

The Language of Pro Wrestling: A Speech Act Analysis on a Promo between a “Face” and a “Heel”

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ABSTRACT

The research examines how language functions as a performative tool in professional wrestling by analysing a WWE promo between Cody Rhodes and Roman Reigns using Searle’s (1969) Speech Act Theory. The research had two main objectives: (1) to identify the types of speech acts used by both wrestlers, and (2) to compare the frequency of the speech acts used by each. A qualitative content analysis approach was used, and the promo was transcribed and categorised into Searle’s five types of speech acts. The results revealed that both wrestlers used four speech act types which were assertive, directive, expressive, and commissive and declarative speech act was absent. Cody Rhodes, as the face, relied more on assertive and expressive acts that reflected humility and respect, whereas Roman Reigns, as the heel, used more directives and insults to show authority and dominance. These findings suggest that professional wrestling promos use speech acts not only for entertainment but also to construct moral contrast and narrative tension between characters.

Keywords: Speech act theory, professional wrestling, WWE, discourse analysis, sports communication

INTRODUCTION

The role of language and communication in sports is important in many ways which can serve both instrumental and performative purposes. From one perspective, besides having the capability to perform at a high level, athletes are also expected to be able to communicate effectively especially when they are working in a team (Kim et al., 2021). This will help their team to coordinate and perform at their best to achieve the best possible results. On the other hand, language and communication also play a critical role to give make sports entertaining and engaging to capture the viewers’ attention (Xia et al., 2024).

Among the many forms of sports, this research focused its attention on professional wrestling. It provides a unique opportunity for discourse of language on sports as professional wrestling relies heavily on two combinations, which are athletic performance and storytelling. Unlike other sports such as football, basketball and mixed martial arts, the nature of professional wrestling is scripted because the outcome of a match is predetermined by its writers. Despite that, audience still has no idea about the outcome of the match, and this makes it as exciting as any other sports. As for the professional wrestlers, they must rely on their physical skills, timing and verbal performance to engage with the audience to deliver the storyline effectively (Azunwo, 2024).

In professional wrestling, there are “heroes” and there are “villains”. These opposing character types are commonly referred to as the face and the heel (BBC News, n.d.). Face or babyface is a term used to describe the performers which the crowds cheer for, while heel refers to performers who the audience despise. The contrast of moral between these characters defines the core of wrestling’s storytelling.

The biggest wrestling company in the world is World Wrestling Entertainment or more popularly known as WWE with million of viewers worldwide across television, streaming and social media (Hale, 2025). Hence, this study focuses a face-off between two current top WWE performers Cody Rhodes and Roman Reigns which

took place in an episode of Smackdown before their match at WrestleMania 40 through the lens of Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory. According to Altikri (2011), analysing through this aspect will help us to understand how language can influence listeners' actions and behaviour. In the context of professional wrestling, performers are not only talking to each other, they are also talking to the audience and almost every utterance could garner reactions whether it is positive or negative. This research has two main objectives:

1. To identify the types of speech acts used by both professional wrestlers
2. To compare the frequency of the speech acts used by each professional wrestler

LITERATURE REVIEW

Austin (1962) first laid out the foundation for speech act theory when he introduced three components which locutionary act (the speaking act), illocutionary act (the act of intention to speak) and perlocutionary act (the act of responding to speaking). Searle (1969) then attempted to perfect the concept by focusing more on illocutionary act by speakers in any context. He then classified the speech acts into five components which are assertive speech act, directive speech act, expressive speech act, commissive speech act and declarative speech act.

Table 1: Searle's (1969) Speech Act (Adapted from Hofmann et al., 2023)

Types of illocutionary act	Description
Assertive (Stating, reporting, denying, claiming)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Illocutionary point: commit speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition 2. Direction of fit: words to world 3. Psychological state: belief
Directive (Orders, suggestions, requesting, commanding)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Illocutionary point: getting the interlocutor to do something. 2. Direction of fit: world to words. 3. Psychological state: wish
Commissive (Promising, guaranteeing, offering, threatening)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Illocutionary point: committing the speaker to a future action 2. Direction of fit: world to words 3. Psychological state: intention
Expressive (Congratulating, thanking, complimenting, Greeting)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Illocutionary point: expression of a psychological state 2. Direction of fit: none 3. Psychological state: diverse
Declarative (Naming, appointing, announcing, nominating)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Illocutionary point: bringing the institutional facts 2. Direction of fit: both 3. Psychological state: none

Past studies which have applied Searle's (1969) speech act theory have been done on various settings such as short stories, speeches, classroom and sports. In a literary study by Khanfar et al. (2023) researchers applied

Speech Act Theory to analyse how fictional characters perform communicative acts within narrative texts. Out of the five Searle's (1969) speech act theory, it was found that directives were the most frequent.

The speech act studies have also been done towards speeches. Hashim and Safwat (2015) conducted a study on political speeches by John Kerry and George W. Bush. They found commissive speech acts was the most dominant speech act used by the two politicians. In another study on speech settings, Suprihana et al. (2025) found assertive speech act was the most dominant speech act used by 20 international exchange students.

In classroom settings, Yulian and Mandarani (2023) conducted a study on the forms of illocutionary acts used by teachers when interacting with seventh-grade students and found directive was the most frequent speech act used. Similarly, Afifuddin (2024) also did a study on classroom communication between 24 students and their lecturer. The study found assertive was the most frequent speech act used. Sports speech acts have also been studied. Jose Mourinho's post-match interviews were examined in a study by Putro (2014), which revealed distinct speech act patterns in winning and losing situations. While directive speech acts questioned the decisions made by referees, expressive speech acts expressed feelings.

As can be observed based on the outcome of the various studies, results could differ under different settings. For example, not all studies on speech act show that assertive speech act is the most common one. It could be influenced by the setting like the study on speech where it was found that commissive was the most frequent speech act. Hence, a study on professional wrestling setting could provide a great opportunity to systematically examine the wrestling promos through Searle's (1969) speech act theory. This could also help us to better understand how linguistic choices help performers elevate themselves to the next level.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study uses Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory and a qualitative content analysis methodology to analyse a WWE promo. While content analysis is especially useful for determining how words and phrases operate within particular settings (Crossman, 2020), qualitative research allows for a thorough investigation of communication patterns and meanings (Creswell, 1994).

Although this study included a simple comparison of speech act frequencies between the two wrestlers, the main focus was on interpretation rather than numbers. Future research can involve more than one coder to improve consistency and reduce subjectivity in the analysis as this study did not use inter-rater validation.

Population and Sampling

The promo between the two wrestlers Cody Rhodes and Roman Reigns was chosen using a purposive sampling procedure, which enables the researcher to specifically select data that satisfy particular requirements pertinent to the study's goals (Etikan et al., 2016).

In the chosen promo, Cody Rhodes played the role as the face which could be seen as the hero figure based on the way he won the crowd's support. Throughout the promo, he showcased respectful manner and his focus on personal belief and family legacy. Roman Reigns, on the other hand, played the role as the heel. This could be seen from the way he adopted a more arrogant and dismissive attitude. The clear contrast between the two performers is a classic wrestling storytelling which can keep the audience emotionally invested in the story between the hero and the villain.

Data Collection Procedure and Data Analysis

The data collection process began with choosing a wrestling promo between a face and a heel. The researcher chose a promo between Cody Rhodes and Roman Reigns and this was taken from the WWE official channel. The video titled "Reigns and Rhodes Come Face to Face Before Wrestlemania" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvOE-Qcwbw4>).

After watching the video, the researcher transcribed the promo and made sure that every line could be captured as accurately as possible. The researcher went through the video a few times to ensure that there are no missing parts. Once the transcription was completed, the dialogue between Roman Reigns and Cody Rhodes was then analysed using Searle's (1969) speech act theory by identifying the speech acts which are assertive, directive, commissive, expressive and declarative. The results were then organised based on the two objectives of the study.

RESULTS

Types of speech acts used

After the study was conducted on a promo between Cody Rhodes (Face) and Roman Reigns (Heel), it was found that only four out of five speech acts were used which are assertive, directive, commissive and expressive. The results of this objective are presented in five sections below.

Assertive speech act

Table 2: Assertive speech act by Cody Rhodes

Speaker	Message
Cody Rhodes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>So if you came alone, I came alone.</i> 2. <i>You guys were unstoppable.</i> 3. <i>You might be right.</i>

Table 2 shows some of the examples of Cody Rhodes using the assertive speech act. Based on his encounter with Roman Reigns, he used utterances such as "So, if you came alone, I came alone.", "You guys were unstoppable" and "You might be right".

Table 3: Assertive speech act by Roman Reigns

Speaker	Message
Roman Reigns	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>"You're here thinking with your heart.</i> 2. <i>He stabbed me in my back.</i> 3. <i>I thought that he was becoming my brother.</i>

Table 3 shows the use of assertive speech act by Roman Reigns. Some of the utterances used by him were "You're here thinking with your heart", "He stabbed me in my back" and "I thought that he was becoming my brother".

Directive speech act

Table 4: Directive speech act by Cody Rhodes

Speaker	Message
Cody Rhodes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Let me ask you something.</i> 2. <i>Let's get real here.</i>

3. Can you trust The Rock?

In table 4, some of the utterances used by Cody Rhodes which fall under directive speech act include “Let me ask you something”, “Let’s get real here” and “Can you trust The Rock?”.

Table 5: Directive speech act by Roman Reigns

Speaker	Message
Roman Reigns	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Where was Seth at?</i> 2. <i>What do you think is gonna happen to you?</i> 3. <i>Hear me out.</i>

Table 5 highlights Roman Reigns’ utterances which fall under directive speech act. Some of the examples here show that he asked Cody Rhodes “Where was Seth at?”, “What do you think is gonna happen to you?” and he also told Cody Rhodes to “hear him out”.

Commissive speech act

Table 6: Commissive speech act by Cody Rhodes

Speaker	Message
Cody Rhodes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Well, I'm as much a man of my word as you are.</i>

Table 6 shows Cody Rhodes did also use commissive speech act. However, in contrast to both assertive and directive speech act, only one utterance by him which has been identified which is “Well, I’m as much a man of my word as you are” as he indicated that he is promising something.

Table 7: Commissive speech act by Roman Reigns

Speaker	Message
Roman Reigns	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>The wise man has made a promise and the tribal chief has kept his word.</i> 2. <i>And that's what I am, I'm a man of my word.</i>

In table 7, Roman Reigns also used some utterances which fall under commissive speech act. The examples are “The wise man has made a promise and the tribal chief has kept his word” and “And that’s what I am, I’m a man of my word”.

Expressive speech act

Table 8: Expressive speech act by Cody Rhodes

Speaker	Message
Cody Rhodes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>I appreciate this education.</i> 2. <i>Good luck at WrestleMania.</i>

Table 8 highlights the use of expressive speech act by Cody Rhodes. He said to his rival Roman Reigns “I appreciate this education” and wished him “Good luck at WrestleMania.”.

Table 9: Expressive speech act by Roman Reigns

Speaker	Message
Roman Reigns	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <i>You're a fool.</i> <i>You're stupid to me.</i> <i>Wait, no, no, no, I mean that with respect.</i>

Table 9 shows the use of expressive speech act by Roman Reigns speech act. He used expressive speech act to tell Cody Rhodes “You’re a fool”, “You’re stupid to me” and “Wait, no, no, no, I mean that with respect”.

Comparison of frequency of speech acts used by each wrestler

Once the types of speech acts used was identified, the research focused on identifying the frequency for each speech act for each wrestler.

Table 10: The frequency of speech act by each wrestler

Speech acts	Cody Rhodes	Roman Reigns
Assertive	54.3%	48.3%
Directive	28.6%	33.3%
Expressive	14.3%	11.7%
Commissive	2.8%	6.7%
Declarative	0%	0%

Table 10 shows the comparison of the frequency of speech acts used by Cody Rhodes and Roman Reigns based on the promo which they had before WrestleMania 40. Both professional wrestlers used mainly assertive speech acts in their promo with Cody Rhodes had a higher percentage (54.3%) than Roman Reigns (48.3%). The second most frequent speech act for both Cody Rhodes and Roman Reigns is directive speech act. Unlike assertive speech act, Roman Reigns used directive speech act more (33.3%) as compared to Cody Rhodes (28.6%). Next, Cody Rhodes used more expressive speech act (14.3%) than Roman Reigns (11.7%). The use of commissive speech act is fewer compared to the other three speech acts with Roman Reigns using it more (6.7%) than Cody Rhodes (2.8%). Lastly, there is not a single use of declarative speech act with both wrestlers having 0% frequency.

DISCUSSION

This first objective of this study was to identify the types of speech acts used by both professional wrestlers. The findings showed that only four out of five speech acts assertive, directive, commissive and expressive were found. There was no declarative speech act found from this study. Declarative speech act refers to utterances made by the speaker to change a social reality such as declaring a winner and announcing retirement. In the wrestling promo between Cody Rhodes and Roman Reigns, the focus emphasised more on speech acts which allowed them to state their claims, challenge each other and many more. For example, this could be identified from phrases like “Let’s get real here”, “You’re stupid to me” and “Good luck at WrestleMania”. These utterances can get the audience to be emotionally invested in the storyline and look forward to their match.

The next objective of this study was to compare the frequency of the speech acts by both professional wrestlers. The results indicate that both wrestlers relied primarily on assertive speech acts, followed by directive speech

act, expressive speech act and commissive speech act. This suggests that both speakers focused on stating beliefs and presenting claims to establish credibility and authority. As the face, some utterances by Cody Rhodes showed humility when he said, "You might be right" and "You guys were unstoppable".

However, Roman Reigns used more directive speech act compared to Cody Rhodes. This reflects his tendency to issue commands and assert dominance which can be said is consistent with his heel persona with phrases like "Hear me out" and "What do you think is gonna happen to you?". Both wrestlers also used the expressive speech act and it was the third most frequent speech act. "I appreciate this education," and "Good luck at WrestleMania," were used by Cody Rhodes to show expressions of thanks and respect but Roman Reigns, on the other hand, called Cody "a fool" and "stupid" to degrade his opponent. This difference demonstrates emotional function of their words, even within the same category. The fourth most frequent speech act was commissive speech act where both wrestlers used it in an almost identical fashion.

This supports the idea that professional wrestling uses language as part of its performance, where words help tell the story and influence how the audience views each character. The differences in tone and speech acts show how language helps create the moral contrast between the hero and the villain. Although this study only looked at the dialogue, future research could also study audience reactions or other elements like gestures, tone, and facial expressions to better understand how language and performance connect with the crowd.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how Speech Act Theory reveals the pragmatic foundations of identity and power in professional wrestling discourse. The *SmackDown* promo between Roman Reigns and Cody Rhodes shows that even scripted language performs real rhetorical work: Roman Reigns' assertives and directives create dominance, while Cody Rhodes' expressives and commissives project sincerity and moral resolve. The findings support the view that wrestling promos operate as microcosms of persuasive dialogue, where linguistic form enacts emotion and ideology.

This research was conducted to identify and compare the types of speech acts used by two professional wrestlers from WWE which were Cody Rhodes and Roman Reigns. The study found the order of the most frequent speech act is in the order of assertive, directive, expressive, commissive and declarative which was non-existent in the study. The findings suggest that patterns of a wrestling promo between a face and a heel are done deliberately to make sure the masses or to be more specific professional wrestling fans stay interested in the product. Analysing through the lens of Searle's (1969) speech act theory allows us to understand the crucial role of language in professional wrestling.

The study's limited dataset offers focused insight into how wrestlers construct meaning through dialogue, though a larger sample which involves more wrestling promos between a "face" and a "heel" under different circumstances could enhance generalisability. Future research may also adopt a multimodal or mixed-method approach to integrate linguistic, visual, and audience-based analysis. Comparative studies involving multiple promotions besides WWE such as All Elite Wrestling (AEW) and Total Nonstop Action Wrestling (TNA) or different cultural contexts could further reveal how speech acts operate across diverse entertainment environments.

This study included a basic comparison of speech act frequencies between the two wrestlers, but the main focus was on understanding meaning rather than numbers. Future studies could involve more than one coder to make the analysis more consistent and objective, since this study did not use inter-rater validation.

To conclude, despite its limitations, the study highlights that language in professional wrestling functions not only as dialogue but also as a performative tool to shape character identity and audience perception. These findings reinforce the value of linguistic analysis in understanding performative communication in popular culture. Future research could expand this study by analysing multiple events, female wrestlers, or multilingual promos to explore how performative speech evolves across audiences and contexts.

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