Compliments and Criticisms Given by Judges on a
Singing Competition Series in Taiwan

Yang-lien Chen and Victoria Rau
Institute of Linguistics, National Chung Cheng University, Taiwan

Abstract

This study examined how the judges on a televised singing competition series gave comments (including compliments and criticisms) to contestants on “Huaren xingguang dadao (華人星光大道)” [Million Star] in Taiwan. A sociolinguistic discourse analysis was adopted to analyze selected episodes of the show to investigate how the judges gave the contestants comments. This study regards a singing competition series as a speech situation. In the speech event of making comments, both the judges’ compliments and criticisms were examined as speech acts. Five patterns were identified from the comments that judges gave to the contestants. Three of the most commonly used strategies were direct compliment, high compliment followed by criticism, and indirect criticism. This study demonstrates the importance of interpreting compliments and criticisms together in a holistic approach.

Keywords: compliment, criticism, speech act, singing competition series

Introduction

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1 This paper was rewritten from the first author’s MA thesis (Chen 2014) and presented at the 2014 ALLT conference. The authors wish to express their appreciation to Dr. Gerald Rau for his invaluable editorial assistance.
Previous studies on compliment have investigated the speech act in either a single language (Chen, 1993; Chen and Yang, 2010; Wolfson 1984) or in comparative studies (Lin, Woodfield, and Ren 2012; Yu 2003, 2005). While some studies have discussed compliment offering strategies (Yu, 2005; Yu, 2011), most research on compliments has focused on compliment response strategies. Studies on criticism, on the other hand, have focused more on strategies for giving criticism in real contexts (Shih 2009; Zeng 2009; Zhu 2004) than on how people respond to criticism.

Criticism and compliment are often closely juxtaposed when making comments in real situations. However, previous studies typically treat compliment and criticism as separate speech acts and have rarely investigated them as a single speech event. Therefore, this study aimed to examine both together by investigating how judges gave comments (including both compliments and criticisms) on a singing competition series in Taiwan.

**Methodology**

The research aims to address how the judges give the contestants comments, including both compliments and criticisms, after a contestant on a singing competition show finishes his/her song or performance.

**Data collection**

The singing competition series “Huaren xingguang dadao (華人星光大道)” [Million Star], broadcast in Taiwan in 2012, was chosen. In the present study, the first ten episodes of the show were examined in order to obtain comments from the judges on contestants of various levels, as opposed to later in the show when only the better singers were still in the competition. The total length of the ten episodes of Million Star was about 1200 minutes (20 hours). As the shows can be watched on the Internet with subtitles, they served as excellent natural data for our discourse analysis. Comments that contained compliments and criticisms were recorded. A judge could give more than one comment.

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Speech event: Comment units

The unit of analysis is the speech event of making a comment, defined as the comments given by one judge to one contestant, as shown in Example 1. Each usually contains two separate comments from the judge with a response from the contestant in between.

Example 1

1 評審: 然後曉清，其實我覺得你可以選擇部分的轉，
2 參賽者: (點頭)。
3 評審: 你有太多的轉的功課了，所以會有一點壓力。

1 Judge: Actually, Xiao-qing, I think you can choose to do less embellishment.
2 Contestant: (Nodding her head).
3 Judge: You worked too much on the embellishments, so you may feel a little bit stressed.

In this speech event of making comments, the judge, Kay Huang, gave the first utterance of the comment in line 1, followed by the contestant’s response in line 2, and ended with further comments in line 3. As the screen shot did not focus on the contestant’s response after line 3, we have to assume that the contestant did not have any further nonverbal response afterwards.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition of a unit</th>
<th>One judge gives comments to one contestant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criteria for inclusion</td>
<td>1. Comments that judges give to contestants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Comments that focus on contestants’ performance, such as singing, appearance, and clothing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Data analysis**

By applying a discourse analysis approach, the interactions between the judges and the contestants and the ways that judges gave comments to the contestants were categorized. The distinctions between direct and indirect compliment and criticism are defined as follows. Following Holmes (1995), direct compliment refers to something directly referring to a certain person, for example, “You look beautiful.” On the other hand, indirect compliment may not be directly understood; instead, the hearer is required to make some inferences based on background knowledge to understand the content of the compliment.

Following Brown and Levinson (1987), direct criticism refers to a speaker directly pointing out the hearer’s mistakes or disadvantages, so that the hearer’s positive face is threatened in public. Indirect criticism is given when the speaker applies euphemistic or implied ways to criticize the hearer. By using such indirect methods, the speaker not only allows the hearer to recognize his/her mistakes but also saves the hearer’s face.

A compliment can be coded as either high or low evaluation depending on the length of the compliments and the inclusion of hedges. A high evaluation usually contains more than one utterance of compliment and contains a superlative comparison. In other words, the judges would give the contestant at least one compliment first, followed by other kinds of comments, and then add utterances to compliment the contestant again. A low evaluation, on the other hand, contains only one minimal utterance of compliment with either hedges or concessive expressions.

**Results**

Five patterns[^3] were identified from comments that the judges gave to

[^3]: As “Other” is not usually considered a pattern – it is simply a catch-all category for those that do NOT fit a pattern, we identified 5 patterns with 2 examples that did not fit one of the patterns.
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contestants on the show. Table 2 demonstrates the patterns of comments the judges gave to contestants on Million Star. The three most frequent strategies in making comments in the show constituted direct compliment (46%), compliment followed by criticism (29%), and indirect criticism (12%). Overall, the move of compliment followed by criticism (29%) was a far more prevalent strategy than criticism followed by compliment (1%). In addition, in the category of direct criticism (11%), judges usually reacted to serious mistakes made in the performance, followed by not meeting the judges’ expectation and boring performance.

Table 2
Patterns of Comments Given by Judges on Million Star

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compliment followed by criticism</th>
<th>High evaluation</th>
<th>46 (20%)</th>
<th>69 (29%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low evaluation</td>
<td>23 (9%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct compliment</td>
<td>108 (46%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>108 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct criticism</td>
<td>Making serious mistakes</td>
<td>16 (7%)</td>
<td>26 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not performing at a satisfactory level</td>
<td>6 (3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boring performance</td>
<td>4 (1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect criticism</td>
<td>27 (12%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>27 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticism followed by compliment</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (advice, suggestions, etc.)</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: 234 (100%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ways judges give contestants comments

In the following section, the above five patterns used by judges when giving the contestants comments will be elucidated, with examples extracted from Million Star.

Compliment followed by criticism. As mentioned before, the judges
tended to compliment the contestant first, then give him/her criticism. This can be divided into two sub-patterns: high evaluation and low evaluation.

**High evaluation.** If the judge believes that the performance was very good, but there is still room for improvement, he/she would give a longer compliment, followed by a shorter criticism, as illustrated in Example 2.

Example 2
Judge Wei-jen Yuan compliments the contestant’s performance and points out her weakness.

1 評審: 是，我覺得許艾文今天選這個歌是目前我聽到選手們唱得最好的一首，很可惜那個高音你還是跑掉了，
2 參賽者: (笑)。
3 評審: 如果那個高音沒跑，我會給你給到很高分。

1 Judge: The song Ai-wen Xu sang is the best song I’ve heard today, but it’s a pity that you failed to hit the high notes.
2 Contestant: (big smile).
3 Judge: I’d have given you a very high score if you had been a successful on the high notes.

Example 2 shows how the judge highly praises the contestant’s singing skill because he says, “This is the best song I’ve heard today.” It is not difficult to see that the judge is overall satisfied with the contestant’s performance. The contestant’s response of a big smile also indicates that she acknowledges the compliment in line 1. However, the contestant’s performance is not without flaw. Though the judge gives her a high compliment, he also points out the main problem (inaccurate pitch on high notes) in her singing, which is the only drawback that she should improve on to make her performance perfect.
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Low evaluation. If a judge offers a short comment first, his/her main point is actually the following criticism. S/he would politely compliment the contestant with a shorter utterance, then present his/her longer criticism, introduced by transitional words such as 可是 ‘but’ or 只是 ‘however.’ Example 3 illustrates how a judge gives a low evaluation.

Example 3
Judge Albert Leung comments on a female contestant’s problem of volume control.

1 評審: 大聲的部分很大很大，
2 參賽者: (點頭)。
3 評審: 可是有一些…我覺得有一些比較在…介乎在中間就是說這個，不光是大小聲啦！就是這個感情那個強跟弱，介乎在中間的時候，我感覺上你的感情有點好像…有點遊魂的樣子，我很難形容，就好像…好像沒有進去的樣子。

1 Judge: You were very loud in the loud parts of this song.
2 Contestant: (Nodding her head).
3 Judge: But in addition to singing loudly, expression of strong and weak emotion is also very important. It seems that you lost your emotion. It’s hard for me to describe this condition, but you were not immersed in your singing.

In line 1, the judge compliments the contestant for singing loudly during sections of her performance. Compared with other songs, the chorus of this particular song requires the performer to have a louder volume and more abundant emotion to show power. The judge’s brief comment on loudness alerts her to what follows. Thus, she responds by nodding her head in anticipation of the main point that he wants to express. The judge thinks that the display of emotion is more vital to success when expressing a song, even though loudness is also important in singing. The transitional word “but”
(line 3) at the beginning of a turn can be taken as the fact that the contestant did not meet the judge’s expectation for this song. Overall, a short compliment followed by a long criticism shows the judge’s low evaluation of the contestant’s performance.

**Direct compliment.** Direct compliments constituted the greatest number (46%) of the judges’ comments in the singing competition series. The judges were not reluctant to give direct compliments when the contestants’ performance was truly exceptional. Example 4 is presented as an illustration.

**Example 4**

Judge Gigi Leung gives direct compliments with several utterances in each turn to a 17-year-old female contestant for her versatility and steady progress.

1 評審: 我記得礎安之前的比賽都是唱英文歌比較多，然後這一次非常開心聽到你唱中文歌，而且真的進步非常的大，那我覺得水準跟以往一樣的，都是非常高，而且，你才 17 歲。
2 參賽者: (笑)。
3 評審: 我只能說你的前途真的是無可限量，所以恭喜妳今天表現非常好！
4 參賽者: 謝謝老師。

1 Judge: I remember that Chu-An has always sung English songs before, but this time, I’m glad to hear you sing a Chinese song. Also, you showed great progress, and you still maintained high quality singing as usual. What’s more, you’re only seventeen years old.
2 Contestant: (big smile).
3 Judge: I can only say that your future is promising. Congratulations on your good performance today!
4 Contestant: Thank you, teacher.
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Example 4 shows the judge’s direct and high compliment of the contestant. The judge compliments the contestant for her courage in singing a Chinese song and making significant progress. She also acknowledges her maintaining her usual high level of performance. The contestant responds to the compliment with a big smile. As the judge’s long compliments in her two turns reaffirm the contestant’s perfect performance, the contestant responds by giving gratitude at the end, using the standard term of address for showing respect to the judges, “teacher.”

Direct criticism. As mentioned earlier, there are three reasons the judges may give direct criticism: first, the contestants made serious mistakes that greatly affected their performance; second, contestants’ performance did not match their usual level; third, the contestant’s boring performance did not meet the judges’ expectations. The following Examples 5-7 illustrate the most face-threatening direct criticism given by the same judge, Wei-jen Yuan, who is known for giving harsh criticism.

Making serious mistakes. When the contestants repeat the same mistakes in singing, certain judges on the show tend to be extremely harsh in their direct criticism, as shown in Example 5.

Example 5

In the following example, the judge criticizes a male contestant for ruining the song by repeatedly singing the wrong lyrics.

1 評審: 一直重複唱錯，一直重複唱錯，我覺得你不要比賽了，沒有什麼好比的，這麼好的歌唱得這麼爛，我根本不應該給你這麼多分數，這是我心裡話，你聽進去。
2 參賽者: (沉默)。

1 Judge: **You sang the wrong lyrics repeatedly.** I think you should stop competing with others. You have no business competing with
others because you ruined such a good song. I should not have given you high scores before. This is from the bottom of my heart, and you should listen and remember.

2 Contestant: (Keeps silent).

This example shows that the judge criticizes the contestant directly because he repeatedly forgot the lyrics and completely ruined the song. The judge also regrets giving him high marks before and suggests that he drop out of the contest. The harsh criticism is met with a total silence from the contestant.

**Not performing at a satisfactory level.** The second reason the judges give direct criticisms is the contestants’ failure to meet the judges’ expectations based on their past performance, as shown in Example 6.

Example 6

The judge expects the contestant, Wei-lin Peng, to perform better than he did. Based on his usual performance, the mistakes he made should not have happened.

1 評審: 彭偉麟唱好幾句是連尾音都...沒有尾音就斷掉了，以你的程度，實在不允許有這種錯誤的！

2 參賽者: (大吸一口氣，尷尬)。

1 Judge: Wei-lin Peng, you did not have the proper ending sound several times. At your singing level, you are not allowed to make this kind of mistake.

2 Contestant: *(The contestant is embarrassed, taking a deep breath).*

The judge thinks that the contestant sings well; however, there is a gap between the judge’s expectation and the contestant’s performance. The contestant thus takes a deep breath (line 2) in response to show he is
embarrassed by this blunt criticism.

**Boring performance which does not match the judges’ expectation.**

The third reason for giving direct criticism is when the contestant’s performance is too boring, as illustrated in Example 7.

Example 7

The judge addresses the female contestant by calling her full name, Ying-Shan Ma, in his direct criticism. Interestingly, he apologizes for his face-threatening act in his next turn.

1 評審: 我覺得馬瑩姍你應該要不就是找更特別的曲目，然後換一些你的歌唱技巧，不然很容易聽多了會無聊。
2 參賽者: (點頭)。
3 評審: 恕我直言。
4 參賽者: 謝謝老師。

1 Judge: **Ying-shan Ma**, I think you should either choose a more special song or change your singing style, otherwise, the audience will easily get bored by the same old stuff.
2 Contestant: (Nodding her head).
3 Judge: **Sorry for my bluntness**.
4 Contestant: Thank you, teacher.

As the contestant’s performance is nothing new or attractive, the judge indicates that the audience would feel bored if the contestant sticks to her old singing style and pattern of song selection. The contestant responds to his direct criticism by nodding her head. Interestingly, in line 3, the male judge apologizes to the female contestant for his bluntness. Compared with his direct criticism to the two male contestants, he seems to treat females more politely (see Example 5). The judge’s apology attempted to mitigate the tense atmosphere and relieve the contestant’s bad feelings, which elicits the
contestant’s expression of gratitude.

**Indirect criticism.** A judge may give indirect criticism by using hedges such as “maybe” or “It seems that…” to avoid hurting the contestants’ confidence directly, as illustrated in Example 8.

Example 8
Judge Gigi Leung gives indirect criticism when a female contestant did not succeed when attempting a new singing style.

1 評審: 我感覺有點不對，我也不知道是哪裡不對，那好像這種風格就是不適合你去唱，
2 參賽者: (笑)。
3 評審: 然後你現在為了比賽，然後為了一個新的感覺，給我們耳目一新的聽覺，
4 參賽者: (點頭)。
5 評審: 然後去嘗試這個新的風格，那先不說有沒有成功，打動到我們，有沒有真的很嗆，但是有好幾個音跑掉，這個是不爭的事實。
6 參賽者: (笑)。

1 Judge: I felt that there was something wrong, but I didn’t know what. *It seems that* this kind of singing style is not suitable for you.
2 Contestant: *(smile).*
3 Judge: But now, in order to give us a new feeling in this competition,
4 Contestant: *(Nodding her head).*
5 Judge: You tried this new singing style. Whether your performance touched or excited us is beside the point; it’s an undeniable fact that sometimes your pitch was not correct.
6 Contestant: *(smile).*

Example 8 shows indirect criticism from the judge. First, she says that there seems to be something wrong *(好像 ‘It seems that …’)* with the
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performance, but she can’t pinpoint exactly what the problem is. Compared with direct criticism, the judge uses a more tentative tone of voice to indicate the singing style might be unsuitable. In lines 2 and 6, the contestant smiles with embarrassment. In line 4, the contestant nods her head in anticipation of further comments.

**Criticism followed by compliment.** Although the judges in general preferred to begin with compliment followed by criticism, on rare occasions (1%), the judges gave criticism first followed by compliment, especially when the contestant lost the competition, as shown in Example 9.

Example 9

Judge Albert Leung criticizes the female contestant Shu-yu Zhang’s poor sense of rhythm, but adds a compliment at the end.

1 評審: 洌瑜饒舌的時候,節奏感還是不夠好,
2 參賽者: (點頭)。
3 評審: 可是整體有一個化學的作用。

1 Judge: Shu-yu, when you rapped, it seems that your sense of rhythm was not very good.
2 Contestant: (Nodding her head).
3 Judge: But there was a kind of chemistry to the whole thing.

In this example, the judge considers a “sense of rhythm” to be very important in rapping, and the contestant did not meet this basic requirement. The contestant responds by nodding her head, acknowledging the criticism. Finally, the judge mentioned the contestant’s merits after the criticism.

**Other.** There were only two examples (1%) that could not be classified into the five patterns easily, so they were categorized as “other.” As shown in Example 10, the comments did not involve any compliments or
criticisms but just contained descriptions, suggestions, or life experiences of the judges.

Example 10

Judge Kay Huang gives the following comment to the contestant who was lucky enough to remain in the contest with a minimal passing score. She challenges the contestant to set her goal higher, rather than focusing on surpassing others.

1 評審: 站在舞台上，我覺得有企圖心是...是一定要的，那有企圖心，你一定要在台上你是表現，不是說我想贏，而是你就是要挑戰你自己，
2 參賽者: (點頭)。
3 評審: 你不是去贏別人，是贏過你自己。

1 Judge: When you stand on the stage, it is important to show your ambition. To show your ambition, you should show your strength, not to surpass others but to challenge yourself.
2 Contestant: (Nodding her head).
3 Judge: You should surpass yourself, not the other people.

By challenging the contestant to surpass herself, the judge shares her own philosophy of life instead of giving a compliment or a criticism. The contestant responds by nodding her head.

Discussion

In this study, five patterns of comments that the judges gave to the contestants have been identified: compliment followed by criticism, direct compliment, direct criticism, indirect criticism, and criticism followed by compliment. Following the principle of politeness, making direct compliments constitutes the most favorable strategy (46%) for making comments, while making direct criticism should be avoided or mitigated, as it
is the most face-threatening speech act. However, direct criticism still constitutes 11% of the comments on the show. As the judges are considered mentors of the singers, their direct criticism is construed as instructions to improve the contestant’s singing skills. Therefore, if the contestants made serious mistakes or did not perform at a satisfactory level, they expected the judges to point out their problems directly, following the parenting metaphor of ”aijrshen tzajrchie (愛之深，責之切)” [tough love].

Table 3
The Distribution of Direct Criticism by The Four Judges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Judges</th>
<th>Making serious mistakes</th>
<th>Not performing at a satisfactory level</th>
<th>Boring performance which did not match the judge’s expectation</th>
<th>Total numbers of direct criticism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kay Huang</td>
<td>3 (11%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>3 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wei-jen Yuan</td>
<td>11 (42%)</td>
<td>6 (23%)</td>
<td>4 (16%)</td>
<td>21 (81%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chien Yao</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gigi Leung</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total: 26 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another plausible explanation might be the nature of TV programs. Some judges act as “good cops” while some act as “bad cops” to increase the dramatic effect that the program producers hope to present to the audience. From Table 3, it is possible that Wei-jen Yuan is set as a “bad cop,” stating his direct criticisms in a confrontational way (see Extracts 5 to 7). Compared with the bad cop, other judges such as Kay Huang, Gigi Leung, and Chien Yao, rarely offered comments in a harsh tone of voice. Instead, they gave indirect criticisms, following the politeness principle. As the male judge,
Wei-jen Yuan has had a reputation of “strict father” in various other TV singing contests, he was naturally assigned to occupy the role of a bad cop again, while the rest of the judges, either male or female, played the role of “kind mothers.”

Besides direct criticism, three patterns of criticism, i.e., “compliment followed by criticism,” “indirect criticism,” and “criticism followed by compliment,” deserve special attention. These three patterns could be interpreted as following two maxims of Leech’s (1983) politeness principle: Approbation and Sympathy.

Adding a compliment before criticism, i.e., “Compliment followed by criticism,” abides by the sub-maxim of the Approbation Maxim by “maximizing praise of other.” Although the contestant had some shortfalls, he/she still had some merit that deserves mention. In both “criticism followed by compliment” and “indirect criticism,” the judges minimized antipathy between the contestants and themselves by applying the Sympathy Maxim. Giving criticisms indirectly, the judges not only saved the contestant’s face but also made a good impression on the contestant.

Notice that gender is a factor that influences how the bad cop modified his direct criticism. Comparing Examples 5 (male contestant) with 7 (female contestant), both of the contestants received direct criticisms from the bad cop, but the harsh judge treated the female contestant more politely by adding “shuwo jryan (恕我直言) [Sorry for my bluntness] to tone down the force of the direct criticism.

Term of address is another factor used by the judges to modify their relationship with the contestants when making direct criticism. Contestants were addressed by their full names when they were criticized severely by the bad cop. For example, in Example 6, the judge used the male contestant’s full name when he failed to meet the judge’s expectation. In Example 7, the female contestant’s full name was also used in the direct criticism, although an apology was added at the end.

Finally, the minimal responses to the compliments and criticism, such as smiling, nodding one’s head, and giving gratitude, all indicate the contestants
in the singing contest are at the powerless, receiving end. The only appropriate response, regardless of whether they receive compliments or criticisms, is exactly the same: acknowledging the comments and giving thanks.

**Conclusion**

In this study, we applied a sociolinguistic discourse analysis to investigate a singing competition series, which has usually been analyzed from other perspectives such as mass communication.

As there are always two sides to a coin, the judges’ comments in the singing competition series contain both compliments and criticisms. This study has demonstrated the importance of investigating compliments and criticisms together in order to provide a holistic picture of the speech act of making comments in a singing competition series. Since most studies have concentrated on responses to compliments, but very few studies have focused on “compliment giving,” this study has added to the literature by providing an analysis of compliments and criticisms in a holistic way.

Due to the limitation of time, only ten episodes of one show were analyzed. For further study, other singing competition series and more episodes could be investigated to validate our findings.

**References**


台灣歌唱比賽節目評審之稱讚與批評

陳泱璉，何德華
國立中正大學語言學研究所

摘要

本篇文章旨在探討台灣「華人星光大道」歌唱比賽節目評審給予參賽者評語(含稱讚與批評)之方式。本文從人際溝通與社會互動角度將歌唱比賽節目視為一言談情境,而在「給予評語」這樣的言語事件中,探討評審如何從事稱讚與批評之言語行為。本文以社會語言學言談分析的方法將語料予以分類,探討評審如何給參賽者評語。研究顯示評審給予參賽者評語的方式可歸納為六種,但最常見的三種為：直接稱讚、先稱讚後批評、以及間接批評。本研究將稱讚與批評放在一起討論,提供研究「給予評語」的文化現象「整合貫通」的研究觀點。

關鍵詞：稱讚、批評、言語行為、歌唱比賽節目