

# “I’m Going to Remember this Audition for a Long, Long Time!”: Simon Cowell’s Compliments on Spectacular Performances on America’s Got Talent and Britain’s Got Talent

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## Abstract

Most studies on talent competition shows (e.g., Culpeper & Holmes, 2013; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al., 2013; Tang, 2016) do not delve into the role of judges giving positive comments to contestants. This paper investigates Simon Cowell’s compliments given to Golden Buzzer winners on America’s Got Talent (henceforth AGT) and Britain’s Got Talent (henceforth BGT) between 2016 and 2020. Apart from the studies on compliments being scarce, the existing coding schemes are not fine-grained. This paper improves the coding schemes. Moreover, previous studies on compliments (e.g., Chen & Rau, 2015; Lin, 2020) compared judges’ pragmatic variations cross-culturally, but none of them compared the pragmatic variations of an individual judge. This paper then explores Cowell’s pragmatic variations while serving as a judge on AGT and BGT over the last five years. Data was collected from Golden-Buzzer winning auditions uploaded on YouTube. Cowell’s compliments were transcribed and later analyzed according to the modified coding schemes. Results show that there

were some pragmatic variations in Cowell's use of compliments. He used a greater number of explicit compliment strategies and more explicit compliment sub-strategies on AGT. Such pragmatic variations, however, are small, and there are marked similarities.
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## 1. Introduction

A large body of research on talent competition shows over the last decade investigated judges' comments (e.g., Chen & Rau, 2015; Culpeper & Holmes, 2013; Garces-Conejos Blitvich et al., 2013; Lin, 2020; Lin et al., 2012; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2013; Tang, 2016). The two types of comments judges on this type of shows give to contestants are positive and negative as illustrated in (1) and (2), respectively.

- (1) "You have genuinely natural soul. You really, really do. I mean that's not an easy song to sing. This is an audition we are gonna remember for a long time." (*Cowell, AGT Season 13*)
  
- (2) "I think you're possibly the worst singer in the world, based on that performance. And I'm absolutely serious. I've never, ever heard anything like that in my life." (*Cowell, American Idol Season 2*)

Over two-thirds of the studies on talent competition shows examined only judges' negative comments (Culpeper & Holmes, 2013; Garces-Conejos Blitvich et al., 2013; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2013; Tang, 2016). Based on these studies, the impressions of judges have been negatively formed. Less than one-third of research in the same field explored both positive and negative comments (Chen & Rau, 2015; Lin, 2020). This type of study is rarely in-depth for both kinds of comments, which can be considered a potential drawback. To the best of my knowledge, there is no study investigating only judges' positive comments on talent competition shows.

A number of famous US and UK talent competition shows have been used as contexts to investigate judges' positive and negative comments such as American Idol (Culpeper & Holmes, 2013; Lin, 2020), The X Factor (Culpeper & Holmes, 2013; Lin, 2020), Pop Idol (Garces-Conejos Blitvich et al., 2013; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2013), and even Project

Runway (Tang, 2016), where contestants took part in fashion designing competitions. Most of these shows had been used as contexts to investigate judges' comments cross-culturally (e.g., Culpeper & Holmes, 2013; Lin, 2020; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2013; Tang, 2016). In some of these studies, researchers made rather incomparable choices. Lin (2020), for example, chose three different shows from episodes 1, 14, and 15 to examine the judges' comments. Comments from judges in a long-running program could be different from those in a newly-released program.

In addition, researchers chose to leave out the names of the judges, and comments given by one of the judges are treated as coming from the entire panel. Social-variations and length of experience as judges can certainly impact the way each judge comments on contestants. In this paper, comments from only one judge are examined in-depth. Among many judges, Simon Cowell, a 61-year-old English television entrepreneur, is an ideal choice. He is not only a talent-show veteran but also one who has served as a judge on various famous programs in the US (American Idol, The X Factor, and America's Got Talent) and UK (Pop Idol, the X Factor, and Britain's Got Talent) for nearly two decades. His expertise is undeniable, but he has acquired a rather negative reputation. He has been described as 'malicious judge', 'notoriously unpleasant Simon Cowell', 'authoritative judge', 'the cruel but honest judge', and 'the witty executioner' (Garces-Conejos Blitvich et al., 2013; Holmes, 2004). These labels mark Cowell's identity as an infamous judge who seems to make only harsh and negative comments. However, many of his comments, especially those given to Golden Buzzer winners, are particularly constructive and positive.

This paper explores and compares Cowell's compliments on AGT and BGT for the auditionees who received the Golden Buzzer between 2016 and 2020. This paper addresses two questions:

1. In auditions which earned the Golden Buzzer on AGT and BGT, what are Cowell's overall compliment strategies?
2. For auditionees who won the Golden Buzzer, do Cowell's explicit and implicit compliment strategies differ on the two shows? If so, what are the nature and extent of those differences?

## 2. Compliments

In this section, three topics are reviewed: (1) Holmes' definition of compliments, (2) compliments in US and UK talent competition shows, and (3) compliment strategies.

### 2.1 Holmes' Definition of Compliments

Although researchers studied compliments in various contexts, most of them (e.g., Danziger, 2018; Lin, 2020; Lin et al., 2012; Maiz-Arevalo, 2012; Rees-Miller, 2011; Sakirgil & Cubukcu, 2013) adopted Holmes' (1988, p. 466) definitions of compliment to determine the scope of their studies. Holmes initially defined compliment as a speech act with a communicative intention to give credit to the addressee. This credit, mutually agreed upon by the speaker and the addressee, are positive and, thus, more likely to foster solidarity rather than undermine it. As part of her definition, compliments can be described as explicit or implicit. In Maiz-Arevalo's (2012) and Sakirgil and Cubukcu's (2013) studies, the term *formulaic* is used instead of *explicit* to describe unambiguous compliments. Following Holmes' definition, a number of subsequent researchers initially classified their compliments as explicit and implicit. In addition, Holmes included some examples of compliment objects in her definition, including possessions, characteristics, and skills. Recent studies on compliments (e.g., Danziger, 2018; Maiz-Arevalo, 2012) adapted these compliment objects and analyzed their influences on compliment strategies.

### 2.2 Compliments in US and UK Talent Competition Shows

As mentioned perviously, the number of studies on compliments in talent competition shows is relatively small. Among these, even fewer are focused on cross-cultural compliments given by American and British judges. In this section, two studies (i.e., Culpeper & Holmes, 2013; Lin, 2020) are examined. Lin (2020) explored two speech acts—compliments and criticisms—while her second research question examined only compliments given by American, British, and Taiwanese judges. The comparison between the two groups of native English-speaking judges, originating from low-context cultures, showed that the American and

British judges preferred explicit over implicit compliments. Although both American and British judges employed a high number of explicit compliments, between-program analysis showed that explicit compliment strategies used by American judges outnumbered those used by British judges (i.e., 178 explicit compliments versus 112 explicit compliments), indicating that American judges were more straightforward than British judges. The analysis on implicit compliment strategies showed that both American and British judges employed implicit evaluation compliments most frequently. British judges, however, used implicit evaluation compliments more often than American judges (63.04% versus 43.18%). This suggests that British judges are less straightforward than American judges.

Culpeper and Holmes (2013) compared two reality television shows, *American Idol* and *The X Factor*, from the US and UK respectively. Their study investigated politeness and impoliteness in comments made by American and British judges about both successful and unsuccessful auditions. There were four hypotheses, three of which focused on criticisms of unsuccessful auditions. Only one hypothesis<sup>1</sup> dealt with compliments on successful auditions. It was found that American judges gave compliments on successful auditions through a nonverbal gesture (giving a round of applause) more often than British judges (11 out of 15 versus 5 out of 15). The use of this particular hand gesture suggests that American judges give positive feedback and compliments to successful auditionees more often than British judges.

These two studies showed that, among native English-speaking judges from low-context cultures, there are pragmatic variations in verbal and non-verbal compliments. This paper examines compliments made by an individual judge, a native speaker of English from a low-context culture, appearing on both American and British talent competition shows, to see whether there are such pragmatic variations<sup>2</sup>.

### 2.3 Compliment Strategies

Lin et al. (2012) compared pragmatic variations between Mainland Chinese compliments and Taiwan Chinese compliments. They initially classified compliment strategies, based on Holmes' (1988) definition of compliments, into three groups: (1) explicit compliments, (2) implicit compliments, and (3) opt-outs. In their study, explicit compliments are direct and unambiguous positive remarks with "at least

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*one positive semantic carrier*" (Lin et al., 2012, p. 1491). The explicitness was clearly defined but the head noun *carrier* is rather broad and vague. When they defined implicit compliments, the head noun *carrier* was substituted by another head noun, the *lexical item*. The change did not solve the problem. Lin et al. (2012) simply defined implicit compliments as positive remarks without a positive lexical item. They further classified implicit compliments into eight sub-strategies: (1) contrast, (2) explanation, (3) requests, (4) admiration, (5) assumption, (6) evaluation, (7) joke, and (8) want-statement. The first three sub-strategies were taken from Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk's (1989) study, while the remaining sub-strategies were data-driven. Considering the definition of each implicit compliment sub-strategy (cf. Lin et al., 2012, p. 1492), some of them (i.e., contrast<sup>3</sup> and request<sup>4</sup> sub-strategies) did not suggest the idea of complimenting.

Lin (2020), basing her coding scheme on Holmes (1988), compared positive and negative comments (i.e., compliments and criticisms) made by American, British, and Taiwanese judges on reality television programs. Her study examined the two speech acts in order to better understand the two roles of judges on talent competition shows. In the analysis of compliments, Lin (2020) pointed out that commonly-cited schemes for implicit compliments had not been fine-grained, except for those developed by Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1989). As a result, Lin (2020) elaborated the coding scheme for implicit compliment strategies in her own study. However, her coding scheme is flawed because her sub-strategies (i.e., comparison, double negation, evaluation, suggestion, and want statement) are inconsistent. All except one, the double negation, are speech acts. Lin (2020) also stated that existing studies focused on explicit compliment strategies (e.g., Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1995; Wang & Tsai, 2003), so she did not delve deeply into explicit compliment strategies. She defined them with one example in a single sentence. In her definition, explicit compliment strategies refer to those compliments with "*at least one positive semantic word*". This is rather broad. What is meant by *word* should be precisely defined.

Maiz-Arevalo (2012) mainly compared implicit compliments in English and Spanish. She based her coding scheme on Boyle's (2000, p. 18). Maiz-Arevalo (2012, p. 983) referred to explicit compliments as formulaic compliments, as opposed to implicit compliments. In her study, formulaic compliments can be expressed in two sentence types: (1)

exclamations, and (2) declarative sentences with a lexical choice of verbs (e.g., love and like) and adjectives (e.g., lovely). The former usually has no subject (e.g., *“What a beautiful bracelet!”*). The latter is further divided into two types, (1) in which the complimentee is in the subject position (e.g., *“You are a real beauty.”*), and (2) in which the complimenter is in the subject position (e.g., *“I love your shirt.”*). It might be problematic when there is neither a complimentee nor a complimenter in the subject position such as *“Everyone is going to fall in love with you.”* In addition, from her title<sup>5</sup>, one would expect to see a more in-depth definition of implicit compliments.

These flawed coding schemes provided a starting point for a new and improved coding scheme. How they were improved is described in Section 3.3.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Data

This paper investigates post-performance compliments given by Simon Cowell to auditionees who won the Golden Buzzer on AGT and BGT during the period 2016-2020. Data was collected only from auditions that received the Golden Buzzer from any judge or host (presenter). These auditions were uploaded on YouTube. One key advantage of this type of data is that it is not artificial (cf. Kasper & Dahl, 1991). The data was not elicited, but naturally-occurring and spontaneously-produced. The data is therefore a rich source of pragmatic structures (cf. Cohen, 1996). Since there are only five performances each year which receive the Golden Buzzer, data was gathered from a five-year period.

#### 3.2 Comparable Sets of Data

While the two shows were aired in two different countries (the US and UK), each judging panel was comprised of two males and two females. While AGT judges were multinational and the BGT judges were all British, the selection of judges with respect to gender and area of expertise was comparable. In addition, acts performed on AGT and BGT, especially during the audition period, could be quite diverse—ranging from singing and dancing to ventriloquism and pet-training. The auditions which earned the Golden Buzzer, however, were less diverse. In the five-

year period, 76% of the acts on AGT pertained to singing, and 68% on BGT were singing-related performances. This suggests that acts that won the Golden Buzzer were comparable. Moreover, all the acts were taken from the blind auditions, not from different rounds.

### 3.3 Coding Schemes

As mentioned in Section 2.3, a number of coding schemes for compliments were developed initially from Holmes' (1988) definition (e.g., Lin, 2020; Lin et al., 2012; Maiz-Arevalo, 2012). This paper also adopts the classification of Holmes by dividing compliment strategies into (1) explicit and (2) implicit compliments. Following Lin (2020) and Lin et al. (2012), explicit compliments are positive comments marked with at least one positive semantic word or carrier. In this paper, semantic words or carriers are specified as adjectives such as *amazing*, *wonderful*, *incredible*, *brilliant*, and *fantastic*. In addition, explicit compliments can be given with a lexical choice of verbs in syntactic formulas such as *I like/love+NP* (Maiz-Arevalo, 2012). In addition, compliments can be explicitly indicated by the explicit performative verb i.e., *compliment* (cf. Austin, 1962), and the exclamatory *wow* (Masuda, 2016). Implicit compliments, on the other hand, are positive comments without any obvious positive marker, including positive adjectives, *I like/love+NP*, the performative verb, and the exclamatory. In other words, implicit compliments attribute positive credits to the addressee by other speech acts such as comparison, suggestion, promises, admiration, and prediction (e.g., Lin, 2020; Lin et al., 2012). There are sixteen implicit compliment sub-strategies in this study. Half of them (i.e., evaluation, expressions of want, comparison, suggestion, contrast, admiration, assumption, and jokes) were adopted from previous studies (Lin, 2020; Lin et al., 2012), while the other half (i.e., metaphor, promises, prediction, surprise, fulfillment, approval, appreciation, and expressions of disappointment) emerged from the data. In these sub-strategies, the intent is to give compliments to the hearer even though the words are not literally a compliment. Table 1 illustrates all newly-defined implicit compliment sub-strategies. Examples are provided in Appendix A.

#### Table 1

##### *Implicit compliment sub-strategies and definitions*



Sub-Strategy	Definition
Comparison (Com)	compares the contestant with another contestant or someone with professional expertise
Metaphor (Met)	says that the contestant is someone or something with an admirable quality
Evaluation (Eva)	judges the worth, quality, or importance of the contestant and his or her performance
Suggestion (Sug)	praises the contestant by recommending a thing to do that would benefit him, her or someone else
Expressing Want (Exw)	shows the judge's wish to praise or acknowledge the contestant's success
Promising (Pro)	promises the judge will do something positive
Contrast (Con)	compares two things in order to underscore a better quality or an improvement
Admiration (Adm)	praises the contestant and his or her performance
Assumption (Ass)	assumes that something positive is true for the contestant
Prediction (Pre)	predicts good things would happen to the contestant
Joke (Jok)	says something funny about the good thing the contestant did
Surprise (Sur)	says the contestant did better than the judge had initially expected
Fulfillment (Ful)	says the contestant did something good to fulfil the judge's expectation
Approval (Apr)	ascertains that the contestant and his or her performance is good enough
Appreciation (Ape)	shows the judge's gratefulness for the contestant's choice to be on the show
Expressing Disappointment (Exd)	expresses the judge's regret for failing to be part of the contestant's success

Remarks: In Figure 3, these abbreviations will be used instead to save space.

### 3.4 Analysis Procedure

In all stages of coding, both the researcher and the research assistant, whose expertise is English-language teaching, watched the performances<sup>6</sup>, transcribed the comments, extracted Cowell's compliments, tallied and sorted<sup>7</sup> each compliment into categories according to the criteria of explicit and implicit compliment strategies as described in Section 3.3. Prior to all coding stages, the assistant received a ten-hour training to ensure that she understood the coding processes. Subsequently, the two sets of coding (i.e., one from the researcher and the other from the assistant) were compared and discussed. There were

some disagreements over the processes of tallying and sorting compliments into categories: 6.81% difference in tallying and 14.54% difference in categorizing. In these cases, the researcher consulted the research assistant again and forwarded items in question to a native speaker of English whose expertise is English-language teaching to resolve the problem. In the final stage, some descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency and percentage) were used to unveil Cowell's similarities and differences in terms of his compliment strategies.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Overall Use

Throughout the five consecutive seasons (or series), the total number of compliments given by Cowell to auditionees who got the Golden Buzzer on AGT was higher than that on BGT. He made 125 compliments on AGT, 95 compliments on BGT. Insignificant differences between the two raw numbers existed, i.e.,  $t(2) = 2.031$ ,  $p < .05$ , indicating that the number of compliments from both shows were comparable. According to this finding, Cowell, whose reputation as a "malicious judge" as described above, also made positive comments. A considerable number of existing studies (e.g., Garces-Conejos Blitvich et al., 2013; Holmes, 2004) described him only according to his reputation as a critical judge who provided hostile comments. But in fact, Cowell fulfilled his proper role as a judge, giving constructive, intelligent comments and compliments, as well as criticisms.

Cowell complimented the Golden Buzzer winners on AGT and BGT explicitly and implicitly. This finding is consistent with Holmes' (1988) finding that compliments can be explicit or implicit. In line with other recent studies (e.g., Danziger, 2018; Lin, 2020; Lin et al., 2012; Maiz-Arevalo, 2012; Rees-Miller, 2011; Sakirgil & Cubukcu, 2013), this dichotomy is applicable to Cowell's compliments even though the context of investigation is different than in previous studies. Examples of explicit and implicit compliment strategies are given in (3)-(6)

- (3) Listen, what's just happened there was extraordinary.  
(AGT Season 14)
- (4) I think this choir is incredible.

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- (5) *(BGT Series 10)*  
I'm gonna remember this moment for the rest of my life.  
*(AGT Season 14)*
- (6) I have a feeling this act is gonna change your life.  
*(BGT Series 12)*

Compliments (3) and (4) are explicit as they contain a positive adjective. In (3), Cowell described as *extraordinary* the performance of a blind, autistic, twenty-two-year-old musician who sang and played the piano. This positive adjective clearly denotes his remarkability. In a similar fashion, Cowell in (4) complimented with the positive adjective *incredible* the audition of a choir made up of multinational singers of different ages. Cowell complimented the choir as a whole as *spectacular*. In both examples, the speaker's intentions (i.e., the illocutionary act) are precisely stated (i.e., locutionary act). There is a direct relationship between the illocutionary and the locutionary acts. On the other hand, compliments (5) and (6) are not explicit because they do not contain an obvious positive marker. In (5), Cowell promised a twenty-two-year-old auditionee that he would remember this moment for the rest of his life. Taken out of context, this does not sound like a compliment. However, promising the auditionee that he would remember this moment for the rest of his life conveys a compliment that the performance is worth remembering. In (6), a forty-six-year-old magician told the judges and audience about his daughter and wife through the magic performance. There was a big plot twist at the end of his performance. Cowell's saying, "*I have a feeling this act is gonna change your life*" seems to function more as a prediction than a compliment. However, such a prediction cannot be made unless the magic show is exceptional. Compliments (5) and (6) are both implicit because the relationship between the locutionary and illocutionary acts are indirect. The frequency distribution of Cowell's explicit and implicit compliment strategies on AGT and BGT is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Comparative distribution of compliment strategies*

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	AGT	BGT
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Explicit compliment strategies	66	52.8%	41	43.2%
Implicit compliment strategies	59	47.2%	54	56.8%
	125	100%	95	100%

The finding shows that Cowell used more explicit compliment strategies on AGT than BGT. This fact is elucidated by the findings of Culpeper and Holmes (2013) and Lin (2020), suggesting that American culture tends to be more explicit than British culture. American judges were more straightforward verbally and nonverbally when complimenting talent show contestants. Although the findings showed some pragmatic variations cross-culturally, they are in line with Cowell's compliment strategies on both shows. Cowell seems more straightforward on the American than the British show. This seems to be a function of context, although there may be other factors such as the quality of the shows and ages of the contestants. These factors may be explored in greater depth.

Findings from Culpeper and Holmes (2013) and Lin (2020) do not directly explain Cowell's pragmatic variations; however, there is a marked tendency for Cowell, a judge serving on two different shows, to give compliments to auditionees in a manner comparable to the American and British panels of judges in previous studies. The difference between explicit and implicit compliment strategies used by Cowell on AGT is 5.6%, but more than twice that on BGT. These percentages show the pragmatic variation of an individual judge when serving on two different programs in two different countries. However, the differences are small. To more readily detect Cowell's pragmatic variations, further between-program analysis is needed.

## 4.2 Explicit Compliment Strategies

Cowell used more explicit compliment strategies on AGT than BGT, but the difference is less than 10%. This minor difference might not be indicative of his pragmatic variations. To find more convincing evidence, this section compares two main points: (1) explicit sub-strategies, and (2) positive adjective sub-strategy.

### 4.2.1 Explicit Sub-Strategies

Cowell used a wider range of explicit compliment sub-strategies when complimenting auditionees on AGT. He employed four explicit compliment sub-strategies: (1) positive adjectives, (2) *I like/love+NP*, (3) performative verb *compliment*, and (4) exclamatory *wow*. On the other hand, he used only two explicit compliment sub-strategies: (1) positive adjectives, and (2) *I like/love+NP* when complimenting auditionees on BGT. This might be another pragmatic variation of Cowell when complimenting winners of the Golden Buzzer in the US and UK. Figure 1 shows the comparative distribution across explicit sub-strategies.

Figure 1

*Comparative distribution of explicit compliments*

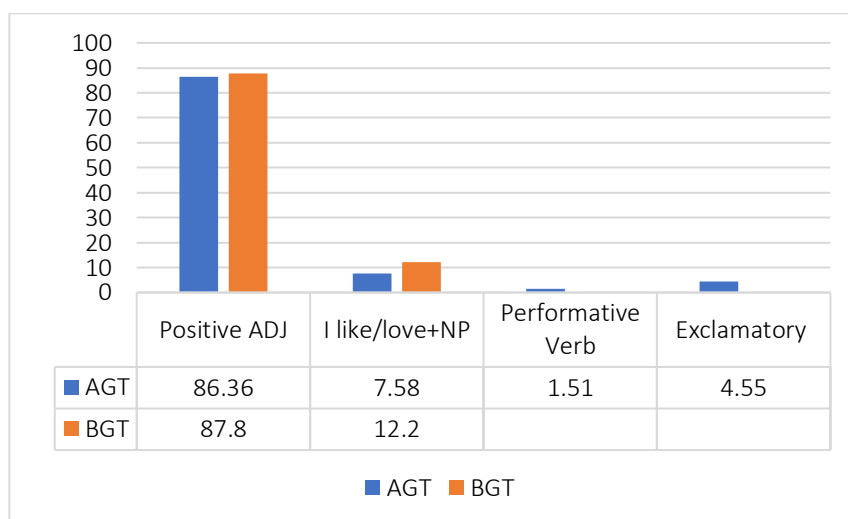


Figure 1 shows that Cowell used positive adjectives and *I like/love+NP* on both AGT and BGT. However, on AGT, he also used the performative verb and the exclamatory. Cowell used various explicit compliment sub-strategies to praise Golden Buzzer winners. Many studies in the past (e.g., Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1995; Lin, 2020; Lin et al., 2012; Wang & Tsai, 2003) did not analyze explicit compliment strategies into sub-strategies, so researchers missed obvious positive markers for explicit compliments. Lin (2020), for instance, gave three examples<sup>8</sup> of explicit compliments but did not specify the markers as adjectives. In fact, all of them were positive adjectives that modify the

head nouns, two of which are the auditionees. Lin's (2020) findings seem to suggest there is only an explicit compliment strategy without any sub-strategies. This research, particularly on AGT, indicates that there are sub-strategies to make explicit compliments in the context of talent competition shows.

Among the explicit compliment sub-strategies shown in Figure 1, Cowell used positive adjectives most frequently on AGT (86.36%) and BGT (87.80%). It may be that positive adjectives are most frequently used in this context because they are noun modifiers. When only outstanding performances were examined, positive adjectives were used to praise the auditionees' personality, talent, and performance. Compliments (7), (8), and (9) are illustrations of possible compliment objects, modified by positive adjectives.

- (7) What a great personality!  
(AGT Season 11)
- (8) Let me tell you something about your voice. I genuinely mean it.  
It's special. (AGT Season 13)
- (9) That was an amazing audition.  
(AGT Season 14)

In (7), Cowell praised the personality of a twelve-year-old singer and ukulele player. In his compliment, the adjective *great* positively describes the girl's personality. In (8), Cowell complimented the vocal quality of a father of six children who sang an emotional rock song. The positive adjective *special* describes the singer's remarkable and unique voice. In (9), Cowell described a twenty-one-year-old contestant's inspiring performance of an original song as *amazing*. The positive adjective *amazing* modifies the noun *audition*, making this compliment explicit. Modified nouns in (7), (8), and (9) can be categorized as compliment objects that require a great deal of effort to acquire. Personality, talent, and a polished performance take time and effort to develop. Cowell mostly chose to compliment objects marked by effort and initiative, not those inborn or easily acquired. This shows that closer analysis is possible than merely determining whether the complimenter or complimentee is in the subject position (cf. Maiz-Arevalo, 2012). Such an analysis better reflects the goal, which is finding individuals who have

put great effort into improving their personality, talent, and performance.

#### 4.2.2 Positive Adjective Sub-Strategy

This section examines the positive adjective sub-strategies of (1) choice of adjectives and (2) syntactic position, revealing further similarities and differences.

Cowell used twenty-five positive adjectives to compliment the auditionees on AGT, and twenty on BGT. Eleven adjectives (*amazing*, *incredible*, *brilliant*, *likable*, *unbelievable*, *great*, *well-done*, *fantastic*, *beautiful*, *special*, and *good*) were used on both shows. These positive adjectives may be more specific to the talent show context than general positive adjectives such as *happy*, *convincing*, *valuable*, and *careful*. In addition, Cowell's varied use of positive adjectives reflects his linguistic repertoire and eloquence comprised both non-gradable adjectives such as *fantastic*, *amazing*, and *incredible*, and gradable adjectives such as *good*, *great*, and *beautiful* (cf. Yaguchi et al., 2010). *Amazing* and *great* were frequently used on both shows with *amazing* being the most frequently used (AGT: 21.43% and BGT: 17.65%). Examples of *amazing* in Cowell's explicit compliments can be seen in (10) and (11).

- (10) You've got amazing presence.  
(AGT Season 13)
- (11) We have just seen the most amazing Golden Buzzer.  
(BGT Series 14)

In (10), Cowell said a fifteen-year-old contestant had "an amazing presence," describing the contestant's captivating stage presence. In (11), similarly, a twelve-year-old contestant was highly praised for her impressive performance. Right after the performance, Cowell gave her a thumbs-up. After the performance, he complimented the girl on his personal Twitter announcing to not only judges but also audience that they had just seen the most amazing Golden Buzzer. In this compliment, the superlative intensifier *most* strengthens the degree of *amazing*. Based only on (10) and (11), this noun modifier *amazing* appears just before a common noun *presence* and a proper noun *Golden Buzzer*. This syntactic position of these adjectives<sup>9</sup> is attributive<sup>10</sup>, but in other

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instances Cowell used adjectives in the predicative and independent syntactic positions. The predicative position is when the adjective follows a linking verb as demonstrated in (12). The independent position is when the adjective stands alone in the utterance, as illustrated in (13).

- (12) Seriously, it was unbelievable.  
(AGT Season 11)
- (13) Beautiful.  
(BGT Series 12)

In (12), Cowell complimented a thirteen-year-old opera singer who delivered a stunning performance. No one expected such a splendid performance from someone her age, so he said, “*Seriously, it was unbelievable.*” In (13), a forty-three-year-old father and his twelve-year-old son sang an original song about losses in their family. Cowell described the father-son relationship, and the poignant performance, as *beautiful*. These syntactic variations of positive adjectives in Cowell’s explicit compliments show that there are three possible ways to use positive adjectives to compliment Golden Buzzer winners. This particular finding was not mentioned in previous studies (e.g., Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1995; Lin, 2020; Lin et al., 2012; Wang & Tsai, 2003) because the obvious positive markers for explicit compliments were not classified as adjectives. Figure 2 compares the syntactic positions of the positive adjectives appearing in his explicit compliments between AGT and BGT.

## Figure 2

*Comparative distribution of adjective positions*



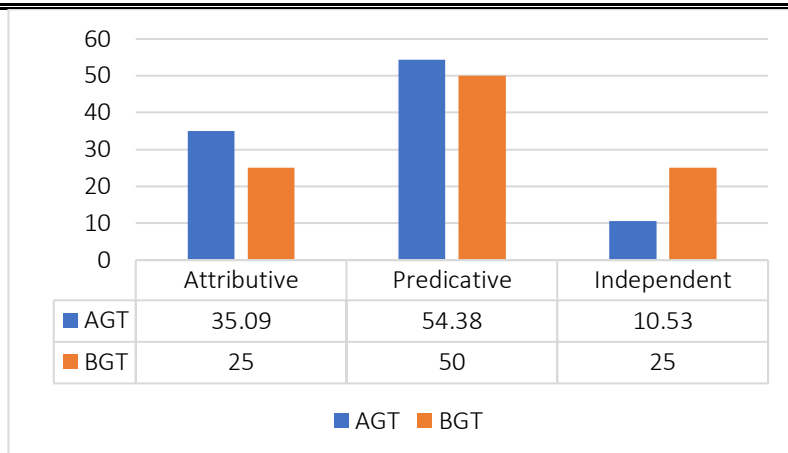


Figure 2 shows that Cowell used positive adjectives most frequently in the predicative position on AGT (54.38%) and BGT (50%). This finding is in line with Maiz-Arevalo's (2012) findings in that judge-contestant compliments can begin with a complimentee in the subject position (e.g., "...because you are really likable..." (BGT 2016)). The positive adjective functions as the subject complement, modifying the complimentees. In this paper, it can be seen that not only are the complimentees praised, but specific attributes such as personality, talent, and performance (cf. examples 7, 8, and 9).

### 4.3 Implicit Compliment Strategies

Cowell used more implicit compliment strategies when on BGT. Like the explicit compliment strategies, the difference in frequency of implicit compliment strategies on both shows is less than 10%. However, further examination discloses similar implicit compliment sub-strategies. Figure 3 illustrates all implicit compliment sub-strategies Cowell used on AGT and BGT and compares the frequencies in percentages.

### Figure 3

*Comparative distribution of implicit compliment sub-strategies*

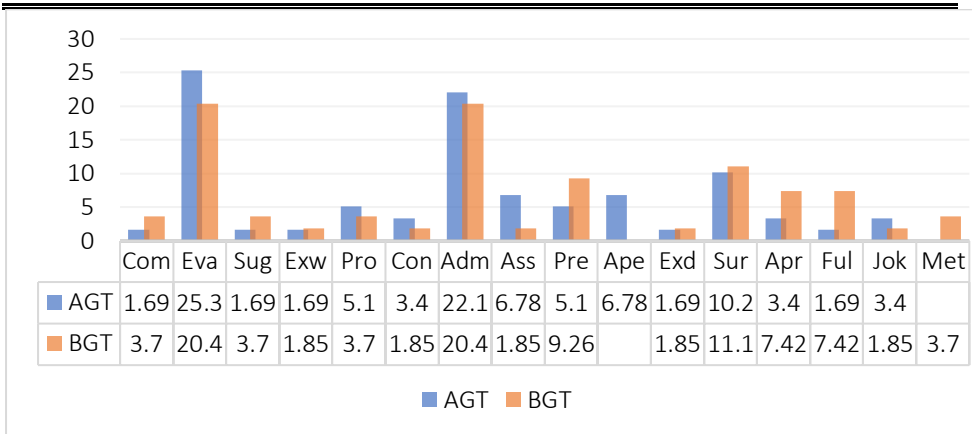


Figure 3 depicts the sixteen implicit compliment sub-strategies used by Cowell on both shows. Cowell's variety of implicit compliment sub-strategies, including evaluation, suggestion, promise, admiration, surprise, and even jokes, illustrate his verbal competence. Compliments reflect the speaker's intent to maintain, improve, and support the person's positive face (cf. Brown & Levison, 1987). Cowell accomplished this through a variety of speech acts, some of which could not by themselves enhance the auditionees' positive face (e.g., evaluation, suggestion, prediction, or comparison) but Cowell made them function as compliments. Lin (2020), although she studied three panels of judges, found only four speech acts: evaluation, want statement, comparison, and suggestion. These implicit sub-strategies are also found in Cowell's compliments. Although the total number of implicit compliment sub-strategies is sixteen, he did not use all of them on each show. For example, he did not use the implicit appreciation compliment sub-strategy on BGT (e.g., *"I'm absolutely honored that you'd come on to our show."* (AGT Season 13)), nor did he use the implicit metaphor compliment sub-strategy on AGT (e.g., *"You're a star."* (BGT Series 14)).

Comparison between programs also shows that Cowell used sixteen implicit compliment sub-strategies at frequencies ranging from 0.16% to 6.78%. Of all these sub-strategies, Cowell used appreciation (6.78%), evaluation (4.93%), and assumption (4.93%) compliment sub-strategies more often on AGT. He used fulfillment (5.73%), prediction (4.16%), and approval (4.02%), compliment sub-strategies much more frequently on BGT. Cowell's use of implicit compliment sub-strategies is varied and unpredictable, and the reason behind each use of sub-

strategies is not apparent. Cowell, for example, used the appreciation compliment sub-strategy four times on AGT (e.g., *"I'm absolutely honored that you'd come on to our show."* (AGT Season 13)), but did not use it at all on BGT. This might be because the quality of auditionees on AGT is higher in his opinion. It is worth noting that four out of five Golden Buzzer winners went on to win the show on AGT, while only one Golden Buzzer winner on BGT finally won the show. This may be why Cowell chose the appreciation compliment sub-strategy to convey how grateful he was that these extremely talented contestants chose to appear on AGT. In another example, Cowell used the fulfillment compliment sub-strategy four times on BGT (e.g., *"Guys, girls, I don't know who you are, but I literally said if we could find Stormtroopers who could dance, seriously I said that this show is going into a different league. My dream has come true."* (BGT Series 10)), and only one time on AGT (e.g., *"[...] we need that raw talent to begin with and that's what we've got."* (AGT Season 15)). This might be because the shows on BGT match his preferences, meet his expectations, or fulfill his wishes more than those on AGT. Why he chose to use such sub-strategies seems to have varied with circumstances, and they are unforeseeable. For this reason, the researcher did not discuss these differences in detail, but discussed the two most-frequently used implicit sub-strategies on both shows, evaluation and admiration compliment sub-strategies, as they best reflect the role of judges. On AGT, the evaluation and admiration compliment sub-strategies were used 15 times and 13 times, while the two sub-strategies were each used 11 times on BGT.

#### **4.3.1 Implicit Evaluation Compliments**

Cowell used implicit evaluation compliment sub-strategy the most on both shows: 25.3% on AGT and 20.37% on BGT. (14) and (15) demonstrate his use of this sub-strategy on AGT and BGT.

- (14) But you know what, it's a really difficult song to sing.  
(AGT Season 13)
- (15) You gave every single ounce you could possibly give to that performance. (BGT Series 11)

There is no positive marker in compliments (14) and (15). Based on this criterion, both are implicit. Moreover, they are implicit because

both comments are meant to evaluate the performance or performer, but the intention is to give a compliment. In (14), a fifteen-year-old contestant sang a moving song called *Warrior*, which Cowell evaluated as a very difficult song. The adjective *difficult* is gradable and intensified by an adjective-modifying intensifier *really* (cf. Yaguchi et al., 2010). Cowell's evaluation implied that, because of its difficulty, not everyone could sing the song well, but the young contestant did sing very well. This is clearly a compliment on her ability even though it does not carry any positive markers. In (15), a fifteen-year-old contestant sang *Hallelujah*. He had failed in the audition round three years previously, but had made a comeback. After the performance, he got a standing ovation from the judges and audience. Cowell evaluated the effort the boy had put into his performance, recognizing his dedication, perseverance, hard-training, and determination. In his evaluation, Cowell praised the boy without using any positive marker. Lin (2020) also found that implicit evaluation compliments were used most often on *American Idol*, *The X Factor*, and *Top Million Star*, which was broadcast in 2015. One explanation for this similar finding may be that evaluating a performance by complimenting or criticizing is the talent show judge's duty (e.g., Chen & Rau, 2015; Culpeper & Holmes, 2013; Lin et al., 2012; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2013). In this paper, the researcher investigated only compliments for Golden Buzzer winning auditions. Not surprisingly, Cowell's implicit evaluation compliment sub-strategy was very positive and used the most, which indicates that he was able evaluate contestants not only critically, but also favorably.

#### 4.3.2 Implicit Admiration Compliments

Cowell used implicit admiration compliment sub-strategies on AGT (22.1%) and on BGT (20.37%). (16) and (17) demonstrate his use of this sub-strategy on the two shows.

- (16) The truth is, you know, we don't get many people like you for a reason because they're hard to find. (*AGT Season 12*)
- (17) This is why we make shows like this to find people like you. (*BGT Series 11*)

Although there is no positive marker in either (16) or (17), the speaker's intended meaning is to compliment. In (16), a thirteen-year-old contestant from a broken family sang the emotional song *I'll Stand by You*. After her performance, Cowell said, "*The truth is, you know, we don't get many people like you for a reason: because they're hard to find.*" Cowell admires the girl for her uniqueness and vocal ability. Admitting that it was not easy to find singers like this young girl is a compliment without any positive marker. In (17), a thirty-seven-year-old stand-up comedian impressed everyone by telling funny stories, and Cowell gave him a thumbs-up. Later, he said, "*This is why we make shows like this to find people like you.*" Part of his compliment includes *shows*, meaning talent competition shows, not specifically BGT. Shows such as *American Idol*, *The X Factor*, and *Pop Idol* (Culpeper & Holmes, 2013; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al., 2013; Lin, 2020; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2013) were used as a context of investigation for the judges' comments. They are seen as platforms which provide opportunities for all talented contestants with strong determination to achieve their goals. Based on his admiration, there is a direct connection between having the shows and finding an ideal contestant. Since Cowell said, "*to find people like you*", the auditionee, therefore, is considered an ideal contestant. This, by all means, is a compliment. This sub-strategy did not appear as one of the implicit compliment sub-strategies in Lin's (2020) study, but as this paper concentrates on outstanding performances, expressions of admiration are a focus of attention.

## 5. Conclusion

The focus of previous studies on Cowell's criticisms reinforces his negative image as an unsympathetic and acid-tongued judge. However, his comments for the Golden Buzzer auditionees are intelligent, constructive, and impactful. Cowell fulfilled his duty as a judge, giving both negative and positive comments professionally. The coding schemes for explicit and implicit compliment strategies for this specific context have been modified to help categorize compliment strategies into more fine-grained sub-strategies, allowing the researcher to compare Cowell's explicit and implicit compliment sub-strategies in greater detail and highlight his pragmatic variations. There were some pragmatic variations found in Cowell's compliments. Cowell, known for

his straightforwardness, seems to be even more straightforward when serving as a judge in America. He used more explicit than implicit compliment strategies on AGT and vice-versa on BGT. The use of explicit compliment sub-strategies varied more on AGT than on BGT. In addition, he did not use the appreciation compliment sub-strategy on BGT, or the metaphor compliment sub-strategy on AGT. The between-program comparison of sixteen implicit compliment sub-strategies revealed differences in each dyad. There were differences, but they were slight, and there were numerous similarities between explicit and implicit sub-strategies. Cowell most often used the positive adjective sub-strategy; *amazing* and *great* were the adjectives used most often, and the positive adjectives were found mostly in the predicative position on both shows. There were fifteen implicit compliment sub-strategies used on each show, and the two most frequently occurring sub-strategies were evaluation and admiration. In this study, context was not shown to have considerable influence on Cowell's choices of compliment strategies. These were comparable whether he was judging in America or Britain. Although this paper has strengthened several aspects of studies on compliments in talent competition shows, future researchers may investigate whether other factors contribute to the choice of compliment strategies. The quality of the shows, for example, may play a role. Golden Buzzer acts on AGT seem to be of higher quality than those on BGT, considering that, over the past five years, more winners on AGT received the Golden Buzzer. The age of contestants might also influence judges' compliment strategies. Winners of the shows over the five-year period were between ages 12 and 90. The talents of the very young might surprise judges and influence their choice of compliments and degrees of appreciation. The same holds true for elderly contestants. These are worth more investigation.

### About the Author

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “The American Idol judges applaud successful auditionees more often when they leave the room than their *The X Factor* counterparts” (Culpeper and Holmes, 2013, p. 177).

<sup>2</sup> This paper examines how compliments on talent competition shows vary when Cowell praises the Golden Buzzer winning auditionees on AGT and BGT.

<sup>3</sup> “The contrast between the addressee and others” (Lin et al., 2012, p. 1942).

<sup>4</sup> “To ask the addressee for his/her opinion, advice or experience, or to request the addressee to do something, for instance, to teach the speaker some skills” (Lin et al., 2012, p. 1942).

<sup>5</sup> “Was that a compliment?” Implicit compliments in English and Spanish (Maiz-Arevalo, 2012)

<sup>6</sup> Cowell did not give any compliment to one auditionee on BGT. Hence, the total number of performances to be analyzed is forty-nine.

<sup>7</sup> Examples of how compliments were tallied and sorted appear in Appendix B.

<sup>8</sup> The three examples are (1) The reviews are more than favorable, (2) You must be popular with women!, and (3) I thought that you were intelligent but you are very intelligent (Lin, 2020, p. 47).

<sup>9</sup> Positions that adjectives can appear in English sentences.

<sup>10</sup> An attributive adjective is an adjective that usually proceeds the noun that is modified without a linking verb.

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## Appendix A

### Examples of Implicit Compliment Sub-Strategies

Sub-Strategy	Example
Comparison	It's like Tina Turner has come back! ( <i>BGT Series 14</i> )
Metaphor	You're a star. ( <i>BGT Series 14</i> )
Evaluation	I think you might be one of the best singers we've ever had. ( <i>AGT Season 14</i> )
Suggestion	If anyone ever says anything negative, you remember this moment. ( <i>BGT Series 14</i> )
Expressing want	I just want to compliment you on what you just did. ( <i>AGT Season 15</i> )
Promising	I'm gonna remember this moment for the rest of my life. ( <i>AGT Season 14</i> )
Contrast	Bloody hell, Courtney! You are like a shy little thing when you first came out, and then you sing and you're like a lion. ( <i>AGT Season 13</i> )
Admiration	For someone your age to stand on this stage with all the nerves and pressure to absolutely not just nail the song, you made it your song. ( <i>BGT Series 11</i> )
Assumption	I think everyone in this room felt it and I think that. ( <i>AGT Season 11</i> )
Prediction	Let me tell you. I think this country's gonna totally fall in love with you. ( <i>BGT Series 10</i> )
Joke	That wasn't you singing, was it? It wasn't someone behind you. ( <i>AGT Season 15</i> )
Surprise	Well, I've got to tell you. I shut my eyes and listen to you sing and that was not the same person. That shouldn't have been you. ( <i>AGT Season 13</i> )
Fulfillment	Guys, girls, I don't know who you are, but I literally said if we could find Stormtroopers who could dance, seriously I said that this show is going into a different league. My dream has come true. ( <i>BGT Series 10</i> )
Approval	Good for you! ( <i>AGT Season 12</i> )
Appreciation	I'm absolutely honored that you'd come on to our show. ( <i>AGT Season 13</i> )
Expressing disappointment	I'm now annoyed that I didn't press the Golden Buzzer ( <i>AGT Season 11</i> )

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## Appendix B

### Examples of Tallying and Sorting Processes

(1) “You know what. I wasn’t one point losing the will to live thinking maybe all the talent has gone and now you come back. Little thing with such a great voice. So charming. Let me tell you. I think this country’s gonna totally fall in love with you.” (*BGT Series 10*)

	Compliment (Sub)-Strategy	Example
1.	implicit/fulfilment	I wasn’t one point losing the will to live thinking maybe all the talent has gone and now you come back.
2.	explicit/positive adjective	Little thing with such a <u>great</u> voice.
3.	explicit/positive adjective	So <u>charming</u> .
4.	implicit/prediction	Let me tell you. I think this country’s gonna totally fall in love with you.

(2) “I’m absolutely gobsmacked. I mean first of all, thank God your little girl’s okay. Uh, that’s the most important. She’s okay now, yeah? (Marc: Absolutely.) Good, well I’m thrilled to hear that. Um, don’t know what you’ve gone through, Marc, through your career trying to get the break you’ve been looking for. I have a feeling this act is gonna change your life. It was unbelievable.” (*BGT Series 12*)

	Compliment (Sub)-Strategy	Example
1.	explicit/positive adjective	I’m absolutely <u>gobsmacked</u> .
2.	implicit/prediction	I have a feeling this act is gonna change your life.
3.	explicit/positive adjective	It was <u>unbelievable</u> .