Speech Act Analysis of Educational Webinars

Mohammed Nasser Abdulsada*, Hussein Hameed Darweesh

Wasit University, Iraq

*Corresponding author: malsharhani@uowasit.edu.iq

Abstract

Mediated by technology, delivered by professionals, and facilitated by moderators, webinars are any online sessions, workshops, and seminars streamed live, recorded, or pre-scheduled times and dates, to discuss a certain educational, business, scientific, or any topic. Webinars often receive a huge attendance or audience from many peers, laymen, or professionals. This paper investigates the use of speech acts in two educational webinars drawing on a pre-observation that presenters and moderators in webinars use pragmatic devices. The paper introduces and defines the research key terms; speech acts, webinars, and online discourse. Then, previous studies, research questions, data, methodology, and limits are presented. The analysis is limited to two American educational webinars. Following data selection, the analysis is conducted according to Searle's (1975) theory of speech acts. The research finds that presenters and moderators in webinars used certain speech acts to express meanings, issue directions, direct sessions, react to the audience, share background demos, and switch topics. Moreover, the presenters and moderators in webinars use speech acts more than other linguistic devices because these forms can easily and clearly communicate meanings and feelings.

1. Introduction

Language is essential to all modes of communication. It is the most important tool for human communication. Orally or in writing, language is vital for conveying our thoughts, ideas, messages, and facts. Yule (1996) argued that through the use of language, humans are capable of producing statements with accompanying actions. In addition to expressing their thoughts and actions, they attempt to influence their audiences and communicate their messages.

Brown (1984) observed that "the interactional use of language is to describe our reactions to the event and to regulate our interaction with other people; this use of language regulates the function of utterances in communicative operation" (p.12).

Webinars have been on the scene back as early as 2000, but they have not gained wider attention, being restricted to limited corporate or campus courses here or there. As the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world in the early-2020, classes, campuses, businesses, conferences, and other work-related demonstrations were cancelled, and normality has been at stake. To curb this deadly virus, social distancing became a must and new techniques were sought to keep normality going on. Educators, businesses, entrepreneurs, and many other stakeholders resorted to the handy technology. This, accordingly, gave online massive open courses a fresh start to take over online professional communication.

A webinar is an online, live presentation or discussion in which a person delivers a particular topic or theme and viewers can ask questions, interact, and participate in discussions. The word "webinar" was created by combining the initial letters of "web" and "seminar." Merriam-Webster dictionary (2021) defined a webinar as "a live online educational session during which viewers may submit questions and comments." Webinars can cover a variety of subjects, including business, education, and technology, among others. Webinar presenters prefer familiar but tightly focused themes; hence, new rather than familiar and well-known topics are anticipated to be discussed.

Clay (2012) defined a webinar as "an interactive, scheduled, e-learning experience that occurs in real-time with an instructor or a facilitator as a web workshop" (p.20). Zoumenou et al. (2015, p. 62) agreed that a webinar is "a presentation, seminar, lecture, or workshop transmitted over the internet, includes video, audio and textual communication between participants".

2. Related Literature

The literature on online learning, MOOCs, webinars, virtual learning environments, and online course wares, has grown rapidly recently, triggered by a shift from traditional methods to online learning technologies, and by an increasing focus from linguists and sociologists to study this subgenre. These studies discussed, raised, and questioned various topics, themes, strategies, methodologies, and advantages relevant to these online platforms. Amhag (2013) accounted for the role of computer-assisted learning in the developed learning styles, what possibilities electronic learning can afford for pedagogy,

and what challenges are there in developing this sort of learning. The study posited that the quick expansion of online learning in mobile and open access free courses, MOOCs, and webinars, had an impact on the existing strategies of student-teacher discussions and learning groups, and it, therefore, attracted the interest of linguists, discourse analysts, and sociologists.

Bernad-Mechó (2015) explained, from a multimodal analysis, the meta-discursive elements employed by lecturers to connect the different sessions within a MOOC. The study sought to realize this connection and therefore it contributes to better cohesion and creates a clearer message for learners. This stated that different modes of physical and kinetic styles are used in sessions when conveying meaning to the audience.

Eynon et al. (2016) researched communication in MOOCs as wide platforms of open online learning. Their study revealed that learning is not an easy process and to understand the learning design in online sessions and courses, one has to unfold the dynamics of communication in online discourse. The study argued that there are several factors underlying communication in MOOCs among which are sociological, dialogic, and collaborative dimensions.

Qunintana (2017) explored interaction in MOOCs, or massive open online courses, by considering students' participation and activity and the possibilities of communication. This study emphasized teachers' role in these online platforms because teachers can enhance these environments with social experiences and the online communities of learning can contribute to the construction of free, open knowledge.

Riehemann and Jucks (2018) described the importance of linguistic styles and techniques common in massive open online courses on the basis that language styles used in a learning setting can generate different outcomes. They held that conversations in online learning settings are peculiar and significant and they should be given attention in linguistic research because they are an important subgenre.

Alexandrovna and Leonidovna (2019) investigated the use of MOOCs in teaching and learning Russian for foreigners with an emphasis on pronunciation. Their study has shown that the existing online techniques used to teach and learn Russian fall short of the tasks and resources that are necessary to master the language. They concluded that Russian can be better taught to foreigners online through internet platforms and the use of attractive strategies.

Hatipoğlu (2019) studied MOOCs from a discourse analysis perspective by analysing discourse practices spotted in online academic settings in Turkey. The study showed that MOOC participants resort to interaction and counter-interactions in discussions. This study, also, found that online communities of learning follow a set of different linguistic modes in presentation and mediation.

Conti (2021) investigated the dialogic role of moderators in webinars with respect to the conversational strategies and modes used. Moderators in webinars play a very significant role in this online communication because they facilitate communication and connection between presenters and the audience. Conti viewed that moderation is necessary in webinars and MOOCs because it helps presenters contribute to these

mediated courses. This study found that agency, empowerment, and intercultural communication affect the dialogic context in webinars due to linguistic and non-linguistic factors.

Panich (2021) conducted a descriptive interaction-based analysis of online discourse as represented by the massive open online free courses. The study included a stylistic, pragmatic, and discursive investigation of all the features of these MOOCs. Panich's study concluded that the interaction in online discourse has developed gradually its own linguistic identity in all its components.

Wu et al. (2021) analyzed presenters' style in MOOCs to evaluate instructors' performance in comparison to traditional instructor-driven teaching but from a natural language processing perspective. Their study relied heavily on the data obtained from analyzing hundreds of online learning sessions in order to detect the impact of tone, words, cohesion, sentence type, and reference in MOOC presentations. Following a comprehensive, semantic analysis, observation, and note-taking, Wu et al. found that MOOCs developed various styles of learning, such as the discussion of topics, group communication, and overall engagement.

Chua (2022) examined the presence of discourse strategies and practices in a large corpus-driven data of MOOCs, represented by teachers' and students' replies, posts, side discussions, comments, and conversations. An in-depth analysis found that teachers used different discourse strategies, whereas students expressed their thoughts by short replies. The study, also, indicated that teachers had the linguistic practices to initiate or end a conversation

3.Research Questions

To better clarify the problem of this paper, two research questions have been formulated;

1.What are the speech acts used by presenters and moderators in educational webinars?

2.How are speech acts utilized for webinar presentations?

4. Data, Methodology, and Limits

Two educational webinars were randomly chosen as the data of analysis, selected from the American English Webinars website. To analyze these webinars, Searle's (1975) speech act theory has been followed. As the two webinars are lengthy, the analysis is limited to a few excerpts. Searle (1975) classified speech acts into five categories; declarative, directive, assertive, expressive, and commissive. Declaratives are the actions of approving, betting, blessing, christening, confirming, cursing, declaring, disapproving, dismissing, naming, quitting, and announcing. e.g. in a courtroom situation, the judge says *"I pronounce you as wife and husband"* he/she is not only saying words but he/she is performing the act of getting married.

Assertives express the speakers' stance on whether they believe something to be true or false. This is realized in arguing, asserting, boasting, claiming, complaining, criticizing, denying, describing, informing, urging, reporting, and recommending. For instance, when a teacher relates a funny anecdote to the class, they are performing the act of informing.

Expressives communicate the speakers' feelings. They are apologizing, complimenting, condoling, celebrating, deploring, praising, regretting, and thanking.

When a person says "thank you very much," they are doing the speech act of thanking.

Directives compel others to take action. They are commanding, requesting, and recommending. When x asks y *"Would you like to come to my school graduation party?",* x asks the hearer to perform the act of coming to the school graduation party.

Commissives commit to future action. These are committing, guaranteeing, offering, promising, refusing, threatening, volunteering, vowing, and many others. When someone says to his father "I promise I will study hard", the speaker intends to perform the act of studying hard.

5.Analysis

1.Webinar 1

In webinar 1, which is entitled "Beyond turn & talk in ELT: Planning productive conversations for learning", there are two presenters and one moderator. It ran for 55 minutes and 33 seconds. Four excerpts are selected from this webinar.

Excerpt 1

Moderator: *We love to see our teacher participants actively engaged in professional development.*

After presenting the topic, the moderator expresses her attitudes toward the participants. Thus, the moderator uses an expressive speech act in an attempt to make the participants participate in the comment section. This is clear when the moderator uses the verb "to love" to perform the expressive act above. Here the moderator is not only saying something, but she expresses that she will be happy when the participants do the act of "commenting".

Excerpt 2:

Moderator: *The presenter will present the material and I as your host will ask questions and make comments too.*

The moderator gives information about how the webinar is going to be operated. It is clear that the moderator, Kate, uses a commissive speech act indicating that the presenter has undertaken to do something which is "presenting" the material. This can be clearly seen when the moderator uses the verb "to present" in the future form. Furthermore, the moderator performs another speech act when he uses the verb "to present"; he performs an assertive speech act. Thus, the verb "to present" has got two acts: commissive and assertive. Again within the same utterance, the moderator uses two commissive speech acts when she says "I *will ask questions and make comments too".* Here the moderator does not only utter words, but she has intended to perform the act of asking questions and making comments.

Excerpt 3:

Moderator: *We really hope to hear from you our audience so that we can address your ideas and experiences. Please do share your thoughts using the comments feature or chat box.*

The moderator delivers this speech after she has explained how the webinar is going to be operated. Here the moderator uses a directive speech act as she uses the verb "to share" in the imperative form. The context of the utterance makes it clear that the verb "to share" receives the function of a request as the moderator requests the audience to share their thoughts in the chat box. She also uses the word "please" to make the request

seem politer. Finally, she has used the emphatic "do" to show that it is very important for the moderator that the participants share their thoughts and experiences.

Excerpt 4:

Moderator: *We are so pleased to introduce our presenters: Dr Amber and Dr Natalia.*

The moderator, here, presents the two presenters: Amber and Natalia. She appears to use an expressive speech act in an attempt to express that she is pleased and happy to have Amber and Natalia in the webinar. The moderator uses the phrase "please to introduce" which suggests that she also uses an assertive speech act. That is, she intends to perform the act of introducing the two presenters. As a result, the utterance has got two speech acts.

2. Webinar 2

In webinar 2, there is a presenter and a moderator, and it is entitled "Increasing student talk time in the online classroom". It ran for 1 hour, and 2 minutes. Three excerpts were selected from this webinar.

Excerpt 1:

Moderator: *Welcome Christine we are so happy to have you here with us today.*

The moderator talks to the presenter, Christine. The moderator uses an expressive speech act when she welcomes the presenter. Again, within the same utterance, the moderator tells the presenter that she is very happy to have her in the webinar. Thus, the moderator uses an expressive speech act to express her attitude towards the presenter. The expressive speech act becomes clear when the moderator uses the adjective "happy".

Excerpt 2:

Presenter: *Assign a student to each group.*

The presenter is talking about how to encourage students to speak continually in online classrooms. She instructs teachers to make groups, and assign students to the groups. Thus, the presenter directs teachers on how they can help students take these practices. It is obvious that when the presenter uses the verb "to assign" in the imperative form, she uses directive speech act. That is, the presenter wants teachers to do something which is "assigning students to groups".

Excerpt 3:

Presenter: *Wonderful, thank you so much.*

The presenter asks the participants to give their opinions about how to make the conversation runs smoothly and continually, participants share their opinions, then the presenter thanks them. Thus, the presenter uses an expressive speech act to achieve the act of thanking "to thank".

Table (1) the most common speech acts detected in the two webinars

Speech act	Example	Webinar 1	Webinar 2
	ask	43 out of 199 (22%)	30 out of 261 (11%)
directive	let's	35 (17%)	44 out of 261 (16%)
declarative	agree	29 out of 86 (31%)	3 out of 40 (9%)
expressive	thank	16 out of 31 (49.5%)	27 out of 66 (38%)
Total	**4**	**340**	**380**

6. Conclusions

1. In both webinars, the presenters and moderators used directive, declarative, and expressive speech acts.

2. Directives are the most widely used speech acts, probably to direct presenters, exchange instructions, share ideas, invite speakers, and guide the audience.

3. The remaining less-used speech acts are used to assert ideas and to hold future actions.

4.The presenters and moderators in the two webinars resort to speech acts to communicate intentions, and directions, exchange speaking roles, express meanings clearly, and engage the audience in the discussions.

5.Although the data is very limited, this short analysis showed that there are other areas and aspects of educational and learning-focused webinars that are worth an in-depth analysis.

7. Further Research

Further studies can contribute to the analysis of specific or general webinars, for instance, in;

1. A discourse analysis of webinars, to realize how presenters and moderators communicate, how moderators react to the audience, and how the audience participates in webinars.

2. A paralinguistic analysis of presenters' and moderators' reactions, moves, gestures, and expressions in webinars.

3. A meta-linguistic analysis of webinar-related demos to understand how pictures, slides,

graphics, and visuals are utilized for communication.

4. A multi-modal analysis of educational webinars.

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