

UNDERSTANDING SPEECH ACTS IN ADOLESCENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER: A PATHWAY TO ENHANCE INTERACTION

Shiane Hanako Sheba^{1*}, Euis Reliyanti Arum², Tetty Ekasari³

^{1,2,3}Politeknik Al Islam Bandung, Indonesia

Email: shianehanako2014@gmail.com¹, euis.reliyanti@gmail.com², tetyekasari@gmail.com³

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ABSTRACT

Communication is a cornerstone of human interaction, yet adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) often face significant challenges in pragmatic language use, including speech acts. These challenges hinder their ability to express thoughts, fulfil requests, and engage with people socially, thus affecting their overall quality of life. This study investigates the types of speech acts employed by adolescents with ASD, focusing on their use of directive, expressive, assertive, and commissive as categorized by Searle and analyses the functional purpose of these acts based on Leech's framework. Using an observational methodology, data were collected from verbal interactions in structured and naturalistic settings, capturing authentic communicative behaviours. The findings revealed a dominance of directive speech acts, followed by expressive, assertive, and commissive acts. This pattern reflects the participants' emphasis on requesting actions and expressing immediate needs, which aligns with their developmental priorities in communication. Despite these strengths, limitations in more complex and varied speech acts were noted, suggesting gaps in pragmatic competence. The study underscores the importance of targeted interventions to enhance the communicative competence of adolescents with ASD. By focusing on the functional and situational use of speech acts, therapists and educators can develop modules that not only build pragmatic skills but also foster social integration and personal autonomy. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on ASD and pragmatic language development, offering practical implications for therapy, education, and parental support.

Keywords: *Autistic spectrum disorder, social and communication disorder, speech acts, verbal communication*

INTRODUCTION

Communication is a cornerstone of human interaction, which involves expressing thoughts, sharing emotions, and fulfilling needs. For typical adolescents, communication skills develop alongside cognitive and social growth, helping them engage in complex social interactions. However, for adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), communication presents unique challenges that go beyond speech. The deficits in social interaction, non-verbal communication, and pragmatic language use form key barriers to effective communication (Tager-Flusberg, 2001; Paul & Norbury, 2012).

Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often struggle with the nuances of pragmatics rules and norms governing how language is used in different social contexts. Pragmatic skills are essential for effective communication, encompassing abilities such as understanding turn-taking in conversations, recognizing and interpreting nonliteral language (e.g., idioms, metaphors, sarcasm), adjusting speech based on social cues, and

maintaining appropriate eye contact during interactions (Kaland & Høien, 2005). Unlike structural aspects of language, such as grammar and vocabulary, pragmatics relies heavily on social cognition and contextual understanding, areas in which individuals with ASD typically experience challenges. These difficulties are not necessarily due to a lack of intelligence or linguistic ability but rather stem from deficits in social communication and perspective-taking, which are core characteristics of ASD (Tager-Flusberg, Paul, & Lord, 2005).

One of the most common pragmatic challenges faced by adolescents with ASD is turn-taking in conversations. In social interactions, speakers are expected to alternate turns naturally, responding at appropriate times without interrupting or pausing excessively. However, individuals with ASD may struggle with this rhythm, either dominating conversations without allowing others to speak or failing to recognize when it is their turn to respond (Adams, Lockton, & Gaile, 2012). This difficulty often leads to misunderstandings or frustration among peers, making social interactions more challenging. In structured settings, such as classrooms, these pragmatic impairments may also affect their ability to participate in group discussions, ask relevant questions, or interpret the implicit meanings behind teachers' instructions.

Another significant challenge involves understanding figurative language. Many individuals with ASD interpret language literally, which can make it difficult for them to comprehend idioms, metaphors, humour, and sarcasm (Norbury, 2005). For example, if someone says, "It's raining cats and dogs," a neurotypical adolescent would understand that it means heavy rain, whereas an adolescent with ASD might struggle to grasp the intended meaning and take the phrase literally. Similarly, sarcasm and irony can be particularly confusing, as these forms of language often rely on tone of voice, facial expressions, and contextual clues. When an individual with ASD does not pick up on these subtle cues, they may misinterpret the speaker's intent, leading to social awkwardness or miscommunication.

In addition to conversational difficulties, adolescents with ASD may struggle with adapting their speech to different social contexts. Pragmatic competence requires individuals to adjust their tone, choice of words, and formality based on the listener and setting (Geurts & Embrechts, 2008). For example, speaking casually with friends differs from communicating with teachers or unfamiliar adults. Many adolescents with ASD find it difficult to switch between these registers, sometimes using overly formal or informal speech in inappropriate situations. This challenge can affect their ability to establish friendships, participate in academic settings, or engage in professional environments in later life.

These pragmatic impairments can have significant consequences on social development, leading to isolation, frustration, and lower quality of life (Langbecker et al., 2020). Adolescents with ASD may find it difficult to form meaningful relationships due to their struggles with reciprocal communication. Over time, social difficulties can contribute to heightened anxiety, depression, and reduced self-esteem, as repeated communication failures may discourage them from engaging in social interactions altogether. Consequently, targeted interventions focusing on social communication skills are crucial in helping individuals with ASD navigate social and educational environments successfully.

One crucial aspect of communication is the use of speech acts—functional uses of language in interaction, such as requesting, asserting, questioning, and expressing emotions. These acts are fundamental to everyday conversations and social exchanges, shaping the way individuals convey meaning, establish relationships, and navigate social situations. According to Searle (1969), speech acts are categorized into three primary

types: locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary acts. Locutionary acts involve the production of sounds, words, and grammatical structures to form meaningful utterances. This is the most basic level of speech, where an individual physically articulates words. Illocutionary acts, on the other hand, refer to the speaker's intended meaning behind the utterance. For example, the phrase *"Can you pass the salt?"* is not merely a question about ability but is commonly understood as a request. Perlocutionary acts represent the effect an utterance has on the listener, such as persuading, alarming, or comforting someone. These layers of communication work together to create effective social interactions.

For neurotypical individuals, recognizing and responding to different speech acts occurs naturally through social exposure and implicit learning. However, for adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), these communicative functions present significant challenges (Volden & Mueller, 2011). Difficulties in understanding and producing speech acts can result in social misinterpretations and breakdowns in conversation. For example, an adolescent with ASD might struggle to grasp indirect requests, such as *"It's cold in here,"* which, in some contexts, serves as an implicit request to close a window rather than a mere observation. This difficulty in recognizing implied meanings can lead to responses that seem inappropriate or overly literal, causing confusion for both the speaker and listener.

Moreover, adolescents with ASD often experience challenges in using expressive speech acts, such as conveying emotions effectively. Since social interactions rely heavily on expressing and interpreting feelings—whether through spoken language, tone of voice, or facial expressions—these difficulties can create barriers to forming and maintaining relationships. For example, an adolescent with ASD might struggle to offer condolences in an expected manner or express enthusiasm in a way that aligns with social norms, leading to perceptions of emotional detachment or insensitivity. Furthermore, difficulties in understanding assertive speech acts, such as stating facts or providing opinions, can make academic and social discussions more challenging. They may struggle to take turns appropriately in conversations, failing to recognize when it is their turn to speak or when they should allow another person to contribute.

The impact of these communication difficulties extends beyond casual conversations. Struggles with mastering speech acts can affect an adolescent's ability to engage in group discussions, participate in classroom settings, and handle social negotiations, such as requesting help or clarifying misunderstandings. Consequently, they may experience frustration, social isolation, or anxiety in communicative settings. Given these challenges, speech and language interventions that focus on explicit teaching of speech acts can be highly beneficial. Strategies such as role-playing, video modeling, and structured social scripts can help adolescents with ASD recognize different types of speech acts, practice their use in context, and improve their overall pragmatic competence. Addressing these difficulties is essential to enhancing their ability to communicate effectively and integrate successfully into social and educational environments.

Despite the increasing body of research on ASD, relatively few studies specifically focus on the pragmatic aspects of speech acts in this population. Much of the existing literature has concentrated on deficits in general language development or the more technical aspects of communication, such as syntax and vocabulary acquisition. However, there is a growing recognition of the need for a deeper understanding of how adolescents with ASD use language functionally in real-world contexts (Levinson, 1983). Exploring the patterns of speech act use in this group can offer valuable insights into the social and communicative difficulties they face and the strategies that could be employed to address these challenges.

This study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the speech acts of adolescents with ASD, with the aim of identifying recurring patterns, difficulties, and areas where interventions could be developed. By focusing on the types of speech acts most commonly used, such as directive, expressive, and assertive (Searle, 1969), this research hopes to provide insights into the ways adolescents with ASD use language in their daily interactions. Additionally, understanding the social contexts in which these speech acts occur can reveal how adolescents with ASD navigate social relationships, which are often a significant challenge (Bishop & Norbury, 2002).

Ultimately, the goal of this research is to offer practical implications for therapy, education, and support systems. By identifying areas of difficulty and potential strategies for improvement, this study aims to contribute to enhancing the communicative competence of adolescents with ASD. Effective interventions can help individuals with ASD better navigate social and educational contexts, improving their quality of life and facilitating social integration (Tager-Flusberg, 2001). Furthermore, insights from this research can guide the development of targeted speech therapy programs and educational curricula that focus on pragmatic language skills, helping adolescents with ASD interact more effectively with peers and adults (Paul & Norbury, 2012).

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design, focusing on the analysis of speech acts among adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of communication behaviours in natural settings, providing rich, contextual insights that quantitative methods might overlook. The primary aim was to observe and categorize the types of illocutionary acts used by the participants during natural communication instances. The acts are crucial for improving social communication interventions for individuals with ASD.

To achieve this goal, the study utilized observation as the main data collection technique. Observational methods are particularly valuable in research involving communication difficulties because they allow for the analysis of spontaneous interactions rather than relying on self-reported data, which may not fully capture pragmatic language use. By directly recording and analysing speech samples from real-life interactions, the study ensured that the findings reflected the authentic communicative behaviours of the participants.

The participants in the study were a group of adolescents diagnosed with ASD, aged between 12 to 19 years. They were selected from a specialized education program that provides structured support for students with developmental conditions. Their communication behaviours were observed in various settings, such as structured classroom discussions and unstructured free-play activities, to assess how different contexts influenced their use of illocutionary acts. The selection criteria included the ability to communicate verbally and the capacity to demonstrate clear communicative acts, ensuring that the study could analyse distinct speech patterns effectively. The findings from this study may contribute to the development of more effective communication strategies and interventions tailored to the needs of adolescents with ASD. The observations were conducted over a period of 5 weeks.

Then, the collected data were analysed using a descriptive qualitative analysis method, allowing for a detailed exploration of the speech acts used by adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This approach was selected because it enables researchers to examine language use in natural contexts, providing insights into how different types of speech acts function in real-life communication. The primary objective

of the analysis was to categorize and interpret the frequency, function, and contextual use of speech acts, shedding light on the communicative patterns observed in the participants.

To systematically analyse the data, the researcher followed a structured multi-step process:

1. **Transcription of Data:** The first step involved transcribing the field notes and recorded speech from observation sessions. This transcription process was conducted verbatim to ensure accuracy and preserve the authenticity of each utterance. Special attention was given to non-verbal cues accompanying speech acts, as they can provide additional context for understanding how the participants used language. The transcriptions formed the primary dataset for subsequent analysis.
2. **Categorization:** After transcription, the next step involved classifying the recorded speech acts based on Searle's (1969) taxonomy of illocutionary acts. Each utterance was analysed and assigned to one of the four major categories. They are directive speech acts, such as requests, commands, and instructions; expressive speech acts, which included statements of emotions, gratitude, or frustration; assertive speech acts, involving statements of facts, opinions, or beliefs; and commissive speech acts, which included promises or commitments.

Along with the categorization, the researcher also examined the context in which these speech acts occurred. For example, if a participant used a directive act such as "Give me that," it was noted whether this request was made in a structured setting (e.g., classroom) or an informal environment (e.g., free-play session). Understanding the circumstances under which different speech acts were used provided deeper insights into the communicative tendencies of the participants.

To strengthen the analysis, the study also incorporated Leech's Language Function Theory (1983), which emphasizes the social and functional roles of language. This theoretical framework helped interpret the communicative intent behind the illocutionary acts. For example, a directive act could serve the purpose of controlling behaviour (e.g., requesting assistance), while an expressive act could function to maintain social relationships (e.g., expressing gratitude or frustration). By integrating Leech's theory, the study was able to deepen its understanding of how speech acts contribute to the participants' overall communicative competence.

Overall, the descriptive qualitative analysis provided a comprehensive view of speech act usage among adolescents with ASD, highlighting both strengths and challenges in their pragmatic language abilities. The findings underscore the importance of supporting diverse speech act use, particularly in areas where social and emotional engagement is crucial.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Results of this study indicate that adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) predominantly use directive speech acts (40%), followed by expressive acts (33.33%), assertive acts (20%), and commissive acts (6.7%). This distribution reveals valuable insights into the communicative tendencies and challenges faced by this population.

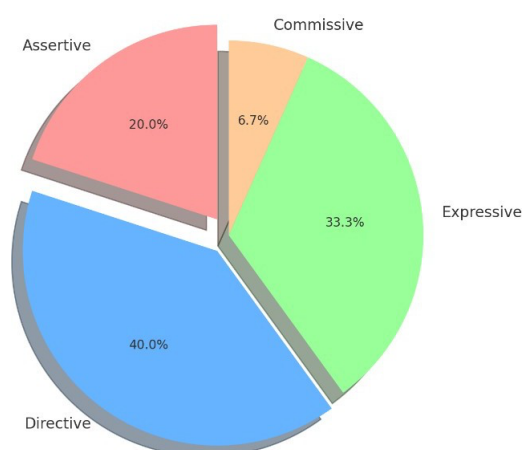


Figure 1. Distribution of Speech Acts in Utterances

The high occurrence of directive speech acts, which include commands, requests, and instructions, reflects the functional nature of communication often observed in individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Adolescents with ASD frequently rely on directive language to fulfil their immediate needs and desires, demonstrating a tendency toward instrumental communication. This pattern aligns with Tager-Flusberg's (2001) observations, which suggest that individuals with ASD use language primarily as a tool for achieving specific goals rather than as a means for social engagement. For instance, they may frequently use imperatives such as "Give me that" or "Help me," focusing on obtaining a desired response from their conversational partner. While the ability to use directives indicates some level of communicative competence, it also highlights a potential over-reliance on a narrow range of speech acts, which may restrict broader pragmatic engagement. A limited repertoire of speech acts can hinder effective social interactions, making it difficult for these adolescents to participate in more complex, reciprocal conversations.

In contrast, the relatively frequent use of expressive speech acts (33.33%) provides an encouraging indication that adolescents with ASD can communicate emotions through language. Expressive speech acts include utterances that convey emotions such as happiness, frustration, or excitement. For example, an individual might say, "I love this game!" to express joy or "I'm so tired" to indicate fatigue. However, despite their ability to express emotions, many individuals with ASD struggle with emotional reciprocity, as noted by Bishop & Norbury (2002). They may have difficulty interpreting the emotions of others, responding appropriately to emotional cues, or engaging in mutual emotional exchanges. This can lead to misunderstandings or social difficulties, as their expressions may not always align with social expectations. These findings emphasize the need for targeted interventions that enhance emotional comprehension and reciprocity, helping adolescents with ASD develop deeper social connections.

The lower frequency of assertive speech acts (20%) suggests additional challenges in abstract thinking and social engagement. Assertive speech acts include statements of fact, opinions, or beliefs—elements of communication that require an understanding of shared knowledge and contextual awareness. Landa (2007) highlights that individuals with ASD often struggle with perspective-taking and inferencing, which are essential for making meaningful assertive statements. For example, in a conversation about a shared experience, a neurotypical adolescent might say, "That movie was really exciting, don't

you think?” whereas an adolescent with ASD might struggle to generate such statements or initiate discussions beyond their immediate interests. The preference for concrete and immediate communication over abstract or narrative-based exchanges limits their ability to engage in extended conversations or contribute meaningfully to collaborative discussions.

Finally, commissive speech acts, which involve making promises, commitments, or future-oriented statements, were the least frequently used (6.7%). This finding aligns with prior research suggesting that individuals with ASD face difficulties with future-oriented thinking and planning (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985). Since commissive requires an understanding of intention, time, and social obligations, their low usage may indicate a need for explicit instruction and support in developing these cognitive and pragmatic skills. Encouraging individuals with ASD to use commissive speech acts could enhance their ability to engage in structured social agreements, such as making plans with peers or following through on commitments, thereby improving their overall social adaptability.

The findings underscore the necessity of targeted interventions that address the unique communicative profiles of adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). While the frequent use of directive and expressive speech acts suggests a functional foundation for communication, it also highlights an imbalance in speech act use, with limited engagement in assertive and commissive speech acts. This imbalance may impact the ability of individuals with ASD to participate in complex social interactions, such as discussions, negotiations, and long-term collaborative tasks. Therefore, therapeutic interventions should aim to create a more balanced and diverse communicative repertoire by addressing the following areas:

Expanding Assertive Speech Acts

Adolescents with ASD may benefit from interventions that encourage them to express opinions, share information, and engage in reciprocal discussions. Activities such as storytelling, role-playing, and guided narrative building can help develop these skills. For instance, storytelling exercises can be structured to include prompts that require the adolescent to state their thoughts, make inferences, and share personal experiences. Debates and discussion-based activities can also be effective in helping them practice asserting opinions and responding to different viewpoints, fostering both abstract thinking and social engagement.

Strengthening Commissive Speech Acts

Since commissive speech acts, such as making promises or commitments, are used infrequently, interventions should focus on developing skills related to future planning and social responsibility. One effective approach is to integrate structured group projects where adolescents must commit to specific roles and tasks over time. Encouraging them to participate in collaborative activities like planning an event, completing a team-based assignment, or engaging in problem-solving exercises can reinforce the concept of making and keeping commitments. These activities help build an understanding of long-term thinking and accountability, which are essential in personal and professional interactions.

Enhancing Emotional Reciprocity

While expressive speech acts are frequently used, challenges in emotional reciprocity remain. Social-emotional learning programs that focus on recognizing, expressing, and responding to emotions in various social settings can be beneficial. Interactive exercises,

such as emotion- matching games, role-play scenarios, and guided discussions about emotions in storytelling, can help adolescents develop a deeper understanding of emotional communication and improve their ability to interpret and respond appropriately to others' feelings.

Promoting Balanced Communication

To foster a holistic approach to language use, interventions should include training modules that encourage the balanced use of all speech act types. These could involve structured communication exercises that require participants to switch between different types of speech acts within a conversation. For example, in a simulated social setting, an adolescent might need to make a request (directive), express a feeling (expressive), provide an opinion (assertive), and make a promise (commissive) in a single structured interaction. Such exercises encourage flexibility in communication and help adolescents engage in more varied and meaningful interactions.

By implementing these targeted interventions, therapists, educators, and caregivers can support adolescents with ASD in broadening their communicative competencies, ultimately enhancing their social interactions and overall language development.

These findings align with prior studies emphasizing the functional and instrumental nature of language in individuals with ASD while also revealing areas for growth in pragmatic communication. By addressing these gaps, educators, therapists, and caregivers can support adolescents with ASD in building richer, more effective communication skills, ultimately improving their social and academic outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant role of speech acts in the communication patterns of adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). The findings reveal that these adolescents predominantly use directive speech acts, with expressive acts following closely behind, and assertive and commissive used less frequently. This suggests that their communicative focus is primarily on fulfilling immediate needs and expressing emotions, areas that are more accessible to them than engaging in abstract reasoning or future planning.

These results support existing research that suggests individuals with ASD often prioritize functional language use (Tager-Flusberg, 2000) and face challenges in emotional reciprocity and social engagement (Bishop & Norbury, 2002). The lower frequency of assertive and commissive speech acts aligns with the understanding that individuals with ASD may struggle with abstract thinking and complex social interactions (Landa, 2007).

The findings have important implications for therapeutic practices, suggesting the need for interventions that expand the range of speech acts adolescents with ASD can use, particularly in narrative skills and social interactions. Targeting these areas in communication interventions can enhance their social integration and overall communicative competence. Furthermore, the study advocates for the development of tailored learning modules that focus on a broader spectrum of speech acts, helping adolescents with ASD to improve not only their functional communication but also their ability to engage meaningfully with others in various social contexts.

Future research should explore the use of other speech acts in various social and educational settings, examining how these acts interact with the development of social cognition and emotional understanding in adolescents with ASD. Additionally, longitudinal

studies could investigate the long-term impact of targeted interventions on the communicative abilities of adolescents with ASD.

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