Society, Culture and the Speech Act of Praise – Observations from Ugandan English vis-à-vis British English

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Abstract

Whilst there has recently been an upsurge in studies into self-praise on social media, and despite the fact that there exists a vast amount of literature available on speech acts such as requests, apologies and compliments, praise in traditional spoken and written English has largely escaped scholarly attention. However, it seems to form a substantial part of everyday behaviour in various linguacultures, and the Ugandan ones appear to belong to these. This paper aims at describing how praise is performed in Ugandan English. Using data collected for the Uganda component of the International Corpus of English, it examines how praise is performed linguistically, in which genres praise can be found, and which functions it seems to perform in comparison to what is the case in British English data.

Keywords

Ugandan English – expressive speech acts – praise – Bantu – Nilotic

1 Introduction - Praise, Politeness and Conventions

Following Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper's (1989) seminal comparison of speech act realisations across linguacultures, that is, cultures “manifested through patterns of language use” (House and Kádár, 2021: 5), scholars have...
investigated how a speech community’s patterns and cultural conventions of politeness are reflected in its languages’ speech acts and how these patterns and conventions are carried over from first language (L1) practices when speech acts are performed in English as a second language (L2), “to recreate, maintain, or represent more faithfully local cultural practices and culturally embedded meanings” (Mesthrie and Bhatt, 2008: 132). One speech act that so far has not received as much attention as others is praise.

To Searle (1969: 151), “[t]o praise something is [...] a favourable assessment of it. As such, the illocutionary verb praise, to Searle (1969: 151), falls into the same group as verbs such as commend, laud, extol, express approval or express satisfaction and recommend, all of which include a semantics of favourably assessing something or somebody. In his 1976 taxonomy, praise is an expressive speech act in Searle’s taxonomy, used “to express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content” (Searle, 1976: 1), similar to thank, congratulate, apologize, condole, deplore and welcome.

Expressive speech acts, and thus also praise, have all been linked to politeness. From within (mostly pre-2000) first-wave approaches to politeness, for example Itakura (2013: 134) assumes that “in face-to-face conversations, praise is given explicitly to the addressee as a positive politeness strategy with the aim of forming close relationships,” following Brown and Levinson (1987: 101–105) and Holmes (1988: 462). Positive politeness has, in these approaches, been discussed to include strategies attending to interlocutors’ positive face wants, “the desire (in some respect) to be approved of” (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 13). In fact, Brown and Levinson (1987: 101–103) explain that positive politeness involves some exaggeration, as is the case with praise.

However, again in first-wave approaches to politeness, research has demonstrated that cultures vary as regards the status they attribute to positive and negative face (“the desire to be unimpeded in one’s actions,” Brown and Levinson, 1987: 13), and studies reveal that individual cultures attribute particular importance to positive face. For example, Sifianou (2011) argues that Greek is more positive face oriented than British English (BrE). At the same time, studies have continued to find that Brown and Levinson’s model cannot easily be applied to Asian cultures, e.g. Gu (1993) or Jiang (2012) for Chinese cultures (cf. Huang, 2014: 148 for a concise account).

With reference to African cultures, work by Nwoye (1992) on Igbo and later Agyekum (2004, 2010) on Akan has revealed that cultures may also distinguish between an individual’s face and that of the community, the collective or “group face” (Nwoye, 1992: 313). In such cultures, members “desire to behave in conformity with culturally expected forms of behaviour” (Nwoye, 1992: 313).
Agyekum (2010: 14) explains that Goffman’s (1967) notion of face, which does not differentiate a negative and positive face, is more applicable to African cultures or societies than the one proposed by Brown and Levinson, as it allows to conceptualise “face as a public property on loan” (Agyekum, 2010: 14), in a society that emphasises communalistic needs over individualistic ones.

From a more recent, typically post-2000, second-wave understanding of politeness, the above reflects a second-order politeness, that is an “abstract, scientific conceptualisation” (Kádár and Haugh, 2013: 41), whilst approaching praise from a first-order politeness perspective, that is from how it “is perceived by its users” (ibid) seems to be beneficial when investigating English across cultures. Such an approach assumes that “differences in the forms and strategies that give rise to politeness reflect divergences in the ways in which politeness itself is conceptualised in different cultures” (Kádár and Haugh, 2013: 42) and, thus, avoids the issues related with Brown and Levinson’s model. In fact, individuals are typically well aware of what Silverstein (2003) termed third-order indexicality, that is the conventions that hold in a society/culture and that determine how a particular function is performed through particular linguistic forms.

This paper explores how society and (lingua)culture shape the speech act of praise in Ugandan English (UgE). Following an account of how praise has been defined and how it has been used in the English language and on the African continent, it then contrastively investigates which forms praise takes in the Ugandan and the British subcomponents (ICE-UG and ICE-GB) of the International Corpus of English (ICE), how it is used across different text genres and what functions, both interpersonal and societal, praise performs in these data.

2 Defining Praise

In linguistic research, praise has frequently been conflated with compliments. Kampf and Danziger (2018), for example, do not differentiate the two, and Rudolf von Rohr and Locher (2020: 191) “treat compliments and praise as near-synonyms and will use them interchangeably.” Others see the two as subsets of each other. For example, Herbert (1990: 221) finds that compliments may serve to express praise and admiration. To others (for example Lorenzo-Dus and Izura, 2017), on the other hand, compliments seem to be one of several options to realise praise, and to Tannen (1994: 68), “compliments are a conventional form of praise, and exchanging compliments is a common ritual” [italics mine, cm].
Other scholars differentiate between praise and compliments depending on the social function of the speech act. Thus, a compliment has been defined by Holmes (1988: 446) as being “a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some ‘good’ (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer.” More recent research on compliments, such as Golato (2005), Jucker (2009) and Chen (2010), often follows her definition. Additionally, Searle and Vanderveken (1985: 21) argue that compliments “express approval of the hearer for something.” Clearly, these are meant to be directed at the interlocutor, rather than praising a third person or an inanimate object. Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1989: 74) explains that “[c]omplimenting always involves a human addressee, typically in a direct interaction” [italics in original, cm].

Similarly, Tannen (1993: 37) explains that compliments have an interpersonal and interactive component to them, and states that praise lacks both. Jucker (2009: 1611) considers compliments that attribute credit to the addressee of the compliment “personal compliments;” whilst he states that if addressed or referring to a third party, this constitutes praise. As he (2009: 1612) explains, “there has to be a link from the ‘someone’ [mentioned in Holmes’ 1988 definition, cm] who is attributed credit to the addressee of the compliment, otherwise the utterance is more likely to be understood as praise on some third party but not as a compliment.”

Varzari (2020) establishes further criteria for the study of praise. Following Kamins and Dweck (1999), she for example differentiates person, outcome, and process praise. Or similarly, following Mueller and Dweck (1998) praise for ability or intelligence, achievement or hard work. Crucially, praise “expresses a positive assessment, and it definitely contains words with a positive semantic load” (Varzari, 2020: 301).

For the purposes of this paper, those utterances will be considered to constitute praise that

1. serve to “express warm approbation of; to proclaim or commend the excellence or merits of; to speak highly of; to laud” (OED Online, 2022), and
2. to do so contain words with a positive semantics that serve to express a positive assessment of a person or object, and
3. are directed to the person being praised, OR a third party OR an object,¹ but
4. lack the interactional component attributed to compliments, that is, there is no second pair part in the form of an uptake of the praise.

¹ Instances of self-praise were excluded from our analyses.
Such utterances include the following examples,\(^2\) which were observed in our data.

1. *Am truly blessed* to have you for a boyfriend.
3. This tour *is crowned* by a cultural gala composed of traditional dance performances from the native Acholi people.

### 3 Praise in the History of English, across Its Varieties and in Comparison to other Languages

Praise seems to be a speech act that was more prevalent in earlier stages of the English language than it is today. In the Old English period, it was frequently encountered in the genre of heroic poetry, in which explicit praise for heroic virtues of warriors was no exception, for example in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’s entry for 937, *The Battle of Brunanburh* and *The Battle of Maldon*, and verse often included praise songs. As Kohnen (2008) explains, Anglo-Saxon society was characterised by mutual obligation and kin loyalty, both of which were reflected in such practices that served to reinforce social ties and power relations. Praise poetry flourished in the Middle English period, including e.g. Chaucer’s praise of the Knight in *The Canterbury Tales*, but has been on the decline since the 17th century (Burrow, 2008).

This decline in literary realisations of praise seems to go hand in hand with a general decline in the use of praise in England. Taavitsainen and Jucker (2008) discuss the influence of French court culture on compliments, which to them occupy the same pragmatic space as praise, from the Middle English period onwards and explain that compliments developed “from a more general sense to the more specific known as compliments today” (2008: 195) from the Early Modern English (EME) period onwards. At that time, compliments, which included praise, were a rather formal and formulaic social practice in the higher strata of society and taught, e.g. via etiquette books (Taavitsainen and Jucker, 2008: 203–4).

Besides this diachronic development, there exists variation depending on gender, power-relations, regional and cultural background of those giving praise. Tannen (1994), who includes praise in her catalogue of conversational rituals, explains that there are cultural as well as gender differences as regards the use of what she calls “a very special form of feedback” and finds

\(^2\) All examples from the corpora retain the original spelling. Markup has been removed for ease of reading. Short pauses are indicated using the ICE annotation <,>.
that women praise more often than men. Holmes (1995: 119) indicates that “[p]raise is often directed downwards from superordinate to subordinate,” e.g. in teacher-student interactions. Recently, there has been growing interest in (self-)praise on social media (for example individual papers in Placencia and Eslami, 2020), which, however, is not at the centre of this paper.

In research on varieties of Engishes, praise itself has only received scarce attention so far. Mahboob (2009) focuses on Pakistani English and finds that the variety makes use of Islamic features such as “words of praise and appreciation, e.g. *Maasha-Allah* and *Alhumd-o-Lullah*” (2009: 182), which come in the form of borrowings from Urdu. Praise in Pakistani English also occurs at the beginning of letters of complaint (Hartford and Mahboob, 2004) and, in the form of “explicit praise of Allah,” at the beginning of Master’s theses (Mahboob, 2009: 187).

However, expressive speech acts in general have been scrutinised for Irish English. Kallen and Kirk (2012), developed *Systems for Pragmatic annotation for the spoken component of ICE-Ireland (SPICE)* and carried out an initial investigation into the various speech act categories in the data. As regards expressives, they found that their frequency is generally low, that expressives are mostly found in telephone conversations and, interestingly, parliamentary debates, and that they are comparatively more frequent in face-to-face conversations and business transactions (Kallen and Kirk, 2012: 96) than in other text categories. Ronan (2015: 41), investigating only the broadcast discussions and the classroom interactions, found that “there were no examples of [...] compliments” in these two genres.

From a contrastive perspective, Kampf (2016: 52) finds that, in the Israeli context, praise is frequently used by nominators in their congratulatory announcements, “as a strategy aimed at justifying the decision” for the nomination. By contrast, in Polish culture, as Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1989: 76) points out, praise may create social distance if felt to be patronising the addressee.

4 Praise on the African Continent

In most African countries, praise is strongly associated with a particular genre, i.e. that of the praise song or that of praise poetry, as used to be the case in the Old English period, at least from the literary documents available to us today. This traditionally oral genre exists in almost all African traditional societies and has been performed by praise singers in various parts of Africa. In fact, praise songs are “one of the most widely used poetic forms in Africa; a series of laudatory epithets applied to gods, men, animals, plants, and
towns that capture the essence of the object being praised.” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1998).

In literate societies, praise is also frequently expressed in writing, that is in praise poems. For the context of South Africa, Groenewald (1989) describes the genre of praise poems in Xhosa and Koopman (1987) for Zulu. Whilst the genre has a long tradition, it is by no means relegated to history. In fact, in South Africa, both cultural leaders as well as politicians have their private official praise poets. For example, Kgoshigadi (Queen) Mogoshadi Marishane in South Africa’s Limpopo province has an official praise poet, Kgato Masemola, who also “heralded the arrival of Jacob Zuma in Parliament with a poem in Sepedi before the president delivered his sixth State of the Nation address” (Mohlomi, 2015, unpagedinated). Similarly, Nelson Mandela had Zulani Mkiva as his praise poet. However, as Koopman (1987) explains, the role of the praise poet went far beyond praise but included expressing popular opinion, including criticism. Today, praise poetry has become commercialised with poets frequently using social media platforms. Furthermore, popular music cultivates praise songs as is the case with the South African Zulu ensemble Ladysmith Black Mambazo. Their repertoire includes, for example, a traditional chant of ancestral names, “Two Shellini.” Linguistic descriptions of praise poetry in Uganda do not exist to date, but an example of a Ugandan praise poem (in Ankole) can be found at http://africanpoems.net/praise/in-praise-of-seven-women/.

At the same time, studies of praise in authentic speech and writing outside of praise songs and poetry are scarce. Closest comes Agyekum (2010), who investigates compliments (for similarities with and differences from praise, see Section 2) in the Akan society and explains that “[c]ompliment strategies avoid conflict and provide harmony among communicative participants and aim at politeness. Akan compliment expressions strengthen the communal aspect of Akan culture.” (2010: 15). Seeing compliments as instantiations of positive politeness, he (2010: 14) explains that “exaggeration that serves as a marker of face-redress [...] is manifested in Akan compliments.”

Finally, praise names have also received attention from within linguistics. Their use in contemporary Uganda, where they are characteristic of just two particular ethnic groups, the Runyoro and Rutooro, has been described by Isingoma (2014). In the two speech communities, a set of twelve of these empaako “must be used when addressing or referring to somebody” (2014: 90) and they serve to express respect when used towards an elder person or somebody of higher status.

The form in which and the degree to which praise is verbalised in Ugandan indigenous languages and in Ugandan English (UgE) has so far not received any attention. The next section presents the data and methods used to approach praise in UgE.
5 Data and Methodology

Both ICE-UG and ICE-GB are collections of spoken and written English across a variety of text genres, collected in 500 texts (300 transcripts of spoken English and 200 texts of written English) of approximately 2,000 words each (cf. Nelson 1996). The corpora comprise approximately one million words in the case of ICE-GB and 960,000 words for ICE-UG. The latter component is smaller, since two text categories, legal cross-examinations and legal presentations, could not be collected, due to Ugandan law. The text categories captured in ICE summarised in Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category label</th>
<th>Number of texts / approximate word count</th>
<th>Category description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1A</td>
<td>100 / 200,000</td>
<td>Private dialogue (face-to-face conversations and phone calls)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1B</td>
<td>80 / 160,000</td>
<td>Public dialogue (classroom lessons, broadcast discussions, broadcast interviews, parliamentary debates, legal cross-examinations*, business transactions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2A</td>
<td>70 / 140,000</td>
<td>Unscripted monologue (spontaneous commentaries, unscripted speeches, demonstrations, legal presentations*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2B</td>
<td>30 / 60,000</td>
<td>Scripted monologue (broadcast talks, non-broadcast speeches)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20 / 40,000</td>
<td>Mixed (broadcast news)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W1A</td>
<td>20 / 40,000</td>
<td>Non-professional writing non-printed (un-timed student essays, student examination scripts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W1B</td>
<td>30 / 60,000</td>
<td>Correspondence non-printed (social letters, business letters)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W2A</td>
<td>40 / 80,000</td>
<td>Academic writing printed (humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, technology)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W2B</td>
<td>40 / 80,000</td>
<td>Non-academic writing printed (humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, technology)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 Word counts here are approximate with the individual categories typically containing slightly more words.
Table 1: Text genres in the International Corpus of English (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category label</th>
<th>Number of texts / approximate word count</th>
<th>Category description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W2C</td>
<td>20 / 40,000</td>
<td>Reportage (press news reports)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W2D</td>
<td>20 / 40,000</td>
<td>Instructional writing (administrative/regulatory, skills/hobbies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W2E</td>
<td>10 / 20,000</td>
<td>Persuasive writing (press editorials)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W2F</td>
<td>20 / 40,000</td>
<td>Creative writing (novels, stories)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* As explained above, these two genres are missing in ICE-UG.

While corpus pragmatics has established procedures for the analyses of large amounts of data for various foci, such as the use of discourse markers or hesitation phenomena, several authors have pointed out that retrieving speech acts is not a straightforward procedure. Lutzky and Kehoe (2017: 38) point out that speech acts cannot be easily identified using automated corpus linguistic searches, due to their being “produced in a potentially infinite number of ways.” Similarly, Jucker et al. (2008) and Rühlemann (2010: 289) indicate that an automated search for a particular linguistic form is seldom possible for speech acts, which often tend to be performed indirectly.

As one possible solution, Jucker (2018) retrieves speech acts via their illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs) in his investigation into apologies and employs searches for sorry, excuse, apologise and pardon and for specific syntactic patterns attested for apologies, as well as metapragmatic expression analysis, which looks for passages where the speech act is explicitly mentioned. However, looking for IFIDs “does not work for speech acts which are not sufficiently conventionalised and do not have reasonably frequent IFIDs” (Jucker 2018: 384). Given the fact that descriptions of what might be conventionalised praise in UgE do not yet exist, this procedure was not fully feasible. Maybe even more importantly, corpus searches performed on the basis of findings for BrE and/or AmE may miss instances of praise that do not follow BrE or AmE conventions (cf. Jucker 2009 and Ronan 2015 above) but follow UgE nativised conventions, which to establish is one purpose of this paper. In fact, Daikuhara (1986) found in her comparative study of AmE and Japanese compliments, that the pattern I like/love NP, which dominates in AmE, never appeared in her Japanese data, with the verbs like and love being considered too strong.
O’Keeffe (2018) presents a number of “workarounds” (589) to the issue that the forms associated with a particular speech act function vary potentially infinitely, making corpus linguistic searches for function-to-form matches difficult for many speech acts. The first, one-to-one search, “where there is a 100% [...] match from the search item to relevant hits” (2018: 598) is only fully feasible with pragmatically annotated corpora and, hence, of limited use with the un-annotated ICE-UG. However, it can be combined with the second “sampling, searching and sifting” (2018: 602–605) and third method “using existing research findings as ‘seeds’” (2018: 605–606) for investigating our data, as will be outlined below.

In a first step, explicit praise was approached via lexical indicators in the form of speech act verbs. To detect these, verbs synonymous to praise were identified from Collins English Thesaurus in A to Z Form (Makins, 1992) and the American English (AmE) Thesaurus Dictionary of the English Language (March, 1994). This produced the following list: acclaim, admire, adore, applaud, approve, bepraise, bless, cheer, clap, compliment, commend, congratulations, crack up, cry up, encore, endorse, eulogize, extol, flatter, give thanks, glorify, honour, laud, like, magnify (although considered archaic), panegyrisce, pay homage to, pay tribute to, praise, prize, puff, recommend, sing the praises of; uphold, value, well and worship.

Furthermore, in Manes and Wolfson’s (1981) data, “the positive evaluation of the compliments is regularly carried by an adjective with a positive semantic load, but only few different adjectives are used for this purpose” (Jucker, 2009: 1621). These adjectives are nice, good, beautiful, pretty and great. Further verbs and adverbs were identified from the syntactic compliments formulae that Manes and Wolfson (1981: 120–121) identified for AmE compliments:4 looks, really, love, and like. Inevitably, simple concordance searches for the above adjectives and adverbs returned very high numbers of hits that were too unspecific and too many to process. We therefore, following Lutzky and Kehoe (2017: 44), identified the most frequent collocations of these words “at span 4 (i.e. a window of four words to the left of the IFID and four words to the right.” All collocations that occurred more often than three times in our data were then used as context words (again four words to the left and four words to the right) to refine our concordance searches and establish those instances where the search term functioned as an IFID for praise.

Finally, following Flöck and Geluykens (2018) and Ronan (2015), we complemented the previous procedures with a manual search of our corpus.

4 We did not search our data for the formulae themselves, which take the form of e.g. NP {is/looks} {really} ADJ (accounting for utterances such as Your hair looks nice). Given the fact that ICE-UG is not annotated, searches for word classes are (currently) not possible.
Two informal genres of ICE-UG, the private letters (W1B 1–15) and a selection of 30 face-to-face conversations (S1A 1–30) were sifted for expressions of praise that may have escaped the searches, to detect lexical items, phrases or structures used to express praise in UgE and to eventually use those as seed words for further corpus searches.

All resulting hits were examined manually and doublets and instances that turned out not to be praise were eventually removed manually and excluded from the further analyses.

6 Forms of Praise in Written and Spoken Ugandan English (in Comparison to British English)

The various searches yielded a total of 309 instances of praise in the ICE-UG data, which is 249.2% of the ICE-GB data. The ICE-GB data, in turn, had 124 instances of praise, which is 40.1% of those found in the ICE-UG data. This section discusses the forms that praise takes in the examples identified from ICE-UG and compares these to ICE-GB. Section 7 then looks into the uses of praise in the different text genres captured in the data and at the functions of praise.

6.1 Praise Uttered via Explicit Speech Act Verbs

ICE-UG was searched for a conflated set of those items culled from the thesauri mentioned and listed in Section 4. The search for speech act verbs only produced 30 hits with the function of praise. These are acclaim (1), admire (3), applaud (2), bless (2), congratulate (15), esteem (2), pay tribute to (1), recommend (1), and uphold (3). The speech act verb praise itself was observed three times, when used to praise a person. Examples 4 and 5 represent such uses.

(4) I hereby also add my voice onto that of the many to applaud, thank and congratulate to the team of individuals behind that noble cause.

(5) I praise and worship the ground on which he walks. (about boyfriend)

Only a very restricted subset of these verbs can also be identified as IFIDs for praise in ICE-GB. These are congratulate (3) and honour (1). Apparently,

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5 Note that there may be even more praise that escaped the above procedures and could only be identified from reading the entire corpus. A number of such instances are presented in examples (21) to (24), in the conclusions.

6 There are further nine instances where the praise is directed at God. Due to their formulaic nature, these were not considered here.
speakers of BrE use explicit praise, expressed via speech act verbs, to an even smaller extent than speakers of UgE.

6.2 Praise via Other Lexical Items
In a next step, ICE-UG was scrutinised as regards occurrences of those lexical items that Manes and Wolfson (1981) identify as recurring in compliments, provided they occurred in a collocation that was indicative of approbation and positive assessment as per the definition of praise presented above (see Section 2). Uses of good, nice and similar adjectives were only taken to indicate praise when they were accompanied by an intensifying adverb such as really or very, as they are semantically rather weak. For example, This is a good school was not taken to constitute praise, as opposed to This is a really good school. Applying the procedure outlined in Section 5, we identified praise expressed via selected adjective and adverbs as conflated in Table 2. Note that the 182 items identified in ICE-UG and the 56 in ICE-GB include examples that re-occur in the following sections. This is due to the fact that the collocations identified as recurring in UgE praise here co-occur with those lexical items that the manual search reported in 5.3 identified (see section 5.3 for details).

As is visible from Table 2, there is more than merely a quantitative difference between the two corpora, with ICE-UG inevitably containing more instances of praise performed through adjectives and adverbs, which results, of course, from the fact that ICE-UG has more praise in the first place. Importantly, there is also a qualitative difference, in that the various adjectives and adverbs collocated with a larger and more varied set of nouns in ICE-UG as opposed to ICE-GB. In ICE-UG, most of these collocations are related to actions on the sports grounds, which is caused by the fact that most praise occurs in sports commentaries (cf. Section 8 for further details). Crucially, none of the items related to sports performances, such as very good pass, really a good game, or what a good defence, occur in the ICE-GB data. Also, none of the beautiful + Noun forms occur in the ICE-GB data.

A word of caution is required with regard to the collocate nice of beautiful, which occur in the forms beautiful nice or nice beautiful. This might reflect idiosyncratic language use, since all eleven instances occur in one text in the demonstrations category: a cooking school video.

Examples (6) to (8) represent these uses of adjectives and adverbs in ICE-UG.

(6) And uh the most interesting is that though I didn't participate in the dancing but they really they really have a nice dance.
(7) And uh Brenda there with a very good defence.
(8) So she is really a good player at taking free throws.
The search for *great* returned 25 hits that could be identified as praise, one of which is given in example (9).

(9) You have achieved so much through our unity of purpose. It is *great* that we have had you go ahead of us – a leader goes ahead of the Led, and has no power whatsoever without the masses he/she leads.

6.3 **Potentially Culture-Specific Ugandan Strategies of Praise: a Manual Check for Seed Words in ICE-UG**

The manual search of the social letters and a selection of the face-to-face conversations (for details see Section 4) yielded seven one-word lexical items that recurrently performed praise on their own, with a total of 41 examples of praise. These were *awesome* (4), *proud* (11), *darling* (1), *admire* (3), *appreciate* (14), *gorgeous* (2), and *honoured* (1). Examples (10) to (11) illustrate these.

(10) Laban is an *awesome* guy.
(11) I hope you are living the life that seraphic beings live and keeping a smile on that gorgeous face, because I would not want you to ruin God's masterpiece and you know that's your pretty face.

Whilst almost all items occurred in variable phrases, the item proud was typically used in the expression I am/we are proud, which expressed praise very explicitly, as in example (12).

(12) I do not know whether you know how much prayers, proud confidence we offer to you. We are proud of you and happy for all your successes.

In the ICE-GB data, praise expressed via these lexical items is very rare, with only nine instances, and excludes several of the items, being restricted to two uses of proud (talking about the performance of soldiers rather than friends or relatives) and seven instances involving gorgeous.

Besides these one-word items, the manual search further revealed that a number of adverb-adverb and adverb-adjective 2-grams in which the first element was an intensifying adverb, either most, so, too, or very, recurred in particular collocations to perform praise. Table 3 summarises the various results.

Similar to what has been discussed in relation to Table 2, there is considerably more variation in the patterns found in ICE-UG as compared to those in ICE-GB. One 2-gram that stands out in both corpora is very good with 58 hits (39%) in ICE-UG and 57 hits (67%) in ICE-GB.

**Table 3** Adverb-adverb and adverb-adjective 2–grams performing praise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item and absolute frequencies (ICE-UG / ICE-GB)</th>
<th>Second words in ICE-UG (absolute frequencies)</th>
<th>Second words in ICE-GB (absolute frequencies)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>most + ADJ (9 / 4)</td>
<td>beautiful (7), perfect (2)</td>
<td>beautiful (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>so + ADJ (11 / 6)</td>
<td>amazing (2), beautiful (1), good (6), strong (2)</td>
<td>beautiful (4), good (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>so + ADJ (15 / 2)</td>
<td>very (1), well (12), perfectly (2)</td>
<td>very (1), well (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very + ADJ (34 / 13)</td>
<td>very (16), well (18)</td>
<td>very (9), much (1), well (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very + ADJ (80 / 60)</td>
<td>calm (5), efficient (1), fast (1), friendly (4), good (58), smart (4), delicious (5), organised (1), sharp (1)</td>
<td>efficient (3), good (57)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Since several of the collocation patterns involved reduplication (that is, *so so*, *too too*, and *very very*), a strategy found in many of the world’s languages, we then also performed a search that was geared at reduplication specifically. Table 4 presents the details.

Examples (13) and (14) are indicative of the use of reduplication.

(13) Students are so so serious.
(14) Lecturers are too too knowledgeable.

In sum, the various formal strategies employed to voice praise compare quantitatively as follows in Table 5. Note that the figures do not add to the total amount of requests found and the percentages do not add up to 100%, since, as explained above, many instances of praise involved a combination of the various strategies.

### Table 4 Absolute frequencies of selected reduplication patterns performing praise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reduplication pattern</th>
<th>Instances in ICE-UG</th>
<th>Instances in ICE-GB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>good good</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>so so</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0(^a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>too too(^b)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very very</td>
<td>16 (see table above)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) The form does occur in ICE-GB, but not as praise.

\(^b\) Importantly, *too* in Ugandan English, as in several other World Englishes, can replace *very*, as is the case here.

### Table 5 Praise strategies in ICE-UG and ICE-GB

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Instances in ICE-UG (n)</th>
<th>Use in total praise (%)</th>
<th>Instances in ICE-GB (n)</th>
<th>Use in total praise (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speech act verb</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjectives and adverbs</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture-specific strategies from ICE-UG</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-grams from ICE-UG</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduplication from ICE-UG</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total speech acts</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>124</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evidently, there is a tendency for UgE to employ more speech act verbs than BrE and also to use more adjectives and adverbs, often in combination, as in example (15). The BrE speakers and writers, on the other hand, have a higher preference for formulaic 2-grams.

(15) It is really a good good good play from uh team JKL Dolphins.

Besides the various differences documented as regards the forms preferred in ICE-UG vis-à-vis ICE-GB, we also observed crucial differences as regards the functions of praise in the two corpora. These will be discussed in Section 7, which looks at the contexts in which praise occurs and towards whom it is directed and why.

7 Functions of Praise in Ugandan English

Generally, praise in both UgE and BrE seems to be a more oral activity than a written one. In both corpora, praise was predominantly encountered in the spoken data. In the spoken text genres captured in ICE-UG, there are 272 versus only 37 instances in the written genres, and in ICE-GB, 112 instances in the spoken genres compare to just twelve in the written data. Table 6 summarises the differences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genres</th>
<th>ICE-UG</th>
<th>ICE-GB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spoken genres</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written genres</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This section investigates in which genres and situations speakers and writers give praise, whom or what they praise and for what reason they do so.

7.1 Praise across Text Genres

More precisely, there is one genre that stands out as regards both the raw amount of instances of praise and as regards its occurrence per 1,000 words. The latter was calculated to account for the fact that the individual text genres in ICE contain very different amounts of texts and, hence, words, as captured in Table 1. Figures 1 and 2 reveal that praise is particularly prevalent in category
S2A (unscripted monologues) but also in S1A (private dialogue), S1B (public dialogue), S2B (scripted and mixed monologue), and in W1B (non-printed correspondence, that is letters).

A closer look at the sub-genres comprised in these text categories reveals that praise is most likely to occur with spontaneous commentaries (which in ICE-UG were sports commentaries only, while three texts in ICE-GB are comments on a ceremony or parade), face-to-face conversations, and private letters.

There are two genres for which no instances of praise have been attested in the ICE-UG and ICE-GB data, i.e. academic publications and instructional writing. This is not a surprising finding and suggests that, as in many other societies, Ugandan scholars do not include praise in their writings, possible since they have been socialised into the norms of the dominant first language varieties, BrE and AmE, for academic writing or found that deviating from these norms results in negative reviewer comments. Similarly, instructions, either for administrative/regulatory matters or skills and hobbies, seemingly do not lend themselves to the speech act of praise. Most other written genres display rather low amounts of praise. Interestingly, popular science texts (category W2B) do make use of praise, as opposed to their more academic counterpart.

The category that in ICE-UG clearly stands out in the written genres is that of letters (WiB), with a total of 50 instances of praise, all of them in the social but none in the business letters. As such, praise in social letters is considerably more frequent than in the face-to-face conversations. This is even more pronounced when the figures are seen in relation to the size of the data, that is the number of words, in the various text categories. Figure 2 summarises the

![Figure 1](https://example.com/figure1.png)

**Figure 1** Absolute frequencies of praise per text genre
amount of praise per 1,000 words across the various text categories to make the figures better comparable.

When normalised, the comparison reveals that the difference between categories S2A and S1A becomes even more pronounced in the ICE-UG data. Also, category W1B, that is the letters, now feature more prominently as a genre supporting praise than in the comparison of the raw data in Figure 1 above, indicating that, outside the sports commentaries, praise may be used more often in indirect communication.

7.2 Targets of and Reasons for Praise

In a final step, we investigated our data as regards who or what were the targets of praise and what were the reasons for praise, that is, what were individuals, groups or objects praised for. In the ICE-UG data, praise was directed at

- **individuals:**
  - authors (1), babies (1), children (1), office personnel (2),
  - chess players (1), coaches (6), colleagues (2), daughters (3),
  - drug dealers (1), fathers (1), lecturers (1), missionaries (1),
  - mothers (1), football, basketball and cricket players (141),
  - pupils (3) scholars (3), superiors (1), supervisors (1), and
  - individuals who could not be easily characterised further (33),

- **groups of people:**
  - choirs (1), classes (1), and sports teams (37),

- **institutions:**
  - airline (1), consulate (1), cooking school (1), education system (1), government (1), tourism industry (1), UNDP (1), university (2),
objects: farm (1), food (16), lodge (3), make up items (3), goal (1), shot (3),
nation: clans (1), cultures (1), landscape (8), nation (1), peoples (2), tribes (4).

Examples (16) to (18) illustrate these uses:

(16) First and foremost Baganda are so so welcoming.
(17) I thank the beautiful choir that has animated us very well.
(18) The journey to Murchison does not prepare you enough for the awesomeness to expect.

In comparison, in the ICE-GB data, the spread of instances of praise seems somewhat different. Here the target of praise were

individuals: actors (7), child (1), cousins (1), framer (1), jockey (2), musician (1), players (8), singer (1), and individuals not further specified (16),
groups of people: orchestra (1), soldiers (3), sports teams (4),
animals: dog (2), horse (1), primates (1), owls (1),
institutions: police (1),
objects: book (7), caricature (1), concert venue (1), diagram (1), dinner/food (14), discs (1), drive (3), drug (1), email (1), essay (1), film (14), furniture (1), hotel (1), house (1), letter (1), machine (1), paint (1), painting (2), PASC (1), room (1), rugs (1), school (1), smelling salt (1), tent (1),
nation: landscape (4).

Table 7 allows for a comparison of the targets of praise.

Apparently, users of UgE, as captured in ICE-UG, overwhelmingly issue praise towards human beings, either individuals or groups of people. This makes up for 79 per cent of all instances of praise and compares to just 37 per cent in the ICE-GB data. The ICE-GB data, on the other hand, demonstrate a more varied use of praise. Whilst there is still a dominance of human targets, praise is most often directed at objects. Interestingly, in ICE-GB, there are two instances where animals are the target of praise, whilst ICE-UG contains no praise for animals at all. This, most likely, has to do with the fact that British society knows pets, which are uncommon in Uganda. There, animals are livestock or farm animals, which do not perform activities that deserve praise.
As varied as the targets are also the reasons for praise. Given the dominance of sports people as targets of praise in the corpora, particularly in ICE-UG, it does not come as a surprise to find game performance and general performance as the major reason for praise in the ICE-UG data (n=191). In ICE-UG, praise was given for

- **performance:** job performance (11), game performance (156), general performance as sports person (35), service (1), academic performance and achievement (13), awards and scholarships (2), assistance (2), executive performance (2), other performance (10), play performance (1), raising children (1), referee performance (1), school performance (1), stance taking (1), support (4), teaching (2), training (1), work (3),

- **skills & knowledge:** knowledge (1), public speaking skills (1),

- **character:** general character (9, individuals and peoples),

- **looks:** looks (4, persons), looks and strength (1),

- **qualities of objects:** campus life (1), campus facilities (1), colour (of food, 3), cut (of food, 3), flavour (1), food quality (7), taste of food (5),

- **properties of country:** beauty (7, of landscape), dance (1), game drives (1), game park (1).

### Table 7: Targets of praise (most frequent target highlighted in bold face)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target of praise</th>
<th>ICE-UG n</th>
<th>ICE-UG %</th>
<th>ICE-GB n</th>
<th>ICE-GB %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual humans</td>
<td>171 + 33</td>
<td>not further identified</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>22 + 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups of humans</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animals</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutions</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objects</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nation (incl. peoples and landscape)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some of these reasons are captured in examples (19) to (20):

(19) And actually I <,> people could talks about Mbarara <,> it produces very good doctors. (speaker talking about Mbarara University)
(20) Shaban Muhammed doing so perfectly for KCC.

All other reasons for praise seem to play a marginal role in ICE-UG. In the ICE-GB data, performance is drastically less often the reason for praise, with the qualities of various objects dominating. This is obviously due to the fact that objects are the main targets of praise in ICE-GB, as pointed out above. In detail, speakers and writers in the ICE-GB data give praise for

- **Performance:**
  - academic performance (1), acting (3), cabinet performance (1), efficiency (2), game performance (11), hosting (2), general performance (12), race performance (4), service (1), work (1),
- **Skills & Knowledge:**
  - composing (3), guard dog qualities (2), math skills (2), writing (1),
- **Character:**
  - general character (9),
- **Qualities of Objects:**
  - music in film (2), colour (1, of paint), food quality (1), book or film plot (18), room decor (1), painting details (2), effects (2), school grounds (1), quality of machine (17), taste of food (3),
- **Properties of Country:**
  - beauty (flora & fauna, 5).

### Table 8 Reasons for praise in ICE-UG and ICE-GB

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Praise</th>
<th>ICE-UG</th>
<th>ICE-UG</th>
<th>ICE-GB</th>
<th>ICE-GB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills &amp; knowledge</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looks</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualities of objects</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Properties of country</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear/other</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>309</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In both corpora, praise is also directed at the country, its landscape and peoples, although not frequently. When praise is given for individuals or groups of individuals, it is less often given for skills, knowledge, character and looks (in fact, it does not occur at all for the latter reason in ICE-GB).

8 Discussion and Conclusions

The analyses documented in Sections 6 and 7 indicate a number of differences between the forms and functions of praise in UgE vis-à-vis BrE, as captured in ICE-UG and ICE-GB. Overall, praise is much more prevalent in ICE-UG and also assumes a considerably larger variety of forms in this variety than it does in the BrE data. At the same time, targets and reasons for praise differ between the two corpora, with ICE-UG displaying praise mainly targeted at individuals or groups of human beings, typically for performance.

Some of the differences may be artefacts of the design of the two corpora. On the one hand, the data for ICE-GB was collected between 1990 and 1993, while that for ICE-UG dates from 2013 to 2022. Given the recent attention paid to self-praise on social media (see Section 3), we cannot rule out that praise has become more widely used in BrE today. Another difference lies in the nature of the face-to-face conversations. While ICE-GB captures fairly informal conversations between individuals, the S1A section of ICE-UG had to rely on interview data. While care was taken to reduce the formality of these conversations, they still reflect a more careful style than those in ICE-GB, potentially causing less praise in this category. Furthermore, as mentioned above, there is a slight difference in the spontaneous commentaries, collected in category S2A: in ICE-UG, all of these are sports commentaries, while in ICE-GB the category includes three texts that comment on a ceremony and parade, where praise is not expected.

The higher variability found to characterise the form that praise takes in the Ugandan data in comparison to the British data is also in contrast to the low amount of variability that Manes and Wolfson (1981) found in AmE complimenting patterns. The low variability in the ICE-GB data is indicative of the formulaicity that characterised BrE praise in the Early Modern English (EME) period (see Section 3).

Praise in UgE instead may be more varied due to the history of oral praise poetry and praise songs in the country’s linguacultures. In fact, praise often seems to be individually phrased, as is documented in examples (21) to (24) which were also found during our manual searches but do not fit in the categories discussed in Section 6 and have not been included in the counts for...
Sections 6 and 7. Possibly, the higher variability of praise in the UgE data is a result of the importance attributed to it, as visible in praise songs and praise poetry, and of the status attached to individuals who perform these genres skilfully.

(21) One of my personal joys is having the opportunity to see our children grow into a glitzy family whose genuine love exudes warmth.
(22) Thanks for producing the queen (referring to their daughter).
(23) You are the precious jewel that I will keep forever.
(24) The school I looked up to

Giving praise for mainly performance also seems to have roots in Ugandan cultural values. In the Ugandan data, with the second most of the hits coming from social letters, the main function of praise, outside of sports commentaries, seems to be a social one. Similar to what used to be the case in Anglo-Saxon society (cf. Kohnen, 2018), praise seems to be employed to strengthen an existing social affiliation when directed at the addressee. In Uganda, many ethnic groups are organised in clans, led by chiefs. In the pre-colonial era, these were responsible for ensuring rain, good crop planting and harvest, and for protecting people, livestock and land against others, for which chief praise was issued (cf. Gunderson, 2010: 17–18). As Kampf and Danziger (2018: 5) explain, “praise and compliments set models for civic conduct and thereby validate and reinforce shared cultural values and traditions.” In the context of Hebrew political discourse, they “maintain and establish solidarity” (2018: 19).

The status of chief is attained through distinguished service and ability (Nizza et al., 2011: 18). As Onyango (undated: 7) explains, hard work was always praised as this “was the means through which societies survived.” Its value has been appreciated in praise names, proverbs and songs. In fact, praise for hard work seems so deeply enshrined in Ugandan linguacultures that there even exists a greeting *Well done!*, which is a calque of the first language *apwoyo* (in Acholi), *gyebaleko* (in Luganda), *ogyebale* (in Runyoro, Rutooro and Lusoga). As Isingoma (2016: 167) explains, this phrase typically precedes asking how the addressee is, “even when the speaker is actually doing nothing at the time,” since “[t]he speaker assumes that the addressee must have done/be doing something productive.” Given the prevalence of praise poetry and songs across the Bantu-speaking area, there is some likelihood that praise may be an “African speech act” (see Meierkord, in preparation), a notion that requires future research to further investigate the link between speech acts, society and (lingua)cultures.
References


Biographical Note

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