

# Introduction

## A speech-act(ion) perspective on commenting

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Commenting is an omnipresent activity in linguistic communication. In everyday conversation, we comment on various aspects of our interlocutors' contributions to discourse, on shared perceptive stimuli, and on all kinds of actions and situations. With the advent of social media and multimodal communication channels, commenting on other users' shared contents has become an almost indispensable activity in social interaction. However, while most speakers will be able to apply an intuitive, everyday notion of commenting, a common linguistic definition of commenting is still lacking. On the one hand, a difficulty is that there is a very broad variety of linguistic forms that can be used to express comments, including phonological, graphemic, morphological, lexical, and syntactic means, as well as non-linguistic resources, such as emojis or gestures. On the other hand, it is very hard to pin down the exact function(s) of comments. This perceived difficulty is not only due to the lack of a linguistic standard form of comments, but also due to the apparent complexity of the linguistic activity of commenting itself. Ultimately, it seems that for an utterance to be regarded as a comment, a hearer must receive it as such. Thus, there is a striking discrepancy between our intuitive use of the notion of comment or commenting and the difficulties one encounters when trying to theoretically grasp this notion.

If we take it that commenting is some kind of linguistic action, it is suggestive to turn to the notion of speech act, as influentially developed by Austin (1975) and Searle (1969), or, somewhat broader, to the notion of speech action (Sbisà & Turner 2013), in an attempt to define what commenting is. Surprisingly, though, the notion of speech act(ion) has, so far, not been systematically and comprehensively applied to commenting. While Searle (1969: 23) lists the verb *to comment* among English verbs that denote illocutionary acts, it is not clear into which of his speech act classes this alleged illocutionary act would fall. On the other hand, while Austin's (1975) examples of illocutionary verbs do not include *to comment*, he provides with Expositives a class of speech acts that seems to be a good fit for comments. Posner (1972: 25) considers comments as speech acts by which

a speaker provides information about a *commentandum*. However, Posner does not elaborate in detail on the speech-act theoretic implications of this definition. Following Grice (1989:362), one might take comments to be higher-order speech acts. Such an approach seems to be largely compatible with an approach that takes comments to be Expositives. Other, more recent approaches suggest that comments can be regarded as one of multiple simultaneous functions of interactional turns (cf. Levinson 2017:203), or as larger (inter-)actional patterns (cf. Larrory-Wunder 2021:185).

According to Schneider-Mizony (2021:18), comments have three main functions. First, a speaker can use a comment to expand on a given piece of information from a subjective perspective. The piece of information commented on can be related to the content of the *commentandum*, aspects of how the *commentandum* is uttered, prevailing opinions in discourse, or other aspects. Second, a comment can be used as a reformulation of an earlier, potentially misleading statement of the speaker. From the speaker's point of view, this function is used to provide a more accurate statement to a larger discourse, or to emphasize what was intended to be communicated. Third, a speaker can use a comment as follow-up communication (cf. also Fetzer & Weizman 2015) to refer back to previous discourse and connect with the reader. According to Schneider-Mizony, comments can also express multiple functions, or sub-act(ion)s, simultaneously (cf. also Breindl & Schreiber 2021; Petkova-Kessanlis 2021). One of the sub-act(ion)s performed by a comment is the action of establishing a link to the *commentandum*. As Schneider-Mizony's list of uses of comments implies, commenting may also include a form of stance-taking (e.g., Du Bois 2007; Jaffe 2009). Speakers evaluate *commentanda* by expressing feelings, attitudes, value judgments, or assessments about them (Biber et al. 1999:197), thereby positioning themselves in a discourse and aligning with other discourse partners (cf. Du Bois 2007:163). The more general issue of utterances expressing several illocutionary functions at the same time has long been at the heart of speech-act theory. A case in point are indirect speech acts, as discussed by Searle (1979). However, the insight that utterances can be illocutionarily multifunctional has also led to the more general concept of 'illocutionary pluralism', which is not restricted to indirect speech acts (cf. Sbisà 2013; Lewiński 2021; Johnson 2023).

As this short outline indicates, the concept of speech act(ion) provides a promising starting point for a more systematic exploration of commenting. While the speech *act* perspective emphasizes the fact that commenting utterances fulfil (a) specific illocutionary function(s) to be described in more detail, the speech *action* perspective emphasizes that commenting utterances are parts of larger (inter-)actional patterns, or sequences of (sub-)actions, and as such are interdependent on, and closely intertwined with other speech actions. As Sbisà & Turner

(2013:5) put it, “[i]f speech acts are seen as actions and actions are viewed as the bringing about of changes in a situation, research has as its first task the description of the kinds of changes that are, or can be, brought about, of their relations to linguistic and cultural practices and routines, and of the interactional dynamics thanks to which the recognition of the performance as an action of a certain type is achieved.”

This Special issue takes a speech-act(ion) approach to comments and commenting, with a special emphasis on commenting in social media. It combines theoretical and empirical perspectives to provide answers at least to the following questions:

- How can we define commenting from a speech-act theoretical perspective?
- In how far does our understanding of what speakers do when they comment on something benefit from a speech-act theoretical approach, and what are its limitations?
- Which particular linguistic constructions are there in various languages that can be used to comment, and how do languages differ in this respect?
- What are the specific affordances of social media that make them so prone for commenting?
- Is what is put into a commenting section on a social media platform automatically a comment in a linguistic sense?
- What are commonalities and differences between comments and related speech actions (in social media) such as compliments, appraisals, or criticisms?
- How is commenting related to interpersonal phenomena (in social media) such as humor, irony, stance-taking, or the construction of group membership?

The five contributions to this special issue build upon an in-depth discussion of the topic of commenting at the panel “The speech action of commenting across discourse types”, held at the 18th International Pragmatics Conference at the University of Brussels, Belgium, on July 10th, 2023. They approach the topic from different angles, both discussing commenting from a speech-act theoretical perspective and applying the notion of speech act(ion) to a variety of commenting activities in various types of (mediated) discourse. While the focus of the special issue is on the use of comments in social media, it also integrates a perspective from language-specific constructions that are used in commenting. The contributions in this issue cover various languages (English, Chinese, Hebrew, and Turkish), constructions (*because X, I think*, and so-called specified compliments), and social media platforms (Twitter, Xiaohongshu, and Facebook), and also include a perspective from translation studies. As a shared point of reference, the four

empirical studies presented take their starting point in the theoretical contribution by Marina Sbisà, which develops the speech-act theoretical categories for the analysis of comments.

The paper by Marina Sbisà, entitled “Is commenting an expositive illocutionary act?”, sketches an approach to commenting within an Austin-inspired speech-act theoretical framework, suggesting that the act of commenting belongs to Austin’s Expositives. After discussing some difficulties that can be found in dealing with commenting as an illocutionary act, concerning the variable linguistic form and the diversity of functions of the utterances that can be taken to be comments, a minimal characterization is developed that takes a comment to establish a relation between the utterance constituting it and a speech act, action or situation, that is thus constituted as its *commentandum*. This minimal characterization is put to test in numerous examples, and some open issues are highlighted.

Martin Konvička, in his paper “Cause and comment: Two functions of non-finite causal constructions”, investigates the functional dimensions of English *because* X constructions, based on a large Twitter corpus. The analysis identifies two functions of these constructions: expressing causality and commenting. It is argued that primarily, *because* X constructions express cause or reason. Secondly, speakers can also use these constructions to offer a comment about the expressed cause or reason. The analysis suggests that the two functions represent two poles on a functional continuum. While some instances of the *because* X constructions only express causal meaning and some serve predominantly as comments, they usually combine both functions.

Pnina Shukrun-Nagar & Zohar Livnat, in their paper “Specified compliments in comments to politicians’ Facebook posts: Champion, loser, or both?”, discuss a particular type of compliment in Hebrew, consisting of an expression of positive evaluation of an ability or achievement, a preposition, and an expression that specifies the area of expertise or excellence, e.g., *experts in security*. The analysis of “specified compliments” in comments on politicians’ Facebook posts reveals their predominantly ironic usage and leads to three different categories of ironic specified compliments. The authors argue that the compliments can generally be perceived as commenting in their function in that they convey positive evaluations of the skills, abilities and attributes of the politician or a previous commenter, as (ostensibly) expressed in their post or comment.

The paper “Sisterhood construction through commenting by Chinese women” by Bin Wang presents an in-depth case study in which replies to a post on the Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu are analyzed, which concerns feminist issues. A speech-act analysis of these replies leads to results supporting the view that comments are a type of speech act, by showing their constructive functions across intra-utterance, inter-utterance, and extra-textual contexts. It

becomes clear that the performance of comments does not always require illocutionary force indicators and can be conducted implicitly. The study demonstrates that comments can facilitate the securing of a hearer's uptake of an illocutionary act, modify the actual hearer's uptake of another illocutionary act, and construct sisterhood within a redefined context.

Aytaç Çeltek's paper "The functions of I THINK in TED talks and their Turkish translations: A corpus-based study" analyzes the pragmatic marker *I think* and its translations into Turkish, employing a parallel corpus of English TED Talks and their corresponding Turkish translations. *I think* can be regarded as an instance of a comment clause. Relating comments to expositive illocutionary acts, the study examines the illocutionary pluralism of *I think* in managing discourse, expressing speaker attitudes, and engaging interlocutors. It is demonstrated that the different illocutionary functions of English *I think* can be related to different equivalents of the pragmatic marker in Turkish and their differing functions, such as *bence* 'in my opinion' and *sanırım* 'I suppose/I assume'.

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