

DOI: https://doi.org/10.56550/d.4.2.3	Original research article	
Received on: September 23, 2025	Accepted on: December 17, 2025	Published on: May 21, 2026

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PRAGMATICS OF AUTHORITY: DIRECTIVE SPEECH ACTS IN POLITICAL AND HEALTHCARE COVID-19 DISCOURSE

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic placed political leaders and healthcare experts at the center of crisis communication, requiring them to issue urgent instructions under conditions of uncertainty. This paper analyzes how authority was enacted through language, focusing on directive speech acts in political and scientific discourse in the United States and Croatia. Drawing on speech act theory, the study examines press conferences, official statements, and interviews to compare how politicians and scientists shaped public behavior through direct and indirect directives. Findings show that political leaders often preferred direct strategies, embedding directives in appeals to solidarity, unity, or political identity. Medical experts relied more on direct and explicit directives as well, framing them as scientific necessity. The study highlights the adaptability of directive speech acts as tools of authority in crisis contexts, demonstrating how they balance power and clarity.

Keywords: speech acts; directives; crisis communication; COVID-19; pragmatics; authority

PRAGMATIK DER AUTORITÄT: DIREKTIVE SPRECHAKTE IM POLITISCHEN UND GESUNDHEITLICHEN DISKURS DER CORONA-PANDEMIE

Zusammenfassung

Die COVID-19-Pandemie stellte politische Führungspersonen und medizinische Fachkräfte in den Mittelpunkt der Krisenkommunikation und zwang sie dazu, unter unsicheren Bedingungen dringende Anweisungen zu geben. Dieser Beitrag untersucht, wie Sprache zur Ausübung von Autorität eingesetzt wurde, mit einem Fokus auf direktive Sprechakte im politischen und wissenschaftlichen Diskurs in den USA und Kroatien. Auf der Grundlage der Sprechakttheorie bzw. direkter und indirekter Sprechakte vergleicht die Studie Pressekonferenzen, Pressemitteilungen und Interviews von Politikern und Wissenschaftlern bezüglich ihres Einflusses auf das Verhalten der Öffentlichkeit. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass politische Führungspersonen häufig direkte Strategien bevorzugten und die Direktiven als Appelle an Solidarität, Einheit oder politische Identität einsetzten. Medizinische Experten verwendeten ebenfalls überwiegend direkte und explizite Direktiven, die sie als wissenschaftliche Notwendigkeit darstellten. Die Studie beleuchtet, wie direktive Sprechakte in Krisenzeiten als einflussreiches und mächtiges sprachliches Instrument eingesetzt werden können.

Schlüsselwörter: Sprechakte; Direktiven; Krisenkommunikation; COVID-19; Pragmatik; Autorität

Introduction

It can be argued that until the emergence of Speech Act Theory, a boundary between philosophy of language and linguistics had been drawn; linguists were concerned with the empirical facts about languages, and the philosophy of language was concerned with the truths that lie at the basis of any language. However, after Austin introduced his theory, and Searle and other philosophers expanded on it, it became a working tool for many linguists and they simply incorporated it into their research processes, and this continues to be the case in the present as well. Such a collaboration and interdisciplinary approach is welcome as it brings new insights into the

topics being discussed, and the practical tools of linguists are inherently of great help to philosophical theories.

This paper will research directness and indirectness in directive speech acts in the time of the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in order to explain how language is used in these situations and contexts. To this end, four speakers were chosen to be included in the analysis. Two politicians were selected to represent executive officials: Donald Trump, who was the president of the United States, and Andrej Plenković, who was the Croatian prime minister at the time. The health care officials were represented by two scientists: Anthony Fauci, who was the leading epidemiologist in the United States at the time, and Alemka Markotić, who was the leading epidemiologist in Croatia. Since the period of the COVID-19 pandemic was a period of uncertainty, the speeches made by executive and health-care officials were very important to inform the public about the events taking place, but also to persuade the public that what was being said was actually trustworthy. Based on this, it is hypothesized that both politicians and scientists are more prone to use direct than indirect directive speech acts. In addition, the study seeks to examine how the use of direct and indirect speech acts is connected with the relative superiority of the speaker and hearer.

The paper is divided into four chapters. The first chapter deals with the theoretical background of speech act research, putting the focus primarily on Austin's and Searle's theories as the most important ones. The second chapter brings the description of the methodology used. The method of choice is content analysis and it is arguably the most suitable method for research on a scale like this. The hypothesis, research question and dataset description are all specified in this chapter. The third chapter offers the analysis of the dataset which is too large to be shown in its entirety, so its description is provided. The final chapter brings the results of the analysis and the discussion of the findings.

A lot of research can be done to test speech act theory further and to give it more importance in explaining human communication and the meaning involved in it. The theory on its own is a good example of describing how we assume human communication may take place, but it is the practical work and research of everyday speech that actually confirms these theories and this paper will be a small contribution to that cause.

1. Speech Acts, Indirectness, Politeness

The formal architect of the theory of speech acts is usually thought to be J. L. Austin, who held a series of lectures on speech acts at Harvard University in 1955. The lectures were published posthumously as a book titled *How to Do Things with Words* in 1962. After Austin, the speech act theory was improved and systemized by J. R. Searle, whose contributions were probably the most valuable ones. Searle's two most important works on speech act theory are *Speech Acts* (1969) and *Expression and Meaning* (1979). Besides Austin and Searle, speech acts were discussed by other authors, such as Vendler (1972), Bach and Harnish (1979), Alston (2000), Hanks (2018).

Searle considers the study of speech acts fundamental for understanding language and communication, since they are the “basic or minimal units of linguistic communication” (Searle, 1969, p. 16). Communication always involves producing utterances with intentions in context, and for Searle, the crucial category is not just “speech acts” broadly, but specifically illocutionary acts—the acts performed in saying something (Searle & Vanderveken, 1985).

Searle criticized Austin's taxonomy of five illocutionary classes (verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, expositives) as inconsistent, overlapping, and tied to English verbs rather than universal categories (Searle, 1979). He sought instead to ground a taxonomy in systematic principles, especially illocutionary point, direction of fit, and sincerity conditions. On this basis, Searle proposes five universal categories (Searle, 1979):

- *Assertives*: Commit the speaker to truth of a proposition (e.g., stating, describing, hypothesizing). Direction of fit: words-to-world. Psychological state: belief.
- *Directives*: Attempt to get the hearer to do something (e.g., commands, requests, advice). Direction of fit: world-to-words. Psychological state: desire/want.
- *Commissives*: Commit the speaker to future action (e.g., promises, vows, threats). Direction of fit: world-to-words. Psychological state: intention.
- *Expressives*: Express speaker's psychological state (e.g., congratulating, apologizing, condoling). These do not have direction of fit but reveal attitudes.

- *Declarations*: Bring about changes in external reality through utterance (e.g., resigning, baptizing, declaring war). Depend on institutional authority.

This taxonomy avoids the problems of Austin's classification by rooting categories in universal features of illocutionary force rather than lists of verbs in English.

One of the central themes of Searle's *Expression and Meaning* (1979) is the concept of indirect speech acts, which occur when a speaker means more than what is literally expressed. While direct speech acts—where the illocutionary force matches the surface form—are straightforward, many utterances work indirectly through hints, irony, or metaphor. For example, "I'm feeling cold" may function not merely as an assertion but as a request to "Close the window." Here the speaker performs two acts: a literal assertion and a nonliteral directive with different propositional content.

Indirect speech acts are crucial for pragmatics because they rely heavily on convention, presupposition, and shared rationality between speaker and hearer (Palašić, 2020). McGowan, Tan, and Hall (2009) argue that indirectness may even be more significant than direct speech, identifying three types: (1) normally direct utterances that acquire indirect force in special contexts ("I don't like this song" → "Change the song"), (2) expressions that typically carry indirect force ("Can you pass the salt?" as a request), and (3) forms that always signal indirectness through markers like "please". Searle (1979) explains that such communication depends on shared background knowledge and principles of cooperative interaction, echoing Grice's (1975) theory of conversational maxims.

Searle (1979) argues that politeness is a major motivation for indirectness, especially in directives. It is often socially awkward to give blunt orders ("Leave the office"), so speakers prefer more indirect forms. He identifies six syntactic patterns for indirect directives, including appeals to ability ("Can you pass the salt?"), willingness ("Would you be willing...?"), reasons ("Do you have to keep banging so loudly?"), or combinations thereof. Despite surface differences, all contain an implicit imperative illocution aimed at persuading the hearer to act. Palašić (2020) condenses these into three groups: (1) rules or conditions for directives, (2) reasons for action, and (3) combinations of the two.

Although Searle (1979) did claim that politeness was the main motivation for using indirectness, he did not follow up that claim with a thorough analysis. Brown and Levinson (1987) did exactly that by analyzing how and

under which conditions indirect speech acts are used. Although they worked under the Gricean framework of relevance (Brown and Levison, 1987), their work does provide insight into the relation between the illocutionary act and the perlocutionary effect, and how speakers view and engage in such a relation. The fundamental reason for doing research into politeness is to explain how language use carries itself over in building social relationships, i.e., they believe that constructing a linguistic message reflects the interactional aspect of the relationship between two speakers. The most important concept introduced is the notion of “positive and negative face” (Brown and Levison, 1987, p. 62), and a fundamental rule of politeness which talks about non-imposition is extracted from it. Non-imposition stems from the fact that some acts intrinsically threaten face, and a correct strategy of doing a face-threatening act will depend on a number of factors, so that when we do a face-threatening act and we do it on record, then it can be with or without redress (Brown and Levison, 1987). In doing a face-threatening act without redress, the speaker opts for a strategy which is the most direct, clear and concise option, and the speaker does not fear any retribution from the hearer. Among the reasons why a speaker may opt for such a strategy, Brown and Levison (1987) write that the situation might be an emergency, the situation may be such that the requirement made in the act is clearly in favor of the hearer, and the situation may be such that the speaker is vastly superior in power to the hearer. What is especially important for their theory is that it is deemed to be universal and a helpful tool for explaining the similarities and differences in cross-cultural research.

1.1. Speech act research in the COVID-19 pandemic

Smith and Kabele (2021) analyzed the “stay at home” slogans which were used by the UK government at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how these slogans were used in an alignment between the duty of the government to protect the citizens and the public role of the press. It is argued that by devising such slogans, the government uses cognitive and empathetic explanations to induce subjectivation and restore order in a crisis situation, and to present citizens with a new voice of hope through collaborative compliance to the orders given (p. 178). The results also show that the perlocutionary effect is hard to measure because it is not precisely clear when the message of the campaign began to take effect, and the authors conclude with the claim that trust and credibility are crucial if campaigns in such crisis situations are to be successful.

Tsoumou (2021) dealt with expressive speech acts and their connection to politeness strategies in the COVID-19 pandemic. Speech acts are not viewed only through their illocutionary force, but also through the perlocutionary effect, and more attention is given to the dialogical nature of communication, not only to speaker meaning. It is argued that expressive speech acts are usually demanded by certain social norms and that engaging in dialogue, i.e., replying when someone wishes us a speedy recovery is a face-saving act. It is concluded that expressive speech acts and politeness are inherently inseparable (p. 3).

Ogiermann and Bella (2021) proposed a new view on expressive speech acts, claiming that they should not be viewed merely as expressions of emotions, but also conventionalized acts of courtesy. The research was based on collecting signs on doors of closed businesses during the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic in Athens and London. It was found that the signs relied heavily on the use of expressive speech acts, which reflected the business owners' attempt to retain their customers, but these speech acts also reflected the social change which was brought on by the pandemic (p. 13). It is concluded that these signs did not follow the usual footprint of closure signs but were more personalized and could be regarded as acts of courtesy (p. 14).

Che Hassan and Mohammad Nor (2022) analyzed COVID-19 related Facebook comments to see which types of speech acts were used in addressing the government and the public as well to maintain order. The majority of the speech acts collected were Malayan, with only a few examples of English speech acts, but the results were expected: assertive, expressive and directive speech acts were used the most, with directives being used the most to refer to the government as a way of telling them how to control the pandemic (p. 7). This is no surprise given that the corpus consisted of Facebook comments, which are highly informal and represent everyday language of the individual.

Pasternak (2021) analyzed the speeches of Boris Johnson and Donald Trump about the COVID-19 pandemic. He focused on epideictic rhetoric and tried to analyze the illocutionary force of the performative utterances the speakers used in their speeches. What was found was that representatives (assertives) and directives were used the most, and it is suggested that representatives were used to give comfort to the hearers in stating the inevitability of certain events, so that they were used to the restrictions and inconveniences, while the directives were used to encourage the hearers to comply

with the rules of quarantine (p. 191). Interestingly, commissives were found to be twice as few in comparison to directives and representatives, and it was argued that this was because the speakers were unwilling to make commitments and promises in an unpredictable time such as the COVID-19 pandemic (p. 192).

2. Methodology

The method used for the research is content analysis. The main goals of content analysis are to reduce the analyzed text and categorize it in order to gain new insights and understanding of the text. An important aspect of the research method used is that it will be used in a deductive way. The theory of speech acts proposed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969; 1979) is a well-established way of describing how language is used in everyday situations. The research will focus on what the participants are saying, and the directive speech acts contained within the dataset will be identified according to the speech act theory proposed by Searle (1969; 1979). After that, directive speech acts will be classified into direct and indirect speech acts.

The unit of analysis will be a proposition and not a grammatical sentence, because within a complex sentence, there can occur more than one speech act. Searle (1969) writes that a proposition is not a complete speech act, and when it is expressed, it is expressed in the performance of an illocutionary speech act. Matić (2011, p. 205) states that a “proposition is the basic unit of analysis in dialogic interaction and is situated within the speech event”. That is why it is important to focus on propositions, not necessarily on whole sentences, because there can be more propositions within one sentence and hence more speech acts.

The dataset on which the research is done consists of press conferences, official statements and interviews of the four participants, which they made during the months of March and September of 2020. A total of 105 speeches are analyzed, 44 of those given by Donald Trump, 28 by Anthony Fauci, 15 by Andrej Plenković, and 18 by Alemka Markotić.

2.1. Hypothesis

The goal of the research is to examine, based on the dataset analysis, how different prominent members of society, in this case politicians and medical scientists, use directive speech acts in their address to the general population during a time of crisis.

H: While using directive speech acts, both politicians and medical scientists are more prone to use direct than indirect speech acts.

This hypothesis is based on the assumption that in times of crisis, clarity and unambiguity are of primary importance. Direct forms of directive speech acts minimize the risk of misinterpretation and should be more effective for achieving compliance. Politicians, who must assert authority and demonstrate leadership, as well as medical scientists, who rely on their scientific expertise to guide public behavior, are both expected to prefer directness in order to reinforce trust and authority.

3. Analysis, Results and Discussion

The research focuses on the use of speech acts of four prominent members of society during a time of crisis, in this case the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants whose speeches were analyzed are Donald Trump, the president of the United States at the time, Anthony Fauci, chief medical advisor of the president of the United States, Andrej Plenković, the prime minister of the Republic of Croatia, and Alemka Markotić, a member of the Civil Protection Headquarters of the Republic of Croatia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The reasons for using these participants are multiple. They were the leaders of the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in their countries and, therefore, they had the responsibility to inform the citizens about the course of the pandemic in a credible and timely manner. On the one hand, individuals from the sphere of politics are represented: Donald Trump and Andrej Plenković, and on the other, individuals from the sphere of medical science are represented: Anthony Fauci and Alemka Markotić. This way, any difference in the use of speech acts between the representatives of these two fields can be seen.

For the US president at the time Donald Trump, a total of 1,358 directives were found in March 2020, and 359 directives in September 2020. Regarding direct and indirect speech acts, a total of 796 direct and 562 indirect speech acts were found in March 2020, and a total of 282 direct and 77 indirect speech acts in September 2020.

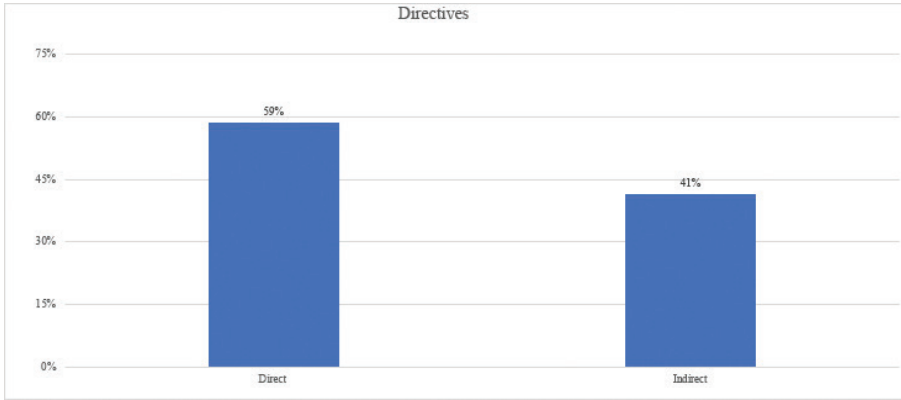


Table 1. Percentage of direct and indirect speech acts in Donald Trump's speeches in March 2020.

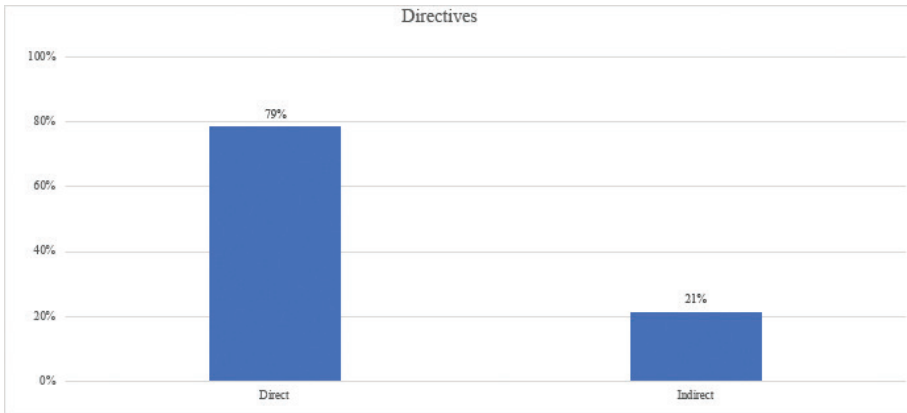


Table 2. Percentage of direct and indirect speech acts in Donald Trump's speeches in September 2020.

For Anthony Fauci, a total of 171 directives were found in March 2020, and 43 directives in September 2020. As far as direct and indirect speech acts are concerned, a total of 135 direct and 35 indirect speech acts were found in March 2020, and a total of 32 direct and 11 indirect speech acts in September 2020.

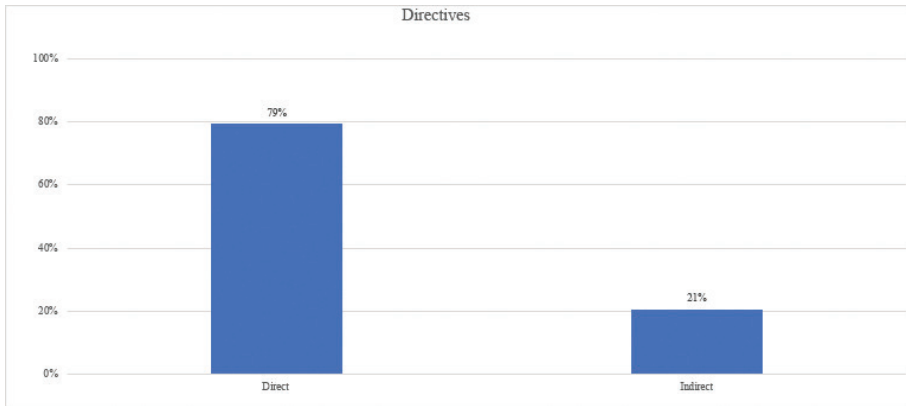


Table 3. Percentage of direct and indirect speech acts in Anthony Fauci’s speeches in March 2020.

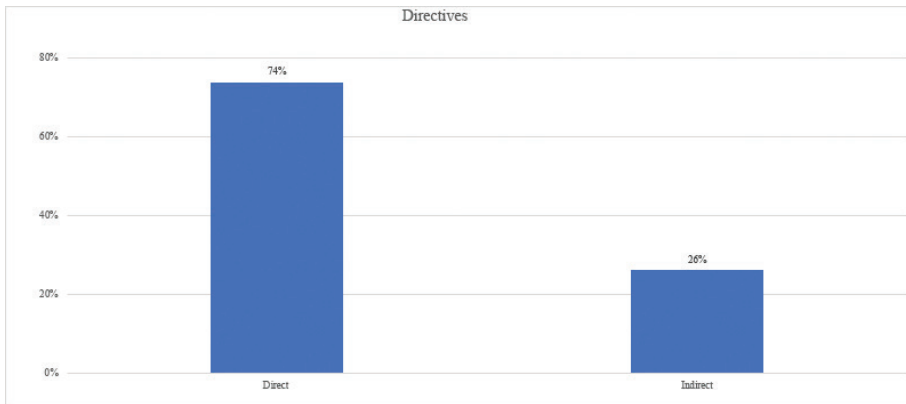


Table 4. Percentage of direct and indirect speech acts in Anthony Fauci’s speeches in September 2020.

For Andrej Plenković, a total of 57 directives were found in March 2020, and 52 directives in September 2020. With respect to the direct and indirect speech acts, a total of 34 direct and 23 indirect speech acts were found in March 2020, and a total of 32 direct and 20 indirect speech acts in September 2020.

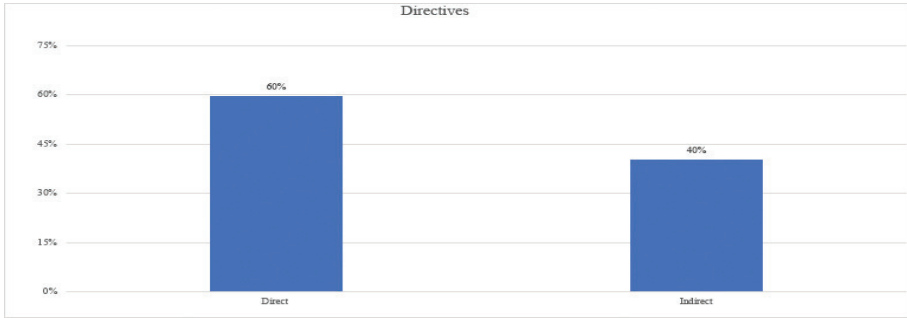


Table 5. Percentage of direct and indirect speech acts in Andrej Plenković’s speeches in March 2020.

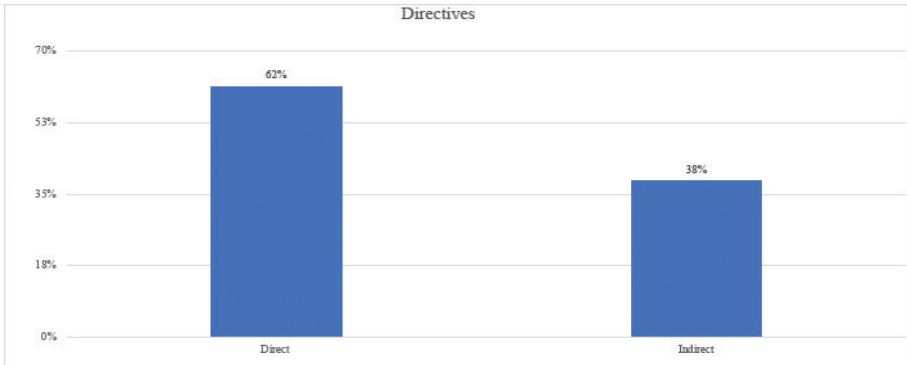


Table 6. Percentage of direct and indirect speech acts in Andrej Plenković’s speeches in September 2020.

For Alemka Markotić, a total of 39 directives were found in March 2020, and 22 directives in September 2020. Regarding the direct and indirect speech acts, a total of 27 direct and 12 indirect speech acts were found in March 2020, and a total of 11 direct and 11 indirect speech acts in September 2020.

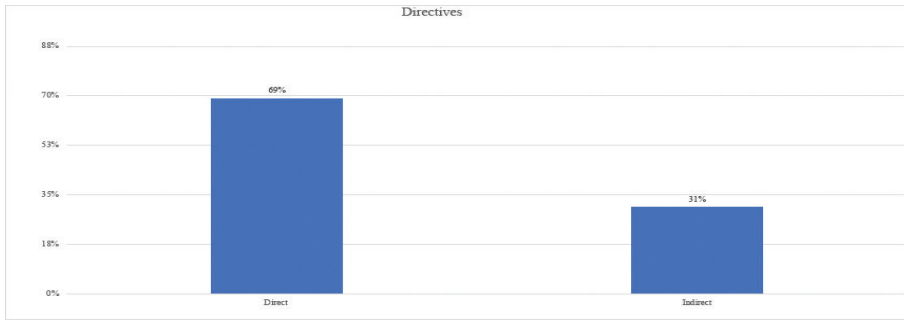


Table 7. Percentage of direct and indirect speech acts in Alemka Markotić's speeches in March 2020.

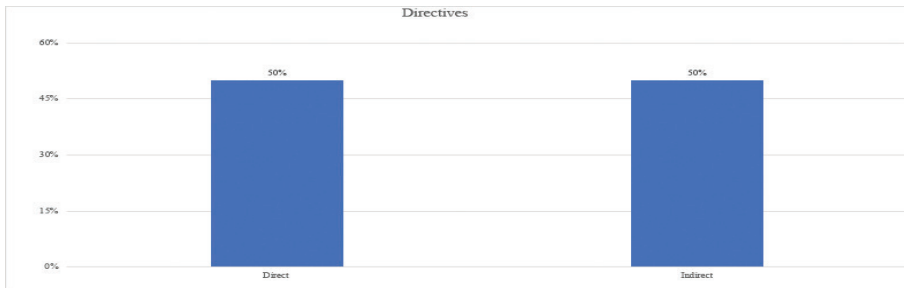


Table 8. Percentage of direct and indirect speech acts in Alemka Markotić's speeches in September 2020.

Since the number of speeches, and therefore speech acts, is different for different speakers, the exact number of speech acts cannot be taken as a valid reference point, and therefore we will focus on the percentage of items collected.

The hypothesis was that while using directive speech acts, both scientists and politicians are more prone to use direct than indirect speech acts. The amount of direct and indirect speech acts pertains only to the class of directives for all the speakers analyzed. From all the data obtained, it is clear that both the politicians and scientists are prone to use far more direct than indirect directive speech acts. This could be explained by the fact that both the politicians and scientists are in positions of power, and because of this, they have the authority to issue direct orders and commands or to request someone to do something in a direct way. This is perhaps even more emphasized by the context in which the speeches were delivered, which was the crisis situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. In such situations, it is necessary for individuals who are in positions of power to take control and direct the

public during the pandemic, and this is done through directive speech acts. This relates to the research question of how the use of direct and indirect speech acts is connected with the superiority of the speaker and hearer and Brown and Levison's (1987, p. 69) strategies for doing a face-threatening act, which is a major aspect of their politeness theory. In explaining why a speaker may choose to do a face-threatening act "baldly, without redress," two reasons seem important in explaining the results obtained in this research: the situation may be an emergency, and the speaker may be superior in power to the hearer. Since the context of the research is the COVID-19 pandemic, the argument stands that the situation is an emergency, and in addition, all the speakers whose speeches are analyzed are superior in power to the hearers, who in this case is the general public. Since the speakers were part of specially formed teams which helped in combating the spread of the pandemic, their power status is even more amplified. We can, therefore, conclude that the data supports the hypothesis.

A question that arose in doing the research is connected to the felicity conditions of performative utterances. In his second lecture, Austin gives a list of rules or conditions that must be met in order for the performative utterance to "go through," for it to be "happy." So, the fourth rule states that "(B.2) the procedure must be executed by all participants completely" (Austin, 1962, p. 36). When discussing these rules, Austin states that the fourth rule refers to hitches: "We attempt to carry out a procedure, but the act is abortive" (Austin, 1962, p. 36). The claim that *all participants* must execute the procedure is interesting. If one of the speakers, e.g., Trump or Plenković, issued a directive, and if all of the participants, i.e., their citizens, who are by the definition participants as the directive was issued to them, did not abide (e.g., wear masks, obey the curfew, etc.) the speech act is then technically a misfire. This seems a rather unusual proposal as it would seem to be an abuse instead but it shows that technicalities like these can sometimes be crucial, especially in the context of law. Further research is needed in order to answer the question if speech acts can be unilateral, and if they can, then where is the line that distinguishes a felicitous and an infelicitous performative utterance.

Conclusion

The intention of this research was to show how speech acts are used in public speeches by US and Croatian executive and healthcare officials

during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The main focus was on the frequency of use of directives and the use of directness and indirectness. The results enabled an analysis of the difference in using speech acts between persons in different positions of power.

The research supports the hypothesis that both scientists and politicians are more prone to use direct than indirect speech acts. This is closely connected to the superiority in power of the speaker and hearer, and the results indicate that persons in positions of power are prone to using direct speech acts more often.

While performing the analysis, it was noticed that speakers use expressives indirectly quite often. Hence, directness and indirectness in the use of expressive speech acts is another area which could be researched further, as well as the reasons why and in which situations speakers tend to be indirect when thanking or congratulating someone. Since thanking and congratulating is in most cases conventionalized, a cross-cultural comparison of indirectness in the use of expressives could also provide interesting results in order to see how different cultures deal with the statuses of these speech acts.

Another aspect that could be included in future analyses is how the use of different speech act classes and indirectness is connected to the gender of the speakers. This research did include one female speaker, but the scope of the research did not allow the inclusion of this variable. Other variables that could be included are age, level of education, and social relationship of the speakers. Such studies would certainly bring more to the understanding of how speech acts are used, and more practical research on real speeches will allow for the theory to develop. Second language teachers may want to focus on how teaching speech acts could help their students attain better understanding of the target language and culture.

As cross-cultural communication becomes more and more important, especially with all the demographic changes in Europe and the US caused by migration, it is essential that more effort is put into understanding how different cultures respond and interact with different events. This is particularly true about crisis situations, and more research in this area could provide a better basis for understanding how the response to a crisis situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic of one country and the culture in the country is not better nor worse than the response of a different country and culture.

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