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Illocutionary Acts and Audience Responses in an Indonesian Graduate's Commencement Speech

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis tindak ilokusi dan respons audiens dalam pidato kelulusan Ahmad Munjizun di North Carolina State University berdasarkan data yang didokumentasikan dalam skripsi sumber. Penelitian menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif dengan transkrip yang diturunkan dari video dan kerangka tindak tutur yang membedakan asertif, ekspresif, komisif, direktif, dan deklaratif. Sumber mengidentifikasi tindak ekspresif dan asertif sebagai kategori yang menonjol serta tidak menemukan tindak direktif dan deklaratif dalam pengodean. Artikel ini mempertahankan temuan tersebut tanpa merekonstruksi frekuensi yang tidak tersedia. Analisis diperdalam melalui hubungan antara narasi pengalaman, ucapan terima kasih, pengakuan terhadap dukungan sosial, dan konteks institusional pidato kelulusan. Respons audiens yang dapat diamati dipisahkan dari dugaan tentang emosi internal atau perubahan motivasi jangka panjang. Pembahasan juga menyoroti tuturan multifungsi, perbedaan antara bentuk gramatikal dan daya ilokusi, serta batas antara tindak ilokusi dan efek perlokusi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa narasi personal dan ekspresi penghargaan bekerja bersama untuk membingkai keberhasilan sebagai pencapaian yang didukung secara sosial. Penelitian merekomendasikan pengodean yang transparan, penggunaan konteks sekitar dalam menangani kasus ambigu, dan pemanfaatan kutipan singkat sebagai bahan kesadaran pragmatik dalam pendidikan bahasa Inggris.

Kata kunci: speech acts; illocution; audience response; commencement speech; pragmatic awareness

Abstract

This study examined illocutionary acts and audience responses in Ahmad Munjizun's commencement speech at North Carolina State University based on the evidence documented

in the source thesis. The study used a qualitative descriptive design, a video-derived transcript, and a speech-act framework distinguishing assertive, expressive, commissive, directive, and declarative functions. The source identifies expressive and assertive acts as prominent and reports no directive or declarative acts in its coding. The present article retains those findings without reconstructing unavailable frequencies. The analysis is extended by examining how personal narrative, gratitude, public acknowledgment, and the institutional setting work together in the speech. Observable audience reactions are separated from claims about listeners' private emotions or lasting motivational change. The discussion also addresses multifunctional utterances, the distinction between grammatical form and illocutionary force, and the boundary between illocution and perlocution. The findings show how personal accounts and expressions of appreciation can jointly frame achievement as socially supported. The study recommends transparent coding decisions, contextual treatment of ambiguous cases, and the use of short excerpts to develop pragmatic awareness in English education.
Keywords: speech acts; illocution; audience response; commencement speech; pragmatic awareness

INTRODUCTION

Public speeches are organized forms of social action, not merely sequences of grammatically well-formed sentences. A speaker can report an experience, thank supporters, make a commitment, evaluate a situation, or invite an audience to adopt a perspective through language. Speech-act theory provides a way to analyze these actions by distinguishing what is literally said from what is performed in saying it. Austin (1962) separated locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary dimensions, while Searle (1969, 1976) developed a functional classification that includes assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. For a commencement speech, this distinction is particularly useful because autobiographical statements, public gratitude, institutional identity, and audience uptake often occur in close succession.

The central analytical problem is that grammatical form does not determine pragmatic function by itself. A declarative sentence may function as an assertion, an expression of gratitude, a commitment, or an indirect request depending on context. Likewise, a sentence that contains factual information may simultaneously contribute

to interpersonal acknowledgment. Levinson (1983), Leech (1983), Yule (1996), and Culpeper and Haugh (2014) emphasize that pragmatic interpretation depends on participants, social relations, discourse position, and shared assumptions. Consequently, a reliable speech-act analysis requires more than matching a sentence with a category label; it requires an explanation of why a communicative force is plausible in the local context.

A second issue concerns the relationship between illocution and audience response. Illocutionary force describes the social action performed through an utterance, whereas perlocution concerns effects on hearers. Applause, laughter, or another observable reaction can provide evidence about public uptake, but they do not reveal every listener's private interpretation or establish durable motivational change. Wahyudiantari (2021), in her analysis of perlocutionary acts, similarly emphasizes that perlocutionary meaning depends on contextual consequences rather than on linguistic form alone. The present article therefore separates what the speaker can reasonably be analyzed as doing from what the available recording or source account allows the researcher to say about audience response.

UNDIKMA scholarship provides an especially relevant local context for the present analysis. Wahyudiantari, Budiarsa, Yadnya, and Satyawati (2020) found assertive, commissive, directive, and expressive acts in literary dialogue and stressed the role of situational context in determining intended meaning. Wahyudiantari and Ariani (2022) later identified assertive, directive, commissive, and expressive acts in students' Speaking in Professional Context interactions at UNDIKMA. These studies are methodologically useful because they show that a speech-act category gains meaning from the communicative event in which it occurs. The present commencement-speech study extends that concern to an institutional public speech in which narrative and gratitude are especially prominent.

The pedagogical relevance also extends beyond classification. Hanan and Sugianto (2021) showed that professional communication involves strategic choices shaped by interlocutors, communicative difficulty, and self-presentation. Suadiyatno,

Firman, Hanan, and Sumarsono (2020) linked speaking performance with contextual instruction and anxiety, while Sugianto, Kamarudin, and Hanan (2020) emphasized meaningful task conditions in speaking development. More recently, Suadiyatno and Abimayu (2025) reported that story-based video input could support speaking practice and communicative engagement. These studies do not validate any particular speech-act label in the present dataset; rather, they support the educational importance of analyzing language as purposeful communication situated in audience, task, and context.

The source study examined Ahmad Munjizun's commencement speech at North Carolina State University and reported expressive and assertive acts as prominent, with no directive or declarative acts identified in the coded account. It also considered audience responses associated with the speech. This article preserves those source findings while sharpening their interpretation. It asks how representative assertive and expressive acts function within the personal narrative, how multifunctionality should be handled when a statement conveys both information and acknowledgment, and what can responsibly be concluded from observable audience reactions. The aim is not to produce a universal profile of commencement discourse, but to provide a context-sensitive account that is analytically defensible and pedagogically useful for pragmatic-awareness work in English education.

METHOD

The source research used a qualitative descriptive design to analyze Ahmad Munjizun's commencement speech at North Carolina State University. Its primary data source was a transcript derived from an online video of the speech. The analytical framework followed Searle's taxonomy of illocutionary acts, distinguishing assertive, expressive, commissive, directive, and declarative functions. The present article uses the completed thesis as its empirical base and does not claim to have produced a new transcription, a new speech sample, or a new audience dataset.

The analysis retained representative English excerpts reproduced in the source thesis and interpreted them in relation to surrounding discourse, the graduation setting, the speaker's role, and the addressee relationship. The source's qualitative conclusion that expressive and assertive acts were prominent was preserved. Because the available source record does not provide sufficiently transparent category totals for every analytical decision, the article does not reconstruct percentages or invent a new frequency distribution. This choice follows the principle that qualitative categories should remain traceable to the evidence and coding decisions that produced them (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019).

Audience response was treated as a separate analytical layer. Reactions reported or observable in the source were used to describe public uptake but were not converted into measures of internal emotion, motivation, or long-term influence. Similarly, an utterance was allowed to have a primary coded force while still contributing to a secondary discourse function. This was important for statements that simultaneously presented a biographical circumstance and acknowledged social relationships. Ambiguity was treated as an interpretive issue requiring contextual justification rather than as an error that had to be eliminated mechanically.

The article also extended the discussion through pragmatic and English-education literature, with particular attention to publications by UNDIKMA English Language Education lecturers available up to early 2025. No undocumented ethics approval number, consent procedure, participant identity, or additional interview was introduced. The pedagogical suggestions presented below are implications derived from the completed analysis; they are not described as instructional treatments already tested in the source study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The source identifies expressive and assertive acts as the most salient categories in the commencement speech and reports no directive or declarative acts in its coded account. Commissive acts belong to the analytical framework, but the source summary

does not provide a basis for treating them as equally prominent. The result is best understood as a qualitative pattern within one speech rather than a frequency profile that can be generalized to commencement discourse as a whole. Table 1 summarizes the principal evidence and the interpretive boundaries retained in this article.

Table 1. Principal evidence and interpretive boundaries in the source study

Source evidence	Analytical interpretation	Boundary retained
Expressive acts reported as prominent	Public gratitude and acknowledgment perform interpersonal work within the ceremony	Prominence is reported qualitatively; no new percentage is reconstructed
Assertive acts reported as prominent	Statements of experience establish circumstances, perspective, and narrative background	An assertion may also contribute to an expressive discourse sequence
No directive acts identified	The coded speech does not contain directives under the source criteria	Absence in this dataset is not a universal property of commencement speeches
No declarative acts identified	The speaker does not appear to perform institutional status-changing acts in the coded record	A grammatical declarative sentence is not the same as Searle's declarative speech act
Audience responses reported/observable	Reactions provide evidence of immediate public uptake	They do not establish identical emotions or lasting effects for all listeners

The source reproduces the statement, "I'm far from home and don't have family here, but I have friends." The propositional content describes the speaker's circumstances: physical distance from family is contrasted with the presence of friends. On that basis, an assertive classification is defensible because the speaker presents a situation as part of his account. Yet the sentence also prepares the interpersonal work that follows. By placing friendship against distance from home, the statement establishes why later appreciation matters. This illustrates an important principle of speech-act analysis: a primary illocutionary classification does not prevent an utterance

from contributing to another discourse function. Searle's categories are useful analytical tools, but discourse meaning emerges through sequences as well as isolated sentences (Searle, 1969, 1976; Culpeper & Haugh, 2014).

A more explicitly expressive example appears in the source wording, "Thank you for providing a shoulder when I cry when I'm down." The conventional expression of thanks makes the interpersonal action relatively transparent. The utterance publicly recognizes support and positions the addressee as part of the speaker's educational journey. Its metaphorical wording makes the assistance concrete without changing the central act of gratitude. Another source excerpt, "Without you, I wouldn't be here today," is more multifunctional. Formally it is a counterfactual assertion, but in the gratitude sequence it also magnifies the importance of the addressee's contribution. Coding it only by surface form would miss the expressive force generated by its discourse position.

This pattern is consistent with UNDIKMA-related speech-act research. Wahyudiantari et al. (2020) showed that intended meanings of illocutionary acts depend on situational context, even when the grammatical form appears straightforward. Wahyudiantari and Ariani (2022) likewise identified multiple illocutionary categories in students' professional-speaking interactions and treated pragmatic meaning as something produced through use rather than sentence type alone. The present speech differs from classroom interaction because it is a prepared institutional address, but the analytical lesson is similar: the researcher needs to justify a category from communicative circumstances, not merely from lexical markers.

The prominence of expressive acts is also intelligible in relation to the commencement genre. Graduation speeches commonly allow speakers to acknowledge relationships, reflect on journeys, and connect individual achievement to communities of support. This does not mean expressives must dominate every commencement speech. Rather, the institutional occasion makes gratitude socially appropriate and rhetorically functional in this particular case. Leech (1983) and Yule (1996) note that pragmatic appropriateness is linked to social relations and communicative purposes.

The analysis therefore gains depth when it asks why an expressive act fits the event, rather than stopping at the label “expressive.”

Assertive acts perform complementary work by constructing the narrative world in which gratitude becomes meaningful. Statements about home, educational experience, difficulty, friendship, or progress provide propositions that the audience is invited to accept as the speaker’s account. These propositions organize a trajectory from circumstance to acknowledgment. In this sense, assertives and expressives are not competing categories at the discourse level. They can cooperate: the speaker reports what happened and then uses that account to publicly recognize the people who mattered. The result is a socially organized narrative of achievement rather than a collection of disconnected act types.

The source reports no directive acts in the coded speech. That finding should be stated narrowly. It means that under the source’s segmentation and coding criteria, utterances were not identified whose primary force was to get the audience to perform an action. It does not mean the speech could not encourage listeners indirectly or invite identification with its values. Thomas (1983) and Kasper (1992) show why indirectness and contextual inference are central to pragmatic interpretation. A reflective statement can influence an audience without functioning as a directive in Searle’s taxonomy. Treating influence and directive force as equivalent would therefore overextend the category.

The reported absence of declarative acts requires a similar distinction. A commencement is an institutional event, but an institutional setting does not turn every declarative sentence into a declarative speech act. In Searle’s sense, declarations depend on constitutive rules and speaker authority such that the utterance itself changes an institutional state of affairs. The graduate speaker can describe achievement, thank supporters, or commit to an attitude without conferring a degree or changing another person’s official status. This distinction is pedagogically important because English learners often encounter the word “declarative” first as a grammatical sentence type and may confuse it with the pragmatic category.

The unit of analysis also matters. A long sentence can contain more than one pragmatic move, and several short sentences can jointly realize one extended action. If coding is performed mechanically at sentence boundaries, multifunctionality can be obscured. Bach and Harnish (1979) argued that communicative acts depend on speaker intentions and hearer inference, while later pragmatic work has increasingly treated meaning as interactionally and contextually organized. For replicability, a future coding protocol should state how utterance boundaries were determined, what counted as the primary act, and how plausible secondary functions were documented.

This methodological point is particularly important for the source's expressive and assertive pattern. When a sentence such as "Without you, I wouldn't be here today" is placed within a sequence of thanks, an analyst could reasonably emphasize either its propositional assertion or its expressive contribution. A transparent analysis does not need to pretend that such ambiguity disappears. Instead, it can identify a primary code for consistency and add a memo explaining the secondary discourse function. Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) emphasis on transparent interpretive decisions is useful here even though thematic analysis and speech-act analysis are distinct methods: both require analysts to show how evidence supports a label.

Audience response introduces a different evidential problem. Applause, laughter, or another audible reaction is public behavior that can be located in a recording, but its meaning is underdetermined. Laughter may respond to humor, recognition, delivery, relief, or group affiliation. Applause may mark appreciation, agreement, or a conventional point in the event. The present article therefore treats such reactions as evidence of uptake without assigning a single internal emotion to every audience member. This preserves Austin's distinction between the act performed in speaking and the consequences associated with hearing it.

The same caution applies to claims that a commencement speech is "inspiring." Inspiration is a plausible reception description, but a lasting motivational effect would require evidence beyond the speech itself. A viewer could feel moved temporarily, decide to act later, simply appreciate the performance, or react conventionally because

of the event. Without interviews, surveys, or longitudinal data, these possibilities cannot be separated. Wahyudiantari's (2021) work on perlocutionary acts reinforces the relevance of contextual consequences, while the present case shows why perlocutionary interpretation should not be expanded beyond the responses actually documented.

The distinction between co-present and online audiences also deserves attention. A commencement video can circulate long after the ceremony and reach viewers who were not part of the original interactional setting. Their background knowledge, relationship to the speaker, and reasons for watching may differ substantially. Selected online comments can illustrate later reception but cannot represent the entire viewership without a sampling procedure. The safest analytical approach is therefore to describe the original audience response and any later online response as different reception contexts rather than merge them into a single measure of public impact.

Hanan and Sugianto's (2021) study of tourist-guide communication is relevant because it shows that professional communication is shaped by strategic adaptation to communicative demands, interlocutors, and public self-presentation. Although a tourist-guide interaction differs from a commencement speech, both contexts require speakers to manage content and interpersonal relations simultaneously. The present speaker's autobiographical assertions establish credibility and experience, while expressive acts establish affiliation and acknowledgment. This combination illustrates how pragmatic choices contribute to public persona without requiring the analysis to infer a fixed psychological trait from the language.

UNDIKMA speaking research also helps situate audience and performance conditions. Suadiyatno et al. (2020) found that contextual instruction and speaking anxiety were associated with speaking performance, highlighting that public language use is shaped by both communicative demands and affective conditions. Sugianto et al. (2020) similarly emphasized meaningful tasks in developing speaking skill. These findings do not determine the illocutionary force of the commencement excerpts. Their relevance lies in showing why pragmatic awareness should be connected with

performance conditions: knowing an appropriate expression is different from being able to use it effectively for an audience.

The communicative dimension is further supported by Terasne et al. (2023), whose English communication training for souvenir traders focused on using English to perform situated transactional and interpersonal purposes. A pragmatic classroom application of the present commencement speech can build on the same principle: learners should examine not only whether a sentence is grammatically accurate, but what social action it performs and whether that action fits the relationship and occasion. This moves speech-act instruction away from memorizing lists of expressions toward analyzing language choices in communicative situations.

Story-based input can also provide a bridge from observation to production. Suadiyatno and Abimayu (2025) reported positive speaking outcomes from using the Fable Cottage YouTube channel, emphasizing narrative input, engagement, and communication. A commencement speech offers a different kind of authentic narrative: a real institutional account in which language choices are tied to gratitude, identity, and audience. Short excerpts can therefore be used as noticing material before learners redesign the same intention for another context, such as thanking a lecturer, acknowledging a classmate, or addressing a professional audience.

A useful pedagogical sequence begins by separating three questions: What proposition is expressed? What social action is performed? What response is actually documented? For the statement about being far from home but having friends, learners can first identify the literal contrast, then argue whether the primary act is assertive, and finally explain how it supports a later expressive sequence. For a direct “Thank you” statement, they can identify the expressive force and discuss how wording, addressee, and public occasion shape its appropriateness. This sequence operationalizes pragmatic awareness as contextual reasoning rather than label recall (Rose, 2005; Taguchi, 2015).

Alternative interpretations can be pedagogically valuable when they are justified. If one learner codes a statement as assertive and another emphasizes its expressive

function, the task need not end with one answer being rejected immediately. Each learner can use neighboring utterances, lexical cues, and the event context to defend a primary interpretation. The teacher can then distinguish between a primary category used for systematic coding and a secondary discourse contribution. Such activities mirror the real interpretive work of pragmatics and can prepare future English teachers to discuss appropriateness without assuming that every form has one fixed function.

The source study also offers an opportunity to teach the difference between speech-act categories and general rhetorical effects. A story of hardship may encourage an audience, but “encouragement” as a broad rhetorical effect does not automatically map onto a directive category. An expression of gratitude may strengthen affiliation, but its primary force can remain expressive. Keeping analytical levels separate prevents the category system from becoming so broad that every positive consequence is treated as part of the same act. This precision is important if learners are expected to use pragmatic terminology in academic analysis.

Another issue is cultural interpretation. The speaker’s references to home, family, friends, and educational support invite cultural reflection, yet the analysis should remain anchored in the wording and event rather than generalize about how all Indonesian speakers express gratitude. Pragmatic competence includes sensitivity to relationships and context, not the replacement of linguistic evidence with national stereotypes. Comparative activities can ask learners how similar gratitude might be expressed in another relationship or language, but conclusions should distinguish evidence from the case, learners’ hypotheses, and broader cultural research.

For research quality, future studies could strengthen coding transparency by adding a coding manual and an ambiguity log. The manual can define the unit of analysis, primary categories, decision rules, and examples. The ambiguity log can record utterances for which more than one category is plausible and explain the final decision. A second coder may provide a useful comparison, but agreement should supplement rather than replace interpretive explanation. The most informative reliability procedure

would therefore combine coder comparison with a record of why contested cases were resolved in a particular way.

Video data also permit a richer analysis of timing, delivery, and audience response. Prosody, pause placement, gesture, gaze, and the timing of laughter or applause can contribute to how an utterance is understood. The source thesis was based on a video-derived transcript, but the present article does not invent multimodal observations that were not systematically reported. A future study could align transcript segments with time-stamped multimodal notes and examine whether audience uptake clusters around particular illocutionary sequences. Such an extension would deepen the analysis while preserving the distinction between observed behavior and inferred emotion.

The findings therefore support a discourse-level interpretation of the speech. Assertive acts construct the circumstances and perspective of the speaker's journey; expressive acts publicly acknowledge relationships that make the journey meaningful; any commissive material should be interpreted only where the source coding supports it; and the reported absence of directives and declarations should remain tied to the source dataset. The categories become analytically useful when they explain how the speech works rather than merely how many labels can be assigned.

The broader educational implication is that pragmatic awareness can connect linguistic knowledge with public-speaking competence. English learners need grammar and vocabulary, but they also need to judge whether an utterance is suitable for an audience, relationship, and institutional purpose. UNDIKMA studies on illocutionary acts, communication strategies, speaking tasks, contextual teaching, and story-based speaking collectively support this contextual view of communication (Wahyudiantari & Ariani, 2022; Hanan & Sugianto, 2021; Suadiyatno et al., 2020; Sugianto et al., 2020; Suadiyatno & Abimayu, 2025). The present case contributes a concrete public speech through which those judgments can be practiced.

At the same time, pedagogical relevance should not be confused with an instructional outcome already demonstrated by the study. The source research analyzed a speech; it did not test a pragmatic-awareness lesson. Claims that the excerpts

improve learners' pragmatic competence would require a separate teaching study with clearly defined tasks and assessment. The current evidence supports the selection of authentic material and the identification of relevant communicative contrasts. It does not establish the effectiveness of any particular classroom procedure.

Overall, the source findings are most persuasive when kept within their evidential boundaries. The speech provides clear examples of public assertion and gratitude, and the audience record provides contextual evidence of reception. The analysis becomes weaker when category labels are inferred from grammatical form alone or when immediate audience reactions are converted into claims about lasting psychological impact. Context-sensitive coding, explicit treatment of multifunctionality, and careful separation of illocution from perlocution therefore strengthen both the scholarly interpretation and its value for English education.

CONCLUSION

The source identifies expressive and assertive acts as prominent in Ahmad Munjizun's commencement speech and reports no directive or declarative acts in its coding. The analysis shows that personal assertions establish the narrative basis for public gratitude, while audience reactions provide bounded evidence of uptake rather than proof of lasting motivational effects. Speech-act coding should distinguish grammatical form from pragmatic force and document multifunctional cases transparently. For English education, short contextualized excerpts can support pragmatic-awareness activities that connect literal meaning, communicative action, and observable response.

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