

SEMI-SPEECH ACTS IN MULTIMODAL COMMUNICATION: PRAGMATIC AND CULTURAL FUNCTIONS OF GESTURE–ELLIPSIS COMBINATIONS**Azimova Sayyora Khusanboyevna**Fergana State University Associate professor
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Abstract. This article examines semi-speech acts as a specific type of multimodal communicative action formed through the interaction of gesture and ellipsis (unfinished or deliberately incomplete verbal utterances). Semi-speech acts are analyzed as pragmatic units possessing illocutionary force that emerges not from verbal expression alone, but from the coordinated use of verbal and non-verbal resources. Drawing on pragmatic theory, multimodal discourse analysis, and cross-cultural data, the study demonstrates that gesture–ellipsis combinations function as culturally regulated strategies for indirectness, politeness, taboo avoidance, and social alignment. The findings contribute to the development of speech act theory by extending it to multimodal and implicit forms of meaning-making.

Keywords: semi-speech acts, multimodal communication, gesture, ellipsis, pragmatics, illocutionary force, cultural norms

1. Introduction

Human communication is inherently multimodal. Spoken language is rarely produced in isolation from gestures, facial expressions, gaze, posture, and silence. While classical speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) focused primarily on fully articulated verbal utterances, contemporary communicative practices increasingly demonstrate the importance of implicit, incomplete, and hybrid forms of meaning-making. One such phenomenon is the semi-speech act: a communicative action realized through the combination of a gesture and a verbally unfinished or elliptical utterance. Examples such as “Well, if you just...” accompanied by a dismissive hand wave, or a silent pointing gesture combined with “You know...” illustrate how illocutionary force may be fully recoverable despite the absence of a complete verbal structure. These communicative units challenge the traditional boundaries of speech act theory and call for a reconsideration of what constitutes an utterance in pragmatic terms. The present study aims to analyze semi-speech acts as multimodal pragmatic phenomena, focusing on their illocutionary structure, communicative functions, and cultural conditioning. Particular attention is paid to gesture–ellipsis combinations as strategies of indirectness, politeness, and taboo management across different cultural contexts.

2. Theoretical Background

Austin’s distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts laid the foundation for pragmatic analysis of language as action. [1] J.Searle further systematized speech acts by proposing a taxonomy of illocutionary types. However, both frameworks presuppose a verbally explicit utterance as the primary carrier of illocutionary force. [2]

This assumption becomes problematic when communicative intent is conveyed through non-verbal means or through utterances that are formally incomplete. Elliptical constructions, pauses, and silence, when combined with gesture, may perform acts such as refusal, warning, request, or evaluation without lexical realization of the propositional content. Multimodal pragmatics views communication as the integration of multiple semiotic resources operating simultaneously. From this perspective, gestures are not auxiliary to speech but function as meaningful components of utterances. Gesture–speech synchrony plays a crucial role in shaping pragmatic interpretation. [4,5] In semi-speech acts, gesture often carries the core illocutionary load, while the verbal component serves as a pragmatic trigger rather than a complete proposition. This distribution of meaning challenges the verbal-centric bias of classical

pragmatics. Ellipsis has traditionally been studied as a syntactic or discourse phenomenon. In pragmatic terms, however, ellipsis can be intentional and strategic. An unfinished utterance invites the addressee to infer meaning based on shared knowledge, context, and accompanying non-verbal cues. When paired with gesture, ellipsis becomes a powerful tool for implicit communication.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology combining:
pragmatic analysis of illocutionary force;
multimodal discourse analysis of gesture–speech coordination;
comparative cultural analysis.

The data set consists of naturally occurring conversational fragments from Russian, Uzbek, English, and Japanese communicative contexts, drawn from spoken interaction corpora, ethnographic descriptions, and previous pragmatic studies. Examples were selected based on the presence of (a) an incomplete verbal utterance and (b) a gesture essential for pragmatic interpretation.

4. Semi-Speech Acts as Multimodal Illocutionary Units

Semi-speech acts are defined as communicative actions in which illocutionary force emerges from the interaction of verbal ellipsis and non-verbal gesture. Neither component alone is sufficient to perform the act; meaning arises only through their integration. For example, the utterance “I would, but...” accompanied by a head shake performs a refusal. The refusal is not explicitly verbalized; it is pragmatically completed by the gesture. Formally, the locution is incomplete, yet pragmatically the illocution is clear. Such acts demonstrate that illocutionary force is not bound to propositional completeness but to communicative intentionality and shared interpretive conventions.

5. Pragmatic Functions of Gesture–Ellipsis Combinations

Semi-speech acts often function as strategies of negative politeness. [3] By avoiding explicit verbalization of face-threatening content, speakers mitigate potential social conflict. Gesture allows the speaker to signal intent while preserving plausible deniability. In contexts where direct mention of certain topics is culturally restricted, gesture–ellipsis combinations provide an alternative means of communication. Pointing, gaze direction, or symbolic hand movements replace explicit lexical items, allowing the speaker to convey meaning without violating linguistic taboos. In hierarchical interactions, semi-speech acts may index authority or subordination. Superiors may use minimal verbal cues combined with gestures to issue directives, while subordinates rely on ellipsis and non-verbal compliance signals to express agreement or refusal indirectly.

6. Cultural Variation in Semi-Speech Acts. Cultural norms significantly influence the frequency, form, and interpretation of semi-speech acts. In high-context cultures, such as Japanese and Uzbek, gesture and ellipsis are integral to polite interaction, and explicit verbalization may be perceived as rude or inappropriate. In lower-context cultures, such as mainstream Anglo-American communication, semi-speech acts are more context-dependent and often limited to informal interaction. Russian communicative behavior occupies an intermediate position, combining expressive gestures with a relatively high tolerance for ellipsis in emotionally charged contexts.

7. Discussion. The analysis demonstrates that semi-speech acts expand the scope of speech act theory by revealing illocutionary force as a multimodal construct. Gesture–ellipsis combinations challenge the assumption that speech acts must be verbally explicit and highlight the role of cultural conventions in pragmatic interpretation. Semi-speech acts function as adaptive communicative strategies that balance efficiency, politeness, and social norms. Their study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of human interaction as a multimodal and culturally embedded process.

Conclusion

Semi-speech acts represent a significant yet underexplored area of pragmatic research. By integrating gesture and verbal ellipsis, speakers achieve communicative goals while managing social risk and cultural expectations. Recognizing these acts as legitimate pragmatic units allows for a more inclusive and realistic model of communication. Future research may benefit from corpus-based multimodal analysis and experimental studies on the interpretation of semi-speech acts across cultures.

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