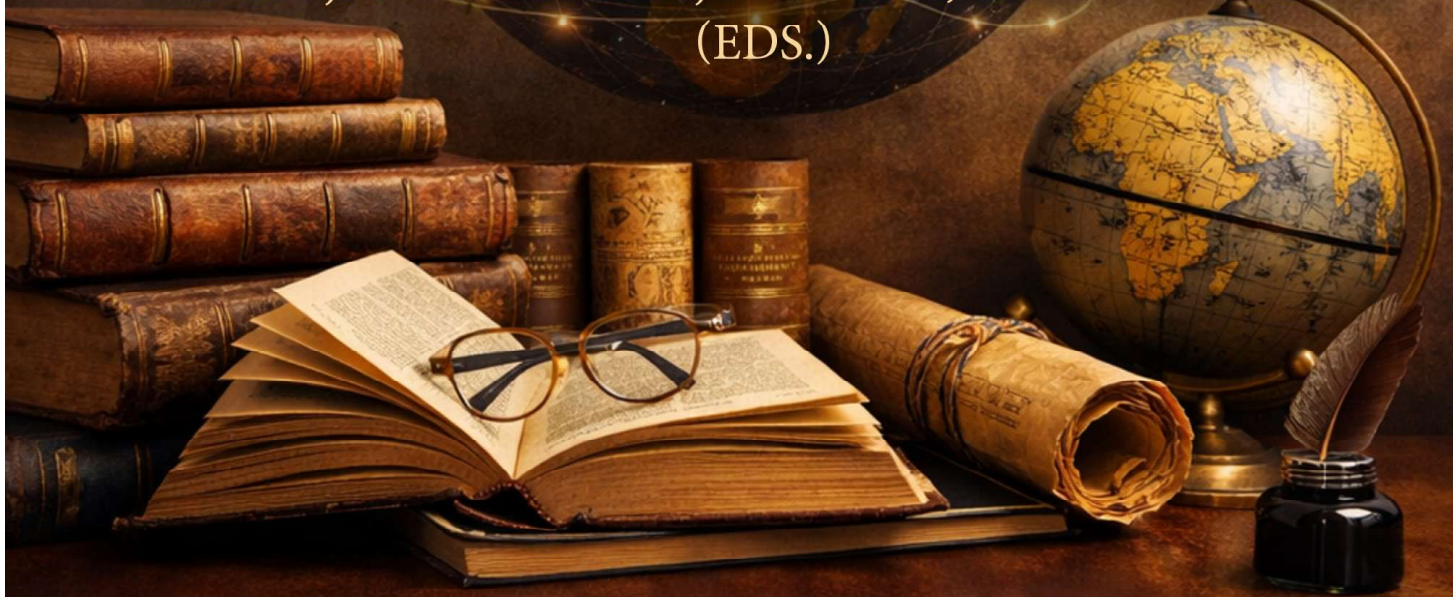


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FACULTY OF PHILOLOGY



BILJANA IVANOVSKA, BRIKENA XHAFERI,
NATKA JANKOVA ALAGJOZOVSKA, GËZIM XHAFERRI
(EDS.)



Contemporary Approaches to
Intercultural Pragmatics Research and its
Application in Language Teaching



From Scientific Concepts to Practical Implementation

*Contemporary Approaches to
Intercultural Pragmatics Research
and its Application in Language Teaching –
From Scientific Concepts to
Practical Implementation*

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Biljana Ivanovska, Brikena Xhaferi,
Natka Jankova Alagjovska, Gëzim Xhaferri

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**Biljana Ivanovska, Brikena Xhaferi,
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and Its Application in Language Teaching –
From Scientific Concepts to Practical Implementation***



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THE SPEECH ACT OF CONGRATULATING IN THE MACEDONIAN DIGITAL LANGUAGE

Marija Grkova-Beader

Faculty of Philology, Goce Delcev University, Stip
marija.grkova@ugd.edu.mk

Ana Koceva

Faculty of Philology, Goce Delcev University, Stip
ana.koceva@ugd.edu.mk

Abstract

Congratulating is an expressive speech act present in both spoken everyday communication and in written form on social media. This paper analyzes the written forms of congratulations that appear in different social contexts. Our focus is on the pragmatic and linguistic realization of congratulations in the Macedonian language. The data for analysis was acquired from publicly available posts on the social network Facebook. The data was analyzed based on the classification of Elwood (2004) and the determined strategies for expressing congratulations. The aim of the research is to define the most common linguistic form of a congratulation in the digital communication of Macedonians.

Key words: *congratulations, speech acts, social media, digital language, Macedonian, Facebook.*

1. Introduction

Speech acts are influential linguistic forms that are part of everyday communication whether in spoken or written form. They are both derived from the context and simultaneously create the context itself. The context represents a collection of statements used to describe our beliefs, knowledge and attentiveness toward the participants in the discourse. However, their role does not refer only to building the context, but also to the aims that we achieve in using language. Specifically, as mentioned by Kusevska (2016), the utterance of a sentence always carries more information than its literal meaning.

Studying speech acts is one of the newest challenges in linguistic studies in relation to natural languages worldwide. Currently, speech acts are studied as elements that highlight intercultural differences (Ramadani, 2024). Besides the numerous analyses of the speech acts in general, congratulations are not frequently analysed, especially in the Macedonian language. Therefore, due to the limited data and research studies, this paper aims to analyze the speech act of congratulating from a linguistic and socio-pragmatic perspective. The main aims of this research paper are as followings: to identify the

linguistic forms used to express congratulations in the Macedonian language, to classify the pragmatic functions and strategies of politeness, and to determine the influence of social and thematic aspects on the form of the speech act. This will contribute to a better understanding of the way native Macedonian speakers express congratulations, specifically in the digital Macedonian language. Furthermore, the research will explore if culture and social habits influence the context of the aforementioned speech act.

2. Literature Review

The research on speech acts shows that different schools of pragmatics propose different classifications of the speech acts. The two larger classifications are into direct and indirect acts. One of the approaches toward directness or indirectness of speech acts is their connection to context. In other words, if the literal meaning of the statement is appropriate in a given context, the act is considered as direct; on the other hand, if the literal meaning is not appropriate or has multiple meanings within a certain context, then it means that the statement has another or secondary meaning and it is determined as indirect. Another viewpoint on indirect acts is the explanation by Searle (1975), who stated that the indirect acts are a collection of two illocutionary acts: one literal and one metaphorical. Hence, for the hearer to understand the act, he/she first needs to understand that the act is metaphorical, and then discover its meaning. Besides this main classification into two large categories, speech acts are also put into other classifications based on some of their other characteristics.

In accordance to a citation by Ramadani (2024) in the book „An Introduction to General Linguistics”, Bugarski establishes the speech act classification in accordance with the views of Searle and Levinson, and classifies them into: assertives (statements), directives (orders/suggestions that are achieved with a certain effect), commissives (promises, threats – with future obligations), expressives (apologizing, thanking, congratulating – by pointing out the psychological condition of the speaker) and declaratives (statements that cause a momentary change of a certain condition). The author cites Searle and mentions that speech act theory starts with the supposition that the minimal unit for human communication is not the sentence or another utterance, but the realization of certain acts such as: making a statement, explaining, apologizing, thanking, congratulating etc.

The classification of Searle (1969) categorizes the congratulations in the group of expressives or i.e., “speech acts that express the psychological condition of the speaker” (Ramadani, 2024, p.50). On other hand, Vinca (2021, p.42) explains expressive speech acts as statements that the speaker uses to express his/her subjective approach toward a certain event. This type of speech acts does not change the factual situation, or i.e., the utterance does not change anything in the real world. For example, if we unintentionally cause somebody damage, we naturally say “Sorry”; and in this situation both the speaker and the hearer are aware that this speech act will not repair the damage. However, social norms impose frequent use of expressive speech acts in everyday speech, because through them the speakers are able to express their feelings and emotions. Besides the apologies, other expressive acts include threatening, giving and taking a compliment,

praising, greeting etc.

In correlation with Ramadani’s views (2024), as presented in Table (1), the speech act of congratulating is part of the expressives, which aim to point toward the psychological condition of the speaker.

Table 1: Speech Act Classification (Ramadani, 2024, p.52)

Assertives	Directives	Commissives	Expressives	Declaratives
Statement	Request	Promise	Expressing emotion	Christening
Notification	Prohibition	Guarantee	Giving a blessing	Wedding
Informing	Appeal	Offer	Giving and responding to a compliment	Judging
Expressing a view	Permission	Acceptance	Expressing condolences	Military reviews
Insisting	Plea	Taking an oath	Regret and condemnation	Dismissal
Response	Order	Threat	(Dis)agreemnt	Appointment
Description	Offer	Rejection	Thanking	Betting
Denial	Invitation		Apology	Decisions of commissions/ juries
Confirmation	Encouragement		Swearing	Openings of new facilities
Suggestion	Propositon		Greeting	
Prediction	Warning		Praise	
Confession	Advise		Congratulating	
Announcement	Suggestion			
Claim				

As mentioned before, the act of congratulating is considered an important social gesture that contributes to the establishment and maintenance of positive interpersonal relations. The main role of congratulatory acts is to strengthen social relations between the interlocutors by expressing empathy, praise for personal achievements or success. Following Searle (1976), congratulations are used to acknowledge a specific type of achievement, happiness or an important life event of another person. These expressive acts represent good-will or recognition and portray the speaker as a supporter of the hearer. In line with the claims of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), congratulating is defined as an illocutionary act through which the speaker conveys a psychological condition such as

happiness, pleasure, or admiration in response to the success, happiness, or achievement of the interlocutor. Despite being an expression of goodwill, it also serves as a mechanism for social connection and identity expression. The primary aim of congratulations is to enhance social relations and maintain communication harmony.

Brown & Levinson (1987) also explain that congratulations are often used to bolster the positive face of the speaker, expressing solidarity and approval, which signifies recognition of the speaker's success. However, it is important to note that in certain situations, congratulations may be expressed with different intentions or used sarcastically.

The research on congratulations is usually directed toward an analysis of how these speech acts improve the social relations between people, how politeness is realized and/or which linguistic forms are used in the expression of the act. The linguistic form of congratulations often varies, similarly to other types of speech acts, and it is directly dependent on the social relations between the speaker, the medium of communication, the topic, the situation, the culture, the social norms etc. Hence, based on the medium of communication, congratulations can be divided into: oral (phone calls, meetings), written (text messages, letters) or multimedia (video messages). On the other hand, based on the style and the tone, they can be: formal (professional), informal (friendly) or humoristic. Differences also appear in the form of the speech act itself based on the context in which it is used, the topic to which it refers and the relations between the interlocutors. Therefore, we can further distinguish between different types of congratulations that are used for: personal achievements (example: graduation, birthday, engagement, wedding...), professional achievements (promotion, business achievement, award, certificate ...), and personal life events (new family member, new home, health recovery...).

The linguistic realization of congratulations is moulded by the language we use, but also by the culture of the speaker that has a great influence over the level of politeness and the type of lexis that is used in its expression. Hence, different cultures vary in the level of directness in the act of congratulating. For example, in collectivist societies the act often emphasizes a group achievement ("We are proud of you"), while in individualistic societies, the personal success is more often emphasized ("You have done an incredible job"). Studies (Xia., Yin & Lan, 2021) in intercultural pragmatics show that congratulations have a direct and explicit form in Western cultures, while the indirect form is more prominent in Asian cultures with the aim of balancing in-between praise and humility.

Herein, it can be summarized that the speech act of congratulating contains complex pragmatic and socio-cultural functions that influence its linguistic form significantly, and for that reason, there is a need to conduct an analysis and a comparison of these acts in different languages and cultures.

3. Methodological Framework

The subject of analysis in this research paper is the speech act of congratulating in written digital communication on the social network "Facebook". Data were collected from three public posts shared on this network by Macedonian public figures. The

methodological framework follows the classification of Elwood (2004); therefore, the comments were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The process of analysis includes determining the linguistic structure of the congratulatory act and the type of applied strategies. Moreover, the potential presence of modifiers in the speech act itself was also analyzed.

In the classification by Elwood (2004), congratulating is described as a complex speech act that is realized through a number of communicational strategies, and not one single fixed phrase. In order to express the illocutionary force, speakers are able to use words or phrases that represent direct and explicit linguistic forms. For example, saying “Congratulations” which is a clear representation of the speech act. These forms are used to express happiness or pleasure that the speaker feels due to a certain information related to the hearer (for example: “I am very happy for you”). Another strategy is the encouragement that is used by the speakers to positively assess an achievement or to justify the emphasis about an achieved work (for example: “You really deserve this”). Furthermore, the strategy of requesting information that functions as a congratulation through showing interest and inclusion in the event (for example: “When did you find out”). Also, speakers may include comments related to themselves and connect the congratulation with their own feelings or experiences, and in that way to help build solidarity (ex: “That gives me hope for me as well”). The classification is also improved through the inclusion of other sub-strategies such as: showing jealousy, making jokes etc. All the strategies as a whole show that congratulations can be expressed both directly or indirectly, and most frequently they appear as combinations of different elements so that both the social and pragmatic functions are fulfilled in a different manner for different cultures. In our analysis, we have considered only those strategies that were detected during the process of discourse analysis.

Table 2: Classification by Elwood (as cited in Aziz, 2004, p.3)

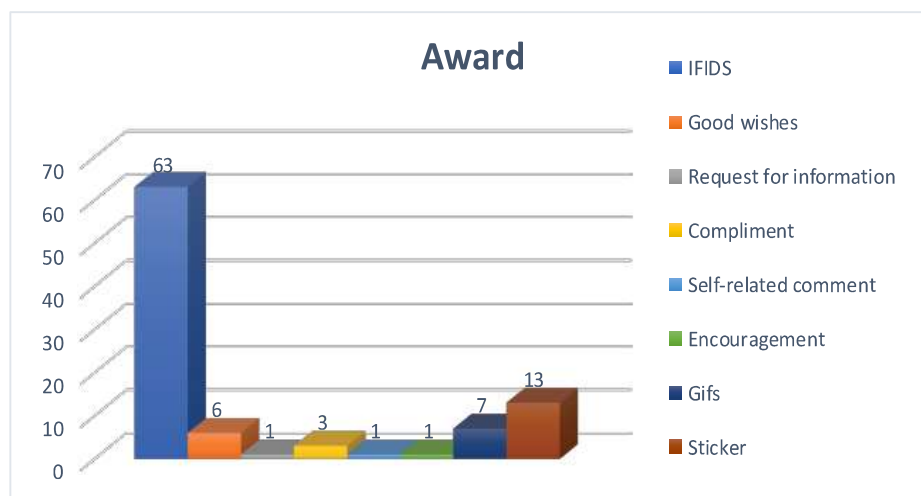
No.	Type of strategy
1	Illocutionary force indicating device (IFID)
2	Expression of happiness
3	An offer of good wishes
4	Request for information
5	Asking for sweets
6	Self-related comments: an expression of envy and longing
7	Joking
8	Thanking God
9	Encouraging

4. Results

Results show that congratulating is often expressed through a combination of a direct congratulation followed by compliments, blessings or comments that show support. Also, congratulations appear in combination with emoticons, likes and other visual elements

that strengthen and intensify the act itself.

Graph (1) represents the results from the analysis of a public post about an announcement of an award gained by a Macedonian singer, which was shared on his personal profile. The post features a photo of the received statuette and the recognition titled “Pop performer of the year”. The post has 105 comments. As presented in graph 1, it is visible that the most frequent strategies are the following: IFIDs, compliments, personal comments, encouragements; while as modifiers we have detected: stickers, emoticons and GIFs.



Graph 1: Post for an Award

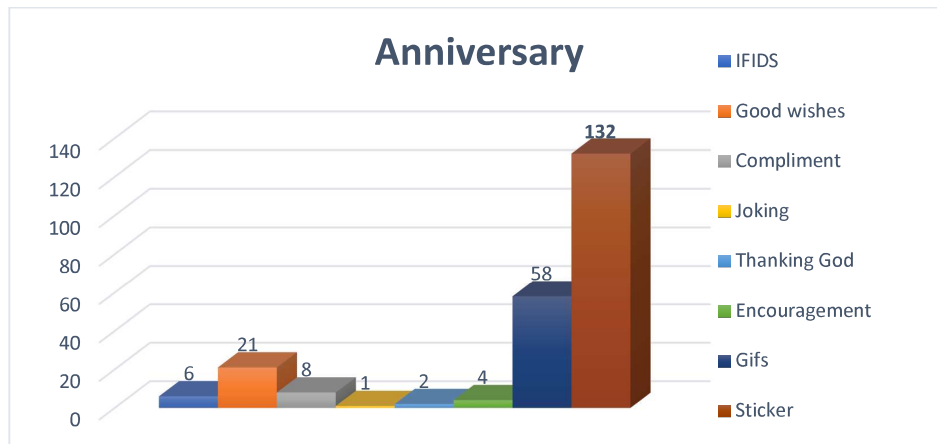
Examples:

IFIDs – Честитки! [Congratulations]

good wishes - Многу успеси [Lots of success]

compliments – Да ти се множат наградите [Many more awards]

The second graph presents the results of the analysis of a personal post about a 9-year anniversary shared by a Macedonian reporter and presenter with a photo of the pair. This post, which was again shared on a personal profile as a public post, received 293 comments. Graph 2 clearly shows that additional elements in the form of stickers, emoticons and GIFs are prevalent in the comments. The most frequent linguistic forms used in the comments are strategies expressing good wishes, compliments, IFIDs, and encouragements.



Graph 2: Celebrating an Anniversary

Examples:

IFIDs – Честитки [Congratulations] / Браво [Bravo]

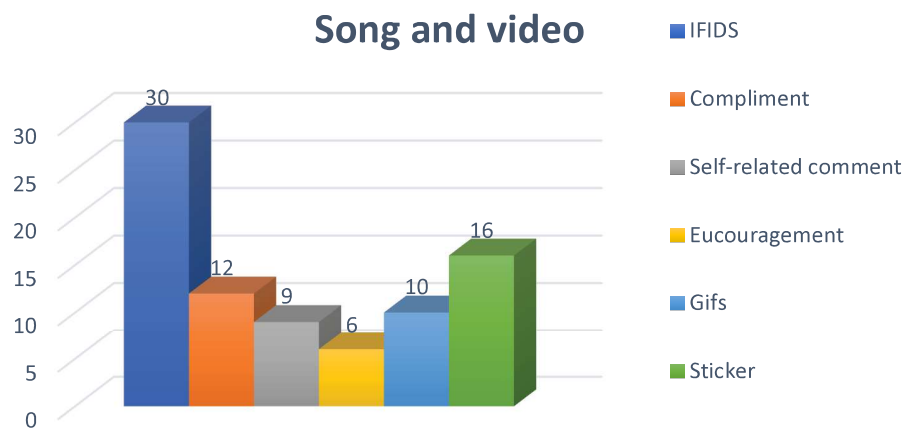
good wishes – Да ви се множат! [May the years multiply]

compliments – Многу сте убави [You are beautiful]

thanking God - Господ да ве благослови [May God bless you]

encouragement – Чувајте се и подржувајте се. [Take care and support each other]

Graph (3) presents the results from a post about a new song with a music video by Macedonian singers, which was followed by 96 comments. Here the strategies that prevail are the IFIDs, the compliments, personal comments and encouragements, while in the role as modifiers appear again stickers and GIFs.



Graph 3: Post of a New Song and a Video

Examples:

IFIDs – Bravo [Bravo] / Секоја чест [What an honor]

compliment – Каква емотивна песна [What an emotional song]

personal comment – Тешки стихови, ние што сме преку граници знаеме какво значење имаат овие зборови [Difficult verses, those of us who are across borders know what these words mean]

encouragement – Како и секогаш најдобри [The best as always]

5. Analysis & Discussion

The analysis of the congratulations, which appear as a response speech act to three different public posts on a digital social medium, reveals similar pragmatic parameters, but different linguistic variations in Macedonian written communication. All three posts elicit a commentary response in the form of a positive and expressive speech act that is formulated in accordance with the shared post. Results show that online congratulations in written form are expressed through different linguistic structures that are influenced by contextual information or the social importance of the event being posted or commented on; they are also influenced by the relationship between the person posting and the person commenting in digital communication.

The main characteristic of the obtained data is the fact that congratulations are expressed through a direct act in the form of an explicit phrase such as: “Честитки” [Congratulations], “Браво” [Bravo] and similar forms that are generally known as congratulatory phrases. The most frequent strategy in two of the posts are the illocutionary indicating devices, which very clearly express the communicative intention of the congratulation and represent a central element in the speech act. Additionally, the data shows that the strategy of IFIDs and other strategies often appear in combination with emoticons, GIFs, and expressive forms of punctuation (for example multiple exclamation points), capital letters (used contrary to spelling rules), etc., with the main aim of strengthening or visually enhancing the act of congratulating. This confirms Darics’ (2013) statement that social media users use various textual and visual tools to compensate for the lack of physical contact in digital communication.

An interesting fact from the obtained data is that the use of elements such as stickers and GIFs often appears as an individual way of congratulating, especially in the second post. These elements allow users of the social network to express their emotional happiness for another person without relying on textual phrases, aligning with findings from other research (McCulloch, 2019; Tolins & Samermit, 2016). These authors have confirmed that GIFs and stickers are important tools for expressing feelings and emotions and for enhancing interpersonal relations in online communication. Furthermore, these types of elements used for congratulations are also frequently present in the first post, where they serve as a tool for expressing support and pride, often in combination with textual or linguistic expressions.

Beside the mutual characteristics, the analysis also provided certain differences or variations in the form of congratulations. The variation throughout the contexts shows that the type of event has a very strong influence and molds the expression of congratulations. The post about a received award caused a feeling of pride in most of the audience members or commentators who responded with formulaic expressions in the form of illocutionary devices in combination with other visual elements. On the other hand, the post about a new song created a hybrid form of congratulations, where emojis appear together with expressions of excitement in comments that assess the song itself – which is an interactive model noticed in previous research on new music releases (Click & Scott, 2018). A different form was detected in the post by the reporter. Here, although stickers and GIFs are highly present, the users relied a lot on personal strategies for expressing good wishes and compliments such as “Ви посакувам љубов цел живот“ [May you have love all your life] or “Двајцата изгледате совршено заедно“ [You look perfect together]. This change from formulaic expressions to more personally oriented expressions shows that posts about personal life achievements cause more intimate forms of congratulating (Page, p.214). Moreover, they also show a lot more avoidance of textual expression of the act of congratulating.

Congratulating on social media has been determined not only as a linguistic act but also as a complex social act molded by the identity of the public and the nature of the event. The combination of a central congratulation with an additional comment and other visual elements that intensify the act itself shows that digital discourse becomes more and more dependent on visual resources that are not elective or possible additions but basic components that create meaning and maintain the general trends described in research on multimodal interaction (Jewitt, 2016). Simultaneously, the frequent use of illocutionary force indicating devices signals a continuity of the traditional structures of a speech act even in visually rich environments, supporting the claim that digital communication connects inherited language habits with new practices.

6. Conclusion

This paper represents an analysis of the speech act of congratulating focusing on public posts on the social network Facebook in three different contexts. The analysis showed that the preferred form of Macedonian speakers is a direct congratulatory act that is further intensified through added visual elements. A dominant strategy is the illocutionary force indicating devices in the public posts of the singers, while the visual elements and expressions of good wishes are more frequent in the posts of the reporter. Hence, it can be concluded that the linguistic and multimodal forms of congratulating are highly modified by the nature of the event and the social status between the person who publishes the post and the audience or the people who comment. This paper contributes to the understanding of how the traditional categories of speech acts are adjusted in the digital environment, where visual elements are gradually taking a more central role in all types of utterances.

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