
The speech act of agreement and ways of expressing it

Nusratullaeva Shokhista Sabirjon kizi

gamletovashokhista@gmail.com

PhD student,

Uzbekistan state world languages university

Annotation

This article investigates the speech act of agreement from pragmalinguistic perspective noticing its importance in everyday human interaction. Based on fundamental theories by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1969, 1979), agreement is primarily examined as an illocutionary act – a communicative activity that expresses the speaker's intent. Utilizing the politeness theories of Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech's (1983) Agreement Maxim, the article recognizes agreement as an essential technique for preserving social harmony and fostering strong interpersonal interactions. This study examines the cultural differences in expressions of agreement, focusing on differences in directness, vocabulary choice, and politeness technique based on insights from cross-cultural studies, especially the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). The article classifies agreements into upgraded, repetitive, and downgraded strategies using Conversation Analysis, particularly the seminal work of Pomerantz (1984). Real-world conversational examples are used to highlight the pragmatic subtleties of each strategy.

Keywords

Speech acts, illocutionary acts, agreement, agreement strategies, conversation analysis, politeness theory

Речевой акт согласия и способы его выражения

Нусратуллаева Шохиста Сабиржон кизи

gamletovashokhista@gmail.com

Докторант,

Узбекский государственный университет
мировых языков

Аннотация

Эта статья исследует речевой акт согласия с прагматическо-лингвистической точки зрения, подчеркивая его значимость в повседневном человеческом общении. Основываясь на фундаментальных теориях Остина (1962) и дальнейших разработках Сёрла (1969, 1979), согласие прежде всего рассматривается как иллокутивный акт — коммуникативное действие, выражающее намерение говорящего. Опираясь на теорию вежливости Брауна и Левинсона (1987) и принцип согласия Лича (1983), статья рассматривает согласие как важную технику поддержания социальной гармонии и укрепления межличностных отношений. В исследовании анализируются культурные различия в выражении согласия, особое внимание уделяется различиям в степени прямоты, выборе лексики и способах выражения вежливости на основе данных межкультурных исследований, особенно проекта по межкультурной реализации речевых актов (Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project) Блюм-Кулки и др. (1989). В статье речевой акт согласия классифицируется на стратегии усиленного,

повторяющего и ослабленного согласия с помощью конверсационного анализа, в частности, с использованием классической модели Померанц (1984). Приводятся реальные примеры из разговорной практики для иллюстрации прагматических тонкостей каждой стратегии.

Ключевые слова *Речевые акты, иллокутивные акты, согласие, стратегии выражения согласия, анализ речи, теория вежливости*

Rozilik bildirish nutq akti va uni ifodalash usullari

Nusratullayeva Shoxista Sabirjon qizi

gamletovashokhista@gmail.com

Tayanch doktorant,

O'zbekiston davlat jahon tillari universiteti

Annotatsiya *Ushbu maqolada rozilik bildirish nutq akti pragmalingsvistik nuqtai nazardan tadqiq etilib, uning kundalik insoniy muloqotdagi ahamiyati ta'kidlanadi. Ostin (1962) tomonidan ishlab chiqilgan va keyinchalik Serl (1969, 1979) tomonidan rivojlantirilgan fundamental nazariyalarga asoslanib, rozilik bildirish avvalo illokutiv akt bo'lib – gapiruvchining niyatini ifodalovchi kommunikativ faoliyat sifatida ko'rib chiqiladi. Braun va Levinsonning (1987) xushmuomalalik nazariyasi hamda Lichning (1983) Rozilik maksimidan foydalanib, maqola rozilikni ijtimoiy uyg'unlikni saqlash va shaxslararo mustahkam munosabatlarni shakllantirishda muhim texnika sifatida belgilaydi. Tadqiqotda rozilik ifodasidagi madaniy tafovutlar, ayniqsa to'g'ridan-to'g'rilik darajasi, so'z tanlash va xushmuomalalik uslubidagi farqlarga e'tibor qaratilib, Blum-Kulka va boshqalar (1989) tomonidan olib borilgan "Nutq aktlarining madaniyatlararo amalga oshirilishi loyihasi" (Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project) doirasidagi tadqiqotlarga asoslanadi. Maqolada Pomerantz (1984) tomonidan taklif etilgan muloqot tahlili asosida rozilik aktlari kuchaytirilgan (upgraded), takroriy (repetitive) va yumshatilgan (downgraded) strategiyalarga ajratiladi. Har bir strategiyaning pragmatik jihatlarini ochib berish uchun kundalik muloqotdan olingan real misollar keltiriladi.*

Kalit so'zlar *Nutq aktlari, illokutsion aktlar, rozilik, rozilik strategiyalari, suhbat tahlili, muloyimlik nazariyasi*

Human communication is based not only on exchanging information, but also on performing actions using words. The concept that saying something is often equivalent to doing something was introduced by Austin (1962) in his theory of *performative utterances*. In pragmatics, these communicative actions are

referred to as speech acts. A speech act is a fundamental unit of communication that expresses the speaker's intention or function. Pragmalinguistics has long been centered around the examination of speech acts, which can be traced back to the works of philosophers like John Searle and J. L. Austin. In his prominent

work *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin distinguished between *locutionary*, *illocutionary*, and *perlocutionary* acts, with illocutionary acts being the most relevant for understanding agreement, as they represent the speaker's intention behind the utterance. Searle (1969, 1979) extended Austin's classification, proposing five basic types of illocutionary acts: *assertives*, *directives*, *commissives*, *expressives*, and *declaratives*.

The act of agreement, which indicates that one agrees with or accepts another's statement or proposal, is an essential speech act in everyday interaction. Walkinshaw (2015) defines agreement as a concurring stance (verbal or nonverbal) to a preceding action or position taken by another speaker, indicating that an addressee shares the speaker's attitude to, or opinion of, that action or position. The speech act of agreement, while not explicitly defined as a separate type, is commonly treated as a subtype of *assertives* (asserting belief in a prior statement) or *expressives* (expressing alignment or approval).

Politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1987), offers further insight into how agreement operates as a face-saving strategy. According to their model, speakers aim to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs) through strategies of *positive* and *negative politeness*. Agreement, particularly when it reinforces the hearer's views, is a form of positive politeness – it enhances solidarity and rapport by showing approval and alignment. However, in contexts where agreement could be seen as insincere or overly compliant, speakers might opt for indirect agreement, which minimizes imposition or the risk of losing face.

Leech (1983) proposed the Agreement Maxim as part of his Politeness Principle: "Minimize disagreement between self and other; maximize agreement between self and other." This principle has been influential in pragmatic studies of dialogic cooperation. Agreement thus

serves as a strategy not only for managing interpersonal relations but also for adhering to broader conversational norms and expectations.

From a cross-cultural perspective, studies have shown that the realization of agreement varies across languages and cultures. Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) in the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project demonstrated that speech acts such as agreement and disagreement are highly culture-sensitive, with different languages showing varied preferences for directness, mitigation, and lexical devices. In Anglo-American English, direct agreement is more common, but politeness concerns still drive the use of hedges, softeners, and partial agreements in sensitive situations.

In the framework of Conversation Analysis, the work of Anita Pomerantz (1984) is seminal in understanding how agreements function in natural discourse. Her study demonstrated that agreements are "preferred" responses in the structure of conversation, meaning they are typically delivered without delay, often with enthusiasm, and in alignment with the social goal of maintaining harmony. Conversely, disagreements are "dispreferred," often preceded by pauses, hesitations, or mitigating expressions. Pomerantz's findings are supported by Levinson (1983), who emphasized the interactional structure of adjacency pairs in conversation (e.g., assessment-agreement), and how preferences in conversation can reflect deeper social norms.

Pomerantz (1984) divides agreement strategies into three groups: *upgrade*, utterance which has the same content or *repetition* of the previous utterance, and *downgrade*. An upgraded agreement is an assessment of the referent assessed in the prior that incorporates upgraded evaluation relative to the prior.

There are two techniques used in upgraded strategy:

1. A stronger evaluative term than the prior:
 - (1) *Isn't he cute?*



- *Oh, he is adorable.*
 - (2) *Beautiful day out, isn't it?*
 - *Yeah, it's just gorgeous*
2. An intensifier modifying the prior utterance:
- (1) *You must admit it was fun the night we went down.*
 - *It was great fun.*
 - (2) *She seems like a nice little lady.*
 - *Awfully nice little person.*

Upgraded agreements are considered to be strong agreements, since they occur not in combinations with disagreements, but in agreement turn.

Next type of agreement is utterance which has the same content or repetition of the previous utterance. *Repetition* serves the function of positive face and sends a metamessage of involvement. Repetition has a wide range of varied functions in conversation (Tannen, 1989). Repeating indicated one's response to another's utterance, establishes acceptance and agreement, and gives evidence of one's own participation:

- (1) *We're off topic.*
- *We're. It's bread.*
- (2) *Bread is great.*
- *Yeah, bread is great.*

In the same content strategy, a recipient asserts the same evaluation as the prior speaker's evaluation. To assert the same evaluation, a recipient may repeat the prior evaluative terms, marking it as a second in a like series with "too":

- (1) *She was a nice lady. I liked her.*
- *I liked her too.*
- (2) *I think everyone enjoyed just sitting around talking.*
- *I do too.*

Finally, the third agreement strategy is downgrading. A downgraded agreement is an assessment of the same referent as had been assessed in the prior with scaled-down or weakened evaluation terms relative to the prior.

- (1) *That Pat isn't she a doll?*

- *Yeah, isn't she pretty.*
- (2) *Oh, it was just beautiful.*
- *Well thank you. I thought it was quite nice.*

Downgraded agreements frequently engender disagreement sequence and may be considered as a weak agreement.

When participants feel they are being asked to agree with some point of view with which they may not necessarily want to agree, they often find themselves in the position of showing partial or weak agreement. They are primarily agreement tokens, asserted or claimed agreements and weakened agreements:

Tokens

- (1) *I sew by hand, I'm fantastic you never saw anything like it*
- *I know but I still say that the sewing machine's quicker.*
- (2) *You've really both basically honestly gone your own ways*
- *Essentially, except we've had a good relationship at home.*
- *Yes, but I mean it's a relationship where...*

Asserted agreements

- (1) *But you admit he is having fun and think it's funny.*
- *I think it's funny, yeah. But it's a ridiculous funny.*
- (2) *Well, oh I think Alice has a good sense of humor.*
- *Yeah, I think she does too but she has a different type.*

Weakened agreement

- (1) *I know but I still say that the sewing machine's quicker.*
- *Oh, it can be quicker but it doesn't do the job.*
- (2) *Well, a sense of humor, I think, is something born with Bea.*
- *Yea. Or it's ... I have ..., I think a lot of people are, but then I think it can be developed, too.*

Having analyzed the taxonomy provided by Pomerantz, we can introduce the new

strategies of expressing agreement elaborated by us:

1. **Informative agreement** (which provides the interlocutor with needed information)
 - *Do you like it?*
 - *Do I like it! Of course, I do! (S. Maugham);*
2. **Evaluative agreement** (approval of interlocutor's evaluation)
 - *Isn't she beautiful?*
 - *Oh, yes, she is! (O. Wild);*
3. **Agreement-promise** (agreement to do interlocutor's request)
 - *Will you walk with me a little?*
 - *With pleasure (S. Maugham);*
4. **Formal-etiquette agreement** (agreement accepted in a definite type of society)
 - *Send this letter to the king, Peter.*
 - *Yes, sir (J. Plaidy).*
5. **Performative agreement:** Explicitly stating "I'd agree with that" by means of performatives:
 - *You're always too British to be African.*
 - *I agree 100 percent!*
6. **Topic Developer:** Contributing an assessment that built supportively on the content of the previous assessment, thereby developing it as a topic. This strategy can also be called *building upon the previous speaker's turn*. In this strategy the second speaker includes additional information, reasons, and details to stress common ground and show support of the previous speaker's talk. Agreement is established by saying the same thing but expanding the content of the prior position.
 - *Well, that was the other thing coz now I'm going back to Nigeria, two years ago. For me was the first step I think I have to ... You know take a real effort to ensure that at least a minimum of once every two years, optimally year.*

- *And you know it's very important that people like us realize that, because when you're born... you're born here isn't it?*
- *Yeah.*
- *When you're born and bred here it's so easy to lose your culture.*

Showing agreement and disagreement to others' opinions is an important speech act. "Agreeing" is a face enhancing act (FEA) that promotes the hearer's positive face (Leech, 2005). Leech (1983) proposed an 'agreement maxim' in which speakers attempt to minimize disagreement between themselves and others. Therefore, agreements tend to be made explicitly and quickly (in synchronous communication) when compared with disagreements. In order to save the face of the interlocutor and counteract the disruptive effects of the face threatening act, people have to employ some speech strategies to minimize disagreement between self and other, and seek agreement between the two speakers. Thus, people employ some pragmatic strategies, using indirect methods or speak in a roundabout way.

Our results would be incomplete without considering **when** and **why** speakers choose one form of agreement over another. The realization of agreement is highly sensitive to context – who the speakers are, their relationship, the setting, and even cultural background. Here we outline some key contextual factors and how they manifest in agreement strategies, as *formality and power dynamics, degree of enthusiasm, cultural variation within English, use of agreement for rapport and truth, and medium (spoken/written) differences*.

In formal contexts or where there is an asymmetry of power, agreements tend to be phrased more politely and sometimes less directly. Subordinates often use "Yes, [Sir/Madam]" or polite complete sentences to agree. The repetition and respectful address convey disciplined agreement. In contrast,

among peers or friends, one might simply say “yeah, okay” or even nonverbally nod.

- *'Foot-washers believe anything that's pleasure is a sin. Did you know some of 'em came out of the woods one Saturday and passed by this place and told me and my flowers were going to hell?'*
- *'Your flowers, too?'*
- *'Yes ma'am, They'd burn right with me. They thought I spent too much time in God's outdoors and not enough time inside the house reading the Bible.'*

In hierarchical situations, sometimes an indirect form can appear as a polite **hedge**. For example, if a boss states an opinion that an employee privately doubts, the employee might nonetheless respond with “*I suppose that could be the case,*” which is a gentle form of agreement (or at least not open disagreement). This allows the employee to remain agreeable without wholeheartedly endorsing something they aren't sure about. In our literary data, such scenes are subtle, but one could imagine in a corporate drama novel, a character saying “*You may be right*” to a CEO's dubious strategy – “*You may be right*” is a cautious agreement, acknowledging the possibility that the boss is correct (and by conversational implicature, not offering any challenge).

- *“You understand the necessity of this alliance?”*
- *“I suppose I do. It makes sense... politically.”*

The emotional tone of the context influences agreement wording. When characters are excited or the stakes are high, their agreements often become more emphatic or elaborate. We saw use of exclamation and intensifiers in some examples to show strong feeling (e.g., “*Absolutely!*” with an exclamation, or “*I couldn't agree more,*” which literally means “*it's impossible for me to agree any more than I already do*” – a fervent endorsement). In a passionate debate in a story, when one character finally convinces another, the yielding character

might burst out with “*Alright, alright, you're right!*” Here repetition (“*alright*” twice) and an exclamatory tone signify an emotionally charged agreement. On the other hand, in somber or serious contexts, even agreements might be delivered in a subdued way (e.g., a quiet “*I think you're right,*” or a simple nod with a murmured “*yes*”). The linguistic form might not change drastically, but things like adding “*I think*” can soften the delivery to match a reflective mood.

- *“Don't you get it? Atticus had to, that's why he was appointed.”*
- *“I know! I know! He's the same in the courtroom as he is at home!”*

English is spoken in many communities worldwide, and cultural communication styles can affect how agreement is expressed. For example, it's often noted that British English speakers may use understatement or litotes as a form of politeness. A British character might say “*Not bad at all,*” meaning “*I agree that it's good.*” Or “*Quite right,*” which in British usage often strongly agrees (where “*quite*” means completely). Americans, in contrast, might be more direct or hyperbolic: “*Absolutely right!*” The difference is subtle and not absolute, but literature from different English-speaking regions sometimes showcases these tendencies. In an English novel by an Indian author, a character might bob their head and say “*sure, sure*” repeatedly to show agreement, reflecting a cultural style of doubling words for emphasis. While our analysis did not systematically compare cultures, we remained aware that what counts as polite agreement in one culture might be seen as lukewarm or overly enthusiastic in another.

Another contextual aspect is whether the agreement is driven by social harmony or factual alignment. Sometimes people agree just to be agreeable, even if they privately have doubts, especially in polite small talk. We see literary characters doing this to avoid conflict. For instance, at a dull party scene in a novel, if one

person remarks, "The music is great, isn't it?" another might smile and nod "Absolutely," despite finding it mediocre, simply to keep a friendly vibe. This usage aligns with Leech's agreement maxim – maximizing agreement to be polite (Leech, 1983). In other cases, the agreement is about acknowledging truth or logic – e.g., detective novels often have moments where one detective lays out a theory and the colleague says, "True, that makes sense," focusing on intellectual agreement. The linguistic forms might be similar, but context reveals the intent behind the agreement (social smoothing vs. genuine concurrence). Our study mainly catalogued forms, but it's important to remember that a simple "Yes" can carry different pragmatic weight in different contexts.

Overall, speech act of agreement and disagreement is complex notion, used in assessing, or expressing one's attitude towards interlocutor's opinion or statement. The speech act of agreement, far from being a mere

conversational filler, serves as a strategically deployed pragmatic resource that fulfills both interpersonal and epistemic functions in human communication. The analysis shows that agreement often functions as a form of positive politeness, helping to strengthen social bonds and protect the interlocutor's face, particularly in situations where maintaining harmonious relationships takes precedence over conveying factual accuracy. Leech's Agreement Maxim – "maximize agreement, minimize disagreement" – continues to serve as a valuable framework for understanding how speakers adjust their level of agreement through hedging, softening, or emphasizing, based on social relationships and differences in power. Whether in the form of enthusiastic endorsements ("Absolutely!"), cautious hedges ("I suppose that could be the case"), or indirect repetitions ("I liked her too"), agreement manifests through a spectrum of strategies that serve to manage alignment and maintain conversational cooperation.

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