



Communicating Democratic Values: A Speech Act Analysis of Kamala Harris's 2024 Concession Speech

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-08-20 Revised: 2026-09-21 Accepted: 2026-09-21 Keywords: <i>concession speech;</i> <i>democratic values;</i> <i>political discourse;</i> <i>pragmatics;</i> <i>speech act theory</i> DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i2. 12236 Corresponding Author: Shufi Annisa Rahmah shufiannisarahmah@students.unnes.ac.id Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia	<i>Concession speeches occupy a distinctive place in democratic communication, requiring political leaders to acknowledge electoral defeat while sustaining public trust and encouraging continued civic engagement. Pragmatic research has paid this genre comparatively little attention, and speeches delivered by women political leaders remain especially underexamined. This study investigates the speech acts used in Kamala Harris's concession speech, delivered at Howard University on 6 November 2024, applying Searle's (1979) classification of assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative acts. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the official transcript was segmented into 62 utterances, each coded according to its dominant illocutionary force and interpreted within its communicative context. All five speech act categories occur in the speech, with assertive acts occurring most frequently, followed by expressive, directive, commissive, and a single but pivotal declarative act, the utterance of concession itself. These speech acts construct a coherent message of democratic continuity: assertions establish shared democratic principles, expressives build solidarity and gratitude, directives mobilise continued civic participation, commissives pledge ongoing struggle for democratic ideals, and the declarative formally enacts the transfer of political legitimacy. The findings extend pragmatic research on political discourse and offer a contemporary case of how language sustains democratic values during moments of political transition.</i>

1. Introduction

Political speeches stand among the most consequential forms of public communication because they let political leaders set out ideas, voice values, win over audiences, and respond to events of national significance, all within a single carefully constructed text. Unlike ordinary conversation, a political speech is planned in advance to serve several communicative goals at once: informing citizens, mobilising participation, expressing gratitude, and restating political commitments can all happen within the same address. This density of purpose is precisely what makes political speeches such a productive source of data for linguistic research, particularly within pragmatics, the branch of linguistics concerned with how language performs action in specific social settings.

A central premise of pragmatics is that an utterance's meaning cannot be read off its grammar or dictionary definition alone. Meaning instead depends on the speaker's intention, the relationship between speaker and listener, and the context surrounding the exchange. Speech Act Theory, first proposed by Austin (1962) and later refined by Searle (1979), remains one of the most influential frameworks built on this premise. Searle argues that language is itself a form of action: every utterance performs a communicative act reflecting the speaker's intention, whether to state something, express feeling, commit to a future action, request behaviour, or bring about a new institutional reality. He sorts these acts into five categories, assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative, a framework widely adopted because it lets researchers examine not just what a speaker says but what the speaker does through saying it (Acheoah, 2017).

Speech Act Theory has been applied extensively to political discourse. Political speeches offer a genuinely social context for language-as-action because leaders must speak to varied audiences while balancing informational, persuasive, and interpersonal goals at once. Across campaigns, debates, inaugurations, and public addresses, politicians deploy language strategically to build credibility, foster solidarity, inspire confidence, and justify decisions (Effendy & Simatupang, 2024; Husain & Nurhayani, 2020). Speech acts in this setting are therefore not simply linguistic categories; they function as communicative strategies that shape public perception and reinforce political messaging.

Existing pragmatic scholarship has used Speech Act Theory to examine presidential inaugural addresses, campaign speeches, parliamentary debates, and government statements, identifying which speech act categories dominate and why they serve persuasive ends (Hambali et al., 2024; Mulyani et al., 2025; Rajabul, 2026). Even so, this body of work has concentrated overwhelmingly on speeches delivered during campaigns or after electoral victory, leaving concession speeches comparatively unexamined despite their distinctive communicative demands. A concession speech asks a political leader to acknowledge defeat while simultaneously sustaining public confidence, encouraging continued democratic participation, and protecting institutional legitimacy, a combination of demands that makes the genre a particularly rich site for pragmatic investigation (Corcoran, 1994; Osisanwo & Chinaguh, 2020).

This gap matters for two further reasons. First, studies of speech acts in political discourse tend to stop at identifying and counting categories, without asking how those categories work together to communicate larger democratic values such as respect for constitutional process, peaceful transfer of power, resilience, and civic responsibility (Weaver, 1982). Second, concession speeches by women political leaders remain especially underrepresented in pragmatic research, even as women take on an increasingly prominent role in political leadership worldwide (Baxter, 2010; Cameron, 2022). Closing this gap can deepen understanding of how language functions during moments of political transition, and how leaders sustain public trust in the face of electoral loss.

Kamala Harris's concession speech, delivered on 6 November 2024 at Howard University following the U.S. presidential election, offers a fitting case for this investigation. In the speech, Harris acknowledges the outcome, congratulates the president-elect, reaffirms her commitment to democratic principles, thanks her supporters, and calls on citizens to stay engaged in protecting democratic values. Rather than dwelling on defeat, the speech foregrounds hope, resilience, public service, and constitutional responsibility, communicative aims carried through a range of speech acts that together build a message of democratic continuity and shared responsibility.

This study examines the speech acts in Kamala Harris's 2024 concession speech through Searle's (1979) classification. Where previous work has largely stopped at identifying speech act categories, this study goes further by asking how those speech acts jointly construct democratic values across the speech. Theoretically, the study extends pragmatic scholarship by applying Speech Act Theory to a recent political speech that has drawn little prior scholarly attention, and to a speech delivered by a woman political leader, a context that remains underrepresented in the literature (Joseph et al., 2021; Lazar, 2007). Practically, the findings may benefit students of pragmatics, discourse analysis, and political communication by showing how speech acts operate in authentic political discourse.

This study addresses the following research questions: (1) What types of speech acts occur in Kamala Harris's 2024 concession speech? (2) Which type of speech act occurs most frequently? (3) How do the speech acts identified work together to communicate democratic values across the speech?

Pragmatics is the branch of linguistics that is concerned with how language is used and understood in context. Where semantics deals with the literal meaning of words and sentences, pragmatics is concerned with what a speaker means to convey, and with the relationship between speaker, listener, and situation. Meaning, on this view, is shaped by social, cultural, and contextual factors as much as by linguistic form (Bibi & Sartini, 2023).

Speech Act Theory originates with Austin (1962), who argued that speaking is itself an act rather than simply the production of words, such that every utterance carries out something the speaker intends. Austin distinguished three components within any speech act: the locutionary act, the literal act of producing an utterance; the illocutionary act, the speaker's intended meaning; and the perlocutionary act, the effect the utterance has on the listener. Searle (1979) built on this foundation with a more systematic classification of illocutionary acts into five types. Assertive acts express statements, opinions, or beliefs the speaker holds to be true. Directive acts try to get the listener to perform some action, covering requests, suggestions, commands, and invitations. Commissive acts commit the speaker to some future action, as in promises or pledges. Expressive acts communicate the speaker's emotions or psychological state, such as gratitude, apology, or congratulation. Declarative acts bring about a change in institutional or social reality through the very act of speaking.

Concession speeches carry communicative demands distinct from campaign or victory speeches. Rather than celebrating success, they must acknowledge an electoral outcome while still promoting political stability and democratic continuity (Mirer & Bode, 2015; Weaver, 1982). Previous studies confirm that Speech Act Theory travels well into political discourse analysis, having been applied to presidential inaugural addresses, election campaigns, and parliamentary debates (Effendy & Simatupang, 2024; Hambali et al., 2024; Husain & Nurhayani, 2020), with assertive acts consistently found to be the most frequent category. Concession speeches specifically, however, have drawn far less scholarly attention: Weaver (1982) and Corcoran (1994) identify recurring themes such as declaring the result and calling for unity; Mirer and Bode (2015) trace similar themes into digital-era concessions; and Osisanwo and Chinaguh (2020) and Mesu et al. (2022) apply linguistic

frameworks to concession speeches from the United States, Nigeria, and Ghana. Koussouhon and Dadjo (2016) is among the few studies to apply speech act analysis specifically to a concession speech. Speeches by women political leaders remain comparatively underexplored in this literature (Baxter, 2010, 2017; Cameron, 2022; Joseph et al., 2021; Lazar, 2007). This study addresses these gaps by examining how the speech acts identified in Kamala Harris's 2024 concession speech work together to communicate democratic values, resilience, and civic responsibility.

2. Method

This study used a qualitative descriptive design to examine the speech acts in Kamala Harris's 2024 concession speech. A qualitative approach suited the aim of interpreting how language functions communicatively, rather than measuring numerical relationships or testing a hypothesis. The descriptive dimension of the design fit the study's objective: identifying, classifying, and interpreting the speech acts present in the speech according to Searle's (1979) theory.

The primary data for this study came from Kamala Harris's concession speech, delivered on 6 November 2024 at Howard University in Washington, D.C., following the 2024 U.S. presidential election. The publicly available transcript of the speech served as the main data source. The speech was chosen for three reasons: it represents an authentic instance of political discourse delivered during a significant democratic event; concession speeches have received far less pragmatic attention than campaign or inaugural addresses; and the speech carries multiple communicative purposes, expressing gratitude, acknowledging results, encouraging participation, and reaffirming democratic values, that make it well suited to speech act analysis. The unit of analysis was the utterance, since a single utterance can carry out a distinct communicative act corresponding to one of Searle's categories.

Data were gathered through documentation. The official transcript of the speech was obtained from a reliable public source, then read multiple times to build a full understanding of its content and communicative context. The transcript was then segmented into individual utterances, each assigned a code for systematic analysis. Utterances carrying a complete communicative intention were retained as units of analysis; incomplete fragments or repeated expressions without an independent communicative function were excluded from detailed coding.

Data were analysed using Searle's (1979) classification of speech acts across four stages. First, each utterance in the transcript was examined to determine its communicative intention. Second, each utterance was assigned to one of Searle's five categories based on its dominant illocutionary force. Third, the classified utterances were interpreted to explain their communicative function within the context of the concession speech. Finally, the results were summarised to identify the dominant speech act categories and to explain how they contributed to communicating democratic values across the speech. To strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, each utterance was reviewed more than once to check that its classification accurately reflected its communicative purpose, with coding decisions anchored in the definitions Searle (1979) provides for each category.

3. Result

Of the 62 utterances analysed, all five of Searle's (1979) speech act categories occur in Harris's concession speech, directly answering the first research question. Table 1 presents the distribution of speech act types across the transcript.

Table 1. Distribution of Speech Acts in Kamala Harris's 2024 Concession Speech

Speech Act	Utterances	Percent	Rank
Assertive	22	35.5%	1
Expressive	18	29.0%	2
Directive	13	21.0%	3
Commissive	8	12.9%	4
Declarative	1	1.6%	5
Total	62	100%	—

Consistent with previous studies of political discourse (Effendy & Simatupang, 2024; Hambali et al., 2024), assertive speech acts occur most frequently, accounting for just over a third of all coded utterances, which answers the second research question. Table 2 presents an illustrative excerpt for each category together with its communicative function.

Table 2. Illustrative Examples of Each Speech Act Category

Type	Excerpt	Function
Assertive	"a fundamental principle of American democracy..."	States the democratic norm anchoring the speech
Expressive	"my heart is full today... full of resolve"	Voices gratitude and composure
Directive	"this is a time to roll up our sleeves"	Calls audience to continued action
Commissive	"I do not concede the fight..."	Pledges continued struggle
Declarative	"I concede this election"	Enacts transfer of legitimacy

Assertive Speech Acts

The largest category identified was assertive speech acts (n = 22, 35.5%). Assertive acts in Harris's speech perform two main functions: they openly state the election's outcome, and they articulate the normative claim that accepting an election's result is a cornerstone of American democracy.

Expressive Speech Acts

Expressive acts were the second most frequent category (n = 18, 29.0%), covering greetings, thanks, and statements of emotion. The speech opens and closes almost entirely through expressive acts, including repeated expressions of gratitude toward supporters, campaign staff, and election officials.

Directive Speech Acts

Directive acts formed the third-largest category (n = 13, 21.0%), clustering in the second half of the speech. Directives here take the form of direct encouragement rather than formal command, urging the audience never to give up and to stay engaged for the sake of freedom and justice.

Commissive Speech Acts

Commissive acts were less frequent ($n = 8$, 12.9%), most directly expressed in the pledge that conceding the election does not mean conceding the fight for freedom, opportunity, and fairness. This commitment recurs across several utterances, each pledging continued effort toward a specific goal.

The Declarative Act

Only one utterance in the speech functions as a declarative act ($n = 1$, 1.6%): the formal act of conceding the election. This is the rarest category in the data, yet arguably the most institutionally significant utterance in the entire address.

4. Discussion

The largest category, assertive acts, shows that political speakers rely heavily on assertions to explain positions and deliver information. By declaring the principle that election results must be accepted as fact rather than merely arguing for it, Harris presents acceptance of defeat as an act of constitutional loyalty rather than personal submission, a discursive strategy that accounts for a large portion of the speech's persuasive power.

The prominence of expressive acts does more than convey emotion for its own sake: by publicly thanking a wide range of supporters and naming her feelings explicitly, Harris builds solidarity with her audience and models the composed, gracious response to defeat that concession speeches are expected to perform. The directive acts, meanwhile, perform the speech's mobilising function: having established through assertive acts that the electoral outcome must be accepted, Harris uses directive acts to redirect her audience's energy toward continued civic participation rather than resignation.

Structurally, the commissive acts separate the declarative act of conceding the election from any suggestion of conceding the underlying political fight, which is precisely the distinction the speech is built around. Although declaratives are the rarest category in the data, this finding is consistent with the genre itself: a concession speech exists, communicatively, to perform exactly one declarative act, transforming Harris's status from a contesting candidate to one who has formally accepted defeat and thereby enabling the peaceful transfer of power. Everything else in the speech works to contextualise, soften, and give meaning to that single institutional act.

Read together, the five speech act categories do not operate independently; they combine to build a coherent message of democratic continuity, addressing the third research question. Assertive acts lay the normative groundwork by stating the principle that election results must be accepted. The declarative act then formally enacts that principle. Expressive acts humanise this transition, thanking supporters and voicing gratitude and resolve rather than bitterness, which models the emotional register expected of a graceful concession. Commissive acts prevent the concession from reading as surrender, and directive acts convert that commitment into a call for collective action, redirecting the audience from the disappointment of defeat toward continued civic engagement.

This layered structure suggests that concession speeches accomplish their democratic function not through any single speech act but through the coordinated sequencing of several types across the whole address. Where earlier studies of political discourse tend to report which speech act category dominates a text, the present findings suggest that the

communicative significance of a concession speech is better captured by examining how categories are sequenced and combined than by frequency counts alone.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the speech acts used in Kamala Harris's 2024 concession speech, applying Searle's (1979) classification to a transcript of 62 coded utterances. All five speech act categories, assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative, were identified in the speech, addressing the first research question. Assertive acts occurred most frequently, followed by expressive, directive, and commissive acts, with a single declarative act, the moment of concession itself, addressing the second research question.

In response to the third research question, the analysis shows that these speech acts do not function in isolation but combine to construct a coherent message of democratic continuity. Assertive acts establish the democratic principle that election results must be accepted; the declarative act formally enacts that principle; expressive acts build solidarity and model grace in defeat; commissive acts ensure that conceding the election is not read as conceding the underlying political struggle; and directive acts convert that struggle into a call for continued civic engagement.

The study contributes to pragmatic research in two ways. Theoretically, it extends the application of Speech Act Theory to a political genre, the concession speech, that has received less scholarly attention than campaign or inaugural addresses, and to a speech delivered by a woman political leader, a context that remains underrepresented in the literature. Practically, the findings offer a concrete illustration, useful to students of pragmatics, discourse analysis, and political communication, of how a single political speech can combine multiple speech act categories to serve a complex communicative purpose.

This study is limited to a single speech and a single speaker, and its coding, like all manual pragmatic analysis, involved interpretive judgement that other researchers might apply differently to borderline utterances. Future research could extend this analysis by comparing Harris's concession speech with concession speeches by other political leaders to examine whether the speech act patterns identified here reflect broader conventions of the concession speech genre or features more specific to this speech and speaker.

Ultimately, this study shows that a concession speech is not simply the delivery of unwelcome news: through the coordinated use of assertive, expressive, commissive, directive, and declarative speech acts, Kamala Harris's 2024 concession speech performs the delicate communicative work that democratic transition demands, acknowledging defeat while affirming the principles, and the fight, that outlast any single election.

6. References

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