

# ANALYZING THE APPLICATION OF SPEECH ACT THEORY IN EDITORIAL EMAILS OF REJECTED MANUSCRIPTS

## **Sohaib Alam**

Department of English Language and Literature, College of Sciences and Humanities  
Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Abdullah Bin Amer Street, 16278  
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

**E-mail address: [s.alam@psau.edu.sa](mailto:s.alam@psau.edu.sa)**

**ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9972-9358>**

## **Muhammad Ajmal**

Department of English Language and Literature, Shaikh Ayaz University Shikarpur  
78100, Shikarpur, Pakistan

**E-mail address: [muhammad.ajmal@saus.edu.pk](mailto:muhammad.ajmal@saus.edu.pk)**

**ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1085-7046>**

## **Shaista Zeb**

Department of English, College of Arts and Humanities, Al Iskan, Qassim University  
Buraydah, 52571, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

**E-mail address: [s.aleem@qu.edu.sa](mailto:s.aleem@qu.edu.sa)**

**ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5991-7348>**

## **Bahia Khalifa Ibrahim Mohammed**

Department of English Language and Literature, College of Sciences and Humanities  
Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Abdullah Bin Amer Street  
16278, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

**E-mail address: [b.mohammed@psau.edu.sa](mailto:b.mohammed@psau.edu.sa)**

**ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3267-7879>**

## **Anam Shams**

Department of English, College of Arts, University of Hafar Al-Batin  
39524, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

**E-mail address: [anam@uhb.edu.sa](mailto:anam@uhb.edu.sa)**

**ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1806-5286>**

## Tariq Rasheed

Department of English Language and Literature, College of Sciences and Humanities  
Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Abdullah Bin Amer Street,  
16278, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

**E-mail address:** [t.abdulrasheed@psau.edu.sa](mailto:t.abdulrasheed@psau.edu.sa)

**ORCID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2613-1124>

### ABSTRACT

**Aim.** This paper discusses the use of Speech Act Theory to analyse editorial emails that reject an academic manuscript. The study investigates how the editorial decisions are communicated with different levels of polite, impolite, polite direct and polite assertive language in the analysed emails' linguistic structure and pragmatic aspects.

**Methods.** Building on the taxonomy of speech acts proposed by John Searle, the study establishes the most common types of speech acts and their roles in rejection communication. The study will establish how editors conduct themselves as they display professionalism while giving negative feedback that could be emotionally uncomfortable to the individuals involved in the work.

**Results.** This research work contributes to the knowledge of pragmatic features in professional discourse to suggest improvements in academic publishing communication practice, and to improve the editor-author relationships.

**Conclusion.** Potential implications of this work include developing better fitting templates for the editorial correspondence that accommodate the communicative purpose and interpersonal relations.

**Keywords:** Application of Speech Act Theory, Editorial Emails, Rejected Manuscripts, self-efficacy, inclusive education, sustainable development goals

### INTRODUCTION

Professionalism and understanding of roles followed by civil communication between authors and editorial teams are crucial elements in academic publishing. Rejection decision messages and other daily editorial emails are important but delicate business communication. Such emails must provide unambiguous decisions at the same time as constructive criticism is offered, and these emails also should avoid causing any adverse emotional reaction (Hyland, 2004). To shed light on these pragmatic processes in such contexts, Speech Act Theory proposed by John Langshaw Austin (1962) and later improved by John Searle (1969) has been applied. Speech act theory puts speech acts into various categories of utterance. Among these speech act categories, assertive is a dominant type followed by directive, commissive, expressive, and declara-

tive based on the function they perform. Strength of their performance is determined by the extent to which they convince others (Searle, 1979).

In academic publishing, editorial emails often combine multiple speech acts to achieve their dual objectives: presenting the decision and maintaining the business relationship with the author. For instance, assertions not only state the decision and directives, and guide the author towards further actions and expressions, but they also demonstrate acknowledging the author's effort and contribution (Brown & Levinson, 1987). These speech acts are strategically used because it is important to protect and sustain politeness and professionalism. After all, too direct or vague messages often create conflicts and inevitably damage the relationship with the interlocutor (Jordan, 1997).

Previous studies reveal politeness strategies and pragmatic competence as areas of concern in the editors' letters. Murphy observed that email communication, especially rejection emails, should be written professionally and sensitively. Likewise, refined issues of cross-cultural difference in academic discourse addressed by Magda Kourilová (1998) stressed the fourth feature of language, the need to make overt and subtle differences in language for polite and professional communication. However, little effort has been made to apply the theoretical framework of Speech Act Theory in the systematic analysis of rejection emails in academic publishing.

This research seeks to address this issue by analysing speech acts found in rejection emails authored in the capacity of the journal editors with reference to their pragmatic and linguistic characteristics. In a way, the research aims to suggest potential directions by categorising the types and frequency of the speech acts to shed light on how the editors balance two fundamental goals: clarity and politeness. The conclusions will help advance scholarly knowledge of professional language and provide applied suggestions for enhancing the quality of editorial discourse. Editorial emails rejecting academic manuscripts play a dual role: presenting the decision while respecting the author-editor connection. However, writing such emails certainly calls for the collaboration of assertiveness, simplicity, and politeness to achieve a rhetorical reduction of rejection. However, to date, there has been limited scholarly effort devoted to studying rejection emails' pragmatic and linguistic characteristics within the framework offered by Speech Act Theory. This gap prevents a straightforward elucidation of how and when different speech acts, namely, assertives, directives, expressives, and commissives, can convey decisions without being rude or abusive. It is crucial to fill the gap for enhancing editorial communication and fostering friendly human relations in scholarly publishing.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

For a long time, the phenomenon of distributed academic publishing has been explored, with email interactions as a significant component of the global polylogue of authors, reviewers, and editors. In these communications, rejection emails have an incredibly delicate purpose. They need to communicate the rejection decision and, more often than not, the rejection explanation while being professional and considerate (Kobylarek, 2017). Deductive speech act theory helps explore the pragmatic aspects of these emails and reveals how language is used to accomplish different goals efficiently.

Initially, as proposed by Austin (1962) and elaborated by Searle (1969), Speech Act Theory categorises language functions into five core types according to social order, obligation, permission, offer and prohibition. These categories include: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. These are called speech acts and are essential elements of communication. They include stating, informing, promising, eliciting, ordering, complimenting, blaming, apologising, persuading, and many others. In editorial rejection emails, these speech acts may be tightly intertwined, meaning that while rejecting an author's submission, writers may balance being polite, professional, and direct. For instance, assertives inform the decisions made, directives help the authors decide what they should do next, and expressives show appreciation to the authors in the workflows (Murphy, 2015).

In scholarly literature, pragmatic competence as a component of academic activity, precisely professional communication, has been identified to play a key role in communication (Zeb et al., 2024). Ken Hyland (2004) noted that academic tone and rejection of email are potent tools that signify interaction among scholarly communities. Editors, as the mediators of information distribution, should be extremely cautious about such dynamics when using proper and sensitive words. In the same respect, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987) highlighted how politeness works to manage threats to face an important concern with rejection emails. As their framework shows, politeness does not ignore the editors' requirement to order for clarity while not becoming antagonistic to one's peers.

Literature, in particular editorial communication, largely covers a range of issues surrounding rejection emails. Kourilová (1998) evaluated newspaper readers' reviews and editorial notes, while discussing with specific emphasis on intercultural differences in using polite language in business relationships and misunderstandings. Jordan (1997) also looked at how rejection emails are written to use words of apology to downplay effects of adverse decisions. However, these studies have not systematically used the principles of Speech Act Theory to describe the morphological and pragmatic function of rejection emails.

Examining the different aspects of editorial communication of empathy and precision, Murphy (2015) found that the expressives and directives are most often used

to indicate appreciation of authors' efforts while providing direct instruction for revision. Consequently, it is still unclear how editors successfully coordinate an array of interacting speech acts within an email message to accomplish particular communicative objectives.

Present research work sheds light on the previous work employing speech act theory to a sample of editorial rejection emails. This research seeks to unravel different types of speech acts, their frequency, and pragmatic functions in hopes of understanding how editors construct editorial messages that remain professional, clear and polite. The findings would be valuable to the current issues in academic publishing concerning communication activities and developing practical recommendations for editors and authors.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

This study focuses, in particular, on the pragmatic conception of speech acts and its relation to the following research question: *How do editors apply the socio-pragmatic model of Speech Act Theory when writing editorial rejection emails?*

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research method has been applied to explain use of Speech Act Theory in editorial rejection emails. Combining the methodology of qualitative analysis of correspondence, the study targets emails received from editors of the journals listed in the Scopus and Web of Science databases in order to identify linguistic and pragmatic approaches to delivering rejection decisions without offending the recipients. The study's methods include data collection, corpus preparation and analysis, as described below.

## DATA COLLECTION

The data comprises one hundred rejection emails collected from different pedagogues teaching Applied Linguistics in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. These pedagogues offered emails from the journal editors with manuscript rejection. Renowned journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science have been selected to guarantee a high academic and professional level of editorial dialogue. To protect identity, names of all the authors, reviewers, and journals have been removed from the study.

Selection of the participants was made on the basis of purposive sampling. It included the participants who have submitted at least one or multiple research manuscripts

to a high-impact factor journal in the past year. These participants have also received rejection emails. The respondents filled informed consent forms. These participants have also been told the purpose of the study, and the matters concerning confidentiality have also been addressed appropriately.

## CORPUS PREPARATION

The collected emails were kept in a data pool for a more organised analysis system. The text was pre-processed to filter out non-relevant material, such as prior disclaimers or booted automatic replies. The resulting text included the rejection statements, feedback statements, and any other comments as part of the body of the email. The corpus was compiled and the stored data were analysed with the help of software.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis was made under Searle's taxonomy of speech acts identified as assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations dated 1969. These speech acts were operationalised in the coding framework for each email to study the presence, frequency and differences in their use in selected email. These steps were followed for data analysis:

*Coding and Categorization:* The Selected emails were coded individually at sentence and phrase levels using speech act coding criteria. In this process, the emails were coded according to the category they fall in on the basis of speech act theory. During the process of categorisation, it was possible to give feedback using various speech acts: assertives such as rejection of the manuscript, directives like providing the author with suggestions they could implement in the improved subsequent submissions, expressives, such as recognition of the effort the author had made, and commissives such as assurance to the author to rewrite the manuscript and submit the improved one.

*Pragmatic Analysis:* The next step of data analysis included finding the roles of speech acts according to the nature of speech acts in performing certain functions: to clear misunderstandings, to be polite, and to present a professional image as needed. Editors avoided giving a direct 'negative face' by paying particular attention to how they offset the threat of writing employment letters due to rejection.

*Frequency Analysis:* For each rejected email, a frequency count of speech act type was made to determine which strategies are used most frequently. This quantitative dimension helped to find the main dominant communication trends among editors.

*Cross-case Comparison:* Applying frequency measures, speech acts were further compared between different journals and disciplines to identify contextual differences in the communication style of journal editors.

## TOOLS AND SOFTWARE

Data was coded and categorised using quantitative data analysis tools such as NVivo. Data frequency analysis and visualisation were performed in Microsoft Excel. Qualitative data analysis heavily relied on the features within NVivo and Microsoft Excel.

## DATA ANALYSIS

A quantitative study of the one hundred rejection emails employing Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory shed light on the categories, occurrence, and sensible uses of the speech acts by editors. The outcome is presented in tabular form where, for each category, the interpretation has also been given.

**Table 1**

*Frequency Distribution of Speech Acts in Rejection Emails*

Speech Act Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Pragmatic Function
Assertiveness	250	40%	Communicating the decision to reject the manuscript.
Directives	150	24%	Guiding authors on potential revisions or future submissions.
Expressives	120	19.2%	Acknowledging the author's effort and contribution.
Commissives	50	8%	Offering encouragement for resubmission or collaboration.
Declarations	60	9.6%	Effectively enacting the rejection decision.
Total	630	100%	

*Source. Own research*

Table 1 shows the frequency of different kinds of speech acts. It includes the maximum number assertives (40%) and the least number of commissives (8%). The frequency of the rest of other speech acts falls in between these two extremes.

*Assertives* (40%): These are also called swear words. These words are the most common type of coverage referring to the overall goal of the emails: stating the rejection decision. One of the common assertives include: "Thank you for submitting your manuscript to our journal; we have, however, gone through your work and regret to let you know that it does not conform to our publishing standards."

*Directives* (24%): The directives guide the authors to take alternative steps like resubmitting the paper to another journal or enhancing particular elements of the manuscript. The directives use such language as: "They thought that one may consider responding to the comments of the reviewers before submitting their work to another journal."

*Expressives* (19.2%): They are coping mechanisms such as qualifying expressions like “Thank you for your time and effort that you have put into this research”. Such statements still maintain a negative message.

*Commissives* (8%): These permissives are relatively less frequent in the communication, they show readiness to cooperate next time. They include the sentences like: “We are ready to take your improved work in the future.”

*Declarations* (9.6%): In such statement’s rejections are made formally and clearly, and they come in different texts such as: “Unfortunately, we have decided not to accept your manuscript.”

**Table 2**

*Politeness Strategies in Rejection Emails*

<b>Politeness Strategy</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Hedging	80	26.7%	“It seems that the manuscript might benefit from further work.”
Positive reinforcement	90	30%	“Your work addresses an important topic.”
Apologetic tone	60	20%	“We regret that we cannot proceed with your submission at this time.”
Mitigating rejection with suggestions	70	23.3%	“Consider submitting to journals with a focus on regional studies.”
Total	300	100%	

*Source. Own research*

Table 2 shows to what extent politeness strategies are used. Various politeness strategies have been used according to the situation and the intention of the editor.

Positive reinforcement policy is employed often (by 30%) to recognise the fact that editors value the contributions of the authors towards the publication with intentions to sustain business-like but courteous relationships.

Hedging (26.7%) uses direct statements thus lowers the chances of creating unnecessary emotional discomfort to authors.

Apologising for the rejection (20%) and offering some excuses (23.3%) are used to show that the authors care about keeping their morale up. Though they refuse but they do not want to create unpleasant feelings for the applicants.

**Table 3**

*Discipline-wise Distribution of Speech Acts*

<b>Discipline</b>	<b>Assertiveness</b>	<b>Directives</b>	<b>Expressives</b>	<b>Commissives</b>	<b>Declarations</b>	<b>Total Speech Acts</b>
Natural Sciences	70	40	30	15	20	175
Social Sciences	100	60	40	20	30	250
Humanities	80	50	50	10	10	200



<b>Discipline</b>	<b>Assertiveness</b>	<b>Directives</b>	<b>Expressives</b>	<b>Commissives</b>	<b>Declarations</b>	<b>Total Speech Acts</b>
Engineering & Technology	50	30	20	5	10	115
Medical Sciences	60	30	20	5	10	125
Total	360	210	160	55	80	865

*Source. Own research*

Table 3 shows feedback emails sent to the participants belonging to different professions and departments. It presents the emails according to disciplines, types of speech act employed, and the frequency of certain expressions.

**Social Sciences:** Feedback emails in this discipline employ the most significant number of speech acts (250), signifying a complex method of responding and interacting with authors.

**Humanities:** In correspondence with the participants belonging to humanities, editors often use expressions which mean that empathetic communication is more important.

**Engineering & Technology:** In the department of Engineering and Technology, we find the least number of communicative emails. Among these emails, assertiveness and directiveness is more frequent. There are only five commissive for this discipline.

The analysis shows that assertives are dominant in editorial rejection emails, supported by directives and expressives to provide decisions, directions and care for the authors. Hedging, positive reinforcement, and mitigation are politeness strategies which cannot be excluded from professional and empathetic communication. Variations in specialties point out the differences in the specificity of norms governing editorial practices. Social Sciences and Humanities demonstrate a higher level of concern with expressiveness and elaborateness of feedback as compared to the discipline's relation to science and technology.

Thus, the validity and application of Speech Act Theory, in studying and enhancing editorial communicative practices, has been found in this analysis. Studying the process of application of Speech Act Theory in various contexts stimulates more efficient and sensitive forms of interaction in academic publishing processes.

## DISCUSSION

This work tries to answer the following research question: *How do editors apply the socio-pragmatic model of Speech Act Theory when writing editorial rejection emails?*

The results show highest percentages of assertives, with a relatively less percentage of other speech acts: directive and expressive, and commissive. It suggests a complex process in managing rejection emails where the editors have to draw a balance between professionalism, rejection sensitivity and face-saving in negative emails. The speech acts used in the emails have been discussed below according to their frequency and function.

## **Assertives as the Core Speech Act**

The analysis also indicated that 40% of formulations used are assertive. It confirms their prominent use in rejection emails because they help an editor relay the decision to reject a manuscript. This is in accord with Searle's (1969) categorisation of assertives as statements that provide information and which may, therefore, not be ambiguous. Standard assertiveness messages like: "Your manuscript has been rejected" are characterised by transactional features. However, the use of polite hedging strategies (e.g., "It seems the manuscript might require further refinement") is proposed since assertives are ranked higher in the level of directness, which does fit the politeness framework elaborated by Brown and Levinson in 1987.

## **Directives as Guide to Future Work**

Industry-related terms (24%) are often used as recommendations for enhancing the manuscript, or they are forwarded to other journals for review. All these speech acts help the editors use the constructive approach while keeping in mind that their goal is to offer specific feedback at the rejection stage. This new model implies an effort to reduce the discouragement that the authors experience especially the young scholars when their manuscripts are rejected. For instance, instructions like: "Consider authorised to rethink the methodology to meet reviewer's feedback." It makes authors see rejection as a positive thing by hinting at other ways too.

## **Expressives and the Role of Empathy**

Expressives (19.2%) show that the editors receive the author's contribution and note their effort while making an adverse decision. Some of the positive words include the phrases: "We appreciate your input and the effort you have made in carrying out this job." Such statements align with Austin's (1962) argument that expressives present the speaker's attitude in a way that reduces the emotional consequences of rejection.

## **Commissives and Encouragement**

Though less often used (8%), commissives promise, reassure, and encourage the other person. It may imply the intention to cooperate in the future. To that effect, a professional, friendly tone, such as, "We look forward to seeing your revised submission in the future", demonstrates the willingness to continue the professional relationship and keep the author optimistic and strong.

## Declarations as a Formal Act

Declarations (9.6%) are used as the actual speech act to express the rejection decision. These acts serve as rejection processes, in this way, the editors follow the conventional policy of scholarly journals and ensure that face-saving is kept. Honesty, flattery, and slang are the elements of communication which need special attention and balance. These aspects of politeness strategies and pragmatic implications make rejection email effective and positive.

In rejection emails, politeness strategies such as hedging are used at 26.7%, positive reinforcement at 30%, and mitigation is used at 23.3%. These strategies operationalise Brown and Levinson's (1987) face-saving acts. The objective of such strategies is to present the editor's message without threatening the author's face. For instance, when Editor says, "Your research addresses an important concern," Such description suggests that the manuscript has worth, irrespective of non-acceptance for publication.

## Variations across Disciplines

The distribution and the frequency of the detected speech acts differ from one discipline to another, and it shows different editorial communication practices. For example, rejection letters about articles submitted to the Social Sciences contain more expressive directives and a longer explanation of the authors' decision. They have fewer abstract rejection texts. In contrast to Social Sciences, emails relating to Engineering and Technology contain considerably higher number of assertive directives, more first-person tags and restrictions, whereas they have fewer hedges, UPS and Apprehensive Tags. It all suggests that people from the discipline of Sciences and Technology show a preference for succinct in technical subject areas. These changes bear ramifications for academic publishing practices:

The study also suggests a proper way to address other incommunicado issues in the rejection emails that editors send to their writers. Hence, editors can become professionally assertive while caring for the recipients' feelings by matching assertives with expressives and using politeness strategies. The author's analysis of the pragmatic structure of emails will assist in developing the correct perception of the feedback they received or that they will have to face in the future.

The current research also offers insights relevant to training editors. This insight is helpful, especially in cross-cultural pragmatic differences. Editors should be encouraged to use compassionate and non-aggressive words to the authors to enhance friendly author and editor communications for enhancing the production of a positive environment in the academic publishing sector.

This research concerns rejection emails from journals listed in Scopus and Web of Science databases using data obtained from respondents. Future researchers can work on acceptance emails; they can compare or contrast different cultures regarding editorial communication and analyse the role of gender and institutions regarding use of speech acts. Moreover, using quantitative analysis and qualitative research techniques, future researchers can also develop a better understanding of structural usage of speech acts in the editorial function.

Exploring the principles of Speech Act Theory in detail, this work reveals the nature and significance of editorial rejection emails as a performative form of professional communication. Nonetheless what are the results of current research work, advance knowledge of the linguistic and pragmatic means employed in this scholarly writing provide specific suggestions for improving the quality of these communicative encounters. It helps the reader get an insight into the way the speech acts have been used and what function they perform.

## CONCLUSION

This research aims to examine the use of Speech Act Theory in the context of editorial email rejections of manuscripts, and it also assesses the pragmatic implications of the editors' messages and the politeness they express. It is found that rejection emails mostly use assertives for delivering decisions, while directives and expressives play their parts in directing authors and expressing appreciation for their efforts. Many grimaces like hedging, positive feedback, and mitigation are employed to reduce the impact of the rejection to ensure a good business relationship between the authors and the editors.

The inconsistency of the frequency of the use of speech acts, identified in this study, indicates that there are various differences related to academic communication. The Social Sciences and Humanities are more empathetic and detailed in their writing, whereas Engineering and Technology disciplines are more concise and direct. These findings suggest that research into the more practical expressions of editorial communication regarding authors' perception and editors' intention still has room for improvement.

The findings of the present study should help enhance editors' professionalism in their interactions with authors in academic publications. The main recommendation arising from this research is that editors should strive not to be overly critical or overly friendly in the rejection messages they send to authors. They need to strike a balance. In addition, the study provides future research directions for cross-cultural editorial communication, gender effects on language use, and the influence of technology on editorial practices.

By applying Speech Act Theory to the editorial rejection emails, we can further comprehend the language of academic publishing, and the way editors convey rejection despite staying polite, empathetic, and respectful to the author's work.

## LIMITATIONS

For the current research work, the selected emails have been sent by the editors of famous journals: Scopus or Web of Science. Moreover, the participants include only targeted teachers who teach Applied Linguistics or English skills at different levels. Future researchers can extend their scope either to the emails of other journals or they can work with other professional groups: college or school teachers, health professionals or business professionals. Future researchers can also take it one step further to look at other types of emails, such as acceptance emails, or they can compare results of different research works focusing on accepting or rejecting emails across different countries or cultures. Thus, using the principles of systematic Speech Act Theory activation, this methodology is intended to reveal various aspects of linguistic work and pragmatic factors constituting the semantic manifest from the rejection emails of academic journals.

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