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# HARMONIZING WORDS AND SOUND: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VERBAL EXPRESSIONS AND PROSODIC CUES IN AMERICA'S GOT TALENT

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***Abstract***
This study investigates at how verbal expressions and prosodic cues convey meaning in spoken communication, focusing on how pragmatic markers influence the purpose of communication, control the flow of conversation, and engage audiences. The study used a qualitative descriptive approach based on a pragmatic and multimodal discourse analysis method. Data were collected using purposive sampling from selected video segments of judge comments on America's Got Talent. The results show that the verbal expressions go beyond conventional linguistic expressions like *you know, I mean,* and *uhh* to express nuanced meanings. In addition, prosodic cues such as rising and falling tones play a dynamic role in changing and shaping the meaning of the message. It is important to note that intonation acts as a key pragmatic element that helps listeners interpret utterances, particularly when verbal expressions do not provide clear linguistic content. Overall, this study highlights the necessity of using multimodal analysis in pragmatic studies to adequately understand spoken meaning.

***Keywords:*** *America's Got Talent, Pragmatic Markers, Prosodic Cues, Verbal Expressions*

## 1. Introduction

Most English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners assume that people are considered proficient at English learning when they understand the meaning (semantic) without considering the context (pragmatic). Practically, language users are required to use the language appropriately with the situation even when using English as the foreign language. The effectiveness of language knowledge includes students' understanding of grammar, vocabulary and the ability to use language appropriately in different contexts (Anita et al., 2023). Consequently, an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaker is insufficient to understand the meaning (semantic) of the conversation but is required to understand the context (pragmatic). Levinson (1983) looked at pragmatic as the study of the relationship between language and context that is encoded in the structure of language. The pragmatic field in linguistics today is beginning to get the attention of researchers and linguists because it tends to examine speech function or language function rather than its form or structure (Andra & Afriana, 2025). The study of pragmatics focuses on the context-dependent components of meaning that are methodically ignored when creating logical forms or content (Horn & Ward, 2006). As a result, language use and context are intrinsically connected.

In addition, speakers also use pragmatic markers along with interpreting the context. Sometimes in a conversation, a speaker may hesitate or struggle to find the proper words. Aijmer & Vandenbergen (2004) stated that conversation is generally unplanned. Commonly, the speaker uses some discourse connectors such as *well, you know,* and *I mean* to smooth the conversation. The discourse connectors are called pragmatic particles ( Ostman, 1981), discourse markers and include items such as *you know* (Schiffrin, 1987), pragmatic expressions (Erman, 1993), discourse operators (Redeker, 1990) and pragmatic markers (Brinton, 1996; Fraser, 1996). The functions of pragmatic markers vary, depending on how the speakers use the markers. Fraser (1996) divided pragmatic markers into four categories: discourse, parallel, commentary, and basic markers. Because of this, pragmatic markers are language strategies that enable speakers in navigating unscripted conversation.

In communication and interaction, pragmatic markers are also considered as communicative signals. The signals are delivered by the speaker in the form of verbal, audio, and visual. Doumont (2002) explained that there is a relationship between verbal expressions and prosodic cues. Additionally, politeness is indicated by the loudness of voices, the length of utterances, the pace of expressions, and the usage of prosody (Mujiyanto, 2017). Therefore, the presence of prosody completes the verbal expressions in conveying messages.

A combination of elements in communicating a message is how verbal expressions and prosodic relate to one another. The meaning of the message passed on can be influenced by the high and low intonation of an utterance. Body language and tone of voice have a greater impact than words when it comes to nonverbal coding (Doumont, 2002). Verbal features related to language (semantic and syntax) while prosodic refers to nonverbal communication (voice tone, rate and volume).

Majority English language learners currently acquire knowledge rapidly through electronic media. The experience makes them absorb English instantly, therefore they imitate and express several English words or sentences similar to the native speaker. Television shows, movies and social media platforms have all contributed to the spread of American-style speaking behaviour in other variations of English (Ahmad Al-Ghamdi & Alrefaee, 2020). America's Got Talent is a popular talent show globally. Dali & Majeski (2013) revealed that America's Got Talent has more than 12 million viewers all over the world and has become the top-rated summer show for eight seasons in a row. The judges' commentaries in America's Got Talent implied a huge amount of meaning. The comments given in the form of support, appreciation or input are spontaneous language spoken when viewing participant performances. The judges' commentaries not only have characteristics in terms of influencing the audiences but also implied meaning which need to be observed deeply. While previous research has tended to focus on the use of pragmatic markers in classroom discourse (Taguchi, 2011), there is limited research regarding the relationship between verbal expressions and prosodic cues especially in television commentary. To address this gap, this study examines how verbal expressions interact with prosodic cues, particularly rising and falling tones in the judge's commentaries on America's Got Talent.

## 2. Literature Review

The study of pragmatic markers has been discussed by many previous experts. Brinton (1996) studied pragmatic markers within the system of

grammatical modification which emphasized that the essential function of pragmatic markers is to convey the relationship between two subsequent utterances. Fraser (1996), expanded on this approach by categorizing pragmatic markers into basic markers, commentary markers, structural markers and discourse markers to perform various communicative acts (e.g., declarative, imperative and interrogative function). Recent functional concepts (Aijmer, 2013; Vanda & Péter, 2011; Naben et al., 2019) integrate these theoretical frameworks by emphasizing how pragmatic markers manage discourse organization (indexicality), reflect cognitive processing (reflexivity), convey speaker attitude (attitudinal tasks), structure feedback and communicative intents. As a result, pragmatic markers appear as a dynamic function tool, leading speakers to express ambiguity, concession and clarification during unscripted interaction.

There are numerous studies on the relationship between verbal and audio expressions. Doumont (2002) defined technical communication as verbal which refers to the language (semantic and syntax) and nonverbal, which is define as non-symbolic and non-sequential coding which related to vocal communication (pitch and intonation) and visual cues (body movement and countenance). Bolinger (1986) recognized that tone is crucial in spoken English because it expresses meaning in a variety of ways. Pierrehumbert & Hirschberg (1990) assumed that intonational contours specify if the proposition conveyed should be added to the set of mutual beliefs, excluded from it or just serves to highlight a relationship to some other proposition in the set. For instance, high pitch accent (*H**) mark information that is added to common belief, low pitch accent (*L**) signal information that is excluded from belief, and boundary tones (*H% and L%*) indicate whether an utterance look forward or stay self-contained. Thus, in spontaneous discourse, these prosodic cues do not only accompany verbal expressions but also change the pragmatic force of expressions particularly when verbal expressions lack explicit semantic content.

Several studies have investigated talent show events as a subject matter, such as impoliteness in game show (Culpeper (2005), expressive speech act in talk show (Malasari & Rosdiana, 2024) and conversational spontaneity (Mutmainah & Djoko, 2016).

America's Got Talent offers an ideal setting to explore the relationship between verbal expressions and prosodic cues. It is a major talent show that attracting over 12 million viewer per season (Dali & Majeski, 2013; Whiting, 2010) . The unscripted comments by the panel judges in giving criticism and emotional support represent a dense concentration of spontaneous verbal expressions combined with prosodic cues. Therefore, analyzing America's Got Talent provides concrete insight into how verbal expressions and prosodic cues interact in unscripted public evaluation.

## 3. Research Method

### 3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with a pragmatic and multimodal discourse analysis approach. This design is appropriate for examining how verbal expressions interact in unscripted communication. The multimodal framework investigates word expressions and prosodic cues to interpret pragmatic meaning in televised interaction.

### 3.2 Data Source and Subject

The data source includes official video recordings of America's Got Talent (Season 13) retrieved from

Youtube. Quarter-final episodes were purposively selected because at this point of the competition, judges are required to deliver spontaneous and high-stake commentaries. Consequently, the episodes provide a rich source of word expressions and prosodic cues. The subject of study is the judges of the America's Got Talent in season 13 which consist of Simon Cowell, Mell B, Howie Mandel and Heidi Klum. The primary data extracted from spoken utterances produce by the judges while delivering evaluative commentaries for 36 participants.

### 3.3 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through non-participant observation by downloading video recordings of America's Got Talent season 13. The judges' comments were observed repeatedly and transcribed into written form. Subsequently, the audio of judges' comments is extracted to enable further analysis of intonation and acoustic pitch.

### 3.4 Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis employs a multimodal approach combining the classification of lexical pragmatic markers by Fraser (1996) and the analysis of prosodic cues using Praat software. The Praat software is used to measure pitch contour ($F_0$) and rising-falling tone intonation based on the ToBI framework by Beckman & Hirschberg (1994).

### 3.5 Validity and Reliability

To ensure the reliability of the research findings, this study employs theoretical triangulation by combining pragmatic taxonomy and acoustic intonation analysis. Both of these approaches were used together to gain more a comprehensive understanding of multimodal meaning. Additionally, researcher triangulation was conducted by assessing coding consistency on 20% of data that had been transcribed and subjected to acoustic contour analysis. The coding results were subsequently discussed through peer debriefing with a linguistic expert to minimize the potential for bias in the analysis process.

## 4. Results And Discussion

The verbal expressions are analyzed using the theory of lexical pragmatic markers proposed by Fraser (1996). Pragmatic markers are categorized into four function types called basic markers, commentary markers, parallel markers and discourse markers.

### 4.1 Sub-types and functional analysis of lexical pragmatic markers

From the 131 identified verbal pragmatic markers, 90 were categorized as basic markers, 19 as commentary markers, 12 as parallel markers and 10 as discourse markers. The finding revealed that America's Got Talent judges' commentary contain at least 131 verbal pragmatic markers with the following distribution. Table 1 details the complete distribution of these markers.

Table 1. The distribution of verbal pragmatic markers

| No | Verbal PM | Function | Frequency |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Basic Markers | Declarative | 46 |
| | | Imperative | 12 |
| | | Interrogative | 7 |
| | | Performative expressions | 2 |
| | | Pragmatic idioms | 13 |
| | | Declarative hybrid | 7 |
| | | Interrogative based | 3 |
| 2 | Commentary Markers | Assessment | 2 |
| | | Manner of speaking | 7 |
| | | Mitigation | 3 |
| | | Emphasis | 7 |
| 3 | | Vocative | 8 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Parallel Markers | Solidarity | 4 |
| 4 | Discourse Markers | Contrastive | 4 |
| | | Elaborative | 4 |
| | | Inferential | 2 |
| | **Total** | | **131** |

4.1.1 Basic markers

Basic markers are verbal expressions that convey the main meaning of an utterance while showing the speakers' commitment to what is being said (Faser, 1996). As illustrated in table 1, verbal pragmatic markers are dominated by basic markers. Basic markers use the sentence proposition as its messages content. (i.e *Well*, it basically, it's a big yo-yo). It was discovered that judges commonly used basic markers that functioned as declaratives. It means that the judges tended to use basic pragmatic markers to express their belief. The finding relevant with (Muhaimi, 2011) which found that the use of the structural basic pragmatic markers emphasized on the use of pragmatic markers to express the narrator's belief that the sentences propositional content represent.

4.1.2 Commentary markers

Commentary markers provide an additional message that comments on the manners, emphasis, or mitigation of the primary proposition (Fraser, 1996). The most commentary pragmatic markers used by the judges were manner of speaking markers. Based on the finding, there are several ways used by the judges in employing *you know* as pragmatic markers. The pragmatic markers *you know* mainly signaled that the speaker provided information for the addressee (i.e *you know,* you make me so emotional). This finding is in line with (Fraser, 1996) who categorized *you know* as manner of speaking marker which signaled analogous with confidentially. *You know* also function to break the silence (i.e I have to say that *you know* when came out the first time you talked about Tourette) as defined as devise to avoid pause (Schourup, 1985) Not only that, the pragmatic markers *you know* also signaled to repair (i.e there is something about *you know* I think your voice is really great). This finding relevant with Aijmer & Simon-Vandenbergen (2004) who figured out *you know* as pragmatic markers that signaled making revision. The pragmatic markers *you know* indicated an invitation at the initial part of the sentence.

4.1.3 Parallel markers

Parallel markers express additional messages that accompany the main proposition without forming part of its main structure (Fraser, 1996). Parallel markers were realized through vocative and solidarity marker (12 linguistic items). The most frequently used vocative markers started from standard name (*Amanda, Mochi, Shin Lim, Brian, Viky, Christina, Michael, Courtney*), general noun (*young lady, young man, guys)* and pronominal forms (*you, you two, you guys)*. Meanwhile the language expression like *sweetie* and *my young lady* expressing the solidarity. The parallel markers function to signals the entire message in addition to the basic message (Fraser, 1996). In other words, parallel pragmatic markers not only highlight the main meaning the utterance but also indicated how the speakers engage the addresses attention toward the basic message.

4.1.4 Discourse markers

Discourse markers are lexical items that indicate the procedural relationship between the prior discourse and the following utterance (Schiffrin, 1987; Blakemore, 2002;Fraser, 1999). At least 4 linguistic expressions identified as elaborative markers (*and)*, 4 linguistics contrastive markers (*but)* and 2 inferential markers *(So)*. The elaborative markers (*and*) identified as the most frequently used among all verbal

pragmatic markers. Generally, discourse markers function as sentences connector which signals the continuity which called as cohesive device by Halliday & Hasan (1976). In this research, the finding showed that the judges used the elaborative markers *and* to signals the multiple information (Howie is over there gloating *and* smiling *and* glowing). Schiffrin (1987) mentioned it as "additive meaning". The contrastive markers *but* used by the judges to signals the different first statement with the next statement (You wasn't my favorite *but* I like you a lot). Discourse markers *but* provide meaning that the next opinion has a meaning that contradicts the previous argument. Due to the previously discussed interpretation, verbal pragmatic markers are meant for all sentences since each sentence convey a message, not just utterances with linguistics expression. The verbal pragmatic marker employed in judges' commentaries provided the information in sentence meaning.

### 4.2 Prosodic Integration with Lexical Pragmatic Markers

To investigate the role of prosody in shaping lexical pragmatic markers, acoustic pitch contours were analyzed using Praat software. Table 2 shows how pitch direction and terminal contours interact with lexical pragmatic markers to convey the overall pragmatic force of an utterance.

Table 2. Integrated Pragmatic-Prosodic model: Co-occurrence pattern of pitch contours and verbal expressions (lexical pragmatic makers)

| **Acoustic Pitch Pattern (Prosody)** | **Co-occurring Verbal Expressions / Markers** | **Phonological Symbol** | **Pragmatic Function** | **Representative Data Example** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Terminal falling intonation | Declarative basic markers | L% (Low boundary tone) | Signal propositional closure | *I think what you did was actually fantastic for the show* |
| | | | Convey speakers' certainty | |
| | | | | |
| Terminal rising intonation | Interrogative-based basic markers | H% (High boundary tone) | indexes anti-assertive | *Can I scream?* |
| | | | Built emotional engagement | |
| | | | | |
| Initial/ Medial rising pitch | commentary markers, vocative markers | H*(High pitch accent) | Signals turn-holding and informational non-finality | *You know, I think your voice is really great* |
| | | | Directs audience attention | |

As shown in table 2, prosody and verbal expressions interact through three distinct co-occurrence patterns, in which pitch direction influences the pragmatic force of lexical markers.

1. Terminal falling intonation (L%): A low boundary tone commonly occurs with basic markers, as seen in *"I think what you did was actually fantastic for the show".* As shown in table 2, the sharp fall in pitch on the final syllable marks the end of proposition and convey speakers' certainty. It was relevant with the finding from Mahammad (2015) regarding declarative certainty. In addition, the terminal fall lowers pitch supporting Pierrehumbert &

Hirschberg (2018) model of intonational meaning where low boundary tones (L%) signal propositional closure and non-negotiable stance.

2. Terminal rising intonation (H%): A high final boundary tone align with interrogative structures and pragmatic questions, as illustrated by *"Can I scream?"*. This rising terminal contour signals a less assertive stance and function pragmatically to invite response from the audience. As noted by Nilsenová (2006) and Truckenbrodt (2009) non-final rising contours signal incompleteness information and manages audience's engagement.
3. Initial/Medial rising pitch accent (H*): A high pitch accent occurring at the beginning or the middle of an utterance and commonly co-occurs with commentary markers and vocative markers such as *"you know, seriously, Joseph,…"*. As shown in table 2, this non-final rising contours signals that the utterance is not yet complete. And direct the audiences' attention.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined the pragmatic function and prosodic integration of verbal expressions as lexical pragmatic markers in the judges' commentaries on America's Got Talent. The findings show that basic markers, particularly declarative forms were the most dominant in the judges' discourse, primarily serving to convey epistemic authority and express decisive evaluations. In addition, the acoustics analysis show that prosodic cues co-occur with lexical markers to shape their pragmatic force. Falling terminal contour (L%) strengthen the speaker certainty and signal propositional closure, meanwhile rising intonation patterns (H%) and (H*) support turn-holding, indicate the non-finality information, and help establish interpersonal rapport with contestant and audience.

Importantly, this study shows prosody plays an important role in televised interaction. Pitch contour and intonation work together with verbal expressions to strengthen or soften the speaker's stance. By combining Fraser's (1996) pragmatic taxonomy, with prosodic analysis the study shows that spoken evaluation in entertainment context depends on the interaction between verbal expressions and acoustic features.

These findings have both theoretical and practical contribution. Theoretically, the study shows that textual analysis alone cannot fully explain the complexity of spontaneous spoken interaction. Practically, the findings can support English Language Teaching (ELT) and pragmatic instruction by highlighting the importance of teaching prosodic cues and verbal expressions. In addition, this study hopefully could be extended by the future researcher to examine other non-verbal features.

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