



Illocutionary Acts by Zelensky in Meeting Donal Trump on the Russia-Ukraine War.

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Abstract

Illocutionary acts are crucial elements in both formal and informal communication, particularly in political discourse where language functions as a strategic instrument. This study examines the illocutionary acts used by President Volodymyr Zelensky during his meeting with President Donald Trump on February 28, 2025, in the context of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. The main objective is to identify the types of speech acts employed and to interpret how they reflect Zelensky's diplomatic intentions. This study adopts a descriptive qualitative method, with data collected from the meeting's video and transcript through observation and note-taking techniques. The analysis applies Yule's (1996) classification of illocutionary acts, consisting of representative, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative types. The findings reveal four types of illocutionary acts, representative (54 data), directive (11 data), commissive (7 data), and expressive (7 data), with representatives emerging as the most dominant. These acts were mainly used to describe Ukraine's situation and emphasize the necessity of strong security guarantees. The results contribute to the understanding of how political leaders employ language not only to communicate but also to negotiate, persuade, and build diplomatic trust. Unlike previous research focused on campaign or victory speeches, this study provides new insights into how illocutionary acts operate in high-level diplomatic communication during international conflict.

Keywords: *Illocutionary acts, Zelensky, Trump, Russia-Ukraine war, political communication*

Introduction

Language is not merely a medium for conveying information; it is also an instrument for performing actions. This principle was first introduced by Austin (1962) in *How to Do Things with Words*, who argued that when people speak, they often perform actions through their utterances. Searle (1969) expanded this

concept by systematically classifying different kinds of speech acts, particularly focusing on illocutionary acts—utterances that express specific intentions such as requesting, promising, or declaring.

In pragmatics, the study of language in context, illocutionary acts are fundamental because they reveal how meaning is shaped by intention and social interaction. Yule (1996) identified five main categories: (1) representatives, (2) directives, (3) commissive, (4) expressive, and (5) declarations. Each serves a distinct communicative function depending on the speaker's goals. Halliday and Hasan (1985) also emphasized the social-semiotic nature of language, highlighting how speech functions as a tool to manage relationships and actions within a given context.

Political discourse exemplifies the pragmatic use of language as a tool for influence and negotiation. Previous research, such as Anjani (2021), Sabtiana & Siregar (2024), and Nurkhamidah (2020), has found that assertive or representative acts frequently dominate political speeches. These acts allow leaders to express beliefs, construct credibility, and persuade audiences. Studies by Wulan & Yulianto (2022) on Joe Biden and Baok et al. (2021) on Hillary Clinton further confirmed that political figures rely on representative and expressive acts to shape public perception.

However, most existing studies focus on campaign or victory speeches rather than diplomatic meetings. Research on Zelensky's interaction with Donald Trump fills this gap by examining speech in a high-stakes negotiation context. This study therefore investigates the illocutionary acts in Zelensky's meeting with Trump at the White House on February 28, 2025, focusing on how language operates as both communicative and diplomatic action during the Russia-Ukraine war.

Research Questions:

1. What types of illocutionary acts are used by President Zelensky during his meeting with President Trump?
2. How do this speech acts reflect Zelensky's diplomatic strategies in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict?

Method

This research employed a descriptive qualitative design, as described by Oranga and Matere (2023), which emphasizes interpretation rather than quantification. The primary data source was the official video and transcript of the meeting between President Volodymyr Zelensky and President Donald Trump at

the White House on February 28, 2025.

Data Collection

Data were collected through three stages:

- 1. Downloading the meeting video and its transcript.
- 2. Watching and listening multiple times to capture context, tone, and intention.
- 3. Selecting utterances by Zelensky directly related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed Yule’s (1996) framework for classifying illocutionary acts; representative, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative combined with the analytic model of Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2014) involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing.

To ensure validity and reliability, data were re-checked by two independent coders for inter-rater reliability. Contextual elements such as tone, facial expression, and emphasis were considered in interpreting each utterance. Ethical considerations were maintained by citing the source video under *fair use* for academic purposes.

Result Discussion

As the result of this study, based on Yule (1996) theory, the researcher found 4 types of the illocutionary acts performed by President Volodymyr Zelensky during his meeting with President Donald Trump concerning the Russia-Ukraine war. They are representatives, directives, commissive, and expressive. The occurrences of each type of illocutionary act identified in Zelensky’s speech are shown in the table below.

Table 1. Types of Illocutionary Acts Found in Zelensky Utterances during the Meeting with Trump

Type of Illocutionary Act	Total	Percentage	Examples of Function
Representative	54	68.4%	Asserting, Describing, Predicting, Informing
Directive	11	13.9%	Requesting

Commissive	7	8.9%	Promising, Refusing, Offering
Expressive	7	8.9%	Apologizing, Thanking, Wishing, Deploring
Declarative	0	0%	

The results of the analysis are summarized in a table that presents the types of illocutionary acts identified in Zelensky's utterances during his meeting with Donald Trump. From the overall data, four types were found, namely representative, directive, commissive, and expressive. Each type served different communicative purposes within the conversation. Representative acts were mostly realized through asserting, informing, predicting, and describing, which Zelensky used to explain the actual condition of Ukraine. Directive acts appeared in the form of requests, as he asked for support or concrete action from the United States.

Commissive acts included utterances of promising, offering, and refusing, reflecting his willingness to commit or, in some cases, his rejection of particular proposals. Expressive acts were identified in the forms of apologizing, thanking, wishing, and deploring, which represented his emotions and attitudes during the dialogue. From the distribution of data, the representative type was the most dominant, especially those functioning as descriptions. This finding indicates that Zelensky's main focus was on clarifying the real situation in Ukraine, particularly the ongoing war and the urgent demand for protection and military assistance. Such results are consistent with the statement of Garcia and Thompson (2020), who argue that representative speech acts often dominate political communication, especially in discussions of international conflict.

The frequent use of descriptive utterances is closely related to the different perspectives between Zelensky and Trump. Zelensky consistently emphasized that security guarantees must be prioritized before negotiating any peace agreement, recalling that previous agreements with Russia had been violated. In contrast, Trump suggested that a political deal should be achieved first and security issues could follow afterward. Because of this gap, Zelensky relied heavily on representative acts to outline the facts in detail, attempting to convince Trump that any agreement would be meaningless without strong guarantees.

His speech was characterized by informative and cautious language, aiming to foster mutual understanding and trust rather than exerting direct pressure. In this section, examples of the analysis are provided to illustrate each category of illocutionary act along with its functions, thereby showing how language served as

both a communicative and strategic tool in the meeting.

Representatives Illocutionary Act.

According to Yule (1996), representative illocutionary acts are types of speech acts that commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition. They represent what the speaker believes to be the case or not. This type includes acts such as asserting, describing, claiming, reporting, and informing. The speaker expresses a belief that corresponds to the reality they perceive. Scholars such as Smith and Johnson (2019) also note that in political discourse, representatives often dominate because leaders tend to justify their positions by presenting facts and evidence.

Data 1

I want to discuss with you what United State will be ready to do, and I really count on your strong position to stop Putin, and you said that enough with the war.
(3.32 - 3.44)

This utterance was delivered by President Zelensky during his meeting with Donald Trump. In this context, Zelensky attempts to asserting the current situation and the expectations regarding the United States' stance and role in stopping the war initiated by Russia. By stating "**I want to discuss with you what United States will be ready to do**" Zelensky is not only opening a diplomatic dialogue but also portraying the seriousness of the war situation.

This utterance is a type of representative illocutionary act, especially in the form of asserting, because Zelensky explains the current geopolitical situation and the possible role of the United States. He mentions Trump's earlier remarks and encourages more discussion about the steps that should be taken. The statement shows what he believes is happening and what needs attention. That's why it is seen as a representative act it shows the speaker's view and belief about the ongoing situation.

Data 2

This is very important and they our defense so in our defense really, we have big deficit with all these systems and we need to provide this we need it very much otherwise Putin will never stop. (25.35–25.45)

In this utterance, President Zelensky explains the real condition of Ukraine's defense by saying that the country has a big shortage of important defense systems and urgently needs support. He is not expressing an opinion, making a request, or giving a promise, but simply describing the situation his country is facing during the war. The phrase "**we have big deficit with all these systems**" shows that Ukraine lacks the tools needed to protect itself. This makes the utterance a clear example of a representative illocutionary act in the describing category, as it

provides factual information to help the listener, especially international partners like the United States, understand the seriousness of the problem.

3.2 Expressive Illocutionary Act.

According to Yule (1996), expressive illocutionary acts are used to express the speaker's feelings or emotional state. These acts don't give information or ask for something, but they show what the speaker feels inside such as apologizing, thanking, congratulating and Wishing

Data 3

Sorry just a second *uh about the any negotiations the first of all I want I want really to tell you and I think that everybody understands that Ukraine more than Ukrainians nobody wants to stop this war."* (30.45–31.00)

This utterance was spoken by President Zelensky when he wanted to interrupt or delay the conversation for a moment. By saying "***Sorry just a second...***", he showed politeness and respect during a serious discussion. This clearly shows that he was aware of the conversation flow and didn't want to seem rude. This utterance is included in expressive illocutionary acts, under the category of *apologizing*, because Zelensky expresses his regret or excuse for interrupting. It reflects his awareness and feelings about the moment, which is the key point of expressive speech acts.

Commissive Illocutionary Act

According to Yule (1996), commissive illocutionary acts are speech acts where the speaker commits themselves to do something in the future. These acts include promising, refusing, offering, and so on. The point is that the speaker expresses their intention or decision about what they will or will not do.

Data 4

I will answer *on more serious question if I can yeah so, please."* (23.14)

This sentence was said by President Zelensky after a reporter asked a question that was answered jokingly by President Trump. Zelensky responded by saying that he would answer a more serious question instead. It shows that he wanted to bring the conversation back to more important matters. This utterance is a commissive illocutionary act, especially *promising*, because Zelensky is saying something he plans to do. The words "***I will answer***" show that he is willing and ready to respond, as long as the question is serious. This means he is making a kind of promise or commitment to do something in the future, which is why this utterance is considered a promise.

Data 5

*That's why, **we will never accept** just ceasefire; it will not work without security guarantees.* (24.07–24.19)

This sentence was spoken by President Zelensky when he talked about the idea of a ceasefire. He clearly said that Ukraine will never accept a ceasefire if there are no strong security guarantees. For him, stopping the war without protection is not a real solution.

This utterance is a commissive illocutionary act, especially in the category of *refusing*, because Zelensky directly rejected an idea or proposal. The words “**we will never accept**” show his strong decision not to agree with the ceasefire plan. It reflects his mental attitude and commitment to only accept a deal that truly protects Ukraine. This makes the utterance a clear example of refusing, since it expresses a firm choice not to do something.

3.4 Directive Illocutionary Act

According to Yule (1996), directive illocutionary acts are speech acts where the speaker tries to get the hearer to do something. This includes requesting, asking, advising, or even inviting. The speaker is not just sharing information but trying to make the listener take action. Brown and Carter (2021) emphasize that in diplomatic contexts, directives are essential tools for persuading or encouraging other parties to act, which makes them highly relevant in international negotiations.

Data 7.

*“Of course, **we need very much the air defense** you have the best air defense in the world.”* (4.28–4.33)

This sentence was spoken by President Zelensky when he explained how much Ukraine needs strong air defense systems. He was clearly talking to President Trump and asking for help, especially from the United States, which has advanced defense technology.

This is a clear example of a directive illocutionary act, specifically *requesting*. Zelensky's words “**we need very much the air defense**” show that he is asking for support in a serious way. Even though he speaks politely, he is clearly making a request. It reflects his intention to get the listener to take action, which is the main goal of directive acts.

Data 8.

*“Mr. President Trump, **you have to come and to look**. No, no, no, we have very good cities.* (32.59–33.25)

In this utterance, President Zelensky asks President Trump to come and visit Ukraine. He wants him to see the situation with his own eyes. Even though many

places have been damaged by the war, Zelensky proudly says that cities are still functioning, people are working, and children are still going to school, sometimes even underground or online because of safety.

This utterance is a directive illocutionary act, especially in the form of *requesting*. The phrase **“you have to come and to look”** clearly shows that Zelensky is making a direct request. He’s not forcing, but strongly encouraging Trump to witness how the Ukrainian people are surviving. His words also reflect his hope and determination, and show how important this visit would be for support and understanding. That’s why this utterance fits well as an example of directive speech acts.

Conclusion

The dominance of representative acts (68.4%) reveals Zelensky’s primary strategy: to persuade through factual narration rather than direct pressure. This aligns with Garcia & Thompson (2020), who noted that representative speech acts dominate political communication during conflicts because they foster credibility and empathy. The minimal use of commissive and expressive reflects the asymmetry of power between Zelensky and Trump—Zelensky could express commitment but lacked authority to impose action. His speech thus mirrors Brown & Carter’s (2021) observation that directives in diplomacy often rely on indirectness and politeness to maintain face and respect.

Interestingly, the absence of declaratives underscores the non-binding nature of this dialogue; Zelensky’s role was to appeal, not to declare. Compared to previous studies (e.g., Anjani, 2021; Sabtiana & Siregar, 2024), this research expands the understanding of illocutionary acts in *interactive diplomatic meetings* rather than monologic speeches. Linguistically, Zelensky’s utterances reveal frequent use of modal verbs (“will,” “must,” “need to”), hedging (“I think,” “maybe”), and politeness markers (“please,” “sorry”)—features typical of persuasive yet deferential diplomacy. His dominance in describing suggests an attempt to shape Trump’s perception through empathy and facts, a strategy coherent with Halliday’s functional view of language as meaning-making in social contexts.

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