

RECEPTION TO ASSERTIVE SPEECH ACTS IN BARACK OBAMA'S SPEECH ON THE VISIT TO CUBA MARCH 22, 2016: PRAGMATICS STUDIES

Syahrul Rohid¹

(Padjadjaran University/ syahrulrohid@gmail.com)

Sutiono Mahdi²

(Padjadjaran University/ sutionomahdi@gmail.com)

Abstract

This article studies about the reception of assertive illocutionary acts in Barack Obama's speech in Cuba. The purposes of this study are to describe the assertive speech and the reception towards it. The data was taken from Barack Obama's utterances of assertive speech acts. This study applies qualitative research and descriptive analysis method as a methodology. This study applies Searle and Vanderveken's assertive speech act classification (1985) and Stuart Hall's reception theory (1980). Based on this research, the writer found that there are seven kinds of assertive illocutionary acts found in the data: state, remind, suggest, report, inform, assure, and argue. Those illocutionary acts are responded with three reception position found in the data: dominant-hegemonic, oppositional, and negotiated position. The reception position that becomes the most frequent response to Barack Obama's utterances is an oppositional position. While 'argue' are the most frequently used by Barack Obama in his utterances. By arguing his belief, Obama has purpose to assure the hearer. As the United States President, that is in the long conflict with Cuba, his speech must be expressed and delivered clearly in order to influence and to get attention from the hearer.

Keywords:

Reception, Assertive Illocutionary Acts, Barack Obama's speech

A. Introduction

Pragmatics is the study about the speaker meaning and its interpretation by the hearer or reader.¹ This study related to the analysis of what the speaker means with the utterances rather than the lexical meaning of it. The speaker meaning can be delivered with text or

utterances, one of them is in delivering speech.

The speech as one of the media in delivering speaker meaning has vital role. Delivering a good speech will persuade and maybe change the point of view of someone. On the other side, the hearer has their own right to absorb the information in the speech. The hearer may be agreeing, disagree, or having

¹ George Yule, *Pragmatik* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2006). 3.

another perspective toward the speech. Delivering what the speaker meaning in the speech will involve the illocutionary act, especially assertive illocutionary act.

The assertive illocutionary acts includes the acts in speech which is aimed at expressing, explaining, suggesting, predicting, and summarizing, all of which serve to describe the state as being certain way.² The utterances of assertive illocutionary acts are focused on stating something that is believed by the speaker. It can be concluded that assertive illocutionary act is speech act that is bond to the actuality of uttered proposition. The speech that becomes the object of this study is the one that Obama delivered when he visits Cuba on March 22, 2016.

This study is conducted to find out the types of reception and assertive illocutionary acts on Obama's utterances in his speech. Reception is study about how the text is received by the hearer, whether they agree, disagree, or having another opinion about the utterances that is delivered to the hearer.

B. Method

The descriptive qualitative method is used in this study. This method focuses on analyzing the data by describing it without making the general conclusion.³ The data are taken from the utterances on Barack Obama's speech. The speech

² John Rogers Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

³ Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian* (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2004).

occurred in March 22, 2016 when he visited Cuba. The speech transcription is acquired from online site www.whitehouse.gov⁴ and the response is taken from YouTube. The utterances in his speech classified based on the assertive illocutionary act concept by Searle and Vanderveken.⁵

These utterances and the responses towards the utterances were analyzed to determine the position of reception based on reception theory from Stuart Hall.⁶ The focus of this study is on studying the utterances containing assertive illocutionary acts then the response toward the utterances. The writer determines the utterances by using the performative verb and then analyzing the response through the decoding process to know the reception position, whether it is dominant-hegemonic position, negotiated position, or oppositional position.

C. Results

After doing the analysis, the 17 utterances selected. The present writer presents the result in table 1 and table 2. Table 1 shows the types of assertive

⁴ "Remarks by President Obama to the People of Cuba," whitehouse.gov, March 22, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/03/22/remarks-president-obama-people-cuba>.

⁵ John R. Searle and Daniel Vanderveken, *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁶ Stuart Hall, *Encoding/Decoding*, 1980; in Stuart Hall et al (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79* (New York: Routledge, 2003). 128-138.

illocutionary acts in Obama's utterances. Table 2 shows the types of reception toward Obama's utterances.

Table 1. Assertive Illocutionary Act Percentage

Type of assertive illocutionary act	Obama's utterances	
	Frequency	%
Argue	5	29.5%
Report	4	23.5%
State	3	17.6%
Suggest	2	11.7%
Assure	1	5.9%
Inform	1	5.9%
Remind	1	5.9%
Σ	17	100%

Table 2. Reception Position Percentage

Type of reception	Obama's utterances	
	Frequency	%
Oppositional position	8	47%
Dominant-hegemonic position	5	29%
Negotiated position	4	24%
Σ	17	100%

The writer explains several data that represent the result of analysis. The results: the assertive illocutionary acts "argue" with dominant-hegemonic, opposition, and negotiated position; the assertive illocutionary act "report" with dominant-hegemonic, opposition, and negotiated position.

1. Assertive Illocutionary Act "argue"

This assertive speech acts can be used as support or disprove a certain idea. The speaker does the argue by mentioning his response to an idea and gives the reason why he supports or refutes the idea. There are three reception positions to Barack Obama's speech which use assertive illocutionary act 'argue' that are dominant-hegemonic position, negotiated position, and oppositional position.

a. Assertive illocutionary act 'argue' used with dominant-hegemonic position

The dominant - hegemonic position occurs when the reception absorbs the meaning and information implied in a full utterance, and produces the exact same message as when the message is delivered by the speaker. Let's see data 1 about some sentences from Obama's speech

Data 1:

"So let me tell you what I believe. I can't force you to agree, but you should know what I think. I believe that every person should be equal

under the law. Every child deserves the dignity that comes with education, and health care and food on the table and a roof over their heads. I believe citizens should be free to speak their mind without fear to organize, and to criticize their government, and to protest peacefully, and that the rule of law should not include arbitrary detentions of people who exercise those rights. I believe that every person should have the freedom to practice their faith peacefully and publicly. And, yes, I believe voters should be able to choose their governments in free and democratic elections.”⁷

In his utterance Obama explained that everyone should be equal before the law. Every child in the world should get regular education, health care, and food intake. Obama also explained that everyone has the freedom to speak and express what is on their mind. Moreover, the freedom to organize and criticize the government's performance. Then every citizen in a country has the right to elect the head of government freely and democratically.

The present writer focuses on the utterances: “Every child deserves the dignity that comes with education, and health care and food on the table and a roof over their heads.”. This utterance belongs to assertive illocutionary act ‘argue’. It can be seen from its

performative verb ‘deserves’ that constructs: I+VERB+YOU that X.

The reception then emerged for assertive speech acts in the speech as in one of the comments on the official American government YouTube channel The White House:

“Thank you president Obama for delivering a great and diplomatic speech. It was about time for someone like you to show the Cubans how you can be good neighbours. Much love and light and peace of heart and mind to you all. Being kind and understanding helps us all over the world to unite on human values, like equality and liberty and the pursuit of happiness and not having to be afraid to speak ones truth in all circumstances. It all depends on a fair and just system which is not ruled by a few elite families. We need to secure the rights of every human being to sustainable energy, housing, good education and natural healthcare. That’s what makes for freedom and true democracy.”⁸

The reception that appears above is an audience response to the speech presented by Obama. In the receptions the writer analyzed how Obama's speech was responded with comments that appear that is the expression *“We need to secure the rights of every human being to sustainable energy, housing, good education and natural healthcare. That’s what makes for freedom and true*

⁷ “Remarks by President Obama to the People of Cuba.”

⁸ Anne Westenbrink- Netherland

democracy". The remarks presented by Westenbrink refers to Obama's expression of "Every child deserves the dignity that comes with education, and health care and food on the table and a roof over their heads." In the speech presented by Westenbrink, it is seen that he agreed with Obama's speech about the right of every human being to have a decent life, education, and a good life. The author sees that Westenbrink's reception of Obama's speech in this data has no contradiction, Westenbrink agrees with what Obama says. So the writer concludes that the position of reception that appears in this data is dominant-hegemonic position because the audience decoding the assertiveness spoken by the speaker without contradicting the message.

b. Assertive illocutionary act 'argue' used with negotiated position

In general, the audience in this negotiated position understands quite well what is defined and what the speakers mean professionally. The decoding process in this position consists of an adaptive and selective understanding. Negotiated position occurs when the audience uses logic to identify the relationship between themselves and the

consumed speech, as Stuart Hall puts it in the general ideology in general but opposes its application in specific case. In other words they operate in situational logic. In this position there is a compromise between the speaker and the audience.⁹

Here is another example of expressions of Obama's speech.

Data 2:

"There's already an evolution taking place inside of Cuba, a generational change. Many suggested that I come here and ask the people of Cuba to tear something down but I'm appealing to the young people of Cuba who will lift something up, build something new. El future de Cuba tiene que estaren las manos del pueblo Cubano."¹⁰

In his speech Obama explains that there is an evolution within Cuba itself. Many people who think Obama's arrival to Cuba is to invite the people of Cuba to destroy something. But Obama invites young Cubans to make something new because the future of Cuba is determined by the Cubans themselves.

The present writer focuses on the utterances: "I'm appealing to the young people of Cuba who will lift something up, build something new." This utterance

⁹ Hall, *Encoding/Decoding*.

¹⁰ "Remarks by President Obama to the People of Cuba."

belongs to assertive illocutionary act 'argue'. It can be seen from its implicit performative verb 'argue' that constructs: I+VERB+YOU that X.

→ *I argue that I'm appealing to the young people of Cuba who will lift something up, build something new.*

The reception then emerged for assertive speech acts in the speech as in one of the comments on cubanow.us:

"We shouldn't expect major change overnight. But opening things up will give hope to a talented, hardworking and industrious people — particularly a generation of highly educated younger Cubans who grow increasingly frustrated for change. These are the same young Cubans who hold Obama in such high regard and are pinning their hopes for the future on his efforts to persuade a reluctant Congress. There are no guarantees that lifting the embargo will bring about the change our leaders seek. But after 50 years, don't the Cuban people deserve a shot at it?"¹¹

The reception that appears above is an audience response to the speech presented by Obama. In the reception, the author discusses how Obama's speech was responded with comments

that appear that is the expression "*We should not expect a major change overnight. But the opening up will be hopeful for a talented, hardworking and industrious people - especially a generation of highly educated younger Cubans who grow increasingly frustrated for change.*" The remarks presented by Palm Beach Post Editorial refers to a speech delivered by Obama that is "*Many suggestions that I want to ask for the Cuban people in Cuba who want to lift something up, build something new.*" In a speech delivered by the Palm Beach Post Editorial this came the opinion which is adaptive and selective in view of the Palm Beach Post Editorial approval in terms of the younger Cubans themselves who must make changes to Cuba, but the Palm Beach Post Editorial further provides another response that Obama's visit to Cuba will not change Cuba in a short time, this will spur the spirit of the Cuban people, especially the younger generation of Cubans to make a change.

Palm Beach Post Editorial generally approves what is said in Obama's speech, but the Palm Beach Post Editorial further provides another response to Obama's speech. So the writer concludes that the reception that appears above is a negotiated

¹¹ Palm Beach Post Editorial: Congress Should Give Younger Cubans A Shot At Change By Lifting The Embargo in "Cuba Now: Reaction To President Obama's Trip To Cuba," Cuba Now, accessed December 17, 2017, http://cubanow.us/blog/reaction_to_president_obamas_trip_to_cuba/.

position because of the compromise of assertiveness spoken by the speaker.

c. Assertive illocutionary act 'argue' used with oppositional position

Sometimes, the audience gives the oppositional position in decoding the speakers' speech. It is the opposition that occurs when audience replaces or changes the speaker's speech by an alternative utterance. Audiences refuse to accept the meaning of the speech that the speaker intended or addressed and replaced it with their own way of thinking on the subject's topic.

Here is the example of expressions by Obama:

Data 3:

"I want to be clear: The differences between our governments over these many years are real and they are important. I'm sure President Castro would say the same thing -- I know, because I've heard him address those differences at length. But before I discuss those issues, we also need to recognize how much we share. Because in many ways, the United States and Cuba are like two brothers who've been estranged for many years, even as we share the same blood."¹²

In his speech Obama explains the differences that exist

between Cuba so far, he feels very real and the difference is important. Obama also believes that not only himself who think about the differences between these two countries but President Castro also has the same thought. Obama explains further that Cuba and America are like brothers who became foreigners in 50 years.

The present writer focuses on the utterances: "*Because in many ways, the United States and Cuba are like two brothers who've been estranged for many years, even as we share the same blood.*" This utterance belongs to assertive illocutionary act 'argue'. It can be seen from its implicit performative verb 'argue' that constructs: I+VERB+YOU that X.

→ *I argue that the United States and Cuba are like two brothers who've been estranged for many years, even as we share the same blood*

The reception then emerged for assertive speech acts in the speech as in one of the comments on powerlineblog.com:

"What blood? As it turns out, the closest Obama came to identifying that blood was to babble on about superficial similarities between Cuban and American culture, especially in the realms of music and sports."¹³

¹² "Remarks by President Obama to the People of Cuba."

¹³ Scott Johnson, "Carlos Eire: Obama's Inglorious Speech," Power Line, December 17, 2017, <https://www.powerlineblog.com/archives/2016/03/>

The reception that appears above is an audience response to the speech presented by Obama. In the receptions, Eire discusses how Obama's speech responded with an emerging response that is

"What blood? As it turns out, the closest Obama came to identifying the blood was to babble on about the superficial similarities between Cuban and American culture."

Eire's remarks refers to Obama's expressed *"Because in many ways, the United States and Cuba is like two brothers who have been estranged for many years, even as we share the same blood."* In a speech delivered by Eire this is an opposite response to what is conveyed by Obama. Obama argues that the United States and Cuba are like two brothers who have been hostile even the United States and Cuba share the same blood that shows that the United States and Cuba are very close. This is denied by Eire, because according to Eire things are considered "closeness" is actually only limited to music and sports. So the writer concludes that the reception that appears to Obama's speech is the oppositional position because the audience did a refutation or rejection of assertiveness delivered by the speaker.

2. Assertive Illocutionary Act "report"

Assertive speech act 'report' is when the speaker reports a situation that has occurred in the past and is related to what is being discussed in the present. Reports can also be used for current events but not for future events.

a. Assertive illocutionary act 'report' used with dominant-hegemonic position

Data 4:

"And to President Castro -- who I appreciate being here today -- I want you to know, I believe my visit here demonstrates you do not need to fear a threat from the United States. And given your commitment to Cuba's sovereignty and self-determination, I am also confident that you need not fear the different voices of the Cuban people -- and their capacity to speak, and assemble, and vote for their leaders. In fact, I'm hopeful for the future because I trust that the Cuban people will make the right decisions."¹⁴

In his speech Obama explained to President Castro who also attended that the arrival of President Obama to Cuba is not a threat. Then Obama also conveyed to President Castro not to be afraid of the difference in votes that existed to the Cuban people who had the right to speak and elect their leaders.

carlos-eire-obamas-inglorious-speech-in-havana.php.

¹⁴ "Remarks by President Obama to the People of Cuba."

The present writer focuses on the utterances: *"In fact, I'm hopeful for the future because I trust that the Cuban people will make the right decisions."* This utterance belongs to assertive illocutionary act 'report'. It can be seen from its implicit performative verb 'report' that constructs: I+VERB+YOU that X.

→ *I report that I'm hopeful for the future because I trust that the Cuban people will make the right decisions.*

The reception then emerged for assertive speech acts in the speech as in one of the comments on dwkcommentaries.com:

"Dared to say in the presence of the leaders, of Raul Castro, that (Cubans) had the right to protest peacefully without being beaten or arrested."¹⁵

The reception that appears above is an audience response to the speech presented by Obama. In the reception, the author discusses how Obama's speech is responded with the comment that is *"(Cubans) had the right to protest peacefully without being beaten or arrested."* This remark referred by Oliva refers to the utterance delivered by Obama *"I am also confident that you need*

not fear the different voices of the Cuban people - and their capacity to speak, and assemble, and vote for their leaders." In the utterance delivered by Oliva it is seen that he approves of the speech delivered by Obama about everyone having the right to speak, protest, and choose their own leaders without fear. The author sees that the reception raised by Oliva against Obama's speech in this data has no contradiction, otherwise Oliva approves of what Obama says. So the authors conclude that the position of reception that appears in this data is dominant-hegemonic position because the audience decoding the assertiveness spoken by the speaker without contradicting the message.

b. Assertive illocutionary act 'report' used with negotiated position

Data 5:

"Despite these differences, on December 17th 2014, President Castro and I announced that the United States and Cuba would begin a process to normalize relations between our countries. Since then, we have established diplomatic relations and opened embassies. We've begun initiatives to cooperate on health and agriculture, education and law enforcement. We've reached agreements to restore direct flights and mail service. We've expanded commercial ties, and increased the

¹⁵ Juan Fransisco Ugarte Oliva in Author [dwkcommentaries](http://dwkcommentaries.com), "Reactions to President Obama's Speech in Cuba," *Dwkcommentaries* (blog), March 26, 2016, <https://dwkcommentaries.com/2016/03/26/reactio-ns-to-president-obamas-speech-in-cuba/>.

capacity of Americans to travel and do business in Cuba.”¹⁶

In his speech Obama explained that between the United States and Cuba is being carried out the process of normalization between the two countries. Among them is the resumption of diplomatic relations and the opening of embassies between Cuba and the United States. The two countries also began to cooperate in various fields, such as in health, agriculture, education, law, transportation, and business.

The present writer focuses on the utterances: “*Since then, we have established diplomatic relations and opened embassies.*” This utterance belongs to assertive illocutionary act ‘report’. It can be seen from its implicit performative verb ‘report’ that constructs: I+VERB+YOU that X.

→ *I report that we have established diplomatic relations and opened embassies.*

The reception that appears for assertive speech acts in the speech as in one of the comments on dwkcommentaries.com:

“In spite of the criticism — and I’ve been one of his critics — it was a very good meeting. Very honest. We realize that we have differences on tactics but not strategy. He said he admires us,

that that’s why he supports us and will continue to do so”¹⁷

The reception that appears above is an audience response to the speech presented by Obama. In the reception, the author discusses how Obama's speech is responded with the comment that is “*We realize that we have differences on tactics but not strategy. He said he admires us, that that’s why he supports us and will continue to do so*”. The remarks presented by Fariñas refers to Obama's expression of “*Since then, we have established diplomatic relations and open embassies.*” In the speeches presented by Fariñas this appears an adaptive and selective view can be seen from Fariñas's approval of Obama regarding the support and the development of diplomatic relations between the two countries, but Fariñas further responded to the differences between America and Cuba as seen in “*We realize that we have differences on tactics but not strategy*”.

Fariñas generally agree on what is said in Obama's speech, but Fariñas further provides another response to Obama's speech. So the writer concludes that the reception that appears

¹⁶ “Remarks by President Obama to the People of Cuba.”

¹⁷ Guillermo Fariñas in dwkcommentaries.com, “Reactions to President Obama’s Speech in Cuba.”

above is a negotiated position because of the compromise of assertiveness spoken speakers.

c. Assertive illocutionary act 'report' used with oppositional position

Data 6:

"From the beginning of my time in office, I've urged the people of the Americas to leave behind the ideological battles of the past. We are in a new era. I know that many of the issues that I've talked about lack the drama of the past. And I know that part of Cuba's identity is its pride in being a small island nation that could stand up for its rights, and shake the world. But I also know that Cuba will always stand out because of the talent, hard work, and pride of the Cuban people. That's your strength. Cuba doesn't have to be defined by being against the United States, any more than the United States should be defined by being against Cuba. I'm hopeful for the future because of the reconciliation that's taking place among the Cuban people."¹⁸

In his speech, Obama explains that he has asked the American people to no longer think of the past with Cuba. Obama also believes that Cuba can be a great country because of the hard work, and the pride of the Cuban people. Obama has great hopes for the Cuban people for the peace that is going on between them.

The present writer focuses on the utterances: "*I'm hopeful for the future because of the reconciliation that's taking place among the Cuban people.*" This utterance belongs to assertive illocutionary act 'report'. It can be seen from its implicit performative verb 'report' that constructs: I+VERB+YOU that X.

→ *I report that I'm hopeful for the future because of the reconciliation that's taking place among the Cuban people.*

The reception then emerged for assertive speech acts in the speech as in one of the comments on powerlineblog.com:

"What makes the use of this term incorrect in the case of Cuba – and what makes all talk of "reconciliation" a lie – is that genuine reconciliation involves penance and an admission of guilt on the part of wrongdoers. Those guilty of the worst sins in recent Cuban history – the Castro brothers and their supporters – have not only refused to admit their guilt, but actually remain in power and refuse to stop abusing the human rights of the Cuban people. Until those who rule Cuba step aside and admit their guilt – and until those at the top ranks are tried in a court of justice for their many crimes against humanity – there can be no genuine "reconciliation" in Cuba."¹⁹

The reception that appears above is an audience response to

¹⁸ "Remarks by President Obama to the People of Cuba."

¹⁹ Johnson, "Carlos Eire."

the speech presented by Obama. In the reception, the author discusses how Obama's speech is responded with the comment that is "Until those who rule Cuba step aside and admit their guilt – and until those at the top ranks are tried in a court of justice for their many crimes against humanity – there can be no genuine "reconciliation" in Cuba." Eire's remarks refer to Obama's "I'm hopeful for the future because of the reconciliation that's taking place among the Cuban people." In Eire's opinion this is a contradictory response to what's being said by Obama. Obama said that he has hope for a better future because of the peace that is going on in Cuba. This is denied by Eire because according to Eire what is called reconciliation or peace can never happen while the government in Cuba is still held by Castro. So the writer concludes that the reception that appear to Obama's speech is the oppositional position because the audience conducts an argument or rejection of assertiveness spoken by the speaker.

D. Conclusion

The aim of this study is to find out the types of Barack Obama's assertive illocutionary acts with its reception toward the utterances. The findings show that seven kinds of assertive illocutionary acts found in the data: state, remind, suggest, report, inform, assure, and argue. Those illocutionary acts is responded with three reception position found in the data: dominant-hegemonic, oppositional, and negotiated position.

The reception position that become the most frequently response to Barack Obama's utterances are oppositional position. While 'argue' are the most frequently used by Barack Obama on his utterances. By arguing his belief, Obama has purpose to assure the hearer. As the United States President, that is in the long conflict with Cuba, his speech must be expressed and delivered clearly in order to influence and to get attention from the hearer.

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