

How Commissives Depend on Representatives: An Illocutionary Analysis of Collective Identity in Zohran Mamdani's Election Victory Speech

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ABSTRACT

Political victory speeches are strategic discursive tools used to build public legitimacy and construct political identity. This article investigates the linguistic strategies in Zohran Mamdani's 2025 mayoral victory speech, focusing on the interplay between representative and commissive speech acts through John Searle's pragmatic framework. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, this study analyzes how the speaker constructs collective agency and aligns political commitments with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The findings demonstrate that Mamdani utilizes representative acts as preparatory conditions to vest political ownership in the collective, which subsequently transforms commissive acts into collectivized commitments. Furthermore, the analysis reveals a significant alignment between these policies and SDG targets 11.1, 11.2, 3.8, and 16.5, suggesting that the speech performatively enacts the participatory governance prescribed by SDG 16.7. This research contributes to the study of political pragmatics by highlighting the constitutive relationship between speech acts, providing a framework for analyzing how discourse actively constructs the collective agency necessary for democratic governance.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, Speech act theory, Illocutionary Act

INTRODUCTION

Political speech is a powerful tool used by politicians during elections to win the hearts of the public and deliver their future plans. Through these speeches, politicians do not merely convey information, they strategically utilize language to build connections with voters, address social crises, and project a persuasive future vision (Pratifri et al., 2023). In contemporary political communication, political speeches function as an important medium through which politicians construct persuasive messages, gain public trust, and communicate ideological goals (Pratifri et al., 2023) (Yusanti et al., 2022).

One example of this phenomenon is the election victory speech by Zohran Mamdani after being elected as the Mayor of New York City on November 5, 2025 (The Guardian, 2025). As a democratic socialist, Mamdani's speech is characterized by a strong emphasis on housing justice and public welfare, and the interests of working class and immigrant communities in New York. His victory speech provides a relevant case for linguistic analysis, as it highlights how an emerging political figure utilizes rhetorical strategies aimed at addressing public perception, challenging established socio-

economic dynamics, and reinforcing grassroots political legitimacy.

This strategic communicative phenomenon can be deeply understood through Pragmatics, a branch of linguistics that examines how meaning is constructed and interpreted in real communicative situations by considering context, speaker intention, and listener (George, 1996). In the realm of political discourse, politicians often use language not just to state facts, but to perform actions, influence behavior, and mask their true political intentions (Rahmani & Saeed, 2024). Political actors often utilize language as a functional tool to execute actions, manipulate behavior, and conceal genuine political motives rather than simply reporting objective realities (Rahmani & Saeed, 2024). For this reason, speech act theory serves as an invaluable framework for exposing the hidden agendas of political rhetoric by evaluating what politicians accomplish through their words rather than what they merely say. This aligns with recent findings by (Mubarok & Budiono, 2025), who argue that political utterances are fundamentally biased; their provocative directives and rigid commitments function as linguistic triggers that fuel digital polarization and public resentment.

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One of the main frameworks within pragmatics used to analyze meaning in context is the theory of speech acts, which was further developed by John Searle (Searle, 1969). According to his theory, illocutionary acts are categorized into five distinct types: representative, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations (Searle, 1979). Among these, the dynamic interplay between Representative acts and Commissive acts is highly significant to examine, as it demonstrates how speakers

establish beliefs and commitments through language use (Searle, 1979).

Previous studies generally analyze speech acts in isolation, primarily focusing on identifying and classifying the types of utterances (Yusanti et al., 2022); (Legowo, 2026). While prior research on Mamdani's speech has successfully explained his general rhetorical or communicative strategies, it has paid less attention to the specific interplay between Representative and Commissive acts within this discourse, as well as how these Commissive acts contextually align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda (Nations, 2015).

This study addresses this research gap by exploring the dynamic interplay between Representative and Commissive acts in Mamdani's speech through the lens of illocutionary speech acts. This study examines how Mamdani utilizes representative acts through collective identity markers (such as "we" and "us") as an ideological baseline to validate his commissive acts (his political goals). By shifting public perception so that the city is viewed as a shared entity belonging to the working class, Mamdani's speech may frame political promises as collective social responsibilities aligned with relevant SDGs targets. Consequently, this study narrows

its scope to analyze Mamdani's Commissive utterances that align with SDGs targets.

Research Questions:

Based on the background above, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the Representative acts (collective identity markers) in Zohran Mamdani's victory speech pragmatically relate to and shape his Commissive acts (political goals)?
2. How do the identified Commissive acts align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

METHOD

This research is conducted using a descriptive qualitative method with a pragmatic approach, specifically focusing on the analysis of illocutionary acts. The data of this study consist of utterances containing speech act forces found in the election victory speech of Zohran Mamdani. The researcher uses the official transcript of the speech as the primary source of data, which was retrieved from The Guardian news archive. Even though the analysis is text-based, the transcript provides a comprehensive record of the

linguistic choices made by the speaker during this significant political event.

In terms of data collection, the researcher applied a documentary study and note-taking technique. This process involved meticulous, repeated reading of the transcript where relevant utterances were identified, coded, and highlighted according to their pragmatic functions, specifically focusing on Representative acts (collective identity markers such as "we" and "us") and Commissive acts (political goals and commitments).

To analyze the collected data, the researcher follows the qualitative interactive data analysis framework proposed by (Miles et al., 2014), which involves data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data condensation, the raw utterances are selected and simplified to focus strictly on the target speech acts. In the data display stage, the data are organized systematically to show the pragmatic interplay between the identified Representative and Commissive acts. Crucially, these utterances are categorized and interpreted based on (Searle, 1979) speech acts classification. Finally, in the conclusion drawing stage, the analyzed political commitments are contextually evaluated and mapped against the socio-economic welfare targets of the United Nations'

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda. By integrating Searle's pragmatic theory with the broader context of the SDGs global targets, the researcher can systematically determine how the speaker's collective positioning shapes his political promises and pragmatically constructs public trust.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section analyzes the representative and commissive speech acts in Mamdani victory speech (2025). Representative speech acts are examined based on their ability to construct a collective identity of New Yorkers where Mamdani is a part of, specifically how they position "the working people" as the source of political change and ownership. Commissive speech acts are analyzed according to the policy promises they convey, including rent freezes, free bus transportation, and universal childcare. Through this analysis, the relationship between representative and commissive speech acts is revealed: representatives perform preparatory illocutionary work that reframes the following commissives as expressions of collective responsibility rather than top-down government programs.

Table 1. Representative speech acts and relevant utterance from Zohran Mamdani

No	Utterance	Category	Representative Illocutionary Force
1.	"My friends, we have toppled a political dynasty."	collective achievement	assertion of collective identity
2.	"New York, tonight you have delivered."	power source	assertion of collective agency
3.	"I speak of Yemeni bodega owners and Mexican abuelas. Senegalese taxi drivers and Uzbek nurses. Trinidadian line cooks and Ethiopian aunties. Yes, aunties."	collective identity	assertion of people as grantors
4.	"We won because we insisted that no longer would politics be something that is done to us."	power inversion	assertion of who belongs
5.	"Now, it is something that we do."	power inversion	assertion of reclaim agency
6.	"Here, we believe in standing up for those we love, whether you are an immigrant, a member of the trans community, one of the many Black women that Donald Trump has fired from a federal job, a single mom still waiting for the cost of groceries to go down, or anyone else with their back against the wall."	collective identity	assertion of inclusive membership
7.	"Your struggle is ours, too."	collective identity	assertion of shared experience
8.	"New York will remain a city of immigrants: a city built by immigrants, powered by immigrants and, as of tonight, led by an immigrant."	collective identity	assertion of collective identity
9.	"After all, if anyone can show a nation betrayed by Donald Trump how to defeat him, it is the city that gave rise to him."	collective power	assertion of collective capability

victory speech

Mamdani's first rhetorical move is to eliminate distance between himself and his audience and he embeds himself within the collective. This is evident in utterance (1), The possessive pronoun "my" establishes intimacy, while "we" includes the speaker as a participant in the action, not its sole author. He does not say "I toppled" or "my campaign toppled." The victory belongs to the collective, and Mamdani is merely a member of that collective, utterance (7) reinforces this identification with the shift of "your" to "ours" is pragmatically significant. He claims shared ownership of the struggle itself. The struggle of a Yemeni bodega owner, a trans community member, or a single mother is not merely recognized by Mamdani; it is his own struggle as well. This representative act collapses the speaker-audience boundary, positioning Mamdani not as a leader above the people but as a comrade within their ranks.

In this speech, Mamdani constructs collective identity not despite difference but through difference. Utterance (3) provides the clearest example where each pair names a specific immigrant community and a working-class occupation. The repetition of nationalities (Yemeni, Mexican, Senegalese, Uzbek, Trinidadian, Ethiopian) explicitly centers immigrants, populations often marginalized in mainstream political

discourse. The occupations (bodega owners, abuelas, taxi drivers, nurses, line cooks) root the collective in labor, not capital. The final inclusion of "aunties", informal, cultural, and gendered, resists the formality of political speech, treating kinship networks as politically legitimate. Utterance (6) expands it further with Mamdani explicitly naming groups that are often politically sidelined: immigrants, trans people, Black women, single mothers. He does not smooth over their different experiences but assembles them under a single banner: those we love. The illocutionary force is representative, he is asserting that these diverse groups do belong together, that their struggles are not separate but parallel with the phrase "anyone else with their back against the wall" as an invitation that expands the coalition to any marginalized person. This is a radically inclusive vision of "the people" that prioritizes shared vulnerability over shared ideology.

Having established who the people are, Mamdani then repeatedly asserts where power resides. The answer is consistent and emphatic: power belongs to the collective, not to any leader, institution, or billionaires. Utterance (2) is the most direct claim with the usage of "you" to address New Yorkers directly. The verb "delivered" attributes the victory to the audience, not to Mamdani. He

does not say “I have won” or “we have won together.” He says you delivered. The victory is a gift given by the people while Mamdani is its recipient, not its author. Utterances (4) and (5) work as a pair to articulate a fundamental power inversion. Utterance (4) diagnoses the traditional condition: politics as something done to people administered by elites, endured by the masses. The passive construction “done to us” emphasizes the people’s historical powerlessness but through a collective act of will the situation has changed. Utterance (5) states the new reality in active voice where the shift from passive to active grammatical voice mirrors the political shift from subjugation to agency. Mamdani does not position himself as the one who now does politics alone but collectively with the people themselves as the agents. Utterance (1) reinforces this by attributing the collective as the protagonist of this victory narrative.

Finally, utterance (8) extends collective agency from local victory to national capability. The agent capable of defeating Trump is not Mamdani, not the Democratic Party, not a future candidate. It is the city, New York as a collective entity. The phrase “the city that gave rise to him” is deliberately ambiguous: New York created Trump, and therefore New York has the unique power, as a collective, to defeat him.

Table 2. Commissive speech acts and relevant utterance from Zohran Mamdani victory speech

No	Utterance	Collective Identity Element	Policy/SDGS
1.	“Because of you, we will make this city one that working people can love and live in again”	policies flows from peoples power	livable city for the working class (sdg 11)
2.	“We will put an end to the culture of corruption that has allowed billionaires like Trump to evade taxation”	justice for the people against billionaires	tax enforcement (sdg 16)
3.	“We will hold bad landlords to account because the Donald Trumps of our city have grown far too comfortable.”	accountability to tenants and naming the enemy	affordable housing (sdg 11)
4.	“Together, New York, we’re going to freeze the rent together... make buses fast and free together... deliver universal childcare together.”	repetition of “together” as a collective effort	rent freeze (sdg 11), free buses (sdg 11), universal childcare (sdg 4)
5.	“We will build a City Hall that stands steadfast alongside Jewish New Yorkers.”	protection against antisemitism	peace, justice, and strong Institutions (sdg 16)

The commissive illocutionary acts in Mamdani's speech are for their policy content and their grammatical and rhetorical construction. Mamdani consistently frames policy goals as collective endeavors rather than individual promises where he systematically constructs his commissives using the first-person plural pronoun "we" rather than the singular "I" as seen in utterance four the repetition of "together" three times within a single sentence performs an important illocutionary function: it distributes the commitment across the entire collective. The force of the commissive no longer serves a personal narrative but rather collective effort. Pragmatically, Mamdani is performing a collectivized commissive where the speaker serves as a spokesperson for the people's own agency. Across all five commissives, the illocutionary point of committing to future action, remains intact with the mode of commitment shifts from individual to collective.

Within Searle's framework of speech act theory, illocutionary acts create commitments that do not expire when the utterance ends. When a speaker performs a representative they commit themselves to the truth of that proposition for the duration of the discourse unless explicitly withdrawn. This principle of persistent illocutionary commitment is a lens to see

the connection between the speeches' early representatives and its later commissives without requiring strict adjacency. Representative utterance in the speech has commits Mamdani to a specific claim about political reality: that authority flows upward from New Yorkers, that ownership of the city resides collectively with the people, and that agency for building belongs to the people themselves. Once performed, these commitments remain active and become the illocutionary background against which all later speech acts are performed. Because the earlier representatives have already committed Mamdani to the truth that the people own the city and are its builders, the "we" in these commissives is not an empty rhetorical pronoun and refers to the collective agent that the representatives have already established. The illocutionary force of each commissive, the act of committing to a future action, is thus performed by that collective agent, not by Mamdani alone. In Searle's terms, the representatives have fixed the referent of "we" before the commissives are even uttered.

The representatives do not merely precede the commissives in time, they constitute the necessary preparatory conditions for the commissives to function as collective commitments rather than individual

promises. The speech performs the illocutionary act of constituting New Yorkers as a unified collective agent. It performs unity illocutionarily: the representatives assert that the people already own and build the city; the commissives then have that collective perform actions together. The connection between representative and commissive is therefore not merely rhetorical but constitutive. It is through this sequential illocutionary structure that Mamdani transforms an audience of individual New Yorkers into a “we” capable of collective action.

Mamdani’s commissive policies, rent freezes (SDG 11.1), free buses (SDG 11.2), universal childcare (SDG 3.8), and anti-corruption measures (SDG 16.5), align directly with SDG targets. This alignment matters because SDG 16.7 explicitly requires participatory, inclusive decision-making. The representative-commissive structure of Mamdani’s speech performs exactly that participatory process linguistically: representatives establish that the people own the city; commissives then commit that collective to action. The SDGs thus validate not only the policies but the illocutionary relationship through which those policies are framed as collective commitments.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Zohran Mamdani’s victory speech functions not only as a political address, but also as a strategic linguistic mechanism that constructs a collective audience identity through a sequence of illocutionary speech acts in the opening sections, Mamdani established preparatory conditions that frame political power and ownership of the city as inherently vested in the people. This discursive foundation subsequently allows the commissive speech acts to operate as collective commitments distributing responsibility among the wider community, rather than positioning them as individual promises for which the speaker alone is accountable.

This is achieved through three interlocking representative strategies: the dissolution of the speaker audience boundary via first person plural pronouns, the construction of a radically inclusive coalition centering marginalized groups under shared vulnerability, and a persistent inversion of the traditional power axis that attributes agency to the collective rather than the individual. Under Searle’s principle of persistent illocutionary commitment, these representatives fix the referent of “we” as the empowered collective of New Yorkers, transforming subsequent policy pledges rent freezes, free public transit, universal

childcare, and anti-corruption measures into what this study terms collectivized commissives, in which the speaker functions as spokesperson rather than sole obligant. The alignment of these policies with SDG targets (11.1, 11.2, 3.8, 16.5) further demonstrates that the speech enacts SDG 16.7's mandate for participatory governance not merely in content but in discursive form, suggesting that the representative-commissive sequential structure warrants further investigation across other genres of political language.

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