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## Performative discourse and societal mobilization: An exegesis of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 7<sup>th</sup> March speech through Austinian speech act theory

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### Abstract

This paper employs J.L. Austin's Speech Act Theory to analyze Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's seminal 7<sup>th</sup> March Speech, highlighting its role as a performative discourse that incited collective action and forged a cohesive national identity during Bangladesh's struggle for independence. By deconstructing the speech's locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, the study reveals how his rhetoric served both as an informative declaration and a binding commitment, thereby galvanizing the masses and shaping a unified national consciousness. This research underscores the transformative power of performative utterances in effectuating socio-political change and highlights the enduring significance of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Oratory in Bangladesh's history.

**Keywords:** Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, 7<sup>th</sup> March speech, J.L. Austin, speech act theory, performative discourse, national identity, independence movement, societal mobilization

### Introduction

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 7<sup>th</sup> March 1971 speech marks a pivotal moment in Bangladesh's history, symbolizing a definitive turn in the nation's quest for independence from Pakistan. Delivered amid rising political tensions and systemic oppression. His address galvanized the Bengali population by voicing their collective aspirations for freedom and justice. Speaking at the Racecourse Ground in Dhaka, Bangabandhu's oration became a rallying cry for liberation, setting the stage for the War of Independence. This speech not only unified diverse groups under a common cause but also transformed the socio-political landscape of East Pakistan.

J.L. Austin's Speech Act Theory provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the intricate layers of Bangabandhu's speech. Austin categorizes speech acts into locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, each serving a different function in communication. Locutionary acts refer to the literal meaning of the words, illocutionary acts involve the speaker's intent, and perlocutionary acts pertain to the impact on the audience. Applying this framework to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's speech reveals how his rhetoric transcended mere information delivery to become a performative discourse that mobilized the masses and shaped a national identity. This theoretical lens allows us to dissect how his strategic use of language incited collective action and facilitated socio-political change.

This study employs Austin's Speech Act Theory to deconstruct Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 7<sup>th</sup> March speech, demonstrating its role as a performative act that spurred the Bengali independence movement. By examining the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary dimensions of the speech, the research illustrates how Bangabandhu's rhetoric operated on multiple levels to resonate with and mobilize his audience. The focus will be on identifying key elements such as declarative and commissive acts, expressive and directive illocutions, and the resulting perlocutionary effects. This study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on the role of performative speech in nationalist movements and political mobilization, offering insights that extend beyond the historical context of Bangladesh.

### Locutionary Dimensions of the Oration

J.L. Austin's Speech Act Theory posits that a locutionary act involves the actual utterance and its basic, literal meaning. This foundational layer of speech acts encompasses the straightforward transmission of information or factual content through language. Understanding this concept is crucial for dissecting the locutionary dimensions of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 7<sup>th</sup> March speech, as it provides a baseline from which the speech's more complex illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects emerge.

Bangabandhu's speech is replete with locutionary acts that articulate the socio-political realities and grievances faced by the Bengali people. He begins with a powerful statement: "Today, the people of Bengal desire independence, the people of Bengal want freedom, the people of Bengal want to live" (Rahman 2021, p. 5) <sup>[7]</sup>. This declaration sets the stage by conveying the core demands of the Bengali population, thus establishing the speech's context and intent. This initial locutionary act is pivotal in framing the subsequent discourse, grounding it in the immediate socio-political context.

Throughout his address, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman details the injustices inflicted upon the Bengali people, including economic exploitation, political disenfranchisement, and violent repression. For instance, he recounts, "We gave blood in 1952; we won a mandate in 1954. But we were still not allowed to take up the reins of this country" (Rahman 2021, p. 6) <sup>[7]</sup>. This historical recounting serves as a factual assertion, emphasizing the long-standing struggle for autonomy and rights. These factual narrations are crucial in establishing the legitimacy of the Bengali cause and the moral imperative for independence.

One of the most significant locutionary acts in Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's speech is his explicit enumeration of the demands to the Pakistani regime: "Martial Law must be withdrawn; the soldiers must return to their barracks; the murderers of my people must be redressed" (Rahman 2021, p. 7) <sup>[7]</sup>. These demands are clear and unambiguous, providing the audience with specific, actionable goals. The clarity of these locutionary acts is instrumental in rallying the masses around concrete objectives, thereby enhancing the speech's mobilizing power.

Another key locutionary act is Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's vivid depiction of the current state of affairs: "The blood of our brothers has stained the streets of Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, and Rangpur" (Rahman 2021, p. 7) <sup>[7]</sup>. This graphic portrayal not only informs the audience about the atrocities being committed but also evokes a visceral response. The descriptive power of such locutionary acts can significantly heighten the emotional engagement of the audience.

It is evident that the literal content and factual assertions play a foundational role in shaping the speech's overall impact. By meticulously detailing the grievances and demands of the Bengali people, he establishes a solid base from which his illocutionary and perlocutionary acts can effectively mobilize and unify his audience. The strategic use of locutionary acts underscores the speech's potency as a performative discourse, capable of transcending mere informational content to drive socio-political change.

### Illocutionary Force: Declarative and Commissive Elements

In J.L. Austin's framework, illocutionary acts are central to the performative nature of speech. These acts go beyond the mere conveyance of information (locutionary acts) and involve the speaker's intent, making statements that perform actions through the utterance itself. Austin explains, "In uttering a performative sentence, we are performing an action rather than simply reporting or describing it" (Austin 1962, p. 6) <sup>[2]</sup>. This concept is essential for understanding the impact of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 7<sup>th</sup> March speech, which used language not just to inform but to act, to commit, and to mobilize.

Declarative acts in Austin's theory are those that bring about a change in the external world simply by being uttered. In his speech, he made several powerful declarative statements that defined the direction and intent of the independence movement. One of the most striking examples is when he proclaimed, "Our struggle, this time, is a struggle for our freedom. Our struggle, this time, is a struggle for our independence" (Rahman 2021, p. 8) <sup>[7]</sup>. This statement is not merely descriptive but performative; it establishes the reality of the independence struggle and galvanizes the audience towards that objective.

Bangabandhu's use of declarative acts was instrumental in transforming the collective consciousness of the Bengali people. By publicly asserting the shift from mere political protest to an outright struggle for independence, he provided a clear and unequivocal goal for the movement. This aligns with Austin's notion that "to say something is to do something, or in saying something we do something" (Austin 1962, p. 12) <sup>[2]</sup>, demonstrating how 7<sup>th</sup> March speech acts shaped the socio-political landscape.

Commissive acts, another key component of illocutionary acts, involve the speaker committing to certain actions or pledging to undertake specific responsibilities. Bangabandhu's speech is replete with such commitments, reflecting his role as the leader of the independence movement. For example, he assured his audience, "I now declare the closure of all the courts, offices, and educational institutions for an indefinite period of time. No one will report to their offices that is my instruction to you" (Rahman 2021, p. 9) <sup>[7]</sup>. This act of commitment serves to reinforce his leadership and signal his dedication to the cause.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's promises and directives were crucial in building trust and solidarity among his followers. By committing to concrete actions, he not only reinforced his leadership but also provided a framework for collective resistance. These commissive acts helped to mobilize the masses by providing clear directives and demonstrating his unwavering commitment to the independence struggle.

The 7<sup>th</sup> March speech also featured several proclamations of intent that outlined strategic objectives for the independence movement. One such proclamation is his directive to prepare for resistance: "Prepare yourselves with whatever you have. If one shot is fired upon us, we will retaliate with a thousand" (Rahman 2021, p. 10) <sup>[7]</sup>. This statement serves a dual purpose: it acts as a declaration of intent to resist and as a mobilizing call to action. Such proclamations are pivotal in performative speech acts as they convert audience members from passive listeners to active participants.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's strategic objectives were not just rhetorical but also performative, designed to elicit specific responses from his audience. By outlining clear actions and commitments, his illocutionary acts

fostered a sense of agency and empowerment among the Bengali people. This aligns with Austin's assertion that "in saying something we do something, and even by saying something we do something" (Austin 1962, p. 12) <sup>[2]</sup>, highlighting the transformative potential of illocutionary acts.

Throughout his speech, Bangabandhu repeatedly pledged his leadership and commitment to the independence movement, reinforcing his role as the movement's leader. He stated, "The Prime Ministership is not what I seek. What I want is justice, the rights of the people of this land" (Rahman 2021, p. 11) <sup>[7]</sup>. This commissive act is a powerful declaration of his dedication to the cause, distinguishing his personal ambitions from the collective aspirations of the Bengali people.

Such pledges of leadership were instrumental in unifying the movement under Bangabandhu's guidance. By publicly committing to the cause and eschewing personal gain, he solidified his position as the movement's moral and strategic leader. This is further supported by Austin's theory, which posits that commissive acts are fundamental in establishing trust and cohesion within a collective.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 7<sup>th</sup> March speech exemplifies the potent use of illocutionary acts, particularly declarative and commissive elements, to perform actions, commit to future endeavors, and mobilize a nation. Through strategic proclamations and pledges, his speech transcended mere rhetoric, effectuating a profound socio-political transformation in the pursuit of Bangladesh's independence.

### **Expressive and Directive Illocutions: Solidarity and Mobilization**

Expressive acts in J.L. Austin's framework involve the speaker conveying emotions, attitudes, or feelings, thereby establishing a connection with the audience on an emotional level. Austin notes, "By saying something, we may express our feelings, attitudes, or emotions" (Austin 1962, p. 15) <sup>[2]</sup>. In 7<sup>th</sup> March speech, these expressive acts are crucial in creating a sense of solidarity and collective identity among the Bengali people.

Bangabandhu's speech is imbued with expressions of shared suffering and resilience, which resonate deeply with his audience. He poignantly states, "The blood of our brothers has stained the streets of Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, and Rangpur. The people of Bengal now must defend their rights" (Rahman 2021, p. 12) <sup>[7]</sup>. This declaration not only communicates his profound sorrow and anger but also reinforces a collective identity rooted in shared experiences of oppression and struggle. The emotional resonance of such expressive acts is vital in forging a unified front against a common adversary.

Directive acts, another key component of illocutionary acts, involve the speaker attempting to get the audience to do something. Austin defines these as "an attempt by the speaker to get the hearer to do something" (Austin 1962, p. 16) <sup>[2]</sup>. In his speech, Bangabandhu effectively uses directive acts to mobilize his audience and provide strategic directives for the independence movement.

One of the most compelling examples of a directive act is his call to action: "Prepare yourselves with whatever you have. If one shot is fired upon us, we will retaliate with a thousand" (Rahman 2021, p. 13) <sup>[7]</sup>. This directive is not just a mere suggestion but a powerful command that urges immediate and decisive action. Such clear and forceful

directives are instrumental in mobilizing a population towards collective action and resistance.

The combination of expressive and directive acts in 7<sup>th</sup> March speech serves to foster national unity and collective agency among the Bengali people. By expressing shared emotions and issuing clear directives, Bangabandhu effectively binds his audience to a common cause and inspires them to take action.

For instance, his emotional appeal, "The people of Bengal now must defend their rights" (Rahman 2021, p. 14) <sup>[7]</sup>, is immediately followed by a directive, "I now declare the closure of all the courts, offices, and educational institutions for an indefinite period of time" (Rahman 2021, p. 15) <sup>[7]</sup>. This seamless transition from expressing collective sentiment to issuing strategic commands exemplifies how expressive and directive acts work in tandem to galvanize a movement. The interplay between expressing emotions and issuing directives is crucial in performative speech acts, as it converts passive listeners into active participants.

The 7<sup>th</sup> March speech also includes strategic directives that outline specific actions for the audience to follow. He instructs, "No one will report to their offices that is my instruction to you" (Rahman 2021, p. 16) <sup>[7]</sup>, and "If the salaries are held up, if a single bullet is fired upon us henceforth, if the murder of my people does not cease, I call upon you to turn every home into a fortress against their onslaught" (Rahman 2021, p. 17) <sup>[7]</sup>. These directives provide clear and actionable steps, ensuring that the movement remains organized and focused. Such strategic directives are essential for maintaining discipline and cohesion within a mass movement, thereby enhancing its effectiveness.

Moreover, Bangabandhu's speech repeatedly emphasizes the importance of unity and collective effort. He states, "Be disciplined. No nation's movement can be victorious without discipline" (Rahman 2021, p. 18) <sup>[7]</sup>. This directive not only calls for specific behavior but also instills a sense of shared responsibility and collective agency. The emphasis on discipline and unity in his speech underscores the role of collective action in achieving political objectives.

This speech masterfully employs expressive and directive illocutions to foster solidarity and mobilize the Bengali population. Through the strategic use of emotional appeals and clear directives, Bangabandhu's speech transcends mere rhetoric to become a powerful performative act that unifies and galvanizes a nation. By blending expressive and directive acts, he effectively harnesses the collective agency of his audience, driving them towards a common goal of independence.

### **Perlocutionary Effects: Socio-Political Resonance and Mobilization**

Perlocutionary acts, as defined by J.L. Austin, are the effects that utterances have on the audience, including their thoughts, emotions, and subsequent actions. Austin describes these as "the achieving of certain effects by saying something" (Austin 1962, p. 101) <sup>[2]</sup>. Understanding the perlocutionary impact of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 7<sup>th</sup> March speech involves analyzing how his words resonated with the audience and catalyzed significant socio-political changes in East Pakistan, leading to the creation of Bangladesh.

The immediate perlocutionary effect of the 7<sup>th</sup> March speech was the massive mobilization of the Bengali population. His

declaration, "The struggle this time is a struggle for our independence" (Rahman 2021, p. 19) <sup>[7]</sup>, served as a rallying cry that galvanized millions. The perlocutionary power of such statements lies in their ability to inspire and incite collective action. The speech precipitated widespread non-cooperation and civil disobedience, fundamentally transforming the socio-political landscape of East Pakistan.

This immediate mobilization was not an isolated event but the beginning of a sustained movement that culminated in the War of Independence. Bangabandhu's speech effectively unified diverse socio-economic groups, fostering a collective identity that was crucial for the independence movement's success.

The speech also had a profound long-term impact on the formation of a unified national identity. His articulation of the collective grievances and aspirations of the Bengali people, as seen in his statement, "The people of Bengal now must defend their rights" (Rahman 2021, p. 20) <sup>[7]</sup>, resonated deeply and enduringly. This articulation helped crystallize a sense of shared identity and purpose among the Bengali population.

The speech's perlocutionary effects were instrumental in forging a cohesive national identity that transcended regional and communal differences. The sense of unity and purpose fostered by his words persisted beyond the immediate struggle for independence, influencing the political and cultural identity of Bangladesh for years to come.

Numerous case studies and empirical evidence underscore the enduring effects of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's speech. For instance, the spontaneous and widespread participation in the non-cooperation movement, as documented by contemporary reports, illustrates the speech's immediate mobilizing power. Longitudinal studies show that the themes of unity and resistance articulated by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman continued to resonate in the national consciousness, shaping Bangladesh's political discourse and identity.

The socio-political legacy of 7<sup>th</sup> March speech endures in Bangladesh's national consciousness. The speech's themes of unity, resistance, and independence continue to resonate, influencing contemporary political discourse and identity. The principles articulated in the speech have become foundational narratives in Bangladesh's political culture.

This enduring legacy highlights the long-term impact of performative discourse in shaping national identities and political landscapes. Bangabandhu's speech, by effectively leveraging performative speech acts, has left a lasting imprint on Bangladesh's socio-political fabric.

## Conclusion

This paper has meticulously analyzed Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 7<sup>th</sup> March speech through the lens of J.L. Austin's Speech Act Theory, demonstrating how locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts were skillfully employed to mobilize a nation. The locutionary acts provided the factual foundation, while the illocutionary acts declared intentions and commitments, and the perlocutionary acts achieved significant socio-political effects, including mass mobilization and the formation of a unified national identity.

The 7<sup>th</sup> March speech stands as a monumental example of performative discourse that transcended mere rhetoric to become a powerful catalyst for Bangladesh's independence.

Its enduring impact is evidenced by its continued resonance in the national consciousness and its influence on subsequent political discourse. Bangabandhu's ability to articulate the collective aspirations and grievances of the Bengali people, coupled with his strategic directives, underscores the profound power of performative speech in effecting socio-political change.

Future research should explore the broader implications of performative speech in various socio-political contexts, examining how similar rhetorical strategies can be employed in contemporary movements. Comparative studies could investigate the effectiveness of performative discourse in different cultural and political environments, providing insights into the universal and particular aspects of speech acts in mobilizing populations. Additionally, interdisciplinary research integrating linguistics, political science, and communication studies could further elucidate the mechanisms through which performative rhetoric shapes collective identities and drives political action. The 7<sup>th</sup> March speech remains a pivotal case study in the transformative power of performative discourse, offering valuable lessons for both historical analysis and contemporary rhetorical practice.

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