



EXPRESSIVE ILLOCUTIONARY ACTS IN TAYLOR SWIFT'S COMMENCEMENT SPEECH AT NEW YORK UNIVERSITY 2022

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Abstract

This study analyzes the types and functions of expressive illocutionary acts found in Taylor Swift's 2022 commencement speech at New York University. The research applied Searle's (1979) speech act theory as the main framework and used a qualitative descriptive method. The data were collected from Swift's speech transcript and analyzed based on the classification of expressive acts and their felicity conditions. The findings revealed that there are 42 expressive illocutionary acts representing 9 types of expressive acts, namely thanking, apologizing, congratulating, praising, complaining, protesting, boasting, lamenting, and welcoming. Among these, praising appears as the most dominant function, followed by complaining. The dominance of praising motivates the audience and strengthens emotional connection, as well expresses admiration. On the other hand, complaining and lamenting acts are used strategically to express vulnerability and authenticity, which made the speech more relatable and persuasive to the audience. The research findings indicate that Taylor Swift employs expressive illocutionary acts to maintain a balance between emotion, humor, and authority in her message, which can help her to build solidarity with the audience, deliver inspiration, and emphasize the values of resilience and self-acceptance. Furthermore, this study can enhance the understanding of how expressive acts are used in public speaking and provide useful insights for further studies in pragmatics and speech analysis.

Keywords: commencement speech, expressive illocutionary acts, pragmatics, qualitative study, speech act theory, Taylor Swift

INTRODUCTION

Speech is a fundamental form of human communication that enables individuals to express thoughts, share experiences, and interact effectively with others (Al-Mamoory & Hussein, 2023). Beyond the exchange of information, speech also serves as a tool to inspire, persuade, and influence the emotions or actions of an audience (Cohen, 1994). Among its functions, the ability to inspire is critical, as speakers can create strong emotional connections with listeners by sharing personal stories, values, or ideas (Grice & Skinner, 1993). This emotional bond can motivate individuals to reflect, take action, or adopt new perspectives, which is especially evident in graduation or commencement speeches. Such speeches are designed to motivate graduates who are entering a new stage of life by combining personal anecdotes, recognition of achievements, and encouragement to pursue future goals (Cohen, 1994).

Speeches can be categorized according to their purpose and context into several types, including informative, persuasive, demonstrative, impromptu, special-occasion speeches, and debates (Grice & Skinner, 1993). Each type has a distinct goal and requires specific techniques to engage the audience effectively. For example, informative speeches aim to educate, persuasive ones seek to influence, while special-occasion speeches, such as graduations, focus on emotional resonance (Gring, 2006). Understanding these categories helps speakers communicate effectively and ensures that messages are clear and meaningful (Burek & Losos, 2014). However, some scholars argue that combining different types of speech can enhance creativity and effectiveness.

A notable example of an inspiring graduation speech is Taylor Swift's commencement address at New York University in 2022. The speech gained wide attention for its blend of humor, personal reflection, and motivational message that resonated with young audiences. It demonstrates how a public figure can use language strategically to attract attention, inspire, and motivate listeners while maintaining relatability and authenticity (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Taylor Swift is considered one of the most influential musicians globally. According to GoodStats (2023), Jakarta ranks first worldwide for the number of Taylor Swift listeners, with over two million by June 2023. This indicates her global appeal, including among Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Her speeches, therefore, provide valuable linguistic and pragmatic insights for understanding how expressive language is used to build emotional engagement.

To understand how language functions in Swift's speech, this study refers to pragmatics the branch of linguistics that studies meaning in context. Pragmatics focuses on the speaker's intention, the listener's interpretation, and contextual factors that shape meaning (Yule, 1996). Within this field, speech act theory plays an essential role. Austin (1962) introduced the concept that every utterance constitutes an action, while Searle (1969) later classified speech acts into five categories: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives. These theories emphasize that communication involves not just saying something but doing something through language.

This study adopts Searle's (1969) theory of speech acts as the main framework to analyze how speakers achieve their communicative purposes. Searle (1969) stated that the Illocutionary acts are central to graduation speeches as they show how language can influence listeners' thoughts, feelings, and actions. Among the three levels of speech acts which are locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary, this research focuses on the illocutionary level, particularly expressive acts, which is one of the illocutionary acts categories that reveals the speaker's psychological state.

Previous studies have mostly analyzed illocutionary acts in various contexts, such as films, politics, and literature, identifying common acts like promising, advising, and encouraging. However, few have focused specifically on expressive illocutionary acts in commencement speeches delivered by global figures like Taylor Swift. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by identifying and analyzing the expressive illocutionary acts used in Swift's 2022 NYU commencement speech and explaining the functions to reveal how Swift uses language strategically to motivate, advise, and inspire graduates while enhancing understanding of expressive acts in effective public speaking.

METHOD

This study applies the theory of speech acts proposed by Searle (1969), which provides a framework for analyzing how speakers accomplish their communicative purposes through language. Speech acts are divided into three categories which are locutionary acts (the act of producing meaningful utterances), illocutionary acts (the speaker's intention, such as advising or encouraging), and perlocutionary acts (the effect on the listener). Among these, illocutionary acts are the most relevant to this research because they reflect the speaker's intention and how language influences the listener's thoughts, emotions, and actions (Searle, 1969; Burek & Losos, 2014).

In particular, this study focuses on expressive illocutionary acts, which function to express the speaker's psychological state such as gratitude, pride, apology, or admiration toward a situation or listener. Leech (1983) and Yule (1996) believe these acts have a crucial role in fostering emotional connection, building solidarity, and conveying sincerity in communication. The analysis employs Searle's (1979) taxonomy of expressive acts, which includes thanking, apologizing, congratulating, praising, condoling, lamenting, protesting, boasting, and welcoming. This theoretical framework enables the researcher to identify and interpret the psychological and pragmatic functions of each expressive act within Taylor Swift's speech.

Methodologically, this research adopts a qualitative descriptive design aimed at describing, interpreting, and understanding linguistic phenomena in a natural context (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research emphasizes meaning rather than measurement and provides an in-depth exploration of how language functions in communication (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This approach is appropriate for pragmatic studies because it allows a detailed examination of how utterances convey emotions and intentions.

The data for this research were taken from Taylor Swift's 2022 commencement speech at New York University. The data sources include the official video published on NYU's YouTube channel and the transcript from Billboard's website. Both sources were cross-checked for accuracy to ensure that the analyzed utterances

faithfully represent the original delivery. This process also considered non-verbal cues such as tone, laughter, and emphasis that contribute to the expressive meaning of the speech.

The study employs library research as its main data collection technique since the data are derived from publicly available sources rather than direct observation. After collecting and transcribing the speech, the researcher identified and classified utterances containing expressive illocutionary acts according to Searle’s framework. Each utterance was analyzed based on its type and communicative function, such as expressing gratitude, pride, or condolence.

Data analysis followed a step-by-step qualitative process, including familiarization with the data, coding, classification, and interpretation (Creswell, 2014). The final interpretation focuses on how expressive illocutionary acts reveal Taylor Swift’s psychological attitudes and strengthen her emotional connection with the audience and provides a deeper understanding of how expressive language functions in public speaking, especially in the context of commencement speeches that combine formal and personal elements to inspire and engage listeners.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the analysis of expressive illocutionary acts found in Taylor Swift’s 2022 commencement speech at New York University. Based on Searle’s (1979) classification, 10 types of expressive acts were identified. A total of 35 Expressive Illocutionary acts were found which each type expresses the speaker’s psychological state and serves to convey emotions that strengthen the social and emotional connection between Swift and her audience. The summary can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The Total of Expressive Illocutionary Acts Found

| Speech act | Types | Total |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|-------|
| Expressive Illocutionary Acts | Praise | 11 |
| | Thank | 4 |
| | Apologize | 0 |
| | Congratulate | 1 |
| | Condole | 1 |
| | Deplore | 2 |
| | Welcome | 1 |
| | Greet | 0 |
| | Complain | 4 |
| | Lament | 6 |
| Protest | 2 | |
| Boast | 3 | |
| Compliment | 0 | |

Based on Table 1, the expressive illocutionary acts identified in the speech consist of several categories, each carrying a different emotional meaning and communicative function. These categories include praising, thanking, congratulating, deploring, welcoming, complaining, lamenting, protesting, boasting, and condoling. The detailed explanation of each category is presented in the following sub-section.

Types of Expressive Illocutionary Acts

To answer the first research question, this section explains the types of expressive illocutionary acts found in Taylor Swift’s 2022 commencement speech. The analysis shows that Swift uses various expressive forms to communicate admiration, gratitude, joy, criticism, frustration, sympathy, and reflection. These expressive acts appear in different functions and emotional shades, contributing to the overall interpersonal tone of the speech. The following paragraphs discuss each type by attaching the data to the analysis, in line with the structure of the research article.

The data reveal several types of expressive illocutionary acts that Taylor Swift performs throughout her commencement address. Praising appears when she expresses admiration or positive evaluation toward the graduates or their achievements, positioning her utterances as forms of acknowledgement and appreciation. Thanking emerges when she explicitly conveys gratitude, often directed toward the institution or audience, reflecting recognition of support or honor. Congratulating is present in utterances that celebrate the graduates’

success and mark the significance of their academic milestone. Welcoming occurs when Swift verbally receives the audience or participants warmly, reinforcing a sense of inclusion and openness from the speaker to the listeners. The data also show instances of deploring, which are expressed when Swift highlights negative or unfortunate situations, often by referencing challenges, struggles, or personal regrets. Complaining arises when she voices dissatisfaction or discomfort about experiences that were difficult or unpleasant, although these are framed in a reflective rather than hostile manner. Lamenting is identified in utterances where she expresses sadness, disappointment, or sorrow about past events, particularly when recalling personal experiences of failure or emotional difficulty. Protesting appears when she rejects or pushes back against widely accepted norms or misleading beliefs, typically by expressing disagreement with ideas she considers harmful, such as the myth of effortlessness.

The speech also contains instances of boasting, which occur when Swift highlights her own accomplishments, authority, or experience to emphasize credibility or illustrate a point, even when delivered humorously or self-referentially. Complimenting emerges when she offers positive remarks about the graduates or aspects of the ceremony, contributing to the overall encouraging tone of the speech. Finally, condoling is present in utterances where Swift acknowledges the hardships or emotional burdens that individuals may face, conveying sympathy and emotional support toward those experiencing difficult moments

Functions of Expressive Illocutionary Acts and Their Felicity Condition

The first expressive illocutionary act identified in the data is praising, which emerges when Taylor Swift conveys admiration and positive evaluation toward individuals she acknowledges in her commencement speech. This type of expressive act functions to recognize the merit, value, or contributions of others, and appears when the speaker expresses appreciation grounded in sincere emotional judgment. One example of this is found in the utterance, *"I feel so proud to share this day with my fellow honorees, Susan Hockfield and Felix Matos Rodriguez, who humble me with the ways they improve our world with their work."* Taylor Swift frequently uses praising expressions in her commencement speech to acknowledge and appreciate the achievements of others. In the example, she directs her praise toward two honorees, Susan Hockfield and Felix Matos Rodriguez. Her statement emphasizes admiration for their contributions to society, especially when she highlights how their work improves the world. Viewed through Searle's felicity conditions, the utterance fulfils the requirements of a successful praising act. The preparatory condition is met because Swift has adequate knowledge of Hockfield's and Rodriguez's achievements, giving her praise a legitimate basis. The sincerity condition is fulfilled through her explicit emotional expressions, "I feel so proud" and "who humbles me", which indicate genuine admiration. The propositional condition is satisfied because the utterance is directed toward the accomplishments of the honorees, which are appropriate objects of praise. Finally, the essential condition is met as the primary purpose of the utterance is to perform the act of praising publicly, not merely describing information about the individuals.

Another expressive illocutionary act found in the speech is thanking, which appears when Swift expresses gratitude toward individuals or institutions that contributed to the significance of the commencement event. This act is reflected in the utterance, *"I'd like to thank NYU for making me technically, on paper at least, a doctor."* Here, she directs her appreciation to New York University for granting her an honorary doctorate, with the phrase "on paper at least" adding a light, humorous tone. This expression functions to formally acknowledge the university's role while establishing a respectful opening to her speech. Viewed through Searle's felicity conditions, the utterance meets the requirements of a thanking act. The propositional content refers to a past action performed by the listener, which is NYU conferring the honorary degree. The preparatory condition is fulfilled because Swift believes the action truly occurred and is beneficial to her. The sincerity condition is shown through the explicit phrase "I'd like to thank NYU," which signals genuine gratitude. Finally, the essential condition is met because the utterance is intended to perform the social act of thanking, not simply describe an event. Thus, its function is to publicly acknowledge NYU's contribution and express appreciation in a formal, ceremonial context.

The next expressive act identified in the speech is congratulating, which appears when Swift celebrates and acknowledges the graduates' achievements. This act is illustrated in the utterance, *"I am elated to be here with you today as we celebrate and graduate New York University's Class of 2022."* In this example, Swift expresses genuine happiness through the phrase "I am elated," signalling her emotional support for the graduates' accomplishment. Her reference to "celebrate and graduate New York University's Class of 2022" directly recognizes the listeners' achievement and strengthens the ceremonial atmosphere of the event. Viewed through Searle's felicity conditions, the utterance fulfils the requirements for a congratulatory act. The propositional content condition is met because the statement refers to a positive achievement experienced by the listeners. The

preparatory condition is fulfilled since Swift understands graduation as a significant accomplishment. The sincerity condition is evident through her explicit expression of joy. Finally, the essential condition is satisfied because the utterance functions to socially acknowledge and celebrate the graduates' success, rather than simply describe the event.

Swift also uses expressive acts of deploring, which involve expressing criticism or strong disapproval of a negative condition or social issue. This appears in the utterance, "*It seems to me that there is a false stigma around eagerness in our culture of 'unbothered ambivalence'. This outlook perpetuates the idea that it's not cool to 'want it.'*" In this statement, Swift highlights a cultural mindset that discourages people from showing enthusiasm or ambition. By calling it a "false stigma," she indicates that this norm is misleading and harmful, and she criticizes the pressure to appear effortless as an unrealistic and unhealthy expectation. Through this expression, Swift encourages the audience to challenge such norms and to value visible effort. Viewed through Searle's felicity conditions, this utterance fits the category of deploring. The propositional content condition is met because the utterance targets a social belief that Swift evaluates negatively. The preparatory condition is fulfilled as Swift believes the stigma exists and has damaging effects. The sincerity condition is evident in her explicit disapproval, shown through phrases like "false stigma." Finally, the essential condition is satisfied because the utterance functions not merely as an opinion but as a clear act of social criticism, expressing her condemnation of the cultural expectation of "effortlessness."

The speech also includes the expressive act of welcoming, which Swift uses to acknowledge and warmly receive the supporters attending the ceremony. This appears in the utterance, "*To all the incredible parents, family members, mentors, teachers, allies, friends and loved ones here today... Welcome to New York. It's been waiting for you.*" By explicitly naming these groups, Swift recognizes their presence and highlights the emotional and practical support they have given to the graduates. The function of this welcoming act is to create an inclusive and appreciative atmosphere, extending beyond a simple greeting through the inviting tone of the phrase "It's been waiting for you." Viewed through Searle's felicity conditions, the utterance fulfills the requirements of a successful welcoming act. The propositional content condition is met because the utterance directs a welcome to specific people and a specific place. The preparatory condition is satisfied since Swift is socially authorized to welcome the audience as the keynote speaker at an event taking place in New York. The sincerity condition is reflected in her positive evaluation of the audience through the phrase "incredible parents...". Finally, the essential condition is achieved because the utterance functions as a social act of hospitality, formally receiving the audience and acknowledging their role in the commencement event.

Another expressive act found in the speech is complaining, which Swift uses to express dissatisfaction with the burdens she experienced in her early career. This is reflected in the utterance, "*As a person who started my very public career at the age of 15, it came with a price. And that price was years of unsolicited advice.*" In this example, Swift highlights the difficulties she faced as a young public figure, describing the constant, uninvited guidance she received as an emotional burden. Referring to this experience as a "price" emphasizes how unwanted and overwhelming the situation felt to her. Viewed through Searle's felicity conditions, the utterance fulfills the requirements of a complaining act. The propositional content condition is met because the utterance refers to a situation perceived as negative, "years of unsolicited advice." The preparatory condition is satisfied since Swift believes the experience truly affected her. The sincerity condition is reflected in her genuine dissatisfaction, implied in the metaphor of paying a "price." Finally, the essential condition is achieved because the utterance functions to express disapproval of an undesirable situation rather than merely describing past events.

Swift also expresses lamenting, which involves revealing sadness or emotional pain from past experiences. This appears in the utterance, "*Not being invited to the parties and sleepovers in my hometown made me feel hopelessly lonely...*" where she recalls a moment of social exclusion that caused significant emotional distress during her youth. By sharing this memory, Swift communicates vulnerability and highlights how the experience shaped her personal development. Viewed through Searle's felicity conditions, the utterance meets the requirements of a lamenting act. The propositional content condition is fulfilled because the utterance refers to a past event associated with emotional pain. The preparatory condition is satisfied as Swift believes the event truly occurred and had negative effects. The sincerity condition is reflected in her explicit admission of feeling "hopelessly lonely," indicating genuine sadness. Finally, the essential condition is achieved because the utterance functions to express grief rather than merely recounting a childhood incident, showing that Swift uses this memory to communicate the emotional impact of her past experiences.

Swift also expresses the act of protesting, which she uses to reject societal narratives she considers misleading or harmful. This appears in the utterance, "*Effortlessness is a myth,*" where she challenges the widespread belief that success should appear natural and without visible effort. Her statement serves as a firm objection to a cultural

expectation that discourages people from acknowledging hard work. By labelling effortlessness a “myth,” Swift criticizes the unrealistic pressure placed on individuals to seem effortlessly successful and instead encourages the audience to value genuine effort. Viewed through Searle’s felicity conditions, the utterance meets the criteria for a protesting act. The propositional content condition is fulfilled because the utterance directly rejects a commonly held belief. The preparatory condition is satisfied as Swift believes the norm she opposes is false and socially harmful. The sincerity condition is shown through her unequivocal phrasing, which reflects genuine disagreement. Finally, the essential condition is achieved because the utterance functions explicitly to oppose and refute a societal narrative rather than simply making an observational claim.

Swift also performs boasting, an expressive act used to emphasize personal achievement or superiority in a particular context. This appears in the utterance, “*But I’m the one who’s up here so you have to listen to me when I say this...*” where Swift draws attention to her position as the commencement speaker, a role that symbolizes accomplishment and high status. By emphasizing that she is “the one who’s up here,” she indirectly highlights the success that brought her to this moment and uses it to establish credibility for the advice she is about to deliver. Although conveyed humorously, the boast strengthens her motivational message by suggesting that her insights carry authority shaped by real experience. Viewed through Searle’s felicity conditions, the utterance meets the criteria for a boasting act. The propositional content condition is fulfilled because the statement refers to Swift’s elevated position, an appropriate basis for self-praise. The preparatory condition is satisfied as Swift believes her role as speaker is noteworthy and legitimate. The sincerity condition is evident in her straightforward acknowledgment of her position, signaling genuine awareness of her achievement. Finally, the essential condition is met because the utterance functions to elevate her status rather than simply instructing the audience, making it an expressive act of boasting.

The final expressive act identified in the speech is condoling, which involves expressing sympathy for possible losses experienced by the audience. This appears in the utterance where Swift refers to supporters who “may not be with us anymore” and adds, “I hope you’ll remember them today.” By mentioning absent individuals, Swift acknowledges the emotional weight that some listeners may carry and offers a moment of shared reflection. This expression directs attention to personal loss and aligns with the core function of condoling, which is to convey sympathy toward those experiencing grief. Viewed through Searle’s felicity conditions, the utterance meets the requirements of a condoling act. The propositional content condition is satisfied because the utterance refers to a possible bereavement experienced by the audience. The preparatory condition is fulfilled as Swift assumes that some listeners may indeed be grieving, making the sympathy relevant. The sincerity condition appears in her gentle appeal, “I hope you’ll remember them today,” showing genuine compassion. Finally, the essential condition is achieved because the utterance functions to express sympathy rather than merely sharing information, thereby validating the listeners’ emotional experiences.

The analysis of Taylor Swift’s commencement speech demonstrates that each expressive illocutionary act serves a distinct communicative purpose while simultaneously reflecting her psychological stance toward the audience and the issues she addresses. Consistent with Searle’s (1979) framework, Expressive illocutionary acts are understood to communicate the speaker’s emotions and attitudes toward situations and participants through utterances such as thanking, praising, complaining, and protesting (Hambali et al., 2024). This aligns with findings that expressive acts are not merely emotional but also rhetorical in function, capable of signaling stance and attitude in social contexts (Panjaitan & Ambalegin, 2024). Moreover, felicity conditions proposed in speech act theory including sincerity and essential conditions influence whether expressive acts are interpreted as genuine and effective communications (Saifudin, 2019). Together, these findings support the argument that Swift’s use of expressive language builds rapport, conveys authentic emotion, and functions both affectively and rhetorically within her speech. These acts successfully fulfill the felicity conditions particularly the sincerity and essential conditions indicating Swift’s genuine appreciation, respect, and happiness. This finding supports Azzahraa and Dianita (2024), who argue that sincerity and essential conditions are crucial in determining the effectiveness of expressive speech acts, and it aligns with Darmawan, Degaf, and Anggrisia (2024), who highlight the role of expressive language in fostering emotional connection between speaker and audience.

In contrast, the presence of deploring, complaining, and protesting illustrates how expressive acts can function rhetorically as forms of social critique. Swift’s expressions of frustration and objection toward cultural norms, such as the stigma surrounding effort and the pressure to appear perfect, show her awareness of broader social issues. These acts fulfill the preparatory condition, as Swift possesses the social credibility and relevant experiences to critique such norms meaningfully. This pattern is consistent with Salsabila (2023), who found that expressive acts like complaining and protesting often serve not only emotional functions but also deliver implicit

critique and challenge societal expectations.

Meanwhile, lamenting and boasting reveal an important balance between vulnerability and confidence in Swift's rhetorical style. Her lamenting expressions highlight emotional honesty and self-reflection, whereas boasting delivered humorously reinforces her authority without creating social distance. Both functions illustrate how expressive acts may overlap in purpose, simultaneously conveying emotion and strengthening persuasive impact. Together, these findings show that Swift's expressive language is not merely stylistic but strategically crafted to build rapport, share personal insight, and motivate her audience.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Taylor Swift's use of expressive illocutionary acts is both broad and purposeful. A total of 35 expressive acts were identified, covering 10 different types. Praising (11 occurrences) and lamenting (6 occurrences) are the most dominant, while other types, such as thanking, congratulating, deploring, welcoming, complaining, protesting, condoling, and boasting, appear in smaller numbers. These expressive acts help Swift build a warm connection with the audience, support her message about resilience, and create a speech that feels personal, honest, and motivating.

The findings also show that Swift combines positive expressive acts (such as praising and thanking) with more sensitive acts such as complaining, lamenting, and protesting. This balance allows her to appear both relatable and credible. Her use of boasting, although limited, strengthens her authority as a commencement speaker, especially when giving motivational advice. In conclusion, the study shows that Swift's expressive language supports her rhetorical goal of inspiring graduates while maintaining emotional closeness with the audience.

The advantage of this study is that it gives a clear description of how expressive illocutionary acts work in a real public speech, especially in a commencement context. It also shows how felicity conditions can help explain why certain expressive acts succeed in creating emotional impact. However, this study has limitations because it analyzes only one speech and does not compare Swift's expressive language with that of other commencement speakers.

The analysis is also limited because it focuses only on expressive illocutionary acts and does not examine other types of speech acts that may also appear in the speech. Even with this limitation, the findings of this study can be applied in future research on public speaking, pragmatics, or rhetorical studies. They may also be useful for English learners or public speakers who want to understand how expressive language can help build a strong connection with an audience. In addition, future studies could compare expressive acts in different commencement speeches, examine how expressive language changes across different speakers or contexts, or explore how expressive acts influence audience perception in other public communication settings.

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