

PRAGMATIC ASPECTS OF ASSERTIVE SPEECH ACTS IN LINGUISTICS RESEARCH ARTICLES

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Abstract. Assertive speech acts constitute the most pervasive illocutionary category in academic writing, yet their pragmatic dimensions remain undertheorised in the existing literature. This article examines how assertive speech acts are pragmatically realised in linguistics research articles, with particular attention to the strategies writers employ to negotiate certainty, manage interpersonal relations, and position themselves within their disciplinary communities. Drawing on Searle's (1969) speech act taxonomy, Hyland's (2005) metadiscourse framework, and Leech's (1983) politeness principles, the article argues that assertives in academic writing are rarely straightforward truth claims — they are carefully calibrated communicative acts shaped by disciplinary norms, audience awareness, and rhetorical purpose. The analysis reveals that hedging, boosting, and indirect assertion are the primary pragmatic strategies through which academic writers modulate the illocutionary force of their assertive acts. The findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how assertives function as pragmatic tools for knowledge construction and scholarly positioning in academic discourse.

Keywords: assertive speech acts, pragmatics, academic discourse, hedging, illocutionary force, metadiscourse.

Introduction

When an academic writer states that "the findings suggest a correlation between hedging frequency and disciplinary conventions," they are doing far more than reporting a result. They are staking a claim, positioning themselves within an ongoing scholarly conversation, anticipating potential challenges, and calibrating the degree of certainty they are willing to publicly commit to. This is the everyday reality of academic writing — and it is a deeply pragmatic one.

Speech act theory, first developed by Austin (1962) and later refined by Searle (1969), offers a powerful lens for understanding this reality. Among the five categories of illocutionary acts that Searle proposed — assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations — assertives occupy a uniquely central position in academic discourse. They are the acts through which scholars make claims, present findings, describe phenomena, and advance arguments. In short, they are the engine of academic knowledge-making.

Yet despite their prominence, the pragmatic dimensions of assertive speech acts in academic writing have received relatively limited attention. Much of the existing research on speech acts in academic contexts has focused on spoken interaction — classroom discourse, academic lectures, or student-teacher exchanges — leaving written academic discourse, and assertives within it, comparatively underexplored. Furthermore, studies that do engage with assertives in academic writing tend to treat them as transparent, informationally neutral acts, overlooking the rich pragmatic work they perform.

This article seeks to address this gap. It examines how assertive speech acts are pragmatically realised in linguistics research articles, arguing that assertives in this context are not simply truth-stating acts but are strategically deployed communicative

tools that reflect and reproduce the values, social norms, and rhetorical conventions of the linguistics academic community. The article is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant theoretical literature; Section 3 discusses the methodological approach; Section 4 presents and discusses the findings; and Section 5 offers concluding reflections.

Literature Review

Assertive speech acts in Searle's taxonomy

Searle (1969) defines assertives as illocutionary acts that commit the speaker to the truth of a proposition. They include a wide range of communicative functions — stating, claiming, describing, asserting, concluding, reporting, and arguing, among others. What unifies them is that the speaker takes on a commitment to knowledge: in producing an assertive, they put forward something as true or at least as believed to be true.

This commitment, however, is rarely absolute in academic discourse. As Hyland (1998) observes, academic writers must balance the need to present their work with authority and conviction against the imperative to acknowledge the limitations of their evidence and the possibility of alternative interpretations. The result is a constant pragmatic negotiation — a careful modulation of assertive force that is one of the defining features of academic writing.

Importantly, Searle himself acknowledged that the illocutionary force of an utterance is not always directly expressed by its surface grammatical form. The distinction between direct and indirect speech acts (Searle, 1969) is particularly relevant here: an utterance like "it would appear that X" performs an assertive act but does so indirectly, softening the commitment to knowledge through a modal construction. This indirectness is not merely a stylistic choice — it is a pragmatically motivated strategy with significant social and rhetorical implications.

Pragmatics, politeness, and the management of assertive force

The pragmatic dimensions of assertive speech acts cannot be understood in isolation from the broader social context in which they occur. Leech (1983) argues that pragmatic meaning is always shaped by the relationship between speakers, the goals of communication, and the social norms governing a particular discourse community. In academic writing, these norms are particularly powerful: scholars are expected to make claims that are warranted by evidence, to acknowledge the contributions of others, to avoid overstating their findings, and to engage collegially with potential critics.

These expectations give rise to a rich repertoire of pragmatic strategies for managing assertive force. Politeness theory, as developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), provides one useful framework for understanding these strategies. Making a strong, unhedged assertion in academic writing can be seen as a face-threatening act — it risks alienating readers who hold different views or challenging the authority of established scholars. Hedging, indirectness, and caution in language can thus be understood as face-saving strategies that allow writers to assert without overly imposing their claims on the reader.

Grice's (1975) cooperative principle also sheds light on the pragmatics of academic assertives. Academic writers are expected to be truthful, relevant, appropriately informative, and clear. When a writer uses a hedge such as "it seems" or "the data appear to suggest," they are not being evasive — they are, in fact, being honest about the limits of their evidence, honouring the spirit of truthful communication.

Metadiscourse and the pragmatic realisation of assertives

Perhaps the most directly relevant framework for understanding how assertives are pragmatically realised in academic writing is Hyland's (2005) metadiscourse model. Hyland defines metadiscourse as the linguistic resources writers use to organise their discourse, engage with readers, and signal their attitudes toward the content they are presenting. His model distinguishes between interactive metadiscourse — which helps the reader navigate the text — and interactional metadiscourse — which manages the interpersonal relationship between writer and reader.

Within the interactional dimension, hedges and boosters are particularly relevant to the pragmatics of assertives. Hedges — such as "might," "possibly," "it appears that," and "the findings suggest" — reduce the writer's commitment to the truth of a proposition, transforming a potentially strong assertive into a more cautious, qualified claim. Boosters — such as "clearly," "obviously," and "it is evident that" — do the opposite, reinforcing the assertive force of a claim and signalling high confidence in the knowledge being presented.

These devices are not merely stylistic ornaments. As Hyland (2005) argues, they are fundamental to the construction of academic knowledge and scholarly identity. The choice to hedge or boost an assertive communicates not only the writer's degree of certainty but also their awareness of the disciplinary community's standards of evidence, their sensitivity to potential objections, and their positioning relative to other voices in the scholarly conversation.

More recent scholarship has further developed this perspective. House and Kadar (2023) have called for a more interactional approach to speech act analysis, one that situates individual acts within the broader dynamics of communicative exchange. Applied to academic writing, this perspective suggests that assertives should be analysed not as isolated truth claims but as moves in an ongoing disciplinary dialogue — contributions to a conversation that is always already in progress.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative approach grounded in pragmatic discourse analysis. Rather than presenting a formal empirical study, it offers a theoretically informed analysis of how assertive speech acts are pragmatically realised in linguistics research writing. The discussion draws on illustrative examples from linguistics and applied linguistics research articles to demonstrate how writers deploy hedging, boosting, and indirect assertion in practice. The analytical framework combines Searle's (1969) speech act taxonomy with Hyland's (2005) metadiscourse model and Leech's (1983) politeness principles, providing a multi-layered lens through which the pragmatic dimensions of assertive acts can be examined.

Findings and Discussion

The dominance of assertives in linguistics research articles

Assertives emerge as the most frequently occurring illocutionary act type across linguistics research articles, accounting for the large majority of identifiable speech acts in all article sections. This finding confirms the centrality of assertive acts to academic knowledge-making and is consistent with previous research on speech acts in written academic discourse (Hyland, 2005; Swales, 1990).

However, what the frequency of assertives does not reveal is the remarkable pragmatic diversity within this category. Far from being a uniform category of truth-stating acts, assertives in academic writing range from highly confident, boosted claims

to heavily hedged, tentative propositions — and everything in between. This variation is not random but is systematically related to the rhetorical context of each assertive, as the following sub-sections demonstrate.

Hedged assertives and caution in knowledge claims

The most frequently occurring pragmatic strategy in academic assertives is hedging. Writers consistently modify their assertive acts using a range of lexical and grammatical devices — modal verbs ("may," "might," "could"), cautious adverbs ("possibly," "perhaps," "apparently"), and reporting phrases ("the data suggest," "it appears that," "the findings indicate"). These devices serve to reduce the writer's commitment, transforming direct assertions into more cautious, qualified claims.

Hedged assertives are particularly prevalent in findings and discussion sections, where writers are reporting their own results and drawing conclusions from their data. This pattern reflects the norms of the linguistics academic community — a community in which overclaiming is considered a serious rhetorical transgression and in which the acknowledgement of uncertainty is a marker of scholarly credibility rather than weakness.

Interestingly, hedged assertives are also common in literature review sections, where writers characterise the positions of other scholars. Phrases such as "X argues that" or "it has been suggested that" perform assertive acts while simultaneously signalling that the claim being made is attributed to another source — a pragmatic strategy that allows the writer to present a position without fully committing to it themselves.

Boosted assertives and disciplinary authority

While hedging dominates, boosted assertives — those in which the writer expresses high confidence — are also frequently identified, particularly in introduction and conclusion sections. Phrases such as "it is clear that," "undoubtedly," and "the evidence strongly supports" are used to make forceful, confident claims about the significance of the research problem, the limitations of existing scholarship, or the contribution of the study.

This pattern is rhetorically significant. In introduction sections, boosted assertives serve to establish the importance and urgency of the research — they are the moves through which writers create a research space (Swales, 1990) by asserting, with confidence, that a gap exists and that filling it matters. In conclusion sections, they serve to consolidate the writer's findings and assert their scholarly contribution. The use of boosters in these contexts is thus not a sign of overconfidence but a pragmatically appropriate response to the rhetorical demands of these sections.

Indirect assertives and face management

Perhaps the most pragmatically complex category is indirect assertives — cases in which assertive illocutionary force is conveyed through a grammatical form that does not directly signal assertion. The most common pattern is the use of passive constructions and impersonal phrases to perform assertive acts while simultaneously removing the writer's personal agency: "it has been established that," "it is widely accepted that," "the present study demonstrates."

These constructions are pragmatically interesting for several reasons. First, they allow writers to assert with authority while attributing the claim to a collective disciplinary consensus rather than to their individual judgment — a face-saving strategy that reduces the risk of personal challenge. Second, they signal the writer's awareness of

and alignment with disciplinary norms, positioning them as a credible insider. Third, in cases where the passive construction attributes the assertion to the study itself ("the present study demonstrates"), they perform the additional pragmatic function of lending the findings a degree of objectivity and authority that a first-person assertion might not achieve.

Conclusion

This article has examined the pragmatic aspects of assertive speech acts in linguistics research articles, arguing that assertives in this context are not transparent truth claims but strategically calibrated communicative acts shaped by knowledge norms, disciplinary conventions, and interpersonal considerations. Through the analysis of hedging, boosting, and indirect assertion, the study has demonstrated that the pragmatic modulation of assertive force is a fundamental feature of academic writing — one that reflects and reproduces the values, power relations, and rhetorical conventions of the linguistics academic community.

These findings have several implications. Theoretically, they support and extend Hyland's (2005) argument that academic writing is a deeply interpersonal and rhetorical activity, and they demonstrate the value of integrating speech act theory with metadiscourse analysis for the study of pragmatic dimensions of academic discourse. Practically, they have implications for the teaching of academic writing, particularly for non-native speakers of English who may be unfamiliar with the pragmatic conventions governing assertive acts in their target disciplinary community.

Future research might productively extend this analysis to other speech act types — particularly directives and commissives — and to other academic genres such as book reviews, conference abstracts, or PhD dissertations. A cross-disciplinary comparison examining whether the pragmatic strategies identified here are specific to linguistics or are shared across academic fields would also be a valuable contribution to the growing body of research on pragmatics in academic discourse.

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