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Research Paper

Commercial Discourse and Sales Strategies in the Mass and High-End Markets: A Socio-Pragmatic Perspective

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Abstract: Language is central to personal selling, but studies on commercial discourse in Bangladesh have focused less on naturally occurring buyer-seller interactions. The current study investigates how language use and sales strategies vary across the mass market and high-end market in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The research used a socio-pragmatic framework based on Speech Act Theory and a qualitative and exploratory-descriptive design. Three non-branded shops were selected from Dhaka New Market and three from Bashundhara City Shopping Complex by purposive sampling, and data were collected through participant observation. The qualitative data in this study were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings suggest that similar speech acts have different functions in market settings. In Dhaka New Market, the discourse was focused on the importance of direct bargaining, claims of practical value, building solidarity through the use of kinship terms, emotional appeals, and fluid power relations between buyers and sellers. In Bashundhara City Shopping Complex, the discourse was more formal and prestige-oriented. Negotiations were controlled by sellers who emphasized exclusivity, fashion trends, foreign origin and business reputation. This study contributes to the research field on commercial transactional discourse from a socio-pragmatic perspective by showing how linguistic practices and sales strategies are actively constructed within the market context and in relation to broader socio-economic meanings.

Keywords: Buyer-seller interaction, commercial discourse, high-end market, mass market

Introduction

Personal selling is one of the classic components of marketing communication, although academic attention has traditionally focused on advertising (Weitz, 1978). Face-to-face buyer-seller interactions involve dynamic bargaining and communication processes that can shape participants' attitudes, intentions, and behaviours (Jap et al., 1999). Commercial interactions may also differ across market settings. The type of value that is prioritized in a business deal, ranging from basic costs to prestige, often varies depending on the circumstances of whether it is a mass-market or high-end one (Heine & Phan, 2011). These differences allow us to better understand the difference in commercial dialogue between different social and economic strata. Interestingly, this is a topic which has not been much researched in Bangladesh till now. Other studies have talked about pricing, marketing and brand recognition (Huda et al., 2011; Rusab, 2020), but they have not really considered the linguistic aspect of face-to-face interactions. Little is known about how speech habits vary between a regular market and a luxury mall, or how those differences link back to broader cultural values. This gap in particular has been addressed in this study. To help fill that gap, this research analyses real conversations in two different market settings in Dhaka between buyers and sellers. Here, mass market environment is Dhaka New Market while high-end environment is Bashundhara City Shopping Complex. The research aims to achieve three objectives: (i) to identify the most frequent speech acts in both places, (ii) to observe how language is used to support sales

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strategies, and (iii) to understand how the language reflects the social and economic values of each of the markets. The study contributes to a context-sensitive understanding of commercial discourse in Bangladesh by comparing these two different market settings.

Literature Review

Language plays a key role in marketplace interaction. It not only provides product information but also shapes consumers' behaviour, builds relationships, and creates meaning. Kelly-Holmes (2019) views marketing as an intensely linguistic activity where both marketers and consumers play an active role in creating identity and product value. Kronrod (2022) explores foundational linguistic concepts and shows how linguistic features such as metaphors, narrative, discourse, etc influence consumers' behaviour and perceptions. Thus, commercial communication can be viewed as a social practice where both product value and identity are constructed.

Language choice also varies based on social, cultural, and situational context. Various factors such as settings, participants, purposes of communication, social rules, genre, etc influence interactions, and successful interaction requires an understanding of the context in which it takes place (Hymes, 1974). Alo and Soneye (2014), in their investigation of open-air market settings in Southeast Nigeria, show how words and expressions go beyond linguistic meaning and are shaped by sociocultural context in marketplace transactions. When humans interact, they often change their way of speaking to either construct, maintain or even widen social distance (Soliz & Giles, 2014). Mahbub-ul-Alam and Quyyum (2025) also show how people use code mixing and code switching in their daily conversations to make their language style unique.

Speech Act Theory provides a relevant framework for analysing how language performs actions in commercial interaction. Austin (1962) established the idea that utterances can function as actions, while Searle (1969, 1976) categorises utterances according to their communicative functions: directives, representatives, commissives, expressives and declarations. Several studies have applied speech-act approaches to advertising and promotional communication. Putra et al. (2021) found a close relationship between directives and politeness in advertising, while Wang et al. (2023) and Ma et al. (2024) examined the role of different speech-act strategies in social and live-commerce interactions and showed that speech-act types are associated with consumer engagement and purchase behaviour.

Buyer-seller communication involves both commercial and interpersonal concerns. Politeness helps speakers manage face and maintain interpersonal relations (Brown & Levinson, 1987), while buyer-seller interactions may also involve personalization and socialization as part of the interaction process (Sheth, 1976). Commercial communication can also contribute to the symbolic meanings associated with products and consumption (Levy, 1959). These symbolic dimensions are particularly relevant to the distinction between regular and high-end consumption. For example, luxury marketing is promoted by creating various identities and symbolic value, such as status, class, etc. (Wei, 2022). It also adapts local culture to Western values based on consumers' expectations (Sun, 2024). Luxury brands put a lot of emphasis on symbolic value and uniqueness, whereas everyday brands care much more about practicality and cheapness (Chen, 2022).

Research on commercial practices in Bangladesh provides context for the present study. Huda et al. (2011), in their study of retail grocery stores in Dhaka, examined marketing practices related to pricing, quality, and promotion and showed the importance of adapting strategies to local consumers. Rusab (2020) explored Aarong's marketing practices and also discussed segmentation, targeting, positioning, customer relationship management, and brand identity. These studies provide insight into commercial practices but their main focus is on marketing strategies rather than on the language used in naturally occurring buyer-seller interactions.

Most existing studies on business communication have mainly looked at advertising, marketing plans, or specific language habits. However, there isn't much research on the actual face-to-face talk between buyers and sellers in Bangladesh, especially regarding how they use different speech acts

in different shop settings. This study addresses this gap by comparing sales discourse in mass-market and high-end market settings through Speech Act Theory.

Theoretical & Conceptual Framework

This research relies on Speech Act Theory, which Austin (1962) first came up with and Searle (1969, 1976) later refined. This theory basically argues that language isn't just for sharing information, but is actually a way of taking action. Austin (1962) identified three layers of these acts: the locutionary, the illocutionary, and the perlocutionary. Building on those ideas, Searle (1969, 1976) grouped these into five types: directives for getting someone to act, representatives for stating a truth, commissives for promises about future actions, expressives for feelings and attitudes, and declarations for changing a social reality. This theory is relevant to this work because buying and selling are full of communicative actions like requesting, bargaining, and promising. Thus, this lens is used to see how language helps people negotiate prices, build product value, and manage power dynamics between the two markets.

Below, figure 1 presents the conceptual framework developed for this study. It applies Speech Act Theory to buyer-seller interactions in mass-market and high-end settings to provide a basis for comparing their language and sales strategies.

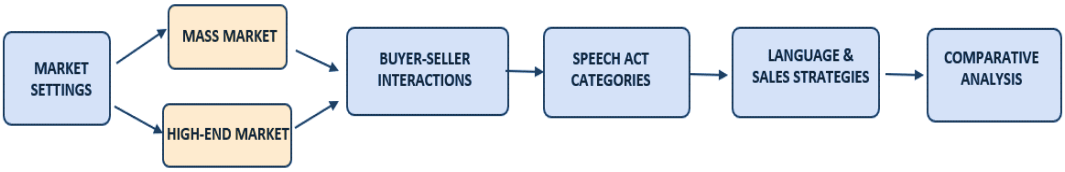


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative and exploratory-descriptive design to examine naturally occurring buyer-seller interactions in two contrasting market settings in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Six non-branded shops were selected using purposive sampling. Three shops were selected from Dhaka New Market representing mass market context and three from Bashundhara City Shopping Complex representing high-end context. The selected shops sold similar products such as clothing and accessories which made a valid comparison between the two settings. The final dataset included six buyer-seller interactions having one interaction from each shop and 142 analyzable utterances.

Data were collected through participant observation, audio recording and field notes. The researchers participated as a customer to observe the interactions. This approach was adopted to reduce researcher interference and preserve, as far as possible, the naturalistic character of the interactions. The conversations were transcribed in the original language and relevant code-mixing, and other conversational features were preserved. All the utterances were classified into five speech act categories such as representatives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations. This study employed thematic analysis because it provides a flexible and systematic approach to analyze the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and organized the data into six themes as follows: bargaining strategies, quality and authenticity claims, power dynamics, emotional appeals and solidarity-building, prestige and social identity construction, and cultural framing and national origin. Then the findings were compared across the two market settings.

This study used natural marketplace conversations and maintained alignment of the analytical framework with the research objectives to ensure validity. This study used both audio recordings and field notes to transcribe the data accurately and the transcribed data were also reviewed carefully. The same data collection procedures, speech act categories, as well as the same thematic framework were applied for both market settings to ensure reliability. This study did not use any personal

information about the participants and business information and only anonymized data were used to ensure confidentiality.

Findings and Discussions

Bargaining Strategies

Bargaining emerged as a central strategy in the Dhaka New Market. To negotiate price, buyers and sellers mostly used directives, representatives, and commissives. In Dhaka New Market, the customer started the conversation with a directive. Customer: "মামা, লাইট কালারের মধ্যে হালকা কাজের শাড়ি দেখান।" (*Uncle, show light-coloured sarees with simple design*). The customer used familial terms here to show solidarity before the negotiations began. After invoking a sense of solidarity, the customer moved from product selection to direct negotiation. Customer: "দাম কত রাখবেন?" *(How much will you keep the price?)* Through this indirect directive, the customer clearly showed his expectations for price reduction. The customer referred to other shops to challenge the seller's price. Customer: "৩০০ রাখেন। অন্য দোকানে তো পাড়সহই ৪০০।" *(Keep it at 300. In other shops, they are giving it for 400 with a border).* In Dhaka New Market, customers used threats to leave or buy from elsewhere as a bargaining strategy. Customer: "আচ্ছা মামা, থাক তাইলে। আমরা অন্য দোকানে দেখি।" *(Okay uncle, leave it then. We will check other shops).* Here, the customer urged the seller to reduce the price without even directly asking for it. The seller immediately responded, "কিছু কমায়ে রাখমু" *(I will reduce a little*). It shows that the threat of losing the sale contributes to the concession.

Unlike Dhaka New Market customers who dive straight into negotiations, the Bashundhara City Shopping Complex customer acknowledged the possibility of fixed pricing. Customer: "এই ড্রেসের প্রাইস কি যেটা দেয়া আছে সেইটাই?" *(Is the price of this dress the one that is written here?)* Rather than responding immediately to the question of price, the seller shifted the interaction towards the product's suitability through representative speech acts. Seller: "বাচ্চার বয়স কত?.....১০ বছরের বাচ্চার জন্য এটা পার্ফেক্ট সাইজ।" *(What is the child's age?.... For a 10-year-old child, this is the perfect size).* After establishing this product-oriented frame, the seller introduced the possibility of negotiation. The seller performed a commissive, though vague. Seller: "দাম কম রাখা যাবে। চয়েজ হয় কিনা দেখেন?" (*The price can be lowered. See if you like it or not?)* Here, the vagueness performed two actions. The seller did show willingness to negotiate but also kept a sense of exclusivity by being vague.

Quality and Authenticity Claims

In both market settings, claims of quality and authenticity about the products were observed as an important persuasive strategy to justify the price demand. Sellers from both markets used representative speech acts to claim their products' quality and authenticity but the meanings and purposes attached to quality vary between the two markets.

In Dhaka New Market, sellers primarily constructed product quality through practical features such as craftsmanship, production costs and material properties. When a customer requested a substantial price reduction, the seller justified the price by referring to the production process. Seller: "এডি তো ব্লক প্রিন্ট এর কাজ করা, এক কালারের ডাই তো ৩০০।" (*This is a block printed work; even single coloured one costs 300).* By referring to block-printed work and production costs, the seller justified the price as fair and resisted the customer's demand for a further reduction. However, customers challenged this construction value. Customer: "এগুলোর কোয়ালিটি তো একেবারেই নরমাল" *(The quality of these is completely normal).* This counter-representative undermined the seller's valuation of the product. Thus, the same speech act type can serve opposing interactional purposes: sellers use representatives to justify value, and customers use them to challenge it.

In Bashundhara City Shopping Complex, quality is constructed through symbolic markers such as foreign origin, exclusivity, fashion trends and business reputation. When a customer requested a lower price, the seller combined origin, quality, and trendiness to construct the product's value. Seller: "এটা বোম্বে থেকে আনা,কস্টিং চার্জ আছে, কোয়ালিটি অনেক ভালো, আর এখন বার্বি গাউন বেশি চলে।" *(This is brought from Bombay, there is costing charge, the quality is very good and Barbie gowns are trending now).* Unlike the cost-based explanations in New Market, the emphasis is not only on what the product

costs to produce but also on what it represents. Sellers used their business reputation to claim authenticity. When a buyer showed concerns about the quality of a cotton dress, the seller challenged the customer's concerns by using the shop's reputation instead of giving evidence about the fabric itself. Seller: "৪০ বছর ধরে ব্যবসা করতেছি। সারা বাংলাদেশে নামকরা।" (*We have been in business for 40 years. We are well known throughout Bangladesh).*

Power Dynamics

Buyers and sellers from both market settings used directives, representatives, and commissives for claiming, resisting, and redistributing power in the interactions. In Dhaka New Market, power shifted between the buyers and sellers and was highly fluid. By setting the product price, customers established their control over the interactions. For example, when the seller asked 500 taka for the product, the customer directly challenged the price: "২০০ হলে নিবো" *(I will take it if it is 200).* The seller took control over the product price by closing the chances of price reduction: "দামাদামি কইরা লাভ নাই, ৩২০ এর কমে হইবো না, আপা।" *(There is no point in bargaining; it will not be below 320, sister)*.

In Bashundhara City Shopping Complex, power didn't shift equally between buyers and sellers. Sellers asserted authority through controlled flexibility. They did not absolutely refuse customers' requests. Seller: "আপনি কাস্টমার, আপনি বলতে পারেন, সমস্যা নাই" *(You are customer, you can tell a price, no problem).* The seller here consented to the customer's right to bargain but held the final price in his hands. Even in conceding, the seller maintained the power frame by representing this as an exception that the seller gave, rather than the result of successful bargaining. Seller: "আমাদের ফিক্সড প্রাইসের দোকান, ১০% ডিস্কাউন্টে দিচ্ছি।" *(This is a fixed price shop, I am giving 10% discount)*. Concessions in Dhaka New Market are bargained hard but in Bashundhara, sellers frame it as a gesture of generosity.

Emotional Appeals and Solidarity-Building

In both contexts, expressives were used to handle interpersonal relationships, but their roles vary depending on the market setting. In Dhaka New Market, solidarity was most visibly constructed through kinship-based address terms such as "মামা" (*uncle*). Customers also employed explicit emotional appeals to strengthen their bargaining position. Customer: "মামা, আমরা অনেকক্ষণ থেকে ঘুরতেছি, দিয়ে দেন।" *(Uncle, we have been looking around for a long time, just give it to us).* The customer's reference to fatigue transforms a price negotiation into an interpersonal appeal for consideration. Similarly, in another interaction, the customer stated, "আমরা স্টুডেন্ট, আমাদের ঠকাইয়েন না।" *(We are students; don't trick us.)* Here, student identity is used to gain sympathy.

In Bashundhara City Shopping Complex, buyers didn't emphasise building solidarity. Emotional appeals were less observed compared to Dhaka New Market. Sellers used polite and reassuring language to maintain rapport and also to preserve authority. Seller: "আপনাদের চয়েজ ভাল" *(You have good taste).* The persuasive statement flattered customers and shifted their attention from price to the value of the product.

Prestige and Social Identity Construction

Buyers and sellers in both market settings used representatives to construct their identities and product value. Prestige in Dhaka New Market was constructed through practical market knowledge and experience rather than emphasising symbolic product value. Customer: "আমরা এই গজ কাপড় ২০০ করেই কিনি সবসময়" *(We always buy this fabric at 200)*. Here, the customer didn't represent themselves as an uninformed buyer but as someone who has greater market knowledge. Sellers also constructed their identities through claims of product knowledge and market experience. When a customer complained about a glass bangle, the seller challenged the customer's claim by using his product knowledge, "এইগুলা কাঁচের চুড়ি, এমনই হয়" *(These are glass bangles; that's just how they are).* Sellers' knowledge of production, material, and price can legitimise their valuation of products.

In contrast, in Bashundhara City Shopping Complex, sellers presented the products as prestige goods rather than ordinary commodities. They used terms such as "*exclusive*," "*glossy*," and "*party wear*" to construct symbolic value of the products. Seller: "এরকম ইউনিক ড্রেস অন্য কোথাও পাবেন না"

(You will not find such a unique dress anywhere else). Here, the seller presented the product as exclusive, and through this claim, he also discouraged direct price comparison. The seller also brought current trends into the interaction to present the product as fashionable and desirable: "এখন বার্বি গাউন বেশি চলে" *(Barbie gowns are trending now)*. However, business reputation was mentioned to construct prestige. Seller: "আজকে ৪০ বছর ধরে ব্যবসা করতেছি। সারা বাংলাদেশে নামকরা।" *(We have been in business for 40 years. We are well known throughout Bangladesh)*.

Cultural Framing and National Origin

In Dhaka New Market, practical concerns such as price, quality, affordability, etc. dominate the interactions. Sellers claimed product quality through practical features rather than referring to the origin of the products. In contrast, in Bashundhara City Shopping Complex, cultural framing was employed as a tool for persuasion. The sellers explained the products as "একদম এক্সক্লুসিভ ইন্ডিয়ান গ্লসি কাপড়ের" *(completely exclusive Indian glossy fabric it is)*, "এটা বোম্বে থেকে আনা" *(This is brought from Bombay),* "অরিজিনাল পাকিস্তানি" *(original Pakistani)*. These references demonstrate that foreign origin plays significant role in constructing the symbolic value of the products. This cultural framing was reflected more strongly when the seller claimed, "বাংলাদেশি ড্রেস চলে না" *(Bangladeshi dresses don't sell).* This reveals the existing cultural hierarchy in the high-end market where Bangladeshi products are represented as commercially less desirable.

Comparative Overview of Language & Sales Strategies

Table 1 summarizes the research findings as the key strategies and their contrasting functions.

Table 1. Comparative overview of language and sales strategies

Strategy	Speech Act(s)	Dhaka New Market	Bashundhara City Shopping Complex
Bargaining	Directives, Representative, Commissives	Direct bargaining and frequent counteroffers	Polite but controlled negotiation
Quality & Authenticity	Representatives	Material quality, production costs	Origin, exclusivity, trends, and reputation
Power Dynamics	Directives, Representative, Commissives	Fluid and openly contested	More seller-controlled
Emotional Appeals & Solidarity	Expressives	Kinship terms, emotional appeals	Compliments, politeness, and rapport-building
Prestige & Social Identity	Representatives	Purchasing experience, market knowledge	Exclusivity, uniqueness, fashionability, and reputation
Cultural Framing & National Origin	Representatives	Limited; emphasis on practical value	Foreign origin enhances product value

Discussion

The findings show that sales discourse differs across the two market settings. Although similar speech acts occurred across both settings, they performed different strategic functions. In Dhaka New Market, directives, representatives, and commissives primarily facilitated direct price negotiation, counteroffers, resistance, and concessions. Customers actively challenged sellers' prices by referring to competing shops, asserting knowledge of market prices and threatening to withdraw from the transaction. This supports the view of buyer-seller interaction as a dynamic bargaining and communication process in which both participants influence the terms and value of the exchange (Jap et al., 1999). Thus, power in the mass-market setting was not fixed and openly negotiated through competing claims about price and product value. In Bashundhara City Shopping Complex, bargaining was controlled by the sellers. Unlike Dhaka New Market sellers, who immediately responded to price demands, they redirected the buyers' attention towards product suitability, uniqueness, fashionability, foreign origin and business reputation. Through this persuasive strategy, they shifted the interactions from practical price considerations to symbolic value construction, and this reveals the distinction between mass-market and high-end market strategies. Thus, in the high-end market, products are valued not only for their functional attributes but also for their exclusivity,

rarity and symbolic meaning (Heine & Phan, 2011). Price negotiation was not entirely absent in the Bashundhara shopping complex. Concessions, when made after a successful price negotiation, were characterized as seller-controlled discounts. The seller still maintained his power by framing the concessions, even as he was making a deal with the customer.

The findings reveal different ways of managing interpersonal relations in the two market settings. In Dhaka New Market, customers used kinship terms to build solidarity and also employed emotional expressions to gain sympathy. The strategies above are examples of how positive politeness and face management can affect interpersonal relations in commercial interactions (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The customers at Bashundhara City Shopping Complex were not found to use emotional expressions or relational strategies to adapt the conversation. Sellers used compliments, reassurance, and polite acknowledgement. These strategies helped them to maintain rapport as well as preserve their authority and avoid direct bargaining.

The findings further reveal that identity and product value are constructed differently in two market settings. In Dhaka New Market, identity was constructed through practical market knowledge and experience. Participants emphasized affordability, material quality, production costs, etc rather than creating symbolic value. In contrast, Bashundhara sellers established the products' value by linking the products with exclusivity, fashion trends, reputation, and foreign origin. Their emphasis on integrating foreign origin to make the product most desirable reveals the cultural hierarchies in commercial settings. This demonstrates that commercial discourse goes beyond linguistic meaning (Alo & Soneye, 2014) and creates identity and symbolic meaning around products (Kelly-Holmes, 2019). The findings demonstrate that functions of speech acts differ based on commercial context. The same category of speech acts: directives, commissives, expressives, representatives, perform different actions in different market settings. New Market interactions emphasized direct bargaining, practical value and fluid power shifts between buyers and sellers, whereas Bashundhara Shopping Complex interactions were more seller-controlled and emphasized symbolic product value construction. This study shows that commercial discourse not only facilitates transactions but also establishes identities, hierarchies, power structures and interpersonal relationships.

Conclusion

This study explores how language use and sales strategies vary across mass-market and high-end market settings in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Drawing on speech act theory, the study shows that similar speech acts perform different functions based on market context. While Dhaka New Market discourse reflected direct bargaining, emotional appeals, practical value claims, solidarity building through kinship terms and fluid power relations between buyers and sellers, Bashundhara City Shopping Complex discourse was more formal and prestige-oriented. The negotiations were more controlled by sellers, with an emphasis on exclusivity, fashion trends, foreign origin, and reputation. The findings reveal that successful commercial transactions in Bangladesh highly depend on linguistic performance, and commercial discourse reflects not only transactional goals but also identity, power, interpersonal relations and social meanings. The study contributes to the body of research on commercial discourse in Bangladesh by exploring linguistic choices in market context. Further research across diverse settings can establish the broader relevance of these patterns. Future research should examine whether Bangla-English code-mixing functions as a tool for sophistication, accommodation, or authority observed among the high-end sellers. Such comparative studies may explore a wide range of markets, products, and regions in Bangladesh to examine the broader generalizability of the linguistic patterns identified in this study.

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