A Pragmatic Analysis of Speech Acts in "Scared to Speak English?" from BBC's 6 Minute English

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Abstract

The study investigates pragmatic implementation of speech acts in the BBC 6 Minute English podcast "Scared to Speak English?" and focuses on speaking anxiety issues among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. The objective of the research is to establish speech acts categories implemented by the podcast hosts, to discuss their communicative functions, and to explain how language use can be connected with emotionality. The study has used qualitative and descriptive methodology based on the framework for analyzing speech acts offered by Searle (1969) and data analysis method described by Miles et al. (2014). Observational notes were made during the conversation between hosts Pippa and Beth. As shown in the results section, representative, expressive and directive speech acts have been identified, Representative speech acts are the most frequent, used primarily to convey facts and definitions regarding anxiety. Expressive acts refer to learners' feeling of anxiety. Directive acts help motivate and encourage learners to overcome their fears to speak.The study concludes that the podcast serves as both an informational and supportive medium, helping learners cope with speaking anxiety through empathetic communication and emotional resonance.

Keywords: BBC 6 Minute English; EFL; pragmatics; speaking anxiety; speech acts.

INTRODUCTION

Language is essential in human life as it is the main means for communication and social interaction. It allows individuals to express their thoughts, concepts, emotions, and intentions to others. In everyday situations, language use goes beyond just sharing information; it also includes actions expressed through words. In everyday situations, language use goes beyond merely sharing information, it also involves actions conveyed through speech. Therefore, when a person speaks, they are not just making a statement but also performing an action. This idea forms the foundation of Speech Act Theory, first introduced by Austin et al., (1962) Later, the theory was further developed and classified into more specific categories by Searle (1969). The effectiveness of communication often depends not only on grammatical accuracy but also on whether the speaker successfully performs the intended action, such as requesting, promising, or stating information.

In contemporary linguistics, the focus on the study of language has evolved from simple structural analysis to a more functional perspective. Pragmatics, a branch of linguistics, is vital for comprehending how language operates in real-life circumstances. This area bridges the gap between the literal interpretation of words and the intended meaning behind them. This understanding is especially critical when evaluating communication during tense moments or emotional scenarios, as the choice of words by a speaker can significantly impact the interaction.

To understand how language functions effectively, it is important to grasp the basic concepts of pragmatics. Pragmatics examines how meaning is understood in relation to context, emphasizing both the speaker's intent and the listener's interpretation. The importance of context in pragmatics cannot be overstated, as the same statement can be interpreted in various ways based on factors such as the situation, the nature of the relationship between the communicators, and the emotional nuances of the conversation. (Searle, 1969) contributed to the study of speech acts by categorizing them into five distinct groups based on their illocutionary force. First, assertions are statements in which the speaker takes responsibility for the validity of a claim. Second, commands aim to prompt the listener to act. Third, commitments are promises made by the speaker to perform an action in the future. Fourth, expressions reveal the speaker's feelings, such as showing fear. Finally, declarative statements create an immediate change in a state or reality.

In the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), speaking is often considered one of the most difficult skills for students to master. This challenge arises not only from the need to master vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, but also from the need to use the language accurately and spontaneously in various communicative situations. In practice, many learners face difficulties in speaking English due to a combination of limited language proficiency and psychological factors. Among these factors, speaking anxiety is recognized as one of the most significant barriers. This anxiety is generally triggered by a fear of negative judgment from others and the pressure to communicate in formal or performance-based situations. Recent research indicates that students often experience anxiety and high levels of stress when asked to speak spontaneously. Such anxiety not only affects students' emotional well-being but also their ability to communicate effectively. When students are overly focused on their nervousness, they may struggle to clearly express the message they intend to convey, leading to hesitation and a decline in the quality of the interaction. Consequently, communication effectiveness may diminish, thereby preventing students from fully achieving their communicative goals.

In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), the use of authentic materials is highly recommended because they bridge the gap between the theory learned in the classroom and the use of language in real life. One example of such authentic material is the BBC's 6 Minute English program. Unlike conventional textbooks, which typically present scripted dialogues that often fail to reflect natural language use, this program features more authentic conversations among native English speakers. In the episode titled "Scared to Speak English?", the interaction between Pippa and Beth provides relevant data for analysis from a pragmatic perspective. The authenticity of this conversation is important because it displays various elements of natural communication, such as pauses, intonation, and spontaneous responses that are often absent in artificial learning materials. Through the analysis of this conversation, research can observe language use in a context resembling real social interaction, thereby serving as a valid representation of contemporary English usage.

The interaction between Pippa and Beth is an important aspect to examine because the two serve as a close representation of language learners' experiences. Throughout the episode, the hosts not only convey vocabulary knowledge but also discuss the various emotional and mental dimensions involved in using a foreign language. When Pippa and Beth express feelings of nervousness and worry about making mistakes while speaking, they produce a variety of expressive speech acts that are interesting to analyze. These expressions reflect an acknowledgment of the psychological difficulties often experienced by listeners, particularly speaking anxiety and the fear of having to demonstrate language proficiency in front of others.

Their conversation can also be viewed as a form of reflection on the phenomenon of communication anxiety, as the hosts discuss these experiences through the dialogue they construct themselves. Through the analysis of these interactions, researchers can gain an understanding of how language is used to express, manage, and reduce psychological discomfort in the communication process. Therefore, efforts to understand and overcome these psychological barriers play a crucial role in supporting individual success in both educational settings and the workplace.

Previous research has extensively examined speech acts in various educational media, but there are still several aspects that have not received comprehensive attention. For example, a bachelor's thesis by Anisa (2023) examined speech acts in an English-language podcast that discussed why learners are able to understand English but struggle to speak it. However, that study focused only on one type of speech act, the assertive speech act. Consequently, there remains a gap in the literature regarding how various types of illocutionary speech acts collectively interact in addressing and describing the phenomenon of speaking anxiety within authentic digital media. To address this gap, this study examines pragmatic strategies more comprehensively as they are used to discuss fear and a lack of self-confidence within the context of professional broadcasting. The significance of this study lies in its ability to demonstrate that speech acts not only function as a means of conveying information but can also be used to build empathy and provide psychological support to language learners. Through an analysis of the speech acts used by Pippa and Beth, both learners and educators can gain a better understanding of how to effectively express and manage speaking anxiety.

Based on the background described above, this study focuses on a pragmatic analysis of the use of speech acts in discussions about speech anxiety. This study is grounded in the importance of understanding how professional communicators utilize language to address sensitive psychological issues in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Thus, this study aims to identify the types of speech acts found in episodes of BBC 6 Minute English based on John Searle's classification and to analyze the communicative functions of the speech acts used by Pippa and Beth when discussing speaking anxiety.

METHOD

1. Research Design

A qualitative descriptive method is utilized in this study, with a focus on the pragmatic evaluation of spoken verbal discourse. Given that it enables an investigation of linguistic subtleties and the psychological bases of communication in authentic settings, the qualitative approach is deemed suitable. Through a descriptive research framework, the researcher can comprehensively describe the linguistic tactics employed by BBC podcast hosts to alleviate language learners' speaking anxiety. This approach enables a thorough examination of each utterance's "illocutionary force," ensuring that the study covers both direct expressions and the emotional and contextual roles communicated in the podcast.

2. Data and Data Source

According to Searle's (1969) categorization, the main data studied in this paper are chosen words, phrases, and sentences that carry out particular speech acts. The main data source came from the BBC audio-podcast series 6 Minute English, particularly the episode "Scared to Speak English?". Pippa and Beth's conversation was the main subject of observation. The researcher

extracted and identified data straight by listening to the audio-podcast episode repeatedly, rather than depending on crude transcripts. This direct listening strategy is particularly crucial for a pragmatic study focused on psychological self-confidence because it captures the subtle paralinguistic aspects and vocal inflections that contextualize the presenters' spoken interactions.

3. Research Instrument

The researcher acts as the principal tool for data collection and analysis within this qualitative framework. Using an established pragmatic framework, the researcher serves as a "human instrument" by proactively engaging with the audio data, recognizing important linguistic patterns, and explaining the fundamental communicative intent. A data classification matrix is used as a tool to facilitate methodical data management. The recorded statements are classified into five different illocutionary groups in this matrix: representative, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative. This methodical categorization is crucial for identifying each utterance's pragmatic function in relation to the situational context established by Pippa and Beth.

4. Data Collection Technique

Through a systematic procedure of focused observation and document-based recording, data was gathered. The first phase included carefully listening to the podcast segment in order to fully comprehend the discussion's flow. To identify utterances with evident pragmatic functions, a selective listening approach was then used. The recovered portions were cross-referenced and verified against the audio recordings, especially those with expressive and directive characteristics, to guarantee data reliability. It was essential to go through this verification step to be sure that the hosts' vocal subtleties and communicative intentions were precisely reflected in the transcribed text when they talked about the psychological challenges of learning a foreign language.

5. Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis of the collected linguistic data follows the interactive model conceptualized by Miles, Huberman, and Saldanha (2014), which comprises data condensation, data display, and conclusion formulation. The analytical operations are organized in the following sequence:

1. Data condensation, during which the raw linguistic material collected from the podcast is systematically coded and filtered to isolate only the utterances that directly address the research questions.
2. Data display, wherein the refined data are arranged into structured analytical tables to visually categorize the types of speech acts alongside their specific communicative functions.
3. Conclusion drawing and verification, where the compiled linguistic patterns are interpreted using Searle’s (1969) speech act categories and integrated with Young’s (1990) perspective on language anxiety to conclude how conversational discourse can be used to address speaking apprehension

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the speech act analysis in the BBC Learning English podcast *6 Minute English: Speaking Anxiety*, followed by the discussion.

Table 1. Types of Speech Acts Found in the Podcast

No.	Utterance	Type of Speech Act	Function
1.	"My English was actually pretty good but having conversations with people, I found it really difficult."	Representative	Stating personal experience
2.	"I am scared to speak because I don't want to make mistakes,"	Expressive	Expressing fear/anxiety
3.	"You have to try to speak, even though you make mistakes, and mistakes can be a good thing."	Directive	Giving encouragement/advice
4.	"Yes, I learnt French when I was younger and I was actually quite good at it, I think, but I was really nervous when I was speaking French."	Expressive	Expressing feeling
5.	"So lots of people feel nervous speaking another language,"	Representative	Stating general fact
6.	"We can call this speaking anxiety."	Representative	Giving explanation
7.	"Anxiety means an uncomfortable feeling or worry about something that is happening or could happen in the future."	Representative	Defining a concept
8.	"You know, usually the beliefs that cause anxiety, especially severe anxiety, are, we call it irrational beliefs."	Representative	Stating opinion
9.	"You have to try to speak, even though you make mistakes,"	Directive	Giving instruction
10.	"Mistakes can be a good thing."	Representative	Giving evaluation

Table 2. Frequency of Speech Acts

Type of Speech Act	Frequency
Representative	6
Expressive	2
Directive	2
Total	**10**

Discussion

Based on the findings presented in Table 1 and Table 2, the data demonstrates a clear pattern in how speech acts are utilized by Pippa and Beth in the BBC Learning English podcast episode

titled "Scared to Speak English?". Out of the 10 analyzed utterances, Representative speech acts dominate the discourse with a frequency of 6 utterances, followed by Expressive (2 utterances) and Directive (2 utterances). The absence of Commissive and Declarative speech acts is highly logical, considering that the object of study is a short-duration educational podcast designed to explore a psychological concept rather than to enforce structural actions or alter institutional statuses.

1. The Dominance of Representative Speech Acts: Establishing Facts and Dismantling Irrational Beliefs

The high frequency of Representative speech acts (6 out of 10 data points) indicates that the primary communicative function established by Pippa and Beth in this episode is to present a solid factual foundation regarding language anxiety. According to Searle (1969), representative speech acts commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition. In this context, representative sentences are used to thoroughly dissect the reality that the fear of speaking is a widespread phenomenon experienced by many language learners.

For instance, when stating personal experiences and observations such as “My English was actually pretty good but having conversations with people, I found it really difficult” (Data 1) and “So lots of people feel nervous speaking another language” (Data 5), these verbal actions function to generalize the problem. Through the assertion of general facts and definitions, such as “We can call this speaking anxiety” (Data 6) and “Anxiety means an uncomfortable feeling...” (Data 7), Pippa and Beth pragmatically dismantle what is known as irrational beliefs within the listeners namely, the false internal assumption that they are uniquely flawed or inadequate when feeling anxious. By presenting these insights as objective truths, the listeners' sense of isolation is diminished because their linguistic anxiety has been logically normalized.

2. Expressive Speech Acts: Building Vulnerability and Rapport

Although Expressive speech acts appear only twice in the data (Table 2), their qualitative impact on the initial structure of the conversation is profound. Searle (1969) notes that expressives function to manifest the speaker’s psychological state toward a specific situation. In this podcast, Pippa and Beth strategically deploy expressive speech acts at the beginning of the episode to establish an egalitarian and warm atmosphere.

Beth’s candid admission, “I am scared to speak because I don't want to make mistakes” (Data 2), and Pippa’s shared recollection, “...but I was really nervous when I was speaking French” (Data 4), demonstrate a deliberate use of shared vulnerability. Within the framework of language anxiety proposed by Young (1990), a major learner-internal factor that exacerbates anxiety is a negative self-perception, where learners feel intimidated when facing native speakers whom they perceive as perfect. By using expressive speech acts to confess that they themselves struggle with anxiety when speaking foreign languages (French and Spanish), Pippa and Beth break down this invisible hierarchical barrier. Pragmatically, these expressives create an empathetic safe space (rapport) from the very first minutes of the discourse.

3. Directive Speech Acts: Delivering Encouragement and Solutions

Directive speech acts, which appear twice in the data (Table 2), represent the pedagogical core and conclusion of the episode. Directives are used when the speaker attempts to get the hearer

to do something (Searle, 1969). In this audio-podcast medium, the directives are carefully crafted not as coercive or rigid commands, but as gentle advice and warm encouragement.

The repetition of the utterance, “You have to try to speak, even though you make mistakes” (Data 3 and Data 9), functions as an urgent yet supportive push for learner action. When combined with the final representative evaluation, “and mistakes can be a good thing” (Data 10), the directive loses its authoritative sting and turns into an empowering suggestion. Pragmatically, Pippa and Beth utilize directives to directly challenge the learners' fear of negative evaluation from others. They encourage the listeners to actively practice speaking and to accept mistakes as a natural mechanism of the learning process rather than a social failure.

In conclusion, the interaction among these three speech acts performed by Pippa and Beth creates a highly balanced narrative structure. The episode begins with Expressives to capture empathy, transitions into Representatives to analyze and define anxiety logically, and culminates in Directives to deliver soft, empowering solutions within a compact, six-minute spoken discourse.

CONCLUSION

This research focused on the different kinds of speech acts used in the BBC Learning English 6 Minute English: Speaking Anxiety podcast. The results showed that three types of speech acts were present: representative, expressive, and directive speech acts. Among these types, representative speech acts were the most common, suggesting that the speakers primarily intended to share information, offer explanations, and present opinions related to the discussed subject. Additionally, expressive speech acts served to convey feelings and personal stories, especially those linked to anxiety and apprehension when communicating in a foreign language. Directive speech acts were also noted, as they aimed to motivate listeners to keep practicing their speaking abilities and to recognize errors as an ordinary aspect of the learning experience.

In summary, the results indicate that the podcast acts not just as an informational tool but also as a source of support and emotional comfort for language learners. The inclusion of various types of speech acts enhances the effectiveness of the discussion and increases engagement with the audience. For future research, it is suggested that scholars explore a larger dataset or perform comparative studies across different podcasts to gain a deeper insight into how speech acts are realized in language learning environments.

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