

Discourse of Apology and Plea in R&B Lyrics: A Pragmatic Analysis of “On Bended Knee”

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Abstract

This study explores the pragmatic dimensions of apology and emotional plea in the lyrics of Boyz II Men's "*On Bended Knee*". As an emblematic R&B song from the 1990s, the lyrics are rich in expressive speech acts that convey regret, longing, and emotional vulnerability. The objective of this study is to analyze the types and functions of speech acts, particularly focusing on apology and pleading expressions using the framework of speech act theory and politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson. This research applies a qualitative descriptive method with textual analysis as the main tool. The results indicate that the lyrics contain multiple expressive and commissive acts, such as requests, promises, and repeated apologies, demonstrating a strong emotional appeal. These elements construct a discourse of emotional surrender and remorse, reflecting key features of interpersonal communication in popular music. The study contributes to the understanding of how language in music can perform social functions beyond aesthetic value, particularly in articulating relational dynamics and emotional expression.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Speech Acts, Apology, R&B Lyrics, On Bended Knee

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi dimensi pragmatik dari ungkapan permintaan maaf dan permohonan emosional dalam lirik lagu "*On Bended Knee*" oleh Boyz II Men. Sebagai lagu R&B ikonik dari era 1990-an, liriknya sarat dengan tindak tutur ekspresif yang mengungkapkan penyesalan, kerinduan, dan kerentanan emosional. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis jenis dan fungsi tindak tutur, dengan fokus khusus pada ungkapan permintaan maaf dan permohonan menggunakan kerangka teori tindak tutur dan strategi kesantunan dari Brown dan Levinson. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan analisis teks sebagai alat utama. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa lirik tersebut mengandung berbagai tindak tutur ekspresif dan komisif, seperti permintaan, janji, dan permintaan maaf yang diulang, yang menunjukkan daya tarik emosional yang kuat. Unsur-unsur ini membentuk wacana penyerahan emosional dan penyesalan, mencerminkan karakter komunikasi interpersonal dalam musik populer. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman tentang bagaimana bahasa dalam musik dapat menjalankan fungsi sosial di luar nilai estetikanya, khususnya dalam mengartikulasikan dinamika relasional dan ekspresi emosional.

Kata kunci: Pragmatik, Tindak Tutur, Permintaan Maaf, Lirik R&B, On Bended Knee

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INTRODUCTION

Language is a powerful medium of communication that extends beyond everyday conversation into various expressive forms, including music. Song lyrics, particularly in the R&B genre, serve not only as artistic expressions but also as vehicles for conveying complex emotions and interpersonal dynamics. As a genre, R&B is characterized by its emotive vocal delivery and lyrics that often center on love, apology, reconciliation, and emotional vulnerability (Moore, 2012). Boyz II Men's "*On Bended Knee*" (1994) exemplifies this lyrical tradition by presenting a narrative of deep regret and a passionate plea for forgiveness after a romantic breakdown.

Linguistically, such lyrics offer fertile ground for pragmatic analysis, particularly in terms of

speech acts and politeness strategies. Searle (1979) defines speech acts as utterances that perform actions, including apologizing, requesting, or promising. In the song, repeated expressions of regret, pleading for a second chance, and promises of change align with expressive and commissive acts, which are central to interpersonal communication. In addition, the use of face-saving strategies in the lyrics echoes Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, where linguistic choices are made to maintain harmony and minimize social friction.

Prior studies have examined speech acts in political discourse (Al-Hindawi & Al-Badri, 2018), movie scripts (Culpeper, 2011), and classroom interactions (Salmani Nodoushan, 2007), but fewer have focused on their manifestation in musical lyrics. Research by Al Kahtani (2012) highlights how songs can reflect complex speech acts, noting that lyrics often mirror the structures of real-life interpersonal exchanges. Meanwhile, Rahmawati and Rido (2019) observed how apology expressions in pop songs carry intentional illocutionary forces aimed at emotional reconciliation. However, the discourse of apology and emotional plea in R&B, particularly through a detailed pragmatic lens, remains relatively underexplored.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating the lyrics of "*On Bended Knee*" using a qualitative-descriptive approach. Specifically, it focuses on identifying and analyzing the speech acts and politeness strategies employed to express apology and emotional pleading. Through this analysis, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how popular music functions as a medium for enacting social acts and emotional negotiation through language.

The purpose of this research is to explore the pragmatic functions of apology and plea in Boyz II Men's "*On Bended Knee*", focusing on expressive and commissive speech acts through the lens of speech act theory and politeness strategies.

METHOD

This study applies a qualitative descriptive method, focusing on the pragmatic analysis of song lyrics. The qualitative approach is appropriate as the aim is to interpret meanings embedded in language use, especially how speech acts and politeness strategies are employed to convey emotional depth and interpersonal intentions. As Creswell (2014) states, qualitative research is designed to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems, often through the analysis of words or textual data.

Data Source

The primary data source for this study is the official lyrics of "*On Bended Knee*", written by Jimmy Jam, Terry Lewis, and Boyz II Men. The song was released in 1994 as part of the album *II*, which became one of the best-selling R&B records of the decade. The lyrics are retrieved from verified lyric repositories and cross-checked with official sources to ensure accuracy.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is based on two main theoretical foundations:

1. Speech Act Theory: Particularly John Searle's classification (1979), which includes five types of speech acts: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives. In the context of this study, expressive (e.g., apology, regret) and commissive (e.g., promises, pledges) acts are the focus.
2. Politeness Theory: Developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), this framework explains how individuals use strategies to maintain face and avoid face-threatening acts (FTAs). In apologetic and pleading discourse, speakers often apply negative politeness (e.g., hedging, indirectness) and positive politeness (e.g., seeking solidarity, emotional appeals).

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection follows the documentation technique (Moleong, 2012), in which textual elements of the song are treated as research objects. The steps include:

1. Selecting relevant excerpts from the lyrics that contain an apology or plea.
2. Classifying the utterances based on Searle's speech act categories.
3. Identifying politeness strategies used in each utterance based on Brown & Levinson's model.

Data Analysis Technique

Data are analyzed through content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013), allowing the researcher to interpret meaning from the context of the utterances. The procedure includes:

1. **Coding** each line of the lyrics for illocutionary acts.
2. **Interpreting** their function within the emotional narrative.
3. **Triangulating** findings by comparing them with scholarly definitions and previous literature on apology in music or discourse.

The reliability of the analysis is ensured through a cross-checking process involving theoretical definitions and repeated evaluation of the textual segments. The goal is not to generalize but to generate insights into how language in music performs pragmatic functions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The pragmatic analysis of “*On Bended Knee*” revealed a dominant use of expressive and commissive speech acts throughout the lyrics. Utterances such as “*Can we go back to the days our love was strong?*” and “*I'll never walk again until you come back to me*” illustrate a deep sense of emotional vulnerability, remorse, and longing. These are typical markers of expressive acts, where the speaker communicates internal emotional states.

A total of nine expressive speech acts were identified, predominantly indicating regret, sorrow, and desire for reconciliation. Meanwhile, six commissive acts were observed, mainly in the form of promises and pledges of personal change. Additionally, the lyrics demonstrate the use of negative politeness strategies, as seen in requests that are indirect, mitigated, or framed as questions to reduce imposition for example, “*Can somebody tell me how to get things back the way they used to be?*”

These findings indicate that the lyrics closely mimic real-life interpersonal communication, even within the stylized and rhythmic constraints of musical form. The song operates as a sincere and socially meaningful discourse of apology and emotional appeal.

These results directly align with the research objective to uncover how apology and emotional plea are constructed through speech acts and politeness strategies in R&B lyrics. The analysis demonstrates that "*On Bended Knee*" functions as more than a lyrical expression; it acts as a communicative performance where language carries social and emotional intent.

From a pragmatic perspective, expressive acts serve to reveal the persona's emotional state, fostering empathy and moral alignment with the listener. Meanwhile, commissive acts, such as promises of transformation, function to rebuild trust within the imagined relational dynamic. This balance of emotional confession and pledging aligns with common patterns in interpersonal apology scenarios.

What distinguishes this study from previous works such as those by Al-Hindawi & Al-Badri (2018) on political apologies or Rahmawati & Rido (2019) on apology in pop lyrics is its focus on R&B as a genre uniquely suited to convey deep emotional nuance. The highly affective delivery of the lyrics amplifies the impact of speech acts, demonstrating how music not only reflects communicative patterns but intensifies them through stylistic repetition, emotional tone, and sonic emphasis.

In contrast to spoken discourse, where utterances are often spontaneous and fragmented, song lyrics provide carefully constructed verbal acts. This curated nature allows for intentional layering of meaning, making the communicative function both explicit and performative. In the case of "*On Bended Knee*", language is used not only to convey sorrow but to restore a damaged relational bond, mirroring real-life acts of remorse and reconciliation.

These findings reaffirm the notion that popular music lyrics are fertile ground for pragmatic inquiry, especially regarding how speakers (or lyricists) navigate face-threatening acts like apology. The study thus contributes to the broader understanding of how language in music serves social, emotional, and interpersonal functions, offering insight into the communicative richness embedded in popular culture.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the pragmatic functions of apology and emotional plea in the lyrics of Boyz II Men's "*On Bended Knee*" through the frameworks of speech act theory and politeness strategies. The findings demonstrate that expressive and commissive speech acts particularly those conveying regret, sorrow, and promises are central to the construction of emotional meaning in R&B lyrics. These acts are carefully shaped through both linguistic choice and politeness strategies, enabling the persona in the song to perform socially recognizable behaviors such as apologizing and requesting forgiveness.

The contribution of this study lies in its demonstration that popular music, especially R&B, serves not merely as entertainment but as a rich site of communicative action and emotional discourse. By

applying a pragmatic lens to musical lyrics, this research extends the scope of speech act theory to a genre and context that has received relatively little scholarly attention in this domain. It reinforces the idea that song lyrics, though poetic and stylized, are capable of performing real-world speech acts that resonate with listeners on personal and social levels.

Scientifically, the study offers a deeper understanding of how language is used to enact interpersonal functions such as reconciliation, emotional repair, and social bonding. These insights can contribute to interdisciplinary fields, including linguistics, media studies, sociolinguistics, and musicology.

Future research might expand this investigation by conducting comparative studies across genres (e.g., pop, hip-hop, country) or by exploring how different cultural contexts influence the use of apology and plea in music. Additionally, incorporating listener perception studies could enrich our understanding of how audiences interpret and emotionally respond to these linguistic elements in song.

In conclusion, analyzing lyrics through a pragmatic perspective not only validates the communicative depth of musical texts but also affirms the value of popular culture as a site of meaningful language use and human interaction.

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