

THE REALIZATION OF DIRECTIVE SPEECH ACTS IN AIRPORT SERVICE INTERACTIONS

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Abstract

This study examines directive speech acts in airport service interactions, with a focus on how airport staff direct passenger actions across different service stages, namely check-in, security check, and boarding gate procedures. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method (Creswell, 2014). The data were taken from a YouTube educational video entitled *At the Airport*, uploaded by the Easy English Channel, which presents simulated airport service interactions. Data were collected through observation and transcription, where utterances containing directive speech acts were identified and selected for analysis. The analysis is based on Searle and Vanderveken's (1985) classification of directive acts, including requests, commands, requirements, and permissions. It also examines how these acts are realized through different linguistic forms in context. The findings show that directive speech acts appear in interrogative, conditional, hedged, declarative, and imperative forms. At the check-in stage, directives are mostly expressed as polite requests. At the security check stage, they become more direct and function as requirements and commands due to procedural demands. At the boarding gate, directives are mainly realized in softened imperative forms used for boarding preparation. These patterns show that directive choices are shaped by institutional roles and the specific demands of each stage of service. In conclusion, directive speech acts in airport service interactions vary according to procedural stages and reflect the need to balance clarity and efficiency in institutional communication.

Keywords –*directive speech acts, airport service interactions, pragmatics*

Introduction

Language is a key tool in human communication, used not only to convey information but also to perform actions. Communication involves not only understanding the literal meaning of words in an utterance, but also interpreting what speakers intend to convey in a given context. This aspect of meaning, known as “speaker meaning,” is studied in pragmatics (Yule, 361: 2017). In pragmatics, this view of language is explained through speech act theory introduced by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1979), who sees utterances as actions performed through language. Searle classifies speech acts into five types: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives. Among these, directive speech acts are particularly important because they are used to influence others to perform certain actions, such as giving instructions, making requests, offering suggestions, or issuing prohibitions. For this reason, directives frequently appear in settings where communication is focused on tasks and procedures.

Several studies have examined directive speech acts in different contexts. Putra and Satwika (2025), for instance, found that commands are frequently the dominant form of directives in animated film discourse, reflecting how authority is expressed through language. Satwika and Susanthi (2024) show that politeness strategies are used to reduce the force of directives in talk show interactions, based on Leech's Politeness Principle. Meanwhile, Susanti and Liusti (2025) highlight how directive speech acts function to organize teaching and learning activities in classroom interaction. Overall, these studies suggest that the realization of directive speech acts depends strongly on context, participant roles, and communicative goals.

However, directive speech acts in airport service interactions remain relatively underexplored in pragmatic research. In airport settings, staff frequently use directives to guide passengers, give instructions, and ensure that procedures are followed properly. Communication in this setting requires clarity and efficiency, while at the same time maintaining politeness because airport procedures operate under strict time constraints and regulations. The need to maintain clarity, efficiency, and politeness is related to Leech's (2014) Tact Maxim, which emphasizes minimizing cost to the hearer and maximizing benefit to the hearer. In directive speech acts, this is often shown through the use of interrogative forms, conditional structures, modal verbs, and politeness markers such as "please" and "could." These forms help reduce the force of directives while keeping the instructions clear and effective.

Based on this background, this study analyzes directive speech acts in airport service interactions using Searle and Vanderveken's (1985) framework. The data are taken from a YouTube educational video entitled *At the Airport*, published by the Easy English Channel, which presents simulated airport interactions that resemble real-life service situations. This study aims to identify and describe the types of directive speech acts and examine how they are realized across different stages of airport service interaction. The findings are expected to contribute to pragmatic studies, particularly in understanding how directive speech acts function in real service interactions.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design. Creswell (2014) explains that this approach is used to describe and interpret linguistic phenomena in a systematic way as they appear in natural or semi-natural contexts. In this study, the method was used to examine directive speech acts in airport service interactions.

The data were taken from a YouTube educational video entitled *At the Airport*, uploaded by the Easy English Channel. The video presents simulated airport service interactions that reflect typical institutional communication in airport settings, including check-in counters, security checks, and boarding gates. Data collection was carried out through observation and transcription. The video was watched repeatedly, and utterances containing directive speech acts were transcribed and selected for analysis.

The analysis was conducted in several steps. First, the transcribed data were identified and selected based on their relevance to directive speech acts. Second, the data were classified using Searle and Vanderveken's (1985) framework of directive acts, including requests, commands, requirements, and permissions.

Next, the analysis focused on how each directive act is realized in context. The grammatical forms and communicative functions of the utterances were examined to explain how directives are expressed in airport service interactions. In this stage, Yule (2017) was used as a supporting reference in identifying direct and indirect speech acts, particularly in relation to imperative and declarative forms.

Finally, Leech's (2014) Tact Maxim was applied selectively to data where politeness strategies are evident, especially in utterances that show mitigation of directive force. These include cases involving interrogative structures, conditional forms, hedged expressions, and modal verbs used to reduce imposition in service interactions. However, not all data were analyzed using this framework, as some directives are expressed in more direct forms depending on the procedural context

Finding and Discussion

This section presents the findings and discussion of the speech act analysis of airport service interactions, including check-in, security check, and boarding gate procedures. The data are analyzed using Searle and Vanderveken's classification of directive acts (1985), supported by pragmatics theories from Leech (2014) and Yule (2017). Each utterance is examined in terms of its form and function to show how directive acts are realized in institutional contexts. The discussion also explores how different levels of directness are used by airport staff to maintain both procedural efficiency and interactional politeness

A. Check-In Counter

1. Request (realized through Interrogative Form)

Check-in Staff	:	Hello! May I see your passport, please?
Passenger	:	Here you go.

The utterance "*May I see your passport, please?*" is produced by a check-in staff member during the check-in process at the airport. At this stage, the staff needs to verify the passenger's identity and travel documents before proceeding with the flight registration process.

This utterance can be categorized as a request because the speaker attempts to get the hearer to perform an action, namely showing the passport. In Searle and Vanderveken's (1985:199) classification, requests belong to the category of directive acts in which the hearer is, at least theoretically, able to refuse the action, although compliance is generally expected in institutional contexts such as airport check-in procedures

Although the utterance is grammatically interrogative, it is clearly understood as part of the document-checking procedure at the check-in counter. The staff holds institutional authority within the interaction, and the passenger is implicitly expected to comply by showing the passport. In this sense, the utterance functions not only as a polite request, but also as a way of directing the passenger's next action within the procedure.

The use of "may" and "please" softens the directive force of the utterance and helps the interaction sound more polite and routine. However, the indirect form does not remove the obligation behind the request. Instead, it allows the staff to maintain authority without sounding overly forceful.

As Leech (2014) explains, requests are often expressed indirectly to reduce imposition and maintain politeness. In this interaction, the indirect form helps present the request as a routine part of the check-in process. However, the passenger is still expected to provide the passport in order for the check-in process to proceed.

2. Request (realized through Conditional Form)

Check-in Staff	:	Are you checking any bags today?
Passenger	:	Yes, just one.
Check-in Staff	:	Perfect. If you could place it on the scale for me, that would be great.
Passenger	:	Here you go.

The utterance *“If you could place it on the scale for me, that would be great”* is produced by a check-in staff member during the baggage check-in process after the passenger’s identity and travel documents have been verified. At this stage, the passenger is asked to place the luggage on the scale so that its weight can be checked according to airline regulations.

This utterance can be categorized as a request because the staff asks the passenger to carry out a particular action, namely placing the bag on the scale. In Searle and Vanderveken’s (1985:199) framework, requests belong to the category of directive acts in which the hearer is theoretically able to refuse, although refusal is unlikely in institutional settings such as airport check-in procedures.

Rather than using a direct instruction, the staff expresses the request through a conditional form. The expression “If you could...” softens the directive and makes the interaction sound less forceful, while the phrase “that would be great” further helps the instruction sound more conversational and polite. Even though the request is expressed indirectly, the passenger is still implicitly expected to comply so that the check-in procedure can continue smoothly.

Leech (2014) explains that indirect requests are often used to reduce imposition and maintain politeness in interaction. In this case, the indirect form helps frame the instruction as a routine part of the check-in procedure rather than as a direct assertion of authority. At the same time, the staff still maintains institutional control over the interaction.

3. Request (realized through Hedged Form)

Check-in Staff	:	Hmmm... it appears your bag is just a bit too heavy. It is over our weight requirement. Perhaps you could take something out of your bag and put it in your carry-on bag?
Passenger	:	Yes! I'll take this big book out of the bag. No problem.

The utterance *“Perhaps you could take something out of your bag and put it in your carry-on bag”* is produced by a check-in staff member after noticing that the passenger’s baggage exceeds the airline’s weight limit. In this situation, the staff asks the passenger to remove some items so that the luggage meets the required baggage regulations.

This utterance can be categorized as a request because the staff asks the passenger to remove some items from the bag. In Searle and Vanderveken’s (1985:199) framework, requests belong to the category of directive acts in which the hearer is theoretically able to refuse, although refusal is unlikely in institutional situations such as airport check-in procedures.

Rather than stating the instruction directly, the staff uses a hedged form through the expression “perhaps” together with the modal “could.” The hedge makes the request sound more tentative and less imposing, while “could” further softens the instruction. This indirect

phrasing also helps the staff inform the passenger about the overweight baggage in a way that sounds less critical or confrontational.

As Leech (2014) explains, indirect requests are often used to reduce imposition and maintain politeness in interaction. In this case, the hedged form allows the staff to manage the situation more tactfully and avoid sounding overly critical toward the passenger. However, the passenger is still expected to adjust the baggage before the check-in process can proceed.

B. Security Check

4. Require (realized through Declarative Form)

Security Check Staff	:	Do you have a laptop in your bag?
Passenger	:	I do.
Security Check Staff	:	I'll need you to remove it as well and place it in a bin.
Passenger	:	Okay.

The utterance ***"I'll need you to remove it as well and place it in a bin"*** is produced by a security check staff member during the airport screening process when the passenger is asked to take a laptop out of their bag before passing through the scanner.

This utterance can be categorized as a directive of requirement because the action is treated as necessary within the security procedure. In Searle and Vanderveken's framework, this type of directive is associated with situations in which the requested action is required for procedural reasons rather than left entirely to the hearer's choice. Although the utterance is expressed in declarative form, it is still understood as a directive within the interaction. As Yule (2017:328) explains, indirect speech acts occur when the grammatical form of an utterance does not directly correspond to its communicative function.

Rather than using an imperative such as "Take your laptop out," the staff frames the instruction through the expression "I'll need you to...". This phrasing makes the instruction sound less abrupt while still clearly indicating what the passenger is expected to do. The declarative form also helps present the instruction as part of a routine security procedure rather than as a personal command from the staff member.

In airport security settings, this kind of indirect directive is commonly used to maintain procedural control while keeping the interaction relatively polite and non-confrontational. The instruction is expressed in a softened form, which helps reduce direct imposition. However, passengers are not in a position to refuse, as compliance is required for the screening procedure.

5. Command (realized through Imperative Form)

Security Check Staff	:	Stretch out your arms. I'm going to scan your body. (Scans the passenger's body.) Are you wearing any jewelry?
Passenger	:	Oh yeah, I think my necklace triggered the alarm. Sorry about that.

The utterance **"Stretch out your arms"** is produced by a security check staff member during the body scanning process at the airport when further inspection is required.

This utterance can be categorized as a command because the staff directly instructs the passenger to perform an immediate physical action. In Searle and Vanderveken's (1985:201) framework, commands typically involve a strong directive force and are commonly associated with situations involving institutional authority. In this interaction, the passenger is expected to comply immediately as part of the airport security procedure.

The utterance is expressed in imperative form and functions as a direct instruction. As Yule (2017:378) explains, direct speech acts occur when the grammatical structure of an utterance corresponds to its communicative function. Unlike the previous examples, the staff does not use mitigation or indirect phrasing, but delivers the instruction in a brief and explicit form.

The directness of the command reflects the nature of airport security interactions, where clarity and efficiency are prioritized during the screening process. This is particularly important because the instruction involves body inspection and requires an immediate response. In this context, the imperative form helps ensure that the screening procedure can proceed efficiently.

6. Permit (realized through Declarative Form)

Security Check Staff	:	(Scans one more time.) Alright. You're all clear. You can pick up your items from the scanner, and you can head to your gate.
Passenger	:	(Picks up his items.)

The utterance "***You can pick up your items from the scanner, and you can head to your gate***" is produced by a security check staff member after the passenger has completed the screening process. At this point, the staff informs the passenger that the security inspection has been completed and that they are allowed to proceed to the departure gate.

This utterance can be categorized as a permit because the staff gives the passenger authorization to carry out certain actions, namely collecting their belongings and continuing to the gate area. In Searle and Vanderveken's (1985:202) framework, directives of permission involve the removal of a prior restriction, so that the hearer is allowed to perform the intended action.

The utterance is expressed in declarative form through the modal "can," which signals that the passenger is no longer restricted by the security procedure. Although the utterance appears informative on the surface, it also functions to regulate when the passenger is permitted to proceed to the next stage of the departure process.

Unlike commands or requests that direct the hearer to perform an action, this utterance marks the completion of institutional control at a particular stage of the interaction. The permission granted by the staff shows that the passenger has fulfilled the required security procedures. At this point, the passenger is authorized to proceed to the next stage of the departure process.

C. Boarding Gate

7. Request (realized through Softened Imperative Form)

Gate 54 Staff	:	United Airlines Flight 803 to London is now boarding. Please have your boarding pass and identification ready for boarding.
Passenger	:	(Boarding.)

The utterance “*Please have your boarding pass and identification ready for boarding*” is produced by a gate staff member shortly before passengers begin boarding the aircraft. At this stage, passengers are expected to have their boarding documents ready so that the boarding process can proceed smoothly and efficiently.

Request realized through imperative form, because the staff asks passengers to carry out a preparatory action before entering the gate area. In Searle and Vanderveken’s framework (1985), requests are classified as directive acts that attempt to get the hearer to perform a particular action, although compliance is generally expected in institutional contexts such as airport boarding procedures.

The utterance is expressed in imperative form, but the use of “please” softens the directive and makes the instruction sound more courteous. Unlike the command found in the security screening interaction, the imperative form here is not used to exercise strict control over immediate physical movement, but rather to organize the boarding process efficiently. The instruction functions as a procedural reminder that helps passengers prepare before boarding begins.

As Yule (2017) notes, imperative forms are frequently used in institutional interactions where instructions need to be communicated clearly and efficiently. In this context, the softened imperative helps the staff guide passengers through the boarding procedure. It also prevents the instruction from sounding overly forceful.

Conclusions

The analysis shows that directive acts in airport service interactions are realized through a range of linguistic forms, including interrogatives, conditionals, hedged expressions, declaratives, and imperatives. These forms reflect varying degrees of directness shaped by the procedural demands of each stage of interaction.

At the check-in counter, directive acts are mainly realized as requests through interrogative, conditional, and hedged forms. In the security check stage, directives take the form of requirements in declarative form, a command in imperative form, and a permissive act in declarative form, reflecting stronger procedural control at this stage. At the boarding gate, directive acts are realized in softened imperative forms that function as procedural instructions for boarding preparation rather than immediate action demands.

Overall, the findings indicate that directive acts are closely shaped by institutional function, ranging from mitigated service-oriented requests at check-in, to more control-oriented directives in security procedures, and finally to instruction-based guidance at the boarding stage.

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