

Simon Cowell's Compliments in *American Idol, Season 8, Episode 1*

Yuki Yoremasa Andrea

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra
Christian University, Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236
INDONESIA

Email: a11210051@john.petra.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study examines the types and characteristics of compliments used by Simon Cowell in *American Idol, Season 8, Episode 1*. The study is based on the idea that compliments function not only to give a positive evaluation but also play an important role in media communication. This study aims to answer two research questions. Using a qualitative approach, all the data were collected from one specific YouTube video, including the whole video's transcript, then analyzed using a theory of compliments. Although Simon Cowell is recognized for his harsh criticism, this study focuses only on how he delivers compliments that shape society's perception. The way he compliments the contestant has made his compliments more memorable and motivated the contestants. The study reveals that Simon Cowell uses both explicit and implicit compliments and demonstrates all five characteristics of compliments.

Keywords: explicit compliments, implicit compliments, media discourse, pragmatics, speech acts

INTRODUCTION

Language is not only used when individuals communicate but can also act as a tool to channel emotions, and shape social perceptions. When language is used in media, such as talent shows, language becomes something that needs to be considered, especially when used by public figures who act as judges or hosts. According to Ogli (2020), language is the main differentiator between humans and animals by being the main part of humans in social life and culture, where through language individuals can exchange ideas, form ways of thinking and community awareness. According to Mhaisane (2023), language and media language and media are interconnected with each other in which language is related with speaks, and the role of media is to highlight the content, matter, and idea through language.

Simon Cowell is a well-known music producer who comes from London, United Kingdom. In recent years, Simon Cowell has become known for his role as a judge on several talent shows, such as X-Factor UK, American Idol, etc., and has become more famous because of the way Simon Cowell compliments other people, especially towards each of the contestant's performance (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2007). When delivering a compliment, Simon Cowell tends to be blunt, and the contestant looks happier when hearing Simon Cowell's compliments that are to the point stating that he likes the contestant's ability. For instance, comparing other judges when they like one of the contestants' performances from America's Got Talent, the other judges said, "Probably top five honest to gosh, I think you're gonna do well in this competition." On the other hand, when Simon Cowell compliments the same contestant, directly says "You're different, I like you" (Online Idol TV, 2021).

Seeing the example above, Simon Cowell has been known as the "benchmark" for the success of a contestants' performance. The statement can be seen from one of the reader's comments written in a news article, "You know you've made it when Simon Cowell showers you with praise and hits the Golden Buzzer! ..." (Azeem, 2024). One of the comments above is enough to explain that a social stigma has been formed regarding compliments from Simon Cowell, where if a contestant succeeds in getting a compliment from Simon Cowell, it means that she/he has succeeded in giving the best performance.

Seeing these differences between the way Simon Cowell and other judges give a compliment to the contestant, the writer wants to know what characteristics are used in Simon Cowell's compliment to contestants to emphasize his opinion as a judge on big talent shows. Considering the importance of Simon Cowell's role in conveying social compliments, as well as the limited research related to the types and characteristics of compliments used by Simon Cowell, moved the writer to write this study.

In this study, the writer employs Alfonzetti's (2013) theory to analyze both the types and characteristics of compliments used by Simon Cowell. This theory provides a framework for identifying both the characteristics, and explicit and implicit compliments, allowing the writer to examine how Simon Cowell conveys compliments to the contestants. By analyzing Simon Cowell's compliments using Alfonzetti's (2013), the study can provide a comprehensive analysis of Simon Cowell's communication style, especially when Simon was a judge in talent shows.

METHOD

For this study, the writer used a qualitative method. The data was collected from a YouTube video posted by Online Idol TV with the title of *American Idol, Season 1, Eps. 8*. This study used 33 of Simon Cowell's utterances that contained compliments. The writer watched the whole video and inputted all the utterances from Simon Cowell, the other judges, the host, and the contestants in the transcript. Then, the writer selected only Simon Cowell's utterances that contained compliments toward the contestant. Next, the writer inputs all the selected utterances on the tables of compliments' characteristics and types proposed by Alfonzetti (2013). Finally, the writer put checkmarks on each of the columns based on which of the characteristics and types the compliments are categorized.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study that answered each of the research questions: the types and the characteristics of Simon Cowell's compliments toward the contestant from *American Idol, Season 8, Episode 1*.

Table of the types used in Simon Cowell's compliments

Types			
No.	Explicit	No.	Implicit
1.	Illocutionary verbs or conventional formulas	1.	Using Gricean maxims and/or contextual information
2.	Containing semantically positive words - adjectives	2.	Using figurative expressions - metaphor
3.	Containing semantically positive words - adverbs	3.	Using figurative expressions - irony

4.	Containing semantically positive words - verbs	
5.	Containing semantically positive words - nouns	

Table of the characteristics used in Simon Cowell's compliments

No.	Characteristics of Compliment
1.	Using evaluative words
2.	Must be able to convince the speaker of the truth
3.	As an expression of confidence in something
4.	Can be said to be true or false depending on the response (agree or disagree)
5.	Depends on the ability, competence, or taste, and occurs in unequal status

Types of Simon Cowell's Explicit Compliments in *American Idol, Season 8, Episode 1*

From the five explicit compliments proposed by Alfonzetti (2013), Simon Cowell used all of the explicit compliments: illocutionary verbs or conventional formulas, containing semantically positive adjectives, containing semantically positive adverbs, containing semantically positive verbs, and containing semantically positive nouns.

Containing Illocutionary Verbs or Conventional Formulas

This is one example of the use of illocutionary verbs or conventional formulas used by Simon Cowell.

Example 1

"I'm gonna say yes, Paul." (13)

The utterance above reflects a compliment with illocutionary verbs. The use of the verb "say", explicitly indicates Simon Cowell's approval, which in this context, serves as a positive evaluation toward the contestant's ability. By directly stating "I'm gonna say yes", he shows the speech act of acceptance, which

also has a function conventionally. The utterance above can be directly understood as a compliment because by saying the word such as “yes”, emphasizes an approval of someone’s ability.

Containing Semantically Positive words - Adjectives

This is one example of compliments that were semantically positive adjectives used by Simon Cowell.

Example 2

“You even got a great voice, but you’ve got a good personality, you’re fun.” (27)

The utterance from Simon Cowell above contains several semantically positive words, especially adjectives. The use of adjective words, such as “*great*”, and “*good*” show positive meanings and are used by Simon Cowell to evaluate the contestant’s ability and personality. Furthermore, the adjective word “*fun*” also expresses a judgment, or assessment toward the contestant’s personality. These semantically positive adjectives directly convey the compliment and make the utterance easy to recognize as a compliment without the need of additional information, or detailed context.

Containing Semantically Positive Words - Adverbs

This is one example of compliments that were semantically positive adverbs used by Simon Cowell.

Example 3

“I think you are absolutely fantastic.” (1)

The utterance above is included as a semantically positive adverb because Simon Cowell uses the word “*absolutely*” to strengthen his compliment. Semantically, the word “*absolutely*” carries a meaning of certainty and strong emphasis, which indicates that Simon Cowell’s compliment is firm and confident. Rather than directly stating “*You are fantastic*,” Simon Cowell intensifies the compliment by adding the adverb “*absolutely*,” making the compliment sound more unquestionable. This intensification highlights Simon Cowell’s strong approval and reinforces the positive evaluation directed toward the contestant. Besides “*absolutely*,” the word “*fantastic*” also conveys a positive meaning that contributes to the utterance, further emphasizing the complimentary of Simon Cowell’s statement.

Containing Semantically Positive Words - Verbs

This is one example of compliments that were semantically positive verbs used by Simon Cowell.

Example 4

“Okay, Scotch, you’re a cool guy. I like you.” (33)

The utterance above also contains semantically positive verbs. The use of the verb “*like*” highlights positive literal meaning and shows Simon Cowell’s approval toward the contestant. This explicit verbal expression not only strengthens the compliment but also shows Simon Cowell’s intention to provide clear and encouraging feedback to the contestant without explicitly stating the act of “*complimenting*” someone.

Containing Semantically Positive Words - Nouns

There is one example of compliments that were semantically positive nouns used by Simon Cowell.

Example 5

“I’ve got to tell you what you have is that likability thing. You’ve got 4 yeses.” (21)

The utterance above shows that Simon Cowell also uses positive nouns to convey his compliment. The noun “*likability*” functions as a positive literal meaning, referring to the contestant’s quality, or skill. Furthermore, Simon Cowell also evaluates the contestant’s attitude by saying that the contestant has a “*likability thing*”. Because the noun used already has a literal meaning, so the compliment does not need an additional context.

Types of Simon Cowell’s Implicit Compliments in *American Idol, Season 8, Episode 1*

From the three implicit compliments proposed by Alfonzetti (2013), Simon Cowell used all of the implicit compliments: using Gricean maxims and/or contextual information, using metaphor expressions, and using irony expressions.

Using Gricean Maxims and/or Contextual Information

This is one example of compliments that were using Gricean Maxims and/or contextual information used by Simon Cowell.

Example 6

“Emily, you better make the difficult call.” (11)

Like the previous example, understanding the full context is essential to avoid misinterpretation. The utterance above functions as an implicit compliment that is interpreted through contextual information. In the context, Simon Cowell gives Emily the responsibility to make a “*difficult call*” implies that he believes the contestant has the ability, and competence to handle an important decision for her future career. Although Simon Cowell does not use explicit compliments, the utterance is relevant and understandable only if Simon Cowell as the speaker explains the detailed context about what he means.

Using Figurative Expressions - Metaphor

This is one example of compliments that were using metaphor expressions used by Simon Cowell.

Example 7

“They’re more kidding me softly. Killing me hardly. She actually murdered me.” (28)

The utterance above demonstrates that Simon Cowell sometimes uses metaphorical expressions to deliver his compliment. The phrases “*kidding me softly*”, “*killing me hardly*”, and “*murdered me*” may initially give the impression of negative language, yet in this context, they function as metaphorical expressions used to emphasize the unexpected impact of the contestant’s performance. Simon Cowell employs these metaphors to highlight how strongly the performance affected him, suggesting that the contestant exceeded his expectations and made a memorable impression to all the judges. Through these metaphoric phrases, Simon Cowell conveys a form of implicit compliment, showing that the contestant’s ability was powerful enough to “*shock*” or “*overwhelm*” him in a positive way.

Using Figurative Expressions - Irony

This is one example of compliments that were using “irony” expressions used by Simon Cowell.

Example 8

“Just forgot the friendship, loyalty.” (10)

The utterance above shows Simon Cowell’s attempt to encourage the contestant to prioritize his or her career, and personal achievement. In this context, the contestant previously mentioned not having any true friends, which leads Simon Cowell to make this statement. Even though he tells the contestant to forget about “*friendship*”, and “*loyalty*”, Simon Cowell does not literally mean that the contestant should abandon

these values. Instead, he intends to motivate the contestant to focus on their own growth and to prove to those friends that the contestant's ability has already been recognized. Through this utterance, Simon Cowell implicitly communicates his belief in the contestant's talent.

Characteristics of Compliments used by Simon Cowell

From the five of characteristic compliments proposed by Alfonzetti (2013), Simon Cowell used all of the compliments' characteristic: using evaluative words, must be able to convince the speaker of the truth, as an expression of confidence in something, can be said to be true or false depending on the response (agree or disagree), and depends on the ability, competence, or taste, and occurs in unequal status.

Using Evaluative Words

This is one example of compliments that were using evaluative words used by Simon Cowell.

Example 9

"A very good, very very difficult song to sing that is really, really hard, you're different, I like you." (4)

The utterance above is included in the category of evaluative words because the utterance contains several lexical items: *good*, *difficult*, *hard*, and *different*. The use of evaluative words above has a function to convey Simon Cowell's positive judgment or compliment toward both the song choices and the contestant's performance. The repeated use of intensifiers: *very* and *really* make the compliments more strengthened. Additionally, the expression "*I like you*" personalizes the compliment by directly stating Simon Cowell's favorable stance toward the contestant.

Must be Able to Convince the Speaker of the Truth

This is one example of compliments that must be able to convince the speaker of the truth used by Simon Cowell.

Example 10

"I mean no question to doubt." (16)

By using phrases such as "*I mean no question to doubt*," Simon Cowell expresses his evaluation convincingly by emphasizing that the contestant's skill or ability goes beyond doubt. This phrase functions as a marker of certainty, indicating that Simon Cowell holds a strong and unquestionable belief in the quality of the contestant's performance. The use of such confident language strengthens the delivery of the compliment, making it appear more truthful, credible, and reflective of a firm judgment rather than an exaggerated or superficial expression of compliment.

As an Expression of Confidence in Something

These are two examples of compliments as an expression of confidence in something used by Simon Cowell.

Example 11

"Emily, you better make the difficult call." (11)

The utterance above shows that Simon expresses confidence in Emily's ability to handle a challenging decision. In other words, by urging the contestant to "make the difficult call," Simon Cowell implicitly implies trust in the contestant's decision-making skills. In this case, the compliment is not directly about Emily's talent or performance but rather focuses on what she can do in a specific situation. This statement reflects Simon Cowell's supportive belief that Emily is strong and competent enough to face challenges,

encouraging her to take responsibility for her choices. Through this indirect form of compliment, he conveys his confidence towards his evaluation as firm, reinforcing his confidence, or beliefs in the contestant's ability.

Example 12

"They're more kidding me softly. Killing me hardly. She actually murdered me." (28)

The utterance above functions as a confidence, as Simon Cowell delivers his strong beliefs in the contestant's ability in singing, and the impact of the performance, in which it successfully *killed*, and *murdered* Simon as the judge. The use of metaphorical expressions such as "*killing me hardly*", and "*murdered me*," emphasizes Simon Cowell's certainty about the strong impact of the contestant's voice, or performance. These metaphoric phrases show that Simon Cowell is confident that the contestant's performance was impactful. The compliment above shows that rather than just expressing uncertain comments, he presents a firm and confident judgment.

Can be Said to be True or False Depending on the Response (Agree or Disagree)

These are two examples of compliments that can be said to be true or false depending on the response used by Simon Cowell.

Example 13

"So, you are the complete opposite of Ryan Seacrest, aren't you?" (20)

The utterance above presents a compliment in which the truth depends on the contestant as the addressee's response. By using the tag question "*aren't you?*" Simon explicitly invites the addressee to either agree or disagree with Simon Cowell's evaluation. If the contestant confirms the statement, the compliment is accepted as true. In contrast, if the contestant denies Simon Cowell's judgment, the compliment is treated as false. Therefore, the compliment does not stand as an absolute evaluation just because he says it, but the judgment will be valid only through the contestant's acceptance, showing whether it is true or not is included as interactionally negotiated.

Example 14

"I think you are absolutely fantastic." (1)

The utterance above can be said to be true or false depending on the response because it expresses a subjective evaluative judgment rather than an objective fact. Although the speaker presents the compliment as an opinion through the phrase "*I think*," the proposition still invites validation from the contestant. If the contestant agrees (e.g., "Thank you, I appreciate that"), the compliment is pragmatically accepted as *true* within the interaction. Conversely, if the contestant disagrees or rejects it (e.g., "I don't think so" or "You're exaggerating"), the compliment is treated as *false* or overstated.

Depends on Ability, Competence, or Taste, and Occurs in Unequal Status

These are two examples of compliments that depend on ability, competence, or taste, and occur in unequal status used by Simon Cowell.

Example 15

"You certainly stand out." (5)

The utterance above functions as a complement that depends on the ability, competence, or taste, and occurs in unequal status interaction. The phrase “*stand out*” emphasizes that Simon Cowell is genuinely impressed with the contestant’s ability and notices the difference between the contestant’s ability and the others. Rather than simply saying “Your performance stands out,” Simon Cowell uses the word “*certainly*” to intensify his compliment and highlight his evaluation which reflects his authority and expertise in making the assessment. This utterance clearly shows that Simon Cowell delivers his compliment as someone with a higher status (a judge) to someone with a lower status (a contestant).

Example 16

“I think you got a good voice.” (14)

The utterance above also includes as one of the examples of a compliment that depends on the ability, competence, or taste, and occurs in unequal status. The word “*good*” refers to the contestant’s ability, indicating that Simon Cowell approves the contestant’s performance. Additionally, he uses the word “*think*” to emphasize his authority as someone with a higher status level as a judge who gives his opinion and taste of music. This choice of wording reflects the nature of the interaction, which occurs between Simon Cowell as the judge and the contestant, highlighting that the compliment is subjective and grounded in his individual judgment rather than an objective measure of ability.

CONCLUSION

This study is focused on the types and characteristics of compliments used by Simon Cowell in *American Idol, Season 8, Episode 1*. This study aimed to answer two research questions: (1) What are the types of Simon Cowell’s compliments in *American Idol, Season 8, Episode 1*? and (2) What are the characteristics of Simon Cowell’s compliments in *American Idol, Season 8, Episode 1*? The analysis in this study was conducted using the compliments theory proposed by Alfonzetti (2013). Through these findings, it can be concluded that Simon Cowell delivers compliments in various ways and depends on the context, allowing Simon Cowell to adapt the use of language to different situations and contestants. The use of both explicit and implicit compliments shows that he does not rely on a single compliment strategy but rather combines different forms to achieve specific communicative purposes. Furthermore, the presence of these types and characteristics highlights how compliments function not only as expressions of complimenting someone but also as tools to motivate and evaluate contestants during the audition.

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