

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Research in the area of speech acts has received considerable attention with most dealing with the extent to which language is used to perform actions instead of merely communicate information. Speech act theory, the notion of speech acts, was first attached to language by John Austin (1962) and further developed by John Searle (1969), establishing a distinction between the many kinds of acts that can be carried out using language. Austin (1962), distinguishes between three types of speech acts: locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary acts. One can say a locutionary act is just uttering a certain thing with a determination of its meaning and of its reference, which can be understood simply as “the act of saying something”. In addition to creating words, an illocutionary act actually does something, e.g. informing, questioning, warning, promising, etc. Hence, it is, “the act of doing something.” On the other hand, describing what it does to the person receiving the utterance, like persuading, convincing, discouraging someone, misleading someone, is a perlocutionary act, someone doing “the act of affecting someone.”

Specifically, illocutionary acts pertain to what the speaker intends to do in saying something, such as make a promise, give an order, make a statement, or make a declaration. A more precise classification of illocutionary acts was later established by Searle (1976) who classified them into five basic types, including assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives. It would be possible to apply illocutionary acts to dissect speech, which allows us to

understand the function of language in communication and also the way speakers achieve their intentions.

A crisis is an inevitable and recurring phenomenon in our lives that can show up in many different ways and affect different aspects of life. It may arise from natural events such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and pandemics, or stem from human activities, including political, social, and economic disruptions (Babatunde, 2022). Whether natural or man-made, a crisis often signifies a critical phase that threatens essential values, vital interests, or basic human needs (Nteka, 2021).

To navigate such threats, crisis communication has to achieve its goals, including: 1) delivering accurate, timely information to clarify the crisis and counter misinformation; 2) building trust through transparency and equitable engagement with all stakeholders, especially vulnerable groups; and 3) shaping public perception to mitigate panic, affirm institutional control, and mobilise collective action. Post-crisis, communication shifts toward sustaining community resilience and refining future response protocols (Babatunde, 2022; Nteka, 2021; Savoia et al., 2023).

Managing such situations effectively thus requires more than logistical solutions; it demands communication that not only informs but acts. Through their words, political leaders can reassure, instruct, promise, and declare—these are part of illocutionary acts in speech act theory. Their public speeches thus serve not only as rhetorical expressions but also as instruments for guiding the public, maintaining trust, and demonstrating leadership.

Speech act theory has been widely applied in political discourse to reveal how leaders manage public perception, direct behaviour, and convey empathy during times of crisis. Several studies have explored the use of speech acts in crisis communication, including research on Malaysian, African, and British political leaders (Anyanwu & Abana, 2020; Buczowski & Strukowska, 2022; Kamil & Bahrn, 2020; Odeh et al., 2021). These studies show that directive, expressive, and commissive acts are commonly used to mobilize public action and build trust. Research focusing on Jacinda Ardern's speeches has also emerged (Attamimy et al., 2020; Marsen & Ali-Chand, 2022), identifying her clear and empathetic communication style, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, existing studies tend to analyse Ardern's speeches from a discourse or critical discourse analysis perspective, or focus only on single events.

Jacinda Ardern was Prime Minister of New Zealand from October 2017 until her resignation in January 2023. Under her tenure, she persevered through a number of crises including the March 2019 Christchurch Mosque Shooting, the White Island Volcanic Eruption in December 2019, and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. These events challenged her governing abilities, but Ardern was repeatedly lauded for her empathetic and decisive leadership. Her addresses to the nation during these pivotal times received ubiquitous attention, given their emotional content, clarity of delivery, and apparent leadership style (McGuire et al., 2020).

Ardern's leadership was especially noted as effective during the COVID-19 pandemic. Under her government, New Zealand was able to better contain the spread of the virus than many of the industrialized nations,

tallying just 1.132 cases and 19 deaths as of April 2020 (McGuire et al., 2020). Also, Ardern's early and resolute steps taken during the pandemic, including one of the world's most stringent national shutdowns, displayed her practical approach to governance. On 27 April 2020, Ardern announced that New Zealand had won the battle against community transmission of the virus, a move that found wide praise around the world. Ardern was widely recognised as a model of pandemic response, noting the importance of direct, empathetic communication to engage public compliance (Power & Crosthwaite, 2022).

In addition, Ardern's response to the Christchurch Mosque Shooting exemplified her ability to convey empathy to the public in times of crisis. Fatmaja and Saragih (2021) point out that her sympathetic response to the disaster, including assuring the victims' families, won international praise for her. Ardern's speeches in the wake of the attack helped to unite the nation, provide stability and articulate a sense of shared grief and outrage. Her calm reaction to a horrific moment only served to strengthen her bond with the public and consolidate her status as a global leader.

While the speech acts have been applied in previous studies on the crisis speeches of various political figures, no detailed study of the illocutionary acts featured in Jacinda Ardern's crisis speeches across her various crisis events has yet been undertaken. This study will, therefore, fill this gap by exploring the illocutionary acts in Ardern's speeches and identifying how these acts vary according to the type of crisis, be it a terrorist attack, a public health emergency, or a natural disaster. By focusing on multiple crises, this study aims to uncover patterns of speech acts in her communication strategies and examine how

her use of language adapts to different crisis contexts. Moreover, unlike other studies that either blend theories or focus on discourse analysis, this study will specifically apply Searle's types of illocutionary acts, providing a more detailed and structured look at Ardern's pragmatic strategies.

1.2 Research Questions

Building upon the identified research gap concerning the pragmatic analysis of Jacinda Ardern's crisis speeches across varied contexts, this study specifically investigates the illocutionary acts used by Ardern during three distinct national emergencies. To systematically address this gap, this study is guided by the following central questions:

1. What types of direct and indirect illocutionary acts are present in Jacinda Ardern's crisis speeches across different crises, including a terrorist attack, a natural disaster, and a public health emergency?
2. How does Jacinda Ardern adapt her use of illocutionary acts across different crisis contexts (terrorist attack, natural disaster, and public health emergency)?

1.3 Objective of the Study

Aligned with the research questions above, this study aims to provide a granular understanding of Ardern's crisis speeches through the lens of speech act theory.

The primary objectives are twofold:

1. Identify the types of direct and indirect illocutionary acts that are present in Jacinda Ardern's crisis speeches across different types of crises,

including a terrorist attack, a natural disaster, and a public health emergency.

2. Examine how Jacinda Ardern adapts her use of illocutionary acts across these different crisis contexts, uncovering patterns, consistencies, and differences in her rhetorical strategies.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study examines Jacinda Ardern's crisis speeches by analyzing her use of illocutionary acts in three significant crisis speeches. To ensure a balanced analysis across different crisis contexts, this study focuses on her initial response or official address to three crises: the Christchurch mosque shooting, the White Island volcanic eruption, and the COVID-19 pandemic. These speeches were selected as they represent distinct crisis types (a public health emergency, a terrorist attack, and a natural disaster), which allows for an exploration of how speech acts vary across different crises. The analysis specifically focuses on Ardern's verbal utterances within the transcripts of each chosen speech, identifying instances of illocutionary acts to understand their communicative intent and function. Moreover, the directness or indirectness of the illocutionary acts are also examined in this study to add details and nuance to the analysis.

Despite its contributions, this study focused in several ways. First, this study will only analyse linguistic features. Non-verbal aspects, like tone, facial expressions, and gestures, are not included in this study. Second, this study uses John Searle's theory of illocutionary acts, which divides speech into five categories: assertive, commissive, directive, declarative, and expressive. Although this framework provides a structured approach, other frameworks may

provide different perspectives in their pragmatic or rhetorical interpretations. Finally, this study is limited to a qualitative analysis of three speeches and does not intend to generalise its conclusions to all of Ardern's crisis communications or all leaders' crisis speeches.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study has theoretical significance and practical significance. Each is described in detail below, emphasizing the impact on different stakeholders.

1. Theoretical significance

This study extends the understanding of the use of speech act theory, specifically illocutionary acts, as a theoretical framework for analyzing crisis communication. Using Jacinda Ardern's crisis speeches as the focus, this study will offer insights into how the diversity of illocutionary acts can be utilised in different crisis situations.

2. Practical Significance

a. For Students

This study may equip students in their pursuit of applied knowledge regarding speech act theory and provide a nuanced case study of illocutionary acts employed by government officials in times of crisis. It teaches students how language, power, and communication collide in real-world situations, helping students think critically, which are skills they could apply throughout their studies or work on a research project.

b. For the English Literature Study Programme

This study may enrich the English literature study programme, as it presents an analysis that highlights the importance of pragmatics, particularly within the realm of political rhetoric, thus serving as a guide for students and researchers to work upon in understanding how linguistic features operate outside of the domain of literature. The findings of this study may also be used for curriculum development, especially in courses about pragmatics.

c. For Other Practitioners

This study may provide practical recommendations for professionals like political analysts, communication specialists, and speechwriters, on the effective use of language during critical moments for persuasion, informing, and shaping public opinion. The findings can also inform political leaders and their staff on how to create more effective speeches in general, especially given the unique stressors in these moments where powerful communication is a necessity.