

Speech Acts Analysis of Resolution MEPC.377(80): 2023 IMO Strategy on Reduction of GHG Emissions from Ships

Dhion Meitreya Vidhiasi^{1*}

¹Nautical Sciences Department, Akademi Maritim Nusantara Cilacap

*Correspondence e-mail: mvdhion@gmail.com

Abstract:

This study examines speech actions within the international policy document RESOLUTION MEPC.377(80): 2023 IMO Strategy on Reduction of GHG Emissions from Ships, employing a descriptive qualitative methodology grounded in Weigand's (2010) dialogic speech act theory. The research focuses on the Vision and Levels of Ambition sections, which outline the trajectory of the International Maritime Organization's strategy to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions from the international shipping sector, aiming for a net-zero emissions objective by 2050. A descriptive qualitative method is employed to analyze the data. The study results indicate that the IMO policy statement serves both as a regulatory tool and as a medium for institutional communication, encompassing a series of dialogic speech acts. Three predominant categories of speech acts were identified: declarative (primarily encompassing institutional promises and commitments), directive (manifesting as invitations, encouragement, and implicit demands directed at member states), and representative (notably assertive acts that underscore beliefs and strategic information). The three categories of speaking actions function synergistically to establish legitimacy, urgency, and the trajectory of collective action among IMO member nations to achieve carbon-neutral shipping. This study expands the theory of dialogic speech acts to analyze international ecological policy texts, demonstrating that IMO strategic policies are formulated through dialogic procedures that promote understanding and awareness.

Keywords: Carbon Neutral Shipping, Dialogic Speech Acts, Greenhouse Gas Emissions, IMO, Maritime Policy

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini menganalisis tindak tutur dalam dokumen kebijakan internasional RESOLUTION MEPC.377(80): 2023 IMO Strategy on Reduction of GHG Emissions from Ships dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif berbasis teori tindak tutur dialogis Weigand (2010). Fokus analisis berada pada bagian Vision dan Levels of Ambition yang memuat arah strategis IMO dalam upaya global menurunkan emisi gas rumah kaca dari sektor pelayaran internasional menuju target net-zero emissions tahun 2050. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dalam melakukan analisis data. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa dokumen kebijakan IMO tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai instrumen regulatif, tetapi juga sebagai praktik komunikasi institusional yang mengandung rangkaian tindak tutur dialogis. Tiga jenis tindak tutur dominan ditemukan, yaitu deklaratif (terutama berupa janji institusional dan komitmen), direktif (berupa ajakan, dorongan, serta tuntutan implisit kepada negara anggota), dan representatif (khususnya asertif yang menegaskan keyakinan dan informasi strategis). Ketiga jenis tindak tutur ini bekerja saling melengkapi dalam membangun legitimasi, urgensi, serta arah tindakan kolektif negara anggota IMO untuk mewujudkan pelayaran netral karbon. Penelitian ini memperluas penerapan teori tindak tutur dialogis pada analisis teks kebijakan internasional dan menunjukkan bahwa strategi kebijakan IMO dibangun melalui proses dialogis yang mendorong kepatuhan serta kesadaran ekologis.

Kata Kunci: Emisi Gas Rumah Kaca, IMO, Kebijakan Maritim, Pelayaran Netral Karbon, Tindak Tutur Dialogis

INTRODUCTION

The global maritime industry is currently under pressure to reduce carbon emissions to meet the objective of carbon neutrality by 2050. Energy conservation and emission mitigation in the shipping sector are essential not only to comply with international emission-reduction laws but also to enhance economic benefits for shipping enterprises (Fan et al., 2020).

The International Maritime Organization (IMO), an agency of the United Nations, is crucial in formulating policies and regulations relevant to this matter. The pledge to achieve carbon neutrality (net zero emissions) by 2050 stems from the 2015 Paris Agreement, in which nations agreed to limit global warming to a maximum of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) study underscored that to attain this threshold, global net carbon emissions must attain zero by about 2050 (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023).

In 2018, the International Maritime Organization aimed to achieve a 50% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from vessels by 2050 relative to 2008 levels. In 2023, this commitment was further specified with the introduction of a net-zero emissions strategy targeting 2050, aligning with the worldwide objective of carbon neutrality (UNCTAD, 2023). The implementation of the net-zero emissions policy is facilitated by measures including the Energy Efficiency Design Index (EEDI) for new vessels with a gross tonnage of 400 GT and above operating internationally, the Carbon Intensity Indicator (CII) for existing ships, and the promotion of green fuels such as ammonia, methanol, or biofuels.

Policy is not solely a legal artifact; it is also the outcome of discourse creation, encompassing specific speech acts—representative, explorative, directive, and declarative—that embody the ideology and trajectory of institutional communication. Conventional speech act theories (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1979) conceptualize utterances as actions that embody illocutionary force (Anwari, 2020; Daar, 2023). Weigand (2010) formulated the notion of dialogic speech actions, highlighting that each speech act constitutes a component of a reciprocal dialogic process rather than an isolated individual act (Tsoumou, 2020; Vidhiasi, 2025). Within the framework of IMO policy, these speech acts signify the engagement between international institutions (institutional speakers) and member states (speaking partners).

In IMO papers, expressions such as "urging Member States," "inviting Parties to," or "committing to reduce emissions" exemplify directive and declarative speech acts within a global institutional framework. These verbal acts are not isolated; they embody the IMO's role as a leading organization that welcomes and compels member nations to pursue green shipping actively.

The speech act theory approach in linguistic research has been extensively utilized. Nevertheless, while several scholars have employed Weigand's (2010) speech act theory to analyze written language, as shown by Tsoumou's (2020) research, the majority of applications of speech act theory continue to concentrate on spoken language, as demonstrated by El-Dakhs et al. (2021) and Vidhiasi (2024, 2025). Tsoumou (2020) analyzed the use of language in Facebook comment sections regarding digital political discourse. The study highlighted that discourse on social media serves not only to disseminate information but also to perform behaviors such as denouncing, accusing, soliciting, and threatening.

El-Dakhs et al. (2021) investigated the refusal strategies employed by female lecturers from three cultural groups: native English speakers, native Arabic speakers, and non-native Arabic English speakers, in response to student requests. The findings indicated that all groups generally employed indirect refusal strategies to preserve social relationships, with slight variations in the degree of mitigation and the internal modifiers used. Vidhiasi's (2025) study, while centered on conversational transcripts, fundamentally analyzed spoken language. The research analyzed interview transcripts between investigators and victims, revealing that word

choice, question structure, and pragmatic strategies frequently mirrored investigators' cognitive and cultural biases, including skepticism toward the victim's credibility and an exaggerated focus on the victim's behavior preceding the incident.

This analysis will investigate the speech act tactics employed by the IMO in its policy documents on ecologically sustainable maritime affairs, as no prior research has examined final policy documents through the lens of dialogic speech act analysis. This project aims to extend the application of dialogic speech act theory to the analysis of international policy texts and offer insights into policy communication tactics for fostering ecological compliance and awareness in the marine sector.

METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach based on the dialogic speech act theory proposed by Weigand (2010). This theory views language as a social act that occurs in a dialogic context, where each utterance is a move in a dialogic game involving actions and reactions between the speaker and the interlocutor. Thus, each statement in a policy text is understood as a communicative act with a specific social function, not merely the delivery of information.

This study examines the official document RESOLUTION MEPC.377(80) titled "2023 IMO Strategy on Reduction of GHG Emissions from Ships," published by the International Maritime Organization (IMO, 2023), as the subject of investigation. This paper serves as a global policy that revises the plan to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from the international shipping sector. This study exclusively concentrates on sections 2 (Vision) and 3 (Levels of Ambition, Indicative Checkpoints, and Guiding Principles). The research data focuses on sections 2 and 3, as both sections elucidate the measures implemented by the IMO to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Data were obtained by analyzing official documents retrieved from the IMO website. Data analysis involved identifying speech acts in policy texts using Weigand's dialogic function theory. The unit of analysis comprised a word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph that included a dialogic act. The analytical process was conducted in two phases: (1) examination of statements that prompted dialogic implementations according to Weigand's classification of speech act categories, and (2) interpretive validation through the verification of the coherence of speech act functions within the context of IMO policy.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the RESOLUTION MEPC.377(80) paper, particularly in sections 2 and 3, the IMO employs numerous declarative speech acts. Nonetheless, other expressions suggest a directive to the reader or the policy beneficiary. The analysis in Data 1 is derived from document number 2 of the RESOLUTION MEPC.377(80).

Excerpt 1

¹IMO remains committed to reducing GHG emissions from international shipping and, as a matter of urgency, aims to phase them out as soon as possible, while promoting, in the context of this strategy, a just and equitable transition.

Excerpt 1 presents a perspective from the IMO on mitigating greenhouse gas emissions. The sentence "*IMO remains committed...*" in Excerpt 1 can be classified as a declarative speech act, specifically an act of pledging. According to Weigand, the act of promising is not an isolated statement but rather follows a sequence of preceding statements or occurrences. Consistent with the studies by Tsoumou (2020) and Vidhiasi (2025), the International Maritime

Organization's commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions did not emerge spontaneously; it arose from anticipated increases in emissions from the shipping sector. According to data from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 2023, greenhouse gas emissions increased by around 20% over the last decade (UNCTAD, 2023).

An examination of Excerpt 1 indicates that the IMO's goal is not solely a declarative promise but also implicitly conveys a directive assertion. The expression "... *from international shipping ... as soon as possible*" may be construed as an imperative statement. The IMO's commitment to international shipping requires that all countries engaged in it share this dedication. The statement "... *as a matter of urgency ... as soon as possible*" has a perlocutionary effect, compelling all interlocutors, specifically the IMO member countries, to promptly make the same pledge and take identical actions.

Besides declarative and directive statements, the IMO's goal also engenders representative utterances, especially assertive ones. The line "... *while promoting, in the context of this Strategy, a just and equitable transition*" indicates the conviction that activities associated with the greenhouse gas reduction strategy will be carried out fairly and equitably. The line "... *while promoting...*" generates a perlocutionary impact, suggesting that the interlocutor accepts the strong statements presented by the IMO.

Consistent with the IMO's objective, Indonesia has implemented a Net-Zero Emissions 2060 initiative that encompasses methods such as expediting the transition to renewable energy, enhancing energy efficiency, and electrifying transportation, all while maintaining energy affordability and fostering economic growth (IRID, 2022). This indicates that the IMO's vision is not only a declarative statement in the guise of an independent promise, but also possesses a tangible perlocutionary consequence that materializes through the interactions of the interlocutors.

Excerpt 2

¹***Carbon intensity of the ship to decline through further improvement of the energy efficiency for new ships***

²*to review with the aim of strengthening the energy efficiency design requirements for ships;*

Excerpt 2 constitutes portion number 3 of the RESOLUTION MEPC.377(80) document. In contrast to Excerpt 1, Excerpt 2 comprises two phrases with distinct emphases. Sentence 1 delineates the objective to be attained, whereas sentence 2 articulates the approach employed to accomplish that objective. In Excerpt 2, representational speech, particularly aggressive, is evident in sentence 1. Sentence 1 articulates a conviction held by the IMO concerning the mitigation of carbon intensity generated by vessels.

A declarative assertion subsequently succeeds the IMO's conviction in sentence 1 in the form of a promise presented in sentence 2. The expression "*to review ...*" indicates that the IMO will initiate a process to evaluate energy-efficiency design. Sentence 2, while classified as a declarative statement, also indirectly communicates a directive meaning to the addressee. The phrase "... *strengthening the energy efficiency design requirements for ships*" signifies a necessity for the recipient to focus on the design of each vessel they possess to meet the demand for energy efficiency.

Excerpt 3

¹***uptake of zero or near-zero GHG emission technologies, fuels and/or energy sources to increase***

²uptake of zero or near-zero GHG emission technologies, fuels and/or energy sources to represent at least 5%, striving for 10%, of the energy used by international shipping by 2030

Excerpt 3, like Excerpt 2, commences with a representative utterance, notably an assertive one. The statement posits that there is an increase in the use of technology, fuel, and/or energy sources, with greenhouse gas emissions approaching zero or achieving zero. Excerpt 3, particularly sentence 2, provides supplementary information that reinforces the assertion in sentence 1. As noted by Weigand in Vidhiasi (2024), an utterance may not constitute a novel statement; rather, it can serve as supplementary information that reinforces a prior utterance. This indicates that, despite being categorized as a representative utterance, sentence 2 is classified as an informative utterance.

The phrase “... at least 5%, striving for 10%, of the energy used by international shipping by 2030” not only conveys information but also implicitly issues a command that mandates compliance with the specified values. The expression “... international shipping...” underscores that all IMO member nations are obligated to comply with the IMO’s directives.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the IMO’s RESOLUTION MEPC.377(80) policy document serves as both a regulatory instrument and an institutional communication practice between international entities (institutional speakers) and member states (speech partners), characterized by dialogic speech acts. The analysis of the Vision and Levels of Ambition sections revealed that the IMO predominantly employs three types of speech acts: declarative, directive, and representative, which collaboratively contribute to establishing a global policy framework for reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the international shipping sector. IMO’s vision is not just a declarative illocutionary utterance in the form of a stand-alone promise, but also has a real perlocutionary effect and is realized by the speech partner.

This research has effectively broadened the application of Weigand’s dialogic speech act theory to the examination of international policy texts, revealing that IMO policy documents constitute dialogic communication acts that actively solicit and obligate member states to engage in the realization of green shipping.

Future studies could incorporate additional sections of the IMO policy document beyond the Vision and Levels of Ambition sections. Examining additional areas, such as Policy Measures, Implementation Tools, or Follow-up Actions, would yield a more thorough understanding of the speech patterns the IMO employs in its overarching emissions-reduction policy plan.

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