

# Analysing Tun Mahathir's Persuasive Language in the 74th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the persuasive language strategies employed by Tun Mahathir in his address at the 74th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Drawing on Speech Act Theory and Aristotle's rhetorical modes, it investigates how political discourse functions as both action and persuasion. The research problem focuses on the ways politicians deploy speech acts and rhetorical appeals to shape global audiences. A qualitative design was used, with purposive sampling identifying the UNGA speech as the case study. Data were analysed thematically through a structured coding scheme supported by descriptive analysis. The findings show that assertive speech acts were most prevalent, reinforcing authority, while directive and expressive acts added emotional and ethical resonance. Furthermore, ethos, pathos, and logos were strategically interwoven to strengthen persuasive impact. The study concludes that persuasive political discourse emerges from a calculated interplay of speech acts and rhetorical appeals, with implications for political communication and cross-cultural studies.

**Keywords:** Persuasive language, Speech Act Theory, Rhetorical appeals, Political discourse, United Nations speech

## INTRODUCTION

Persuasive language is a central tool in political communication, often used by politicians to influence public opinion and policy decisions. Through rhetorical modes such as ethos, pathos, and logos, political figures construct arguments that appeal to logic, emotion, and credibility. These strategies are not only used to gain support but also to shape narratives around national and global issues. For instance, leaders often rely on emotional appeals to evoke empathy or urgency, while logical reasoning helps justify policy stances. Ethos, on the other hand, builds trust by highlighting the speaker's integrity or experience. As Kashiha (2022) notes, meta discourse practices in political speeches reveal how politicians tailor their language to engage diverse audiences. Therefore, persuasive language in politics is not merely expressive—it is strategic and deeply contextual.

Speech Act Theory (SAT) provides a framework for understanding how language functions as action, especially in political discourse. Rather than focusing solely on the literal meaning of words, SAT emphasizes the speaker's intention and the effect of the utterance on the listener. In political speeches, utterances often serve multiple functions—asserting facts, issuing commands, expressing emotions, or making commitments. These acts are not passive; they actively shape perceptions and responses. According to Drid (2018), speech acts in political contexts are used to perform actions such as declaring policies, expressing solidarity, or directing public behaviour. The theory highlights how meaning is constructed through context and intention, making it essential for analysing persuasive strategies. Thus, SAT allows researchers to decode the deeper communicative goals embedded in political language.

In sum, persuasive language and speech acts are interlinked tools that politicians use to influence and engage their audiences. While rhetorical modes shape the emotional and logical appeal, speech acts reveal the speaker's intent and communicative function, making both essential for analysing political discourse.

### **Problem Statement**

Politicians strategically use speech acts—such as assertives, directives, expressives, and commissives—to shape their messages and influence audiences. Assertives help present opinions or facts with authority, while directives urge action. As Drid (2018) notes, speech acts in political discourse are tools for performing actions through language, making them central to persuasion.

These acts reflect communicative intentions and situational needs. Commissives express promises, and expressives convey emotions to build rapport. Wodak (2020) emphasizes that political discourse is shaped by strategic language use to achieve ideological and pragmatic goals. Thus, speech acts are deliberate rhetorical choices aligned with political objectives.

In addition to speech acts, rhetorical modes—logos, pathos, and ethos—play a key role. Logos appeals to logic, pathos to emotion, and ethos to credibility. Politicians often blend these modes for stronger impact, such as using data (logos), showing empathy (pathos), and referencing experience (ethos). Argyle et al. (2025) found that combining emotional appeal, reasoning, and credibility enhances persuasive effectiveness.

Despite growing interest in these elements, few studies explore how speech acts and rhetorical modes interact within a single speech. This research fills that gap by analysing Tun Mahathir's UNGA speech to uncover how persuasive language is constructed. Understanding this interplay is vital for interpreting political messaging and its influence on global audiences.

### **Research Objectives**

This study aims to examine how Tun Mahathir strategically employed persuasive language in his speech at the 74th United Nations General Assembly. It focuses on identifying the types and functions of speech acts used, as well as the rhetorical modes that contributed to the overall persuasive impact of his address.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the types of speech acts used by Tun Mahathir in his speech in employing persuasive language?
2. What are the functions of the speech acts used by Tun Mahathir in his speech?
3. What modes of persuasion did Tun Mahathir utilise in his speech?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Speech Act Theory (SAT) and Political Speeches**

Speech Act Theory (SAT), developed by J.L. Austin and later expanded by John Searle, asserts that language functions not only to convey information but also to perform actions. It classifies speech acts into five categories - assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives - each reflecting the speaker's communicative intent. In political discourse, SAT is particularly relevant, as politicians use language to express positions, issue commands, convey emotions, and make commitments (Drid, 2018). According to Al-Hindawi (2017), speech acts are often employed to influence or manipulate public perception, while Kashiha (2022) observed that meta discourse markers in political texts frequently align with speech act functions, reinforcing their persuasive nature. Thus, SAT offers a valuable framework for analysing political language beyond its literal meaning.

Previous studies have applied SAT across diverse political contexts to examine how leaders use language to shape public opinion. For example, Al-Hindawi (2017) found that assertive and directive acts dominated British

and American political debates, helping to construct ideological narratives. Similarly, Anyanwu (2020) analysed speeches by African presidents during the COVID-19 pandemic and identified expressive and commissive acts as key tools for fostering solidarity and trust. In Malaysia, Kashiha (2022) explored meta discourse in political speeches and found that speech acts were used to build credibility and emotional appeal. Despite these contributions, limited research has examined Malaysian leaders on international platforms. This study addresses that gap by analysing Tun Mahathir's UNGA speech, extending SAT's application to a global setting and offering insights into Malaysian political rhetoric on the world stage.

The strategic use of speech acts in political communication reveals how language operates as action, particularly in persuasive contexts. A recurring pattern across studies is the use of assertive and directive acts to shape public perception and policy narratives. The integration of rhetorical strategies such as *ethos* and *pathos* with speech acts suggests a deeper communicative intent beyond surface-level meaning. However, distinguishing overlapping functions—especially when emotional appeals are embedded in assertive statements—remains a challenge (Al-Hindawi, 2018).

Drid (2018) emphasized the manipulative potential of speech acts, noting the prevalence of expressive and declarative acts in shaping ideological narratives. Al-Hindawi (2018) also highlighted how speech acts can obscure intent or redirect attention. Kashiha (2022) found that commissive and declarative acts in Malaysian speeches were used to build trust and signal political shifts. These findings underscore the evolving nature of speech acts and the importance of contextual analysis in understanding their pragmatic functions.

### Aristotle's Modes of Persuasion in Political Speeches

Aristotle's rhetorical modes - *ethos*, **pathos**, and **logos** - are key to understanding persuasive political speech. Kashiha (2022), through meta discourse theory, found **ethos** frequently used in Malaysian political speeches to build credibility, while **logos** appeared through factual claims and statistics, and **pathos** through emotionally charged language. These modes often overlap, creating a layered persuasive effect that is difficult to separate during live delivery. Stavrakakis (2021), in his study of European populist speeches, observed that **pathos** was dominant in evoking emotional responses during political crises, while **ethos** and **logos** supported trust-building and policy justification. Kashiha (2022) also emphasized that persuasion is most effective when all three modes are balanced.

Across studies, political figures consistently use **speech acts** and rhetorical appeals to shape public perception. Assertive and directive acts are common, while **ethos** and **pathos** enhance emotional and ethical resonance. However, isolating overlapping speech functions and measuring emotional impact remains challenging, especially across diverse audiences. Methodologically, many studies rely on qualitative designs with small samples, limiting generalisability. Theoretically, there is a lack of integration between **Speech Act Theory** and rhetorical frameworks in non-Western contexts. This research addresses that gap by analysing Tun Mahathir's UNGA speech, offering deeper insight into persuasive strategies in Malaysian political discourse.

### Framework

This study's conceptual framework combines **Speech Act Theory**, **persuasive communication strategies**, and **rhetorical analysis**. Drawing on Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), Speech Act Theory categorizes utterances by their intended effects—such as asserting, directing, or expressing—highlighting their performative nature in shaping persuasive intent. These acts serve functions like informing, appealing, and challenging, which are essential in understanding how Mahathir seeks to influence his audience.

Aristotle's rhetorical modes—**ethos**, **pathos**, and **logos**—complement this analysis by offering insight into the types of persuasive appeals used. **Ethos** reflects credibility and moral character, **pathos** targets emotional engagement, and **logos** relies on logical reasoning and evidence. As Kashiha (2022) and Stavrakakis (2021) suggest, the strategic balance of these modes enhances persuasive impact, though their overlap can complicate analysis.

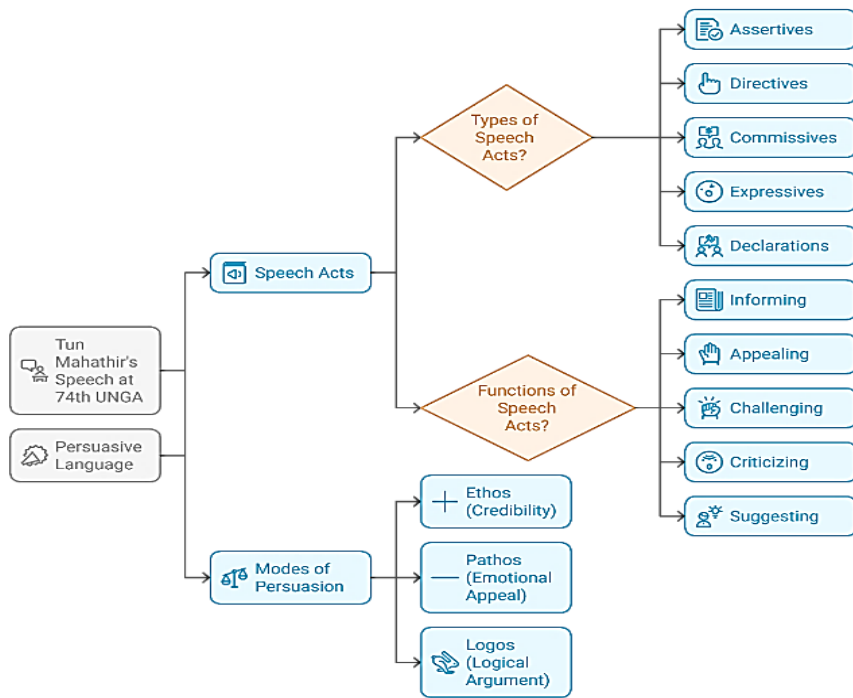


Figure 1: Tun Mahathir's Persuasive Language Analysis

The framework is visually represented in a diagram above, showing how Mahathir’s speech is analysed through two lenses: **speech acts** and **rhetorical modes**. Speech acts are classified using Searle’s (1976) categories - assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations - each serving distinct communicative functions. Simultaneously, rhetorical appeals are examined to understand how Mahathir builds trust, evokes emotion, and presents logical arguments.

Together, these elements form a cohesive structure for analysing persuasive language in political discourse, offering deeper insight into how leaders shape international narratives through strategic communication.

## METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative methodology to investigate persuasive elements in Tun Mahathir’s political speech. Qualitative approaches are well-suited for analysing language, as they facilitate nuanced interpretation of meaning, context, and speaker intent. Bhandari (2020) argues that such methods are ideal for examining complex communicative and social dynamics, while Rihoux (2019) highlights their relevance in political discourse, where subjective analysis is crucial. This design enables a thorough exploration of rhetorical strategies and speech acts, offering a flexible framework to uncover embedded meanings in political language.

The study employs content analysis to examine Tun Mahathir’s address at the 74th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). This method systematically interprets textual data by identifying recurring patterns and themes. Amaireh (2023) demonstrated its effectiveness in revealing rhetorical techniques in political speeches. In this context, content analysis facilitates the categorisation of speech acts and persuasive strategies, supporting the research objective of understanding how language is used to influence audiences in international political arenas.

The sample comprises a single, contextually rich speech by Tun Mahathir, selected from his broader repertoire of public addresses. Although limited in scope, the chosen speech is significant and representative of wider communicative practices. Previous studies, such as those by Amaireh (2023) and Kashiha (2022), have successfully used focused samples to analyse rhetorical features, validating this approach for in-depth qualitative inquiry.

Purposive sampling was applied to select the UNGA speech, targeting a case with high informational value. Klar and Leeper (2019) support this method in political discourse studies, noting its effectiveness in selecting

strategically important texts. The chosen speech reflects persuasive intent and international relevance, aligning with the study’s aims.

Thematic analysis serves as the primary tool for data interpretation. Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasize its adaptability in identifying and analysing themes within qualitative data, particularly in political contexts. This method enables the researcher to uncover underlying persuasive strategies and rhetorical patterns, going beyond surface-level content.

Data were collected over 4–6 weeks, with the speech stored and cleaned for clarity. Following Braun and Clarke (2022), the data were systematically coded to ensure analytical rigour. The coding scheme was based on Speech Act Theory and Aristotle’s rhetorical modes, allowing for descriptive analysis of persuasive elements. To ensure validity and reliability, credibility checks and inter-coder reliability were employed, as recommended by Maxwell (2021) and Zhao et al. (2022), enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings.

## FINDINGS

The analysed data for each research question (RQ) has been compiled into structured tables

Table 1: The types of speech acts used by Tun Mahathir in his speech

Speech Act Type	Example Excerpt	Frequency
Assertive	The veto power - they must know was against all the principles of human rights...	165
Directive	We need to identify the cause and remove it.	19
Commissive	Malaysia pledged to maintain at least 50 percent of our land mass under forest cover.	3
Expressive	But nowhere have they been as brutal as Myanmar.	8
Declarative	Malaysia accepts the state of Israel as a fait accompli.	2

Table 1 shows the distribution of five types of speech acts used in Tun Mahathir’s UNGA speech: assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative. Assertive speech acts were the most frequent (165 instances), followed by directive (19), expressive (8), commissive (3), and declarative (2). These findings indicate that Tun Mahathir relied heavily on assertive acts to present facts and opinions with authority. Directive acts were used to encourage action, while expressive and commissive acts added emotional and ethical depth. Declarative acts were rare, suggesting limited intent to formally alter political realities. Overall, the dominance of assertive acts reflects a strategy focused on logical persuasion and strong positioning.

TABLE 2: The functions of the speech acts used by Tun Mahathir in his speech

Speech Act Function	Example Excerpt	Descriptive Notes
Asserting moral stance	The veto power - they must know was against all the principles of human rights...	Used to highlight contradictions in global policies.
Encouraging action	We need to identify the cause and remove it.	Used to advise and command action.

Making formal declaration	Malaysia accepts the state of Israel as a fait accompli.	Used to express formal recognition or stance.
Expressing emotion	But nowhere have they been as brutal as Myanmar.	Used to evoke emotional response and build rapport.
Committing to policy	Malaysia pledged to maintain at least 50 percent of our land mass under forest cover.	Used to reinforce credibility and national integrity.

Table 2 presents the functions of speech acts identified in the speech, including asserting moral stance, encouraging action, making formal declarations, expressing emotion, and committing to policy. The data show that assertive acts were used to highlight contradictions in global policies, while directive acts served to mobilize listeners. Expressive acts conveyed emotional responses, and commissive acts reinforced national credibility. Declarative acts were used to express formal recognition. These functions demonstrate how Tun Mahathir tailored his speech acts to serve specific communicative goals. The findings suggest that speech acts were not only linguistic choices but strategic tools to influence international audiences.

TABLE 3: Modes of persuasion Tun Mahathir utilised in his speech

Mode of Persuasion	Example Excerpt	Descriptive Notes
Logos	Malaysia pledged to maintain at least 50 percent of our land mass under forest cover.	Appeal to logic through factual environmental commitment.
Pathos	But nowhere have they been as brutal as Myanmar.	Appeal to emotion by highlighting injustice and brutality.
Ethos	Malaysia’s peaceful dispute resolutions show our commitment to diplomacy.	Appeal to credibility through ethical leadership and peaceful actions.

Table RQ3 outlines the use of Aristotle’s modes of persuasion—logos, pathos, and ethos—in Tun Mahathir’s speech. Logos was evident in factual statements about Malaysia’s environmental commitments, pathos appeared in emotionally charged references to injustice, and ethos was reflected in ethical leadership and peaceful diplomacy. These modes were used in combination to strengthen the persuasive impact of the speech. The findings show that Tun Mahathir effectively balanced logical reasoning, emotional appeal, and credibility to engage his audience. This strategic use of rhetorical modes highlights the complexity and depth of persuasive language in political discourse.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings revealed that assertive speech acts were the most dominant in Tun Mahathir’s UNGA speech, followed by directive, expressive, commissive, and declarative acts. This pattern suggests that Mahathir relied heavily on statements and observations to assert his stance and critique global injustices. This aligns with Anyanwu (2020), who found assertive acts prevalent in African presidential speeches during crises, used to reassure and inform. Similarly, Al-Hindawi (2017) observed that directive acts were common in Western political debates, used to influence public behaviour. However, Mahathir’s limited use of declarative acts contrasts with leaders who often use declarations to shift political narratives. The findings support the idea that assertive acts are central to persuasive political speech, especially when aiming to establish authority and credibility. Ultimately, Mahathir’s speech act choices reflect a strategic effort to present Malaysia’s position firmly while engaging global audiences through logic and leadership.

The analysis showed that Tun Mahathir used speech acts to assert moral positions, encourage action, express emotion, make formal declarations, and commit to policy. These functions were not randomly distributed but aligned with the speech's persuasive goals. Kashiha (2022) found similar patterns in Malaysian political speeches, where speech acts were used to construct credibility and emotional appeal. Al-Hindawi (2018) also noted that speech acts serve pragmatic functions such as legitimizing authority or deflecting criticism. Mahathir's use of expressive and commissive acts to build rapport and reinforce Malaysia's integrity reflects a calculated rhetorical strategy. The findings suggest that speech acts in political discourse are multifunctional and context-sensitive, often serving overlapping purposes. In Mahathir's case, the functions of speech acts were tailored to both critique global powers and elevate Malaysia's diplomatic image. This reinforces the idea that speech acts are not just linguistic tools but instruments of political positioning.

Tun Mahathir employed all three Aristotelian modes of persuasion—logos, pathos, and ethos—throughout his speech, often blending them to enhance rhetorical impact. Logos was used to present factual data, such as Malaysia's environmental achievements, while pathos appeared in emotionally charged references to injustice. Ethos was evident in his portrayal of Malaysia as a peaceful and principled nation. These findings align with Kashiha (2022), who observed that Malaysian politicians often balance emotional and logical appeals to strengthen their arguments. Stavrakakis (2021) also found that pathos dominates in populist speeches, especially during crises. Mahathir's strategic use of ethos, however, sets his speech apart by emphasizing ethical leadership and diplomatic credibility. The integration of all three modes demonstrates a sophisticated approach to persuasion, aimed at engaging both rational and emotional dimensions of the audience. This confirms that effective political rhetoric often relies on a balanced use of persuasive appeals to resonate across diverse listeners.

### Implications of Findings

The findings of this study offer both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study reinforces Speech Act Theory as a valid framework for analysing political discourse, especially in non-Western contexts. It also supports Aristotle's rhetorical modes as essential tools for understanding persuasive strategies in speeches. Practically, the findings can guide political communicators in crafting speeches that balance assertiveness, emotional appeal, and credibility. As noted by Kashiha (2022), strategic use of meta discourse enhances audience engagement, while Anyanwu (2020) emphasized the role of speech acts in building public trust during crises. These insights are valuable for diplomats, speechwriters, and educators in political communication. Ultimately, the study highlights how persuasive language can be used not only to inform but also to influence global narratives and diplomatic relations.

### Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should consider expanding the sample size to include multiple speeches across different platforms to enhance generalisability. Methodologically, researchers may integrate mixed methods to combine qualitative depth with quantitative breadth. Practically, comparative studies between Malaysian and international leaders could reveal cultural variations in persuasive strategies. Theoretically, future work could explore the intersection of Speech Act Theory with other linguistic models such as Critical Discourse Analysis. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2021), thematic analysis can be enriched through reflexive practices that deepen interpretation. Additionally, Stavrakakis (2021) recommended examining emotional appeals in populist rhetoric, which could be extended to Southeast Asian contexts. These directions will help refine the understanding of political persuasion and broaden the scope of discourse analysis in global settings.

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