

A Pragmatic Analysis of Expressive Speech Acts in Online Comments on Nightbirde's Audition

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Abstract

Expressive acts are a major category within illocutionary speech acts. This research aimed to explore and classify expressive speech acts in YouTube comments reacting to Nightbirde's audition on America's Got Talent. The analysis is grounded in the expressive speech act theory proposed by Searle and Vanderveken (2009). This research employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the data. Data were collected through non-participatory observation and note-taking. From 38 individual comments, 60 data points were identified. The analysis revealed four expressive speech act types: compliment (25 times), thank (13 times), condole (14 times), and lament (8 times). Other types, such as apologize, boast, congratulate, protest, complain, greet, welcome, and deplore, did not appear in the dataset. These results suggest that digital platforms like YouTube foster emotionally expressive discourse, especially in moments of shared mourning. The researcher encourages further exploration of expressive speech acts in varied online contexts, including multimodal forms such as emojis, visuals, and interactional features.

Keywords: Expressive; Illocutionary Act; Speech Acts.

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the primary components of human communication is the use of speech acts, which are utterances that convey information and perform actions. As stated by Yule (2010), speech acts are performed via utterances, meaning that language serves both representational and functional roles in communication. Austin (1975) originally introduced the concept of speech acts as utterances that express a speaker's intention, such as promising, commanding, apologizing, or requesting. Thus, speech acts hold that speaking a language is also a way of doing something.

According to Austin, speech acts can be grouped into three distinct forms: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. The locutionary act pertains to the act of saying something with a specific linguistic structure, emphasizing the direct, literal meaning conveyed by the utterance (Paltridge, 2012), such as saying "The tea is cold," which merely states a fact. An illocutionary act, on the other hand, conveys the speaker's intended meaning, such as saying "The coffee is cold" to imply a complaint or a request for replacement (Leech, 2016). A perlocutionary act concerns the effect an utterance has on the listener. For instance, if a customer comments that their coffee is cold, the perlocutionary act would be the waiter responding by apologizing and replacing it (Setyaji, 2016).

Searle (2012) proposed five categories of illocutionary acts: assertives, declaratives, commissives, directives, and expressives. Assertives aim to convey the speaker's belief about the world; declaratives bring about change through speech itself, such as in formal declarations; commissives involve a commitment to future behavior; directives are intended to influence the actions of the listener; and expressives reveal the speaker's inner emotional state. This study specifically examines expressives, which, according to Yule (2010), are utterances that outwardly manifest feelings like joy, grief, anger, empathy, or appreciation.

As digital technology advances, expressive acts increasingly appear in social media. Oleni et al. (2019) point out that platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube allow users from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to interact emotionally across boundaries. Of these, YouTube stands out due to its visual nature and open comment sections. Users react not only to content but also to each other, often engaging in emotionally rich exchanges involving expressive speech acts like encouragement, sorrow, support, or critique.

One vivid example is the 2021 Golden Buzzer audition by Nightbirde on America's Got Talent. The emotionally powerful video, which features Nightbirde's story of illness and resilience, prompted thousands of comments on YouTube. These comments reflected a variety of expressive acts: viewers complimented her strength, lamented her suffering, apologized for judging her prematurely, congratulated her performance, and offered condolences. Such spontaneous interactions present an ideal site for studying emotional expression through language in digital environments.

This study aims to explore how people express their emotions through language in a digital setting. Focusing on the YouTube video titled "America's Got Talent 2021 Nightbirde Golden Buzzer Full Performance Auditions Week 2 S16E02", uploaded by TALENTKINGHD, this research identifies and classifies expressive speech acts found in the comment section using the typologies proposed by Searle (2012) and Vanderveken (2009). In addition to recognizing the types of expressive acts performed, the study also analyzes their frequency. Through this, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how digital platforms like YouTube serve as evolving spaces for emotional expression, identity negotiation, and social connection through language.

Herawati et al. (2022) suggest that expressive acts should be interpreted as evaluative utterances that help others understand the speaker's psychological position. Ngasini et al. (2021) emphasize that expressive speech acts often manifest through emotional tone, facial expressions, and social context, reinforcing interpersonal understanding. Searle (2012) outlined common subtypes of expressive speech acts, including apologizing, thanking, and congratulating others. Vanderveken (2009) later expanded the list to twelve distinct categories: compliment, boast, greeting, thank, lament, apologize, praise, condole, deplore, protest, complain, and congratulate. These acts convey the speaker's emotional stance toward a person, event, or situation and are inherently performative (Searle & Vanderveken, 2009).

A compliment expresses approval or admiration for something related to the listener. For instance, "I like your dress" (L. A. H. Putri et al., 2025) highlights positive evaluation of someone's appearance. Boasting involves expressing pride in something advantageous to the speaker, often intended to inspire admiration. In Martínez (2013), the line "I trained under the best, so I knew I'd win" demonstrates self-confidence and pride. Welcoming is used to convey happiness at someone's presence, such as in "Welcome to this show, Mr. Harry Styles" (Nazrah & Rosida, 2024), which shows hospitality and inclusion. Greeting functions as polite social recognition, even without substantive content, like "Hey Miley. How's it going?" (Handayani, 2015).

Thanking expresses appreciation for a benefit or gesture attributed to the hearer. An example from Amani and Setiari (2023), "Thank you for having me," illustrates a formal expression of gratitude. Lamenting reveals sorrow over unfortunate events without necessarily assigning blame, as seen in Rahmawati (2021): "Michael is having an affair. with teary eyes." Apologizing indicates regret for a situation the speaker feels responsible for. In Ayu Amalia and Mujazin, "I'm sorry, I only speak English..." serves as a formal apology seeking reconciliation. Condoling expresses sympathy for someone else's misfortune, such as "My thoughts and prayers are with all the Queen's Family" (Alfia & Fauziati, 2023).

Deploing communicates strong disapproval, often suggesting that someone is at fault. Aritonang and

Ambalegin (2023a) illustrate this with the phrase “Your dress is a disaster...” which expresses dismay and criticism. Protesting is a formal expression of objection toward a changeable negative condition, as in “we don’t want Sars redeployed, Sars must end” (Eze et al., 2024), representing social resistance. Complaining conveys dissatisfaction without direct blame, such as “I have telephoned Room Service twice, but my dinner still has not come yet” (Suryawan et al., 2016). Congratulating shows joy for another’s success, exemplified by “Magnificent show” (Piscesco & Afriana, 2022), which celebrates achievement regardless of responsibility.

Many scholars have explored expressive speech acts across various domains. In fictional and entertainment media, Aritonang and Ambalegin (2023a, 2023b) analyzed the animated films *Avatar: The Way of Water* and *The Willoughbys*, identifying complaints and praise as central to character development. Mareta and Afriana (2024) studied expressive acts in the fantasy-adventure movie *Percy Jackson*, while Tanjung (2021) explored their use in the drama film *The Lovely Bones*, highlighting how lamenting, congratulating, and thanking supported emotional arcs. In literary analysis, Selviyani and Pujiati (2019) examined the use of compliments and apologies in the Indonesian novel *The Perfect Husband*. Meanwhile, J. O. M. Putri and Ariyaningsih (2023) studied spontaneous compliments and boasting in spoken digital media, specifically podcasts featuring Korean American artists Eric Nam and Jessi.

In digital communication platforms, Dini and Rika (2023) investigated expressions of support, sympathy, and complaint in YouTube comments responding to the “Teacher Welfare Issues in the National Education System Bill.” Winda and Fatmawati (2024) examined emotional reactions in YouTube comments under Kompas TV news videos. Asia M et al. (2024) conducted a study on expressive acts in a WhatsApp group chat, emphasizing informal and interpersonal expressions in mobile messaging.

Studies on public and social figures also reveal important ideas. Yuwono (2014) analyzed expressive speech acts in Barack Obama’s public speech at the University of Indonesia, identifying happiness, gratitude, and condolences as dominant. Tauchid and Rukmini (2016) examined Facebook posts made by footballer Wayne Rooney and found that boasting was the most frequent expressive act, often used alongside supportive or preparatory statements to strengthen rhetorical impact. In educational environments, Mazidah (2019) studied classroom interactions in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting and found that “welcoming” was the most frequently used expressive act, typically delivered in a direct manner.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on a digital tribute space that is unplanned, emotionally charged, and spontaneous, specifically the YouTube comment section responding to Nightbirde’s audition on America’s Got Talent. Previous studies on expressive speech acts have largely examined scripted dialogue in films and literary works or formal public speech by figures such as politicians and athletes. Research on digital media has also tended to concentrate on socio-political discussions or professional self-presentation. Unlike scripted texts or prepared speeches, YouTube comments provide direct access to genuine psychological reactions to real experiences of struggle and loss. By examining audience responses to Nightbirde’s performance, this research addresses an underexplored area in pragmatic studies, revealing how anonymous online users employ expressive speech acts to negotiate shared grief and inspiration. In doing so, it demonstrates how digital platforms blur the boundary between expressions of admiration and acts of collective mourning.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method to analyze expressive speech acts in the comment section of Nightbirde’s audition video on America’s Got Talent. According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), qualitative research is a method for exploring and understanding the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human issue. A qualitative descriptive approach is appropriate for this research because it allows a detailed, contextual examination of the emotional expressions embedded in online discourse, particularly in spontaneous, user-generated comments.

The primary data source for this study is the comment section under the viral video of Nightbirde’s audition, chosen for its emotional impact and high engagement rate. These viewer comments are considered rich linguistic

material that reflects a wide range of psychological states, opinions, and reactions. The comments were not scripted or influenced by the researcher, making them authentic sources for analyzing natural language use.

To collect the data, the researcher used an observational technique described by Sudaryanto (2015), specifically employing a non-participatory observation technique. In this method, the researcher does not engage directly with the data source, and in this case, YouTube commenters, but instead observes passively and collects the relevant utterances. The researcher began by browsing and selecting the video, then systematically reading the comments. Selected comments were chosen based on relevance and popularity (i.e., most-liked or top comments), and those that contained expressive elements were then extracted for analysis.

In analyzing the data, the study additionally applied both the Pragmatic Identity Method and the Pragmatic Equalizing Method, as outlined by Sudaryanto (2015). The Pragmatic Identity Method involves identifying the meaning of an utterance based on its context: who is speaking, what is being said, to whom, and in what situation. This method focuses on interpreting the utterance's function in a real-world communicative event, which is essential when dealing with expressive acts, since these often convey emotions or psychological states that are context-dependent.

After identifying expressive speech acts through contextual interpretation, the study used the Pragmatic Equalizing Method to classify each utterance within an established theoretical framework. This method involves comparing observed speech acts with Searle and Vanderveken's (2009) taxonomy of expressive acts, including apologizing, congratulating, thanking, expressing sympathy, and others. This process allowed the researcher to systematically categorize each comment and analyze the frequency and variety of expressive speech acts found in the data.

By using these methods, the research could not only uncover the types of expressive speech acts present but also describe the patterns of emotional and attitudinal expression among viewers reacting to Nightbirde's performance. The results of this analysis are presented descriptively, supported by examples from the data, and interpreted in light of expressive speech act theory.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Findings

The researchers identified 60 data points of the expressive speech act in 38 comments in the YouTube video of Nightbirde's performance on America's Got Talent by applying Vanderveken and Searle's classification. The analysis revealed that the expression of complimenting and condoling occurred most frequently.

Table 1. Expressive Speech Act in the comments of Nightbirde's Performance on America's Got Talent YouTube Video

No	Expressive Speech Act	Frequency	Percentage
1	Complimenting	25	41.67%
2	Thanking	13	21.67%
3	Lamenting	8	13.33%
4	Condoling	14	23.33%
TOTAL		60 Data	100%

As shown in Table 1, the analysis of 38 comments yielded 60 instances of expressive speech acts. The most prominent of these was complimenting, which accounted for 41.67% of the data, with 25 occurrences. This suggests the audience's primary reaction was genuine admiration for Nightbirde's talent. Beyond praise, the data shows a nearly equal split between condoling (23.33%) and thanking (21.67%), highlighting how viewers used the comments to both honor her memory and express gratitude for her story. Lamenting appeared less frequently, at just 13.33%. Overall, these figures show that while the tone was marked by sympathy, the overarching response was overwhelmingly positive and appreciative.

3.2. Discussion

The results of this study are presented descriptively through a qualitative analysis of expressive speech acts. This section begins by outlining the classification of expressive speech acts based on Vanderveken's (2009) framework, supported by examples from YouTube comments in response to Nightbirde's 2021 audition on America's Got Talent. The comments were analyzed using a descriptive approach to identify the dominant expressive speech acts. Each type is discussed with selected utterances and contextual interpretation to highlight how viewers emotionally responded to Nightbirde's performance and personal story. The frequency of each category is also noted to demonstrate which expressive acts were most prominent in the dataset.

A. Complementing

Compliments are expressive speech acts that reflect admiration, praise, or positive evaluation of the hearer, often highlighting their actions, personality, or emotional impact. According to Vanderveken (2009), a compliment is used to express approval or appreciation, often involving positive judgments about the hearer's qualities. In the context of Nightbirde's audition, many commenters responded with emotionally charged compliments that conveyed awe, reverence, and deep appreciation for her performance and resilience.

For example, @jessiewhitman8688 commented, "That moment of silence after she got done, everybody was speechless... she was amazing!" This utterance captures the powerful silence that followed Nightbirde's performance, while the phrase "she was amazing" directly expresses high praise. Another user, @docelektronc568, wrote, "Nightbird most definitely stirred my soul with her grace, elegance, confidence, and infectious smile." This comment employs rich evaluative language such as "stirred my soul" and "a cut above all the rest," signifying deep admiration. Similarly, @viperrecords3288 stated, "She lived enough for 2 lifetimes... it was AWESOME," emphasizing both respect for her bravery and awe for her emotional strength.

Metaphorical and spiritual language further reinforces the complimenting tone, as in comments like "We can see an Angel on Earth" (@drumspout) and "Her voice is absolutely stunning and beautiful" (@modjadjimphahla727). These utterances elevate Nightbirde beyond mere performance into emotional and moral inspiration.

A total of 25 compliments were identified, making this the most frequent expressive speech act in the dataset. This dominance suggests that the prevailing tone of the comment section is one of praise and admiration, aligning with the emotionally inspiring nature of Nightbirde's story and performance.

B. Thanking

Thanking is an expressive act that conveys appreciation for a benefit, service, or emotional value received from the listener. As explained by Searle and Vanderveken (1985), it involves acknowledging the hearer's contribution to the speaker's emotional, psychological, or practical wellbeing. In Nightbirde's case, many viewers expressed gratitude for her courage, inspiration, and emotional message.

For instance, @treasure_tmb wrote, "Thank you, Nightbirde, for reminding us that hope can still bloom..." which clearly reflects appreciation for the emotional strength Nightbirde inspired. Similarly, @FilesByBen said, "Thank you for touching the hearts of many!" Showing gratitude for her wide-reaching emotional impact. A more intimate example appears in @tinaroach6029's comment: "Thank you dear Jane. 'I will never forget you,'" which demonstrates not only gratitude but lasting emotional resonance.

These utterances show that many viewers did not merely admire Nightbirde, but also felt personally impacted by her message. Their expressions of thanks signify that her performance served as more than entertainment, rather it offered emotional healing, strength, or reflection. A total of 13 instances of thanking were identified, showing that many viewers expressed gratitude for Nightbirde's emotional impact and message of hope.

C. Lamenting

Lamenting is an expressive speech act that communicates deep sorrow or sadness, usually in response to suffering, loss, or perceived injustice. It is often reflective, acknowledging the pain of a situation rather than assigning blame. In the context of Nightbirde's audition, lamenting comments reveal the viewers' emotional

response to her terminal illness and passing, often reflecting existential grief.

One such example comes from @petehenderson5794, who wrote, "It is not fair that someone like me has grown old... I hope to encounter her on the next part of our journey." This utterance juxtaposes the speaker's own longevity with Nightbirde's early passing, expressing sadness and a desire for spiritual reunion. Another commenter, @lesterroloff6834, said, "...my wife would follow a similar path as Nightbird... Now this song hits that much harder..." Here, personal grief is projected onto Nightbirde's performance, demonstrating how her story resonates with other experiences of loss.

Even brief utterances such as "I can't hold back tears while listening to her sing" (@gloryfreesia) or "A soul like her should live forever..." (@DariusYzel-j4i) express raw sorrow. These laments reflect collective mourning, suggesting that viewers not only sympathize with her story but feel personally affected by it. A total of 8 lamenting acts were found in the data, demonstrating a shared sense of existential reflection and sadness evoked by Nightbirde's performance and fate.

D. Condoling

Condoling is an expressive act of sympathy and support offered to someone suffering from a loss, especially after death. It is often ritualistic, involving respectful farewells, religious blessings, or spiritual metaphors. In digital contexts like YouTube, condoling allows viewers to participate in collective mourning and express virtual empathy.

For example, @solomong3223 stated, "Rip Nightbird. I write this with tears in my eyes... Godspeed." This expression combines personal grief with a spiritual farewell, a hallmark of condoling acts. Similarly, @StevenZeller-eh7yr wrote, "Fly high Nightbirde!!" which uses uplifting metaphors to express hope for peace in the afterlife. Another notable example is from @MickeyCreole: "May God grant her eternal peace and happiness," a religiously grounded statement that offers spiritual comfort and closure.

Such utterances reflect more than sadness; they represent a shared ritual of saying goodbye, often drawing from religious or spiritual beliefs. They function as digital memorials, inviting others to grieve together. A total of 14 condolence acts were identified, revealing that condolence was a major form of emotional expression in the comment section, showcasing how viewers extend empathy and honor someone they never personally knew.

This study bridges the gap between traditional speech act theory and modern digital discourse by showing how viewers use language to process a shared emotional experience. The high frequency of complimenting (41.67%) aligns with Aritonang and Ambalegin (2023a, 2023b) findings on positive evaluation in the media, while the prevalence of thanking and condoling supports Yuwono (2014) research on how public figures inspire active emotional participation. However, these results contrast with Tauchid and Rukmini (2016) study of athletes, in which "boasting" was the primary act; here, the audience shifts toward collective mourning and lament. Ultimately, whereas scholars like Tanjung (2021) analyze scripted emotional arcs in film, this research validates Vanderveken's theory while asserting that YouTube comment sections are a unique, unscripted medium for emotionally performative language in the modern age.

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis of 60 data points from the comment section of Nightbirde's performance identifies four distinct expressive speech acts: complimenting (41.67%), condoling (23.33%), thanking (21.67%), and lamenting (13.33%). These findings reveal that the audience's primary motivation was to express admiration for the artist's talent and resilience, followed closely by a collective desire to offer sympathy and gratitude. The absence of other expressive acts, such as boasting, complaining, or protesting, underscores the specific nature of the discourse as one of tribute and memorialization. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how digital platforms serve as significant spaces for performing shared psychological states, where viewers transition from mere spectators to a supportive community.

Future researchers are encouraged to expand on these findings by exploring expressive speech acts across different social media platforms, such as TikTok or X (formerly Twitter), to determine if interface differences influence emotional expression. Given the high volume of non-verbal communication in digital spaces, subsequent

studies should also incorporate multimodal analysis, focusing on the role of emojis, GIFs, and punctuation in reinforcing speech acts. Additionally, a comparative study between comments made during the live performance versus those made after the artist's passing could provide deeper insights into how the pragmatic functions of digital discourse evolve in response to real-world events.

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