acts are often used to build emotional closeness with the audience and create a more personal and warm atmosphere.

a. Complimenting

Utterance: *“So I like that.” (5.02)*

In this sentence, Luis shows a positive attitude toward Duolingo's business model, which allows free access to learning for people in developing

countries. This statement is classified as expressive because it does not convey facts, but rather expresses personal feelings or attitudes. By saying that he likes this approach, Luis indirectly shows the values he supports, such as equality and fairness in education. This expression also helps build an ethical image in his delivery, which strengthens the emotional connection between the speaker and the audience.

b. Commenting

Utterance: *"It's funny."* (8.16)

This sentence is used to express the speaker's sense of humor or amusement, particularly in the context of discussing Duolingo's sophisticated yet humorous notification system. Although the previous discussion was quite serious, Luis inserted this sentence to lighten the mood. In this way, he creates a more relaxed and familiar relationship with the audience. Light humor like this also serves as an emotional break that makes the presentation feel more lively and less monotonous.

4. Commissive

Commissive is a speech act that shows the speaker's commitment or plan to do something in the future. In this TED Talk, commissive is used to show the speaker's vision, hopes, and strategic steps for global education. Utterance: *"I hope for a future in which screen time is not a bad thing."* (11.34)

This sentence reflects Luis's hope for a change in society's perspective on the use of technology, particularly screen time. This statement falls under the subtype of committing, as it expresses both hope and a commitment to be part of that change. The sentence not only conveys a vision but also reinforces the message that technology like Duolingo can be used for positive purposes such as learning, not just passive entertainment. The function of this statement is to build an optimistic vision of the future and encourage the audience to think more openly about the role of technology in their lives.

Dominant Type of Illocutionary Act Used by Luis von Ahn

The most dominant type of illocutionary speech act used by Luis Von Ahn in his TED Talk entitled "How to Make Learning as Addictive as Social Media" is assertive. Based on the analysis of 25 selected utterances from the video, 10 utterances are classified as assertive speech acts. According to the theory proposed by Searle in Yulian and Mandarani (2023) Assertive speech acts are used when speakers state beliefs, provide descriptions, or convey facts that are believed to be true. This type of speech act includes forms such as stating, informing, reporting, and asserting. In the context of a TED Talk, assertive functions as a means to convey convincing arguments, either through data, explanations, or personal beliefs of the speaker. This can be seen in utterances such as "We have over three million daily active

users,” which not only conveys factual conditions but also reinforces the effectiveness of the Duolingo language learning platform.

The dominance of assertive speech acts in Luis Von Ahn's delivery style reflects the main purpose of the TED Talk presentation itself, which is to inform, convince, and inspire the audience. Unlike everyday conversation or fictional dialogue, TED Talk has a more formal, logical, and argumentative structure. Therefore, the use of assertive speech acts is very suitable for the speaker's role as an expert or innovator who conveys ideas and ideas. Furthermore, the findings of this study reveal that assertive speech acts comprise four subtypes, which describe more specific communication strategies: informing, reporting, stating, and asserting. The informing subtype is seen in sentences such as “*We actually stop sending notifications after seven days of inactivity,*” which provides operational information about how the Duolingo app works. This shows transparency and strengthens audience trust. The reporting subtype appears in the sentence “*We have over three million daily active users that have a streak longer than 365,*” which presents statistical data to support claims of success and build credibility. The stating subtype appears in statements such as “*We use them to keep people engaged but with education,*” where the speaker delivers an explanation of the app's design strategy directly. Meanwhile, the asserting subtype is reflected in sentences like “*One of the most powerful ones is the notion of a streak,*” which shows the speaker's strong belief in the effectiveness of the feature. These utterances not only convey information, but also show an emphasis or stance on something that is considered important in supporting continuous learning.

These four subtypes together form the foundation of informative rhetoric in the speech, which not only conveys facts but also builds trust, clarifies core ideas, and encourages audience acceptance.

This finding is also in line with previous research. For example, (Sihombing et al., 2021) In their analysis of illocutionary speech acts in *Incredibles 2* also found that assertive speech acts are one of the dominant types, although in the context of animated films, the directive type is slightly superior because it involves more instructions and actions between characters. In contrast, in the TED Talk, the use of assertive is more prominent because it aims to build ethos an image of a speaker who is credible and worth listening to. This comparison shows that the dominance of a speech act can depend heavily on the genre, the character of the audience, and the purpose of communication to be achieved.

Thus, the high frequency of assertive speech acts in Luis Von Ahn's TED Talks not only indicates a delivery pattern based on facts and explanations, but also reflects a broader rhetorical strategy: building audience trust, reducing ambiguity, and encouraging acceptance of the ideas presented

CONCLUSION

Based on an analysis of 25 utterances in Luis Von Ahn's TED talk titled "How to Make Learning as Social as Social Media," four types of illocutionary acts were identified: assertive, directive, expressive, and commissive. No declarative illocutionary acts were found, which makes sense since this type typically appears in institutional or formal contexts. Among the four types, the most dominant illocutionary act was assertive, with 10 utterances covering subtypes such as providing information, reporting, stating, and affirming. This indicates that the speaker's primary goal was to provide information, explain, and establish credibility before the audience. The dominance of assertive speech acts in this speech also reflects the distinctive style of TED Talks, which are informative, persuasive, and inspirational. Although directive, commissive, and expressive speech acts are used less frequently, their presence remains significant as they demonstrate diverse communication strategies, including encouraging audience action, expressing commitment, and building emotional connections. This diversity shows that Luis Von Ahn not only conveys ideas logically but also uses language strategically to influence and engage the audience. As a suggestion, the results of this study can serve as a reference for public speakers, especially in educational or persuasive contexts, to pay attention to the use of illocutionary acts in conveying messages. The combination of assertive and directive speech acts can be an effective strategy for conveying information while convincing the audience to act. For future researchers, this study can be expanded to other discourse domains, such as political speeches, podcasts, or classroom interactions, and combined with other pragmatic elements such as politeness strategies or implicatures to enrich the analysis.

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