



RESEARCH ARTICLE

AN ANALYSIS OF SPEECH ACTS IN NEWSPAPER NARRATIVES ON IMMIGRATION IN THE USA

Ali Abdulhamzah Abdulzahrah

Manuscript Info

Manuscript History

Received: 28 November 2024

Final Accepted: 31 December 2024

Published: January 2025

Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore the pragmatic dimensions of immigration within the newspapers narratives in the contemporary United States. It emphasizes immigration-focused newspapers that exhibit either overt or subtle forms of discrimination, prejudice, bias, and xenophobia. This research intends to perform a corpus analysis of immigration-related articles found in a collection of prominent American newspapers, utilizing the framework of four speech acts as proposed by Bach and Harnish (1979): Constatives (commitments to future actions), Directives (attempts to persuade the listener to take action), Commissives (a specific type of directive that involves a commitment to a future action), and Acknowledgments (expressions reflecting psychological states). This aim can be further expressed in the form of questions: What are the main categories and sub-categories of speech acts used by US Newspapers in their coverage (report) and shaping of public opinion in the United States on immigration issues? And what is the impact of coverage (report) of US Newspapers and shaping of public opinion in the US on immigration issues?

Copyright, IJAR, 2025,. All rights reserved.

Introduction:-

Austin's (1962) 'How to Do Things with Words' presented a novel perspective in linguistics—an initiative to establish a comprehensive theory of speech acts beyond a simplistic view of performatives and constatives. In basic terms, Austin suggested a distinction between speech acts or locutions that consist solely of statements or “sayings” and those regarded as “doings” (Searle, 1968 and 1969; Harris et al., 2018). As Searle elucidated, and Austin acknowledged later in his work, achieving clarity in such classifications is fundamentally difficult (Searle 1969, 1976 and 1983). Furthermore, rather than being merely utterances used to execute an action, speech act theory posits that speakers are simultaneously engaged in three distinct types of speech acts: Locutionary, Illocutionary, and Perlocutionary (Stevani 2023).

Contemporary applications of speech act theories draw from various frameworks, largely shaped by two prominent theorists (Hosseinpour 2021; Weisser 2020). J.L. Austin (1962) is a pioneering linguist who modified concepts from Ludwig Wittgenstein and formalized them into an established framework. Austin's initial theory recognized and categorized two primary types of speech acts, while his subsequent work elaborated on these concepts (Austin 1976 and 2020). This later work was partially influenced by John Searle. In Searle's initial examination of speech acts, he argued that understanding an utterance necessitated considerations that went beyond Austin's original distinction between constatives and performatives (Searle 1969, 1976, 1983 and 1989). This viewpoint prompted Austin to refine his initial model further and assisted Searle in developing a thorough taxonomic framework (Weisser 2020). The work of Bach and Harnish (1979) on “linguistic communication and speech acts” also contributes to this

discourse. The four categories proposed by Bach and Harnish (1979), which are based on Searle's ideas, demonstrate that Searle's classifications are essentially equivalent to those of Bach and Harnish. Therefore, for this general review of speech act theory, we will utilize Bach and Harnish's four categories: Constatives, Directives, Commissives, and Acknowledgements (Bach and Harnish, 1979).

Methodology:-

The corpus was sourced from five American newspapers. It includes 20 articles that were published between 2018 and 2022, which are regarded as some of the most widely circulated and read in the United States, as illustrated in Figure 1.

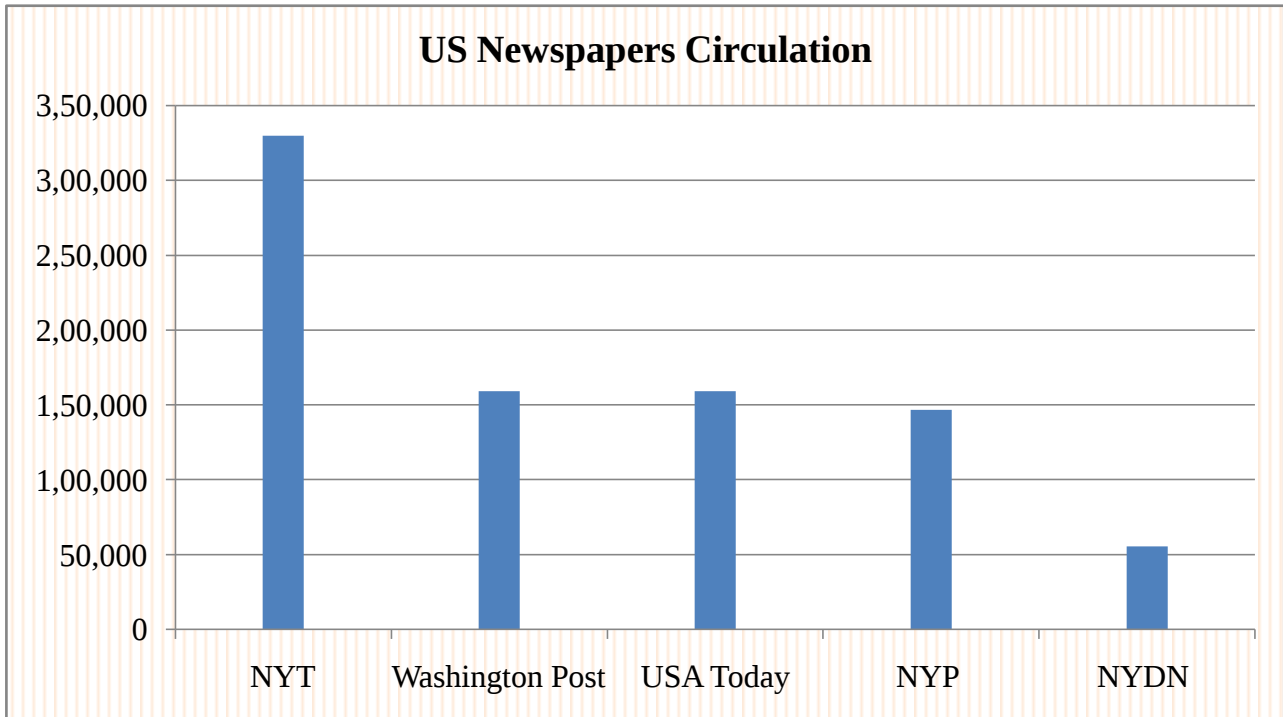


Figure 1:- US Newspaper Distribution.

As illustrated in figure 1 above, The New York Times holds the record for the highest daily newspaper circulation in the United States, with 329,781 copies sold (Turvill, 2022). USA Today and the Washington Post rank as the third most widely distributed daily newspapers in the country, reporting a circulation of 159,233 copies per day according to 2013 data, along with over 1.4 million daily online readers, and they are available in all U.S. states, as well as in several other nations (Turvill, 2022). The New York Post emerged as one of the most circulated newspapers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Turvill, 2022). It surpassed the Los Angeles Times to become the fifth-largest daily newspaper in the United States, boasting a circulation of 146,649, which represented a 2% decline from the previous year up to March 2022 (Turvill, 2022). The New York Daily News is also regarded as one of the most broadly circulated newspapers in America, currently achieving an average weekday circulation of 55,653, elevating its status into the top ten rankings.

Data examined through the framework developed by Bach and Harnish (1979) is categorized into four groups: Constatives, which aim to commit the speaker (to varying extents) to a forthcoming action (Bach and Harnish, 1979), including examples such as Assertives, Predictives, Ascriptives, Descriptives, Informatives, Confirmatives, and Suggestives. Directives are efforts (to varying degrees, and thus more specifically, are determinants of the attempt made) by the speaker to persuade the listener to act (Bach and Harnish, 1979), with examples like Requestives, Questions, Requirements, Prohibitives, Permissives, and Advisories. Commissives are intended to bind the speaker (to varying degrees) to a particular future action (Bach and Harnish, 1979), such as Promises and Offers. Acknowledgements aim to convey the psychological state indicated in relation to a specific situation involving honesty about the content of the case (Bach and Harnish, 1979), encompassing examples such as Apologies, condolences, commiserations, greetings, rejections, refusals, and spurns.

The evaluation utilized two widely accepted methods: Quantitative and Qualitative. Quantitative research methods rely on mathematics, which can be categorized into two types: descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics involve the analysis of quantifiable data, and at their simplest, these statistics measure phenomena through frequency, dispersion around a mean, and other fundamental mathematical calculations. Inferential statistics, on the other hand, are more advanced and typically entail drawing more intricate conclusions from the data. Meanwhile, Qualitative analysis of a specific speech act's support for a certain perspective on immigration might concentrate on the features of that speech act that signify it as either pro- or anti-immigration.

The corpus was created with specific methodological considerations in mind. As is typically the case in qualitative research sampling methods, the goal was to capture a wide range of perspectives. When qualitative researchers aim to investigate various viewpoints, they attempt to compile a sample that is likely to showcase this diversity. For newspapers, this involves selecting publications with ideological diversity to ensure that multiple viewpoints on immigration are represented. Articles were chosen based on their publication dates. The overall time frame of interest began post-Trump era, which influenced the selection of articles. The articles were chosen for their direct relevance to the topic of immigration. Those that only marginally discussed immigration would have been unlikely to provide the detailed and comprehensive data necessary for drawing sound conclusions about the impact of speech acts on immigration discourse.

Data Analysis

Data analyzed through the examination of different types of speech acts across articles, focusing on their distribution and the pragmatic roles they play in the context of immigration narratives in the US Newspapers. Each article analyzed represents a case study on the specific employment of speech acts such as constatives, directives, commissives and acknowledgements. The draft of dataset analysis attached here: <https://data.mendeley.com/preview/35hg67z8cj?a=561790c8-839f-4c72-a1c5-ba52789cb933>

The analysis concentrated on the present application of speech acts in news articles and how they can affect perceptions of specific subjects, such as immigration and race. This chapter evaluated pieces from various biases and agendas to thoroughly grasp how speech acts are utilized in writing, along with their advantages and shortcomings. Speech acts theory was employed to analyze the topic of immigration within this chapter. A number of US newspaper articles were examined to illustrate how these frameworks can be interpreted in a text through the classification provided by Bach and Harnish (1979), which is divided into four main categories and their sub-categories. The categories and sub-categories are as follows: Constatives (Assertives, Predictives, Ascriptives, Descriptives, Informatives, Confirmatives, Suggestives); Directives (Requestives, Questions, Requirements, Prohibitives, Permissives, Advisories); Commissives (Promises, Offers); Acknowledgements (Apologize, Condone, Commiserate, Greet, Reject, Refuse, Spurn). As shown in the analysis, US newspapers use four categories of communicative illocutionary acts (constatives, directives, commissives, and acknowledgements) and different sub-categories of communicative illocutionary acts that vary in usage from newspaper to newspaper.

The sub-categories of constatives, assertives, and descriptives are prominent in five US newspapers. USA Today reports constatives at 94%, which includes assertives at 53%, descriptives at 36%, and confirmatives at 3%, summing up the total number of constatives. The New York Post shows constatives at 85%, with assertives at 71% and descriptives at 10%, aggregating the total number of constatives. The New York Daily News presents constatives at 96%, comprising assertives at 85%, descriptives at 9%, and ascriptives at 2%, in total for constatives. The New York Times indicates constatives at 97%, which includes assertives at 85% and descriptives at 12%, for the complete number of constatives. The Washington Post reveals constatives at 99%, with assertives at 76% and descriptives at 23%, as the total for constatives.

The sub-categories of directives, including requestives, permissives, and advisories, are also significant, representing the overall number of illocutionary acts. USA Today shows directives at 8%, made up entirely of requestives. The New York Post showcases directives at 11%, consisting of 4% requestives and 7% permissives, contributing to the overall directives. The New York Daily News indicates directives at 1%, all from requestives. The New York Times presents directives at 3%, which are all advisories. The Washington Post reports directives at 11%, combining 4% requestives and 7% permissives in the total directives.

The sub-categories of commissives, which express 'promise' and 'offer', were observed only in the New York Post and New York Daily News, with no commissives found in the other articles. The New York Post shows

commissives at 2%, with 1% representing promises and 1% for offers, as a total for commissives. The New York Daily News indicates commissives at 3%, with all 3% representing promises.

The sub-categories of acknowledgment were only identified in the New York Post, with no acknowledgments appearing in the other articles. The New York Post notes acknowledgment at 2%, representing all 2% as rejections, totaling the acknowledgment category.

Overall, the analysis revealed that media often presents immigration in either a positive or negative manner by utilizing the strategies of these frameworks. However, the general intended perlocutionary effect, it becomes clear that the New York Times and Washington Post often humanized immigrants by sharing personal stories, appealing to readers' empathy and support for inclusive policies. USA Today balanced its frameworks to reflect both challenges and resilience in immigrant communities, aligning with its centrist position. The New York Post used frameworks to amplify fears about immigration, highlighting crime and overcrowding, thereby fostering opposition to immigration. The New York Daily News, while occasionally highlighting the personal struggles of immigrants, generally used frameworks to resonate with conservative readers' concerns. The results of the study are interspersed with a discussion that provides interpretational insights into what was found.

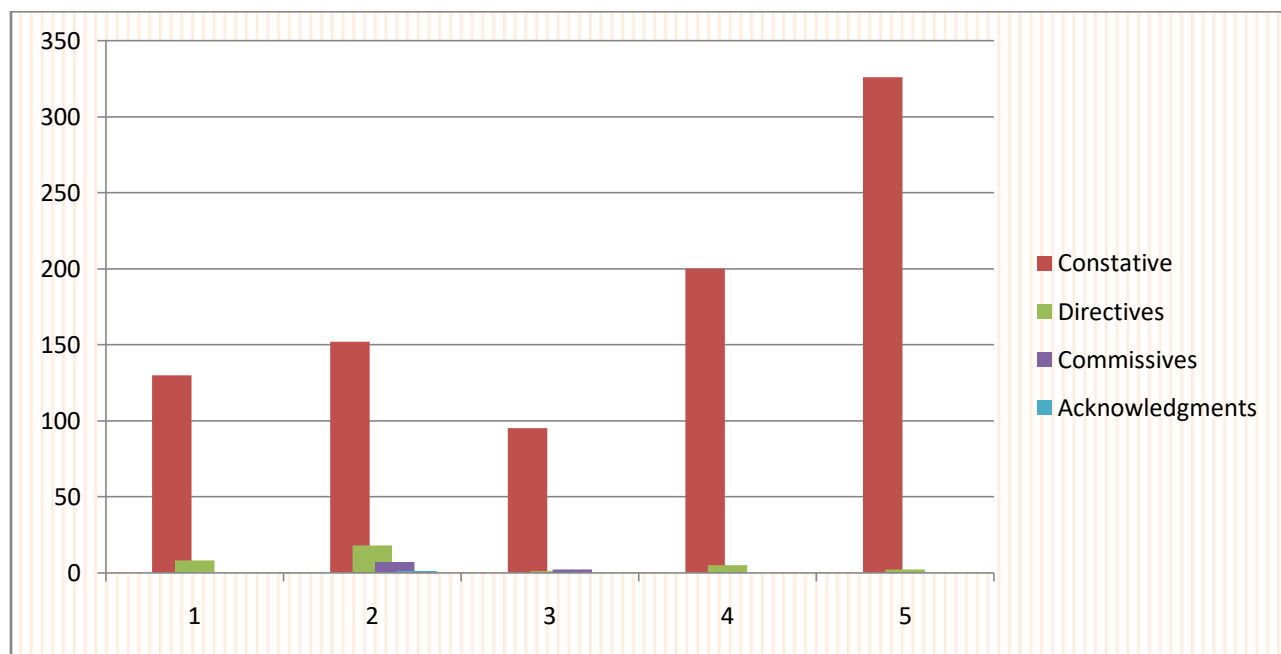


Figure 2:- Frequency of speech acts.

According to figure 2, reporters predominantly use Constative and Directive verbs. For instance, newspapers such as The New York Times and The Washington Post employ constative verbs to shape the framing of immigration policy choices and personal impacts. This approach often shapes public understanding of policy intricacies and the roles of key figures, contributing to a nuanced view of immigration politics. Directives across newspapers range from calls for humanitarian treatment (e.g., Washington Post) to demands for stricter immigration controls (e.g., New York Post). This diversity in calls to action reflects and possibly influences varied public sentiments and policy directions. The overall analysis framework discovered that there are variations in emotional engagement through expressions. For instance, The New York Times tends to emphasize personal narratives in order to elicit empathy, whereas the New York Post may utilize expressions to instill fear such as (the term “barrage” that used in article 1) or basically, Govia says he gets a lot of insults. This affects emotional reactions and societal perspectives towards immigrants.

Results:-

The analysis of articles from the five newspapers reveals the constatives employed. Figure 3 illustrates that constative verbs, including assertives and descriptives, are used more often in newspapers.

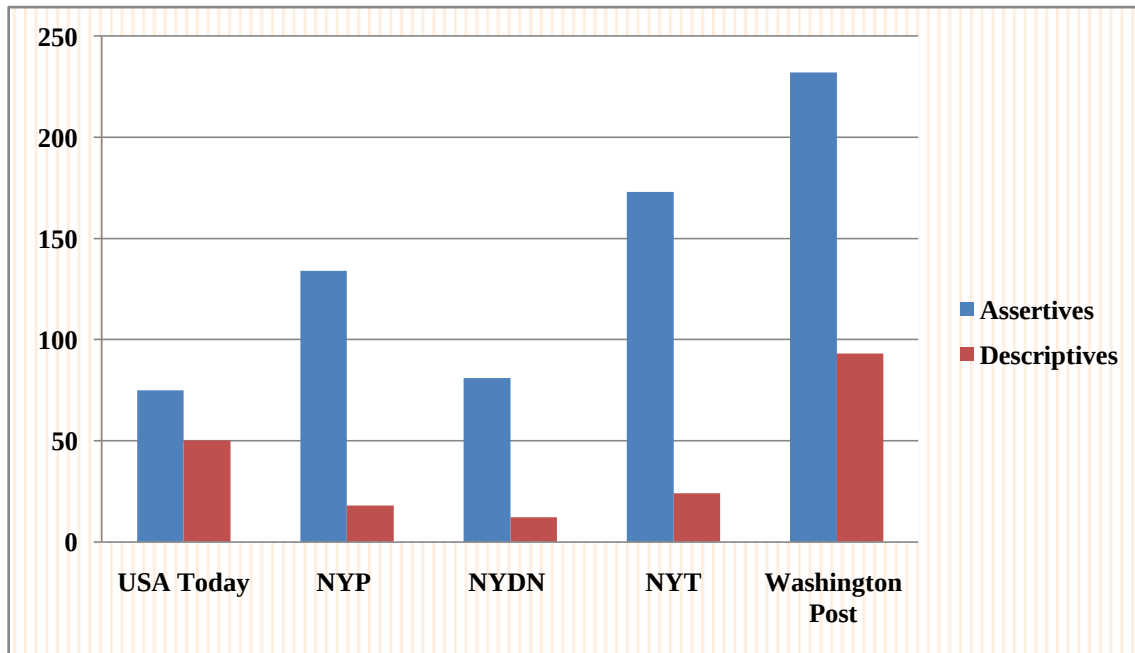


Figure 3:- Illocutionary acts in immigration discourse: constatives.

As illustrated in figure 3 above, The New York Times often employs constative statements (assertives and descriptives). This representation influences the reader's perspective and emphasizes the factual basis of the reporting. The Washington Post uses constative verbs (assertives and descriptives) to detail the factual events and discussions during diplomatic meetings, affecting perceptions of international cooperation or tension. USA Today often employs constative verbs (assertives and descriptives) to report on the direct impacts of immigration policies, thus providing a clear, factual basis for understanding the immediate consequences on affected populations. New York Post uses constatives (assertives and descriptives) to describe local government actions and public reactions, framing the immigration debate in a localized context that influences reader perception of state-level handling of immigration issues. However, the New York Post tends to use assertive and descriptive verbs in a more limited context. The New York Daily News utilizes constative (assertives and descriptives) to highlight the challenges faced by DACA recipients, framing the narrative around the uncertainties and risks affecting this group.

The analysis of articles from the five newspapers to recognize the directives utilized reveals, as shown in figure 4, that newspapers frequently use directive verbs, including requestives, permissives, and advisories.

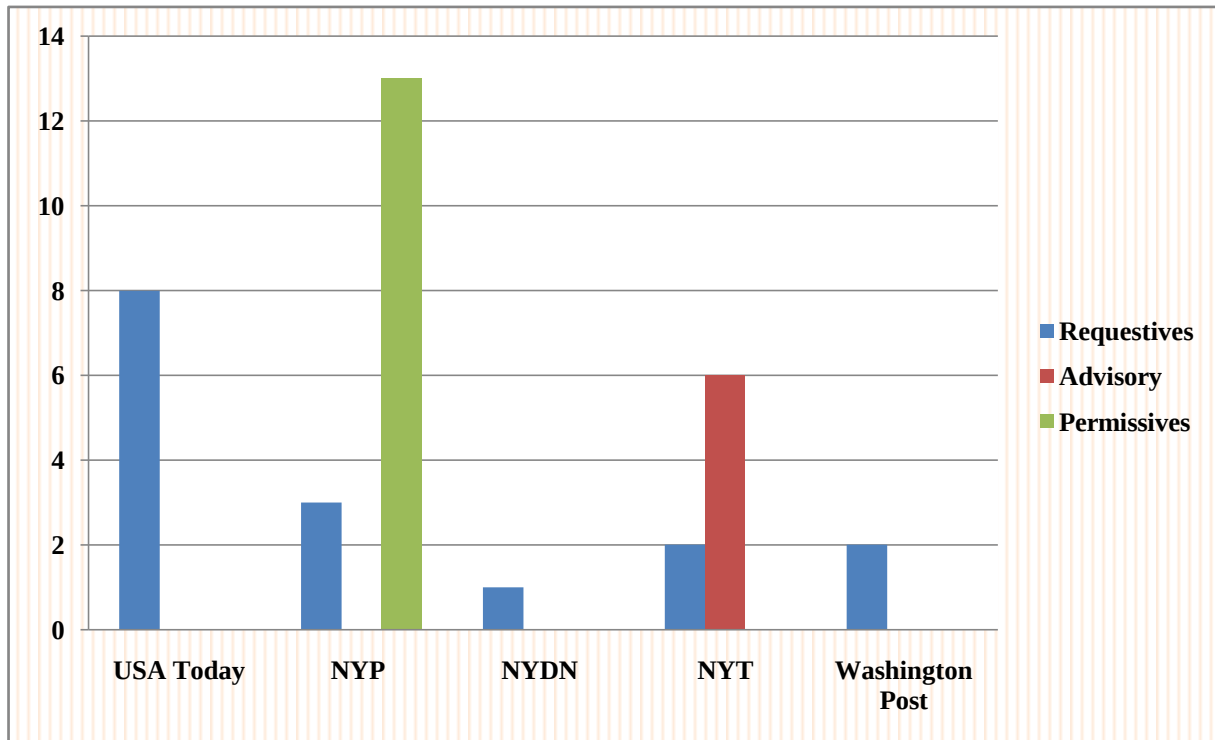


Figure 4:- Illocutionary acts in immigration discourse: directives.

In figure 4 presented above, the New York Times features calls for legislative measures regarding immigration reform, encouraging readers to back particular policy alterations. The Washington Post employs directives to promote more compassionate treatment of immigrants, tapping into the readers' sense of ethics and fairness. USA Today includes explicit calls to action, urging readers and policymakers to consider immediate reforms for a more effective immigration system, given the centrist nature of this newspaper, these calls align with both liberal and conservative stances on immigration. The New York Post uses directives aimed at tightening border security, reflecting a more conservative approach to immigration control. This approach is characteristic of the newspaper, which is conservative and nativist in orientation; this orientation was particularly visible and pronounced during the Trump administration, but it is an enduring characteristic of the newspaper. The New York Daily News employs directives urging the protection and formalization of policies for Dreamers, aiming to influence public support and policy stability, but, in general, this newspaper skews closer to the New York Post in its use of directives as critical vis-à-vis immigration.

To determine which Acknowledgments were utilized, it was found that all newspapers, with the exception of The New York Post, did not include the Acknowledgments, as demonstrated by the following statistical analysis.

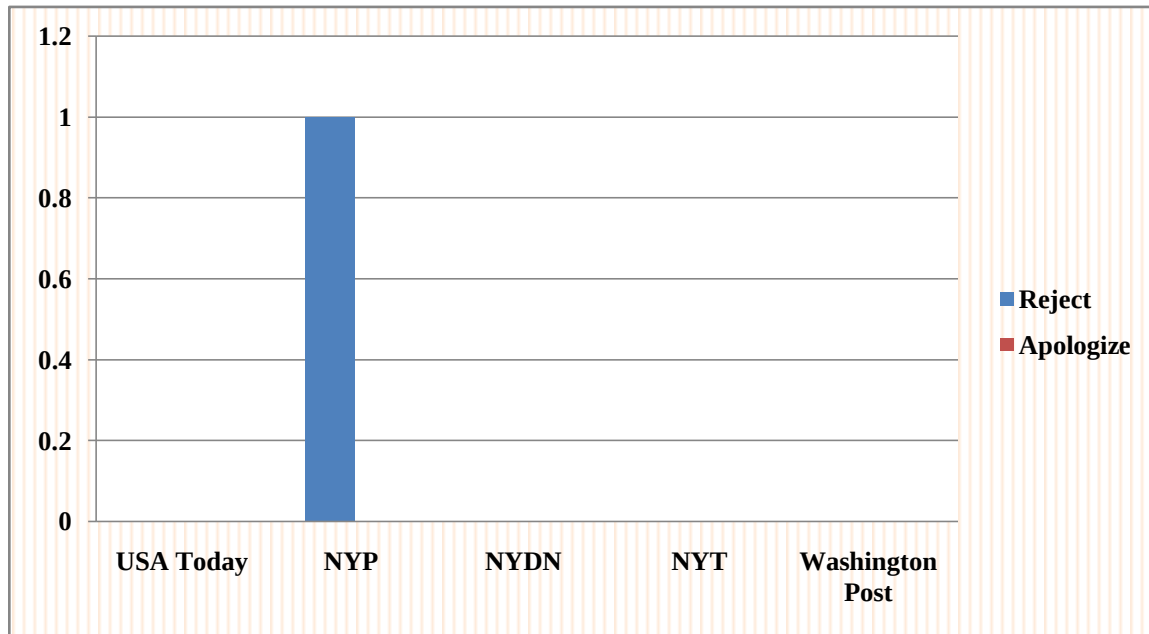


Figure 5:- Illocutionary acts in immigration discourse: acknowledgments.

Figure 5 above shows that The New York Post utilizes acknowledgment verbs like "Rejecting." It makes use of phrases such as in the article, "Dems Are Upset That De Santis Has Made Them Look in the Mirror on Migration," which discounts concerns regarding immigration while highlighting examples of crime and overcrowding. This is likely aimed at inciting greater fear and resistance toward immigration. The article employs a narrative that undermines the significance of immigrants and portrays them as a threat, thereby fostering fear and opposition.

The analysis revealed that The New York Post and The New York Daily News were the sole newspapers to utilize commissives, whereas the others did not, as shown by the statistical analysis provided. Figure 6 shows that The New York Post uses commissive verbs, including promise and offer.

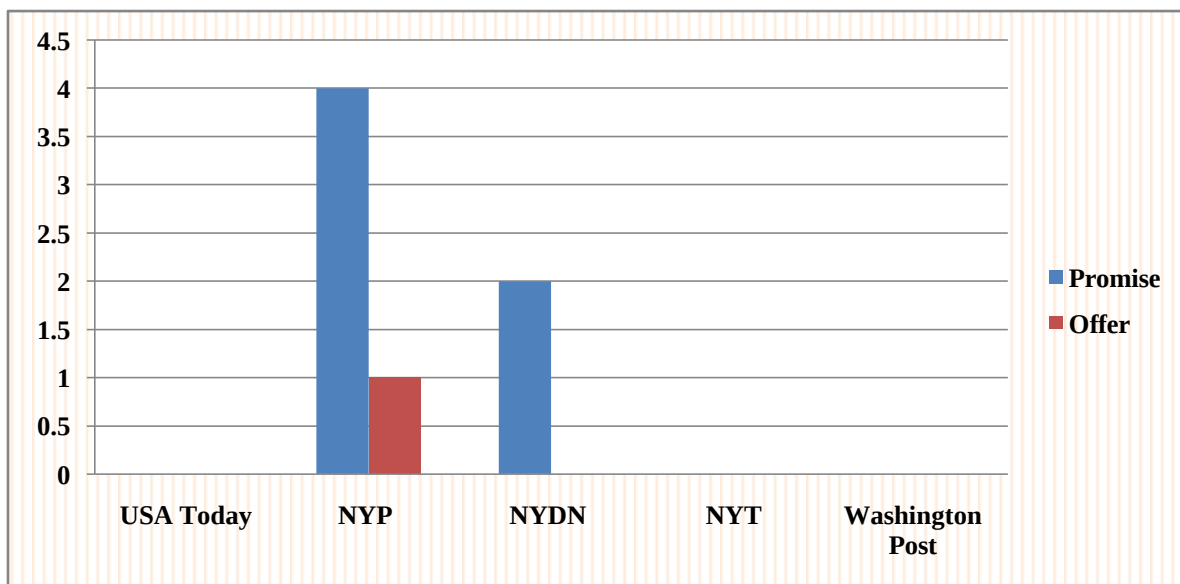


Figure 6:- Illocutionary acts in immigration discourse: commissives.

Figure 6 demonstrates that the New York Post employs commissive verbs such as Promise and Offer, which appears to contest the typical view of conservative Republicans by presenting the personal story of a woman who defies

stereotypes through her intersectional identity as a black, gay, immigrant individual. It examines the experiences of immigrants, assesses the effects of Trump's policies on national security concerning immigration, and claims that the former president attempted to secure funding for the construction of a border wall. It challenges a long-established status quo that has been deeply embedded in society, suggesting that change may take time and evidence. The New York Daily News makes commissive statements through the use of Promise verbs to emphasize determination and opportunity, advocating for an approach to immigration policies that is inclusive and protects the rights of migrants as a progressive direction.

Discussion:-

In five US newspapers, constatives, assertives, and descriptives are the main sub-categories. USA Today's constatives make up 94%, assertives 53%, descriptives 36%, and confirmatives 3% of the total constatives. The constatives in New York Post account for 85%, with assertives at 71% and descriptives at 10%. New York Daily News features constatives at 96%, including assertives at 85%, descriptives at 9%, and ascriptives at 2%. New York Times has constatives at 97%, with assertives at 85% and descriptives at 12%. The Washington Post has constatives at 99%, with assertives at 76% and descriptives at 23%. The different types of directives, including requestives, permissives, and advisories, are significant as they make up the overall number of illocutionary acts. In USA Today, 8% of the directives are requestives. The New York Post shows that out of 11% of directives, 4% are requestives and 7% are permissives. The New York Daily News, 1% of directives are requestives. The New York Times indicates that 3% of directives are advisories. The Washington Post demonstrates that out of 11% of directives, 4% are requestives and 7% are permissives. Commissive sub-categories, such as 'promise' and 'offer', were only present in the New York Post and New York Daily News, with no instances found in the other articles. In the New York Post, commissives accounted for 2%, with 'promise' at 1% and 'offer' at 1% of the total number of commissives. In the New York Daily News, commissives represented 3%, with 'promise' accounting for the entire share of commissives. Acknowledgment sub-categories were exclusively found in the New York Post, with no instances found in the remaining articles. In the New York Post, acknowledgments represented 2%, with 'rejecting' accounting for the entire share of acknowledgments.

The New York Times and Washington Post generally provide proactive coverage that not only reports on immigration policies but also explores their broader implications and the motivations behind them, which can lead to a more informed and possibly critical audience that may advocate for more thoughtful and humane immigration policies. USA Today, New York Post, and New York Daily News tend to react more to immediate policy impacts or administration actions, which might encourage a more immediate and emotional response from readers, have the potential to divide public opinion on immigration issues. Articles in The New York Times and Washington Post that depict immigration policy as a result of diplomatic discussions or individual influence might encourage a view of immigration policy as nuanced and complex, affecting advocacy for more detailed and less reactionary policies. USA Today, focusing on the scale of immigration under current policies could sway public opinion towards concerns about resource management and economic impacts, pushing for tighter controls. The New York Post and New York Daily News highlight the immediate effects and sometimes the dramatic aspects of policies. The New York Post's focus on security and the Daily News's emphasis on human rights abuses might either reinforce stringent policy support or galvanize reform movements, respectively.

Conclusion:-

Speech acts play a critical role in the communication between journalists and their readers, aiding journalists in effectively transmitting information and influencing readers to take desired actions or behaviors. This study discovered illocutionary speech acts techniques used by the USA newspapers differed across constative, directive, commissive and acknowledgments. The study concludes that there are differences in the use of illocutionary speech acts in immigration reporting among USA newspapers, with a tendency to use constative and directive speech acts more frequently than commissives and acknowledgments. The study was found that four types of constative verbs are used (assertives, descriptives, confirmatives, and ascriptives). Three types of directive verbs are utilized (requestives (questions), permissives, and advisories). Two types of commissive verbs are employed (offers and promises). Only one type of acknowledgment verbs is used (rejecting). The analysis of descriptions in terms of quantity has shown that constatives were more commonly used than other types. Constatives accounted for 95.35% of the total illocutionary acts, while directives made up 3.7%. The remaining was distributed across different percentages, including commissives, acknowledgements.

The study explored that the New York Times employed rhetorical questions and hypothetical scenarios to question state actions against migrants, while USA Today used hyperbole to critique political figures' anti-immigrant sentiments. The Washington Post framed immigration within broader human rights contexts, while the New York Post sensationalized immigration issues to justify stringent measures. The New York Daily News used vivid imagery to evoke sympathy but also highlighted systemic issues, again, as usual, reflecting its conservative leanings. More precisely, the results explore that the New York Times and Washington Post, through nuanced and empathetic narratives, often support pro-immigration sentiments. USA Today maintains a balanced view, reflecting both supportive and critical perspectives on immigration. The New York Post and New York Daily News, through fear-based and conservative rhetoric, typically foster anti-immigration sentiments. The strategic use of illocutionary speech acts by these newspapers not only reflects their editorial biases but also actively shapes public opinion and policy debates on immigration. The media's portrayal of immigration issues, whether through constatives, directives, and commissives and acknowledgements along with some acknowledgements, plays a critical role in influencing societal attitudes and political decisions, underscoring the powerful impact of journalistic framing on public discourse.

References:-

1. Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
2. Austin, J. L. (2020). *How to Do Things with Words*. Barakaldo Books. <https://www.kobo.com/ww/en/ebook/how-to-do-things-with-words?srsId=AfmBOoru0SVW1rGHEsVvyT3w5Q94iKIH9GsD5JijJ8AxCgoCa-R3o-9j>
3. Austin, J.L. (1976). *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press.
4. Bach, K. and Harnish, R. M. (1979). *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
5. Harris, D. W., & Unnsteinsson, E. (2018). Wittgenstein's influence on Austin's philosophy of language. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 26(2), 371-395.
6. Harris, D. W., Fogal, D., & Moss, M. (2018). Speech acts: The contemporary theoretical landscape. In Fogal, D., Harris, D.W. & Moss, M. (eds). *New work on speech acts* (1-23). Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press.
7. Hosseinpour, G. (2021). A meditation on Austin and Searle taxonomies of illocutionary acts. *Philosophy*, 19(2), 39-56. <https://doi.org/10.22059/jop.2021.321807.1006599>
8. Searle, J. R. (1968). Austin on Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts. *The Philosophical Review*, 77(4), 405-424.
9. Searle, J. R. (1968). Austin on Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts. *The Philosophical Review*, 77-4, pp.405-424. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183008>
10. Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge University Press: New York.
11. Searle, J. R. (1976). A Classification of Illocutionary Acts. *Language in Society*, 5(1), pp.1-23. <http://Www.Jstor.Org/Stable/4166848>
12. Searle, J. R. (1983). *Intentionality: An Essay in The Philosophy of Mind*. New York, Cambridge University Press.
13. Searle, J. R. (1989). How Performatives Work. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 15, 535-558.
14. Stevani, M., Tarigan, K. E., Sawalmeh, M. H., & Ginting, F. Y. A. (2023). A Case Study of Locutionary, Illocutionary, and Perlocutionary Speech Acts in English Learning Interactions in Junior High School. *Journal of World Englishes and Educational Practices*, 5(1), 47-56.
15. Weisser, M. (2020). Speech acts in corpus pragmatics: Making the case for an extended taxonomy. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 25(4), 400-425. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ijcl.19023.wei>