

Illocutionary Acts as Tools of Resistance Against Mainstream Hegemony in Song Lyrics of Nirvana's *Come as You Are* and *You Know You're Right*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the illocutionary acts present in the lyrics of Nirvana's *Come as You Are* and *You Know You're Right*, focusing on the songwriter's intentions and the communicative functions of each speech act. Using Searle's (1969) theory of illocutionary act types and Leech's (1983) framework of illocutionary functions, the research identifies and classifies 31 non-repeated lyric lines from these songs. A qualitative approach analyzes how each line performs an act such as stating, inviting, expressing, or promising, and how it functions socially and emotionally through collaborative, conflictive, competitive, or convivial purposes. Findings reveal that in *Come as You Are*, directive acts are most frequent, often used to invite or suggest actions, with collaborative functions aiming for mutual understanding. In contrast, *You Know You're Right* employs representative and commissive acts not only to describe emotional withdrawal, but as linguistic mechanisms to resist and detach from dominant societal pressures. While collaborative functions foster a shared space for marginalized identities, the prominent conflictive functions elevate Cobain's internal struggles into a broader critique of social inequality, highlighting the stark friction between the vulnerable minority and the imposing expectations of the mainstream majority. This research concluded that these pragmatic elements, especially the conflictive and withdrawing acts, function as a powerful tool of symbolic resistance. These elements represent the voice of a marginalised subculture minority expressing their alienation and defiance against the expectations of the dominant, mainstream majority.

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INTRODUCTION

The grunge movement, which emerged in the early 1990s under the influence of Nirvana and other notable bands, represented more than just a musical innovation and became a significant cultural voice for marginalised youth subcultures (Moore, 2020). During a period characterised by the dominance of mainstream consumerism and social conformity, Nirvana constituted a minority demographic that experienced a deep sense of alienation from the normative expectations of the majority. The music of the group was not exclusively a form of entertainment, but rather a critical site at which symbolic resistance against systemic uniformity and societal indifferences could be practised (Clark, 2023). From this view, Kurt Cobain's songwriting can be regarded as a significant artefact of this cultural struggle, capturing the raw frustration of a demographic grappling with social inequality and the marginalisation of alternative identities.

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Nirvana was a highly influential band in the grunge movement, known for blending punk energy with heavy metal sounds and giving voice to a generation's feelings of alienation, defiance, and disillusionment. Haslam (2023) notes that their music pushed back against consumerism and societal conformity. Their 1991 album *Nevermind* brought grunge into mainstream culture. *Come as You Are* explores themes of existential uncertainty, self-acceptance, and ambiguous relationships. The line "I don't have a gun" became particularly haunting after Kurt Cobain's tragic suicide with a shotgun, creating a stark contrast between the song's message and his real-life end. *You Know You're Right*, released posthumously in 2002, offers a raw portrayal of Cobain's inner confusion. Both songs were written by Kurt Cobain, whose songwriting captured raw emotion and internal conflict.

From a critical pragmatic perspective, these lyrics are not just expressions of personal alienation, but active linguistic negotiations of power. By analysing the illocutionary acts within Cobain's lyrics, this study explores how language is strategically employed by a marginalised voice to challenge dominant social paradigms. The communicative and functional roles of these minority listeners – whether directive, representative, or commissive – are mechanisms of defiance, emotional detachment, or solidarity. This study therefore examines the pragmatic dimensions of Nirvana's songs, with a view to deriving insights into how linguistic choices reflect and respond to broader issues of diversity, social inequality, and the continuous friction between minority subcultures and the mainstream majority.

Pragmatics, a branch of linguistics, focuses on how language is used in context to convey meaning beyond the literal interpretation of words. According to Yule (1996), pragmatics is the study of speaker meaning, which involves analyzing how speakers use language to achieve communicative goals based on context. It considers aspects like speaker intention, the relationship between communicators, cultural rules, and the situation. Leech (1983) states that pragmatics deals with language use within a given communicative context, focusing on what a speaker truly means and the social relationship between participants in communication. This field explores deeper meanings beyond what is literally expressed through different social contexts.

John Searle, a prominent philosopher of language, significantly contributed to speech act theory, suggesting that language is an organized, rule-guided system of behavior. He stated that speaking a language involves engaging in a rule-governed form of behavior (Searle, 1969: 12). Austin (1962) proposed three main types of speech acts: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. A locutionary act is the production of meaningful sounds or words forming a recognizable sentence. An illocutionary act focuses on the speaker's intention or purpose behind the utterance, such as making a statement, giving an order, asking a question, or making a promise. The perlocutionary act defines the impact an utterance has on the listener, whether intended or not, like inspiring, terrifying, or persuading.

Various previous studies have demonstrated that the analysis of illocutionary speech acts not only examines communicative functions but also reveals the dynamics of power relations and social critique in society. For example, directive speech acts can reflect unequal power relations between a superior group (consumers) and a subordinate group (drivers) in everyday social interactions (Risnawati et al., 2025). In the realm of public discourse, representative and expressive speech acts are actively used as tools to voice criticism of social inequality and to confirm the truth of a claim, as seen in public criticism of government authorities (Rangkuti & Maulida, 2023), as well as in debates on social class justice regarding the "privilege of poverty" on social media (Oktaviani & Nur, 2022). Furthermore, expressive

speech acts in the form of criticism and sarcasm have also proven effective as social satire to respond to social realities through digital comics (Rahmatika, 2024). This body of research confirms that a pragmatic approach is a valid analytical tool for examining how language is used to negotiate social hierarchies, status, and power.

In the context of art and music, song lyrics in particular have been studied as a medium of resistance and cultural framing regarding issues of inequality. Research by Carbone and Mijs (2022) reveals that popular music in societies with high levels of inequality tends to frame such inequalities as structural problems through its lyrics, rather than promoting a meritocratic narrative. More specifically, Searle's speech act analysis has also been adapted by Paundrianagari and Arifin (2025) to explore the lyrics of the song "Fateh," where the representative and directive speech acts in the song were found to function as a medium for social criticism of oligarchy as well as a tool for building collective resistance solidarity. These previous studies share a very strong common thread and provide the theoretical foundation for the objectives of this research. Building on this research trajectory, this study analyzes the lyrics of Nirvana's *Come As You Are* and *You Know You're Right* to demonstrate how illocutionary acts function as symbolic resistance. The study adopts Searle's (1969) theory of illocutionary acts to explain the purpose of the lyrics and Leech's (1983) theory of illocutionary functions to explain how these acts affect relevant functions.

METHOD

This research utilizes a qualitative method to discuss the meaning and role of language in song lyrics. Creswell (2009) states that qualitative research aims to understand how people interpret, understand, and find meaning in their experiences through rich and detailed descriptions rather than numbers. This study provides a structured look at how Nirvana's lyrics elicit a response and estimates the frequency and distribution of illocutionary acts in the two songs.

Data collection involved the documentary method, examining and interpreting existing texts and audio. As Creswell (2009) points out, qualitative researchers often use documents to understand participants' language and the meaning within those materials. The main data came from the lyrics of *Come as You Are* and *You Know You're Right*. *Come As You Are* was selected because it captures the peak of the band's collision with global mainstream popularity and societal expectations. In contrast, *You Know You're Right*, as the band's final recorded song, provides a critical comparative data point that encapsulates ultimate emotional withdrawal and resistance. downloaded from Genius.com, a popular website known for providing verified and annotated song lyrics. The researcher also listened to official recordings on Spotify to ensure accuracy, noting and correcting any differences, repeated lines, or missing words. A total of 31 collected lyric lines were analyzed: 11 from *Come as You Are* and 19 from *You Know You're Right*.

Data processing and analysis involved closely examining the lyrics, separating them into individual lines. The researcher then identified and marked all illocutionary acts using Searle's (1969) classification, which includes assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives. Leech's (1983) model of illocutionary functions was applied to understand the social and communicative goals behind each act. This helped determine if a line was an assertion, a request, an expression of emotion, or another speech act type. The lyrics were reviewed multiple times to ensure consistent understanding. The data is labeled using S.1 for

Come as You Are and S.2 for *You Know You're Right*, with the number after each label indicating the specific line being analyzed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This chapter presents the study's results, focusing on the classification and functions of illocutionary acts in the selected song lyrics. The analysis includes a detailed breakdown of each type of illocutionary act and its communicative function, followed by a discussion of how the type relates to its intended meaning.

From Nirvana's songs *Come As You Are* and *You Know You're Right*, 31 data points are selected. The analysis identified four types of illocutionary acts based on Searle's (1969) classification: representative, directive, commissive, and expressive. Declarative illocutionary acts are not found, meaning there were no utterances that changed social reality within an institutional context. The analysis also reveal four distinct functions of illocutionary acts, categorized following Leech's (1983) framework: collaborative, competitive, convivial, and conflictive. These functions show how the lyrics convey information, express emotions, assert intentions, or suggest actions.

Types of Illocutionary Acts

In *Come As You Are*, directive acts are the most common, with 6 instances (50%). This is followed by representative acts with 4 instances (33%), and both commissive and expressive acts appearing once each (8%). In "*You Know You're Right*," representative acts are the most frequent, totalling 10 instances (53%). Commissive acts occurred 6 times (32%), expressive acts appeared 2 times (10%), and directive acts only once (5%). These findings indicate that *Come As You Are* primarily employs directive acts to engage the listener, while *You Know You're Right* relies more on representative and commissive acts to describe the speaker's personal state and emotional reality, that can be seen at Table 1 below

Table 1 Frequency and Distribution of Illocutionary Acts in Nirvana's Lyrics

Types of Illocutionary Acts (Searle, 1969)	<i>Come As You Are</i>	<i>You Know You're Right</i>
Directive	6 (50 %)	1 (5%)
Representative	4 (33%)	10 (53%)
Commissive	1 (8%)	6 (32%)
Expressive	1 (8%)	2 (10%)
Total	12 (100%)	19 (100%)

Functions of Illocutionary Acts

In *Come As You Are*, the most common function is collaborative, appearing in 4 lines (33%). Competitive and convivial functions each occur in 3 lines (25%), while the conflictive function appears in 2 lines (17%). Similarly, in *You Know You're Right*, the collaborative function is most dominant, with 11 lines (58%). The conflictive function follows with 6 lines (32%), and competitive and convivial functions each appear once (5%). Overall, the collaborative function is the most common in both songs, demonstrating that Nirvana's lyrics primarily aim to convey personal views and experiences in a way that supports

communication and reflection. This section explains the types of illocutionary acts and their functions in Nirvana's *Come As You Are* and *You Know You're Right*. Each lyric line is examined to identify how the act type connects with its function.

The Types and the Functions of Illocutionary Acts in Come as You Are

Stating: Lines (S.1.3) "As a friend, as a friend" and (S.1.4) "As an old enemy" are representative acts, specifically the act of stating. According to Searle (1969), representative acts are used when the speaker says something they believe to be true about the world. These lines also show a collaborative function because the speaker shares their perspective without trying to control or oppose the listener. According to Leech (1983), collaborative functions are used to provide information that encourages mutual understanding.

Describing: Line (S.1.13) "As a trend, as a friend" depicts someone through vivid and conflicting images. This line reflects the feeling of being viewed not for who you truly are, but for how you appear or perform in public. The line "As a trend, as a friend" functions collaboratively, sharing an observation about shifting identity roles.

Informing: Line (S.1.20) "No, I don't have a gun" serves as an informing act. According to Searle (1969), informing occurs when someone shares factual information. The function of this line is conflictive because, although the speaker tries to offer reassurance, the choice of strong words and the emotional context make the statement feel unsettling.

Inviting: Lines (S.1.1) "Come as you are, as you were", (S.1.2) "As I want you to be", and (S.1.12) "Come doused in mud, soaked in bleach" are examples of inviting directive acts. According to Searle (1969), directives are speech acts where the speaker wants the listener to do something. The line "Come as you are, as you were" functions convivially because the speaker invites the listener to come freely. "Come doused in mud, soaked in bleach" can also be seen as having a convivial function. In contrast, "As I want you to be" reflects a competitive function, as it shows the speaker's desire that may limit the listener's freedom.

Suggesting: Lines (S.1.5) "Take your time, hurry up", (S.1.6) "Choice is yours, don't be late", and (S.1.7) "Take a rest as a friend" are examples of suggestions, which are a type of directive act. According to Searle (1969), directive acts are used when the speaker wants the listener to do something. The lines "Take your time, hurry up" and "Choice is yours, don't be late" both function as competitive acts.

Promising (Assuring): Line (S.1.19) "And I swear that I don't have a gun" also fits the commissive act type, where the speaker makes a promise or reassurance. The function of this line is conflictive because, although the speaker tries to offer reassurance, the choice of strong words and the emotional context of the song make the statement feel unsettling. According to Leech (1983), conflictive acts often oppose social harmony.

Expressing emotion: The repeated word (S.1.9-11) "Memoria" is an expressive act. Searle (1969) describes expressive acts as ways of showing psychological states. The function of this line is collaborative because the speaker does not command or accuse but instead shares an emotional experience. According to Leech (1983), collaborative acts aim to share thoughts or feelings in a way that maintains social balance.

In *Come As You Are*, the most common type of illocutionary act found is the directive act. According to Searle (1969), directive acts are speech acts used by the speaker to get the listener to do something. This may include acts such as inviting, suggesting, commanding, or warning. In the lyrics, Cobain performs this through several lines, most notably "Come as you are, as you were". This line serves as an invitation that encourages the listener to come

just as they are. The directive here functions convivially, as described by Leech (1983), because it reflects politeness and aims to build social harmony. However, this character shifts in the line "As I want you to be," which, although still directive, carries a competitive function. The speaker here imposes a standard or expectation, which subtly pressures the listener to conform to how the speaker desires them to be. This push and pull between freedom and expectation mirrors Cobain's own life. As Azerrad (1993) explains, he struggled to stay true to himself while being shaped by the media and his fans. This inner conflict shines through in these lyrics, where the directive speech act highlights both a longing for honesty and the heavy burden of outside influence. Other directive lines, such as "Take your time, hurry up" and "Choice is yours, don't be late," also demonstrate Cobain's conflicted approach.

The second most frequent type in "Come As You Are" is the representative act, which involves stating or describing something the speaker believes to be true. According to Searle (1969), representative acts reflect the speaker's commitment to a particular reality or proposition. In the lines "As a friend, as a friend" and "As an old enemy," Cobain uses direct labeling of social roles. These lines also serve a collaborative function, as they share Cobain's personal perspective rather than imposing a judgment on the listener. Cobain confirmed this complexity in his interview: "The lines in the song are contradictory. One after another, they're kind of a rebuttal of each line. It's kind of confusing, I guess. It's just about people and what they're expected to act like" (Thomas, 1992). Another representative act appears in the line "As a trend, as a friend," where Cobain again states two identities. This line also functions collaboratively because it shares Cobain's view openly, which allows listeners to consider the difference between how someone is seen and who they are.

A commissive act also appears in *Come As You Are*, particularly in the line "I swear that I don't have a gun". According to Searle (1969), commissive acts are speech acts in which the speaker commits to a future action or behavior. On the surface, this line seems to have a convivial function, which, as Leech (1983) explains, aims to create or maintain social harmony. However, the meaning of this line becomes more complex when considered in the context of Kurt Cobain's struggles and eventual suicide. Cobain stated, "It's not a death threat, it's just saying I don't want to be perceived that way" (Azzerad, 1993). Because of this deeper emotional context, the line can also be understood as having a conflictive function.

The diversity of communicative functions, such as collaborative, convivial, competitive, and conflictual, is highly relevant to the objectives of this study because it directly illustrates how power negotiations operate at the linguistic level. Collaborative and convivial functions in the lyrics are used to build solidarity and offer a space of acceptance for subcultural minority groups who feel alienated (Bonsu, 2023; Uwen & Ekpe, 2023). At the same time, however, the emergence of competitive functions (such as the attempt to restrict freedom in the phrase "As I want you to be") and conflictive functions (in the emotional denial "No, I don't have a gun") reflects power imbalances and constant social pressure. Through the interplay of these functions, the song's lyrics do more than simply record personal feelings; they map out the structural clash between marginalized individuals defending their autonomy against the repression of mainstream hegemony.

Among all these data, directive illocutionary acts (inviting and suggesting) are the most significant in constructing a narrative of resistance. Cobain strategically chooses directive speech acts not to position himself as a traditional authority figure, but as an instrument of subversion. By issuing commands that are inherently contradictory, such as "Take your time, hurry up" and "Choice is yours, don't be late", the writer deliberately highlights the

absurdity and hypocrisy of the majority society's expectations. Cobain uses these paradoxical directives to expose the coercion of social norms, highlighting the frustration of minorities who are constantly dictated to by confusing rules, while challenging listeners to question the legitimacy of the social system itself.

Finally, an expressive act appears in the repeated word "Memoria". While expressive acts typically involve showing the speaker's emotional state, in this case, the word can also be interpreted as an expression of a concept that the speaker finds meaningful. The line functions collaboratively because it invites the listener to connect with a shared human experience and recall something important or painful, without demanding a specific interpretation.

The Types and the Functions of Illocutionary Acts in You Know You're Right

Describing: Lines (S.2.8) "You won't be afraid of fear", (S.2.9) "No thought was put into this", (S.2.10) "And always knew it would come to this", (S.2.11) "Things have never been so swell", (S.2.12) "I have never failed to fail", (S.2.17) "I no longer have to hide", (S.2.19) "Steaming soup against her mouth", (S.2.20) "Nothing really bothers her", and (S.2.21) "She just wants to love himself" are examples of representative illocutionary acts. According to Searle (1969), representative acts include asserting, stating, describing, or reporting, where the speaker commits to the truth of a proposition. The function of these lines is collaborative because the speaker is sharing thoughts and personal reflections without trying to control or pressure the listener. According to Leech (1983), collaborative acts are used to provide information or convey thoughts sincerely.

Asserting: Line (S.2.14) "You know you're right" is a strong representative act with an assertive and slightly defensive textual character. The function of the line "You know you're right" is conflictive because it reinforces the speaker's assertion in a way that may confront or dismiss the listener's perspective. According to Leech (1983), conflictive illocutionary acts include speech that may cause disagreement or tension.

Suggesting: (S.2.18) "Let's talk about someone else" is a directive illocutionary act, specifically suggesting a topic shift. According to Searle (1969), directives are attempts to get the listener to do something. The line "Let's talk about someone else" serves a competitive function because it focuses on controlling the conversation rather than fostering closeness. According to Leech (1983), competitive acts are used when the speaker aims to achieve their own goal, even if it means sacrificing politeness.

Promising (Assuring): Line (S.2.1) "I will never bother you" is a clear example of a commissive illocutionary act, specifically the act of assuring. According to Searle (1969), commissive acts include promises, refusals, threats, or offers. The line "I will never bother you" has a convivial function because it aims to keep or restore social harmony. Leech (1983) explains that convivial acts include offers, invitations, or reassurances that help maintain good relations.

Promising (Rejecting Commitment): Lines (S.2.2) "I will never promise to", (S.2.3) "I will never follow you", (S.2.5) "Never speak a word again", (S.2.6) "I will crawl away for good", and (S.2.7) "I will move away from here" are also examples of commissive acts, but they take on a negative and more conflictive form. As Searle (1969) explains, commissives can involve either doing something or refusing to do it. The lines (S.2.2-3) to (S.2.5-7) express a conflictive function because they break social harmony by showing rejection and emotional distance. According to Leech (1983), conflictive acts challenge or disrupt relationships.

Expressing Emotion: Lines (S.2.16) "I'm so warm and calm inside" and (S.2.13) "Pain, pain, pain" are an expressive act; they show the speaker's psychological state. According to Searle (1969), expressive acts communicate feelings rather than facts. The lines "I'm so warm and calm inside" and "Pain, pain, pain" serve a collaborative function because they express the speaker's feelings without blaming or commanding. According to Leech (1983), collaborative acts aim to foster understanding.

In *You Know You're Right*, the most dominant type of illocutionary act is the representative act. According to Searle (1969), representative acts commit the speaker to the truth of a proposition and include asserting, describing, and stating. The line "You know you're right," which is repeated throughout the song, is a clear example of an assertive representative act. The speaker strongly asserts a belief that leaves no room for disagreement, which gives the utterance a conflictive function. As Leech (1983) explains, conflictive functions occur when the speaker's intention challenges social harmony or creates emotional tension. Other representative lines, such as "I have never failed to fail" and "Things have never been so swell," function collaboratively, as they are not delivered with force or judgment but rather as insights into the speaker's experience.

The second most frequent illocutionary act found in *You Know You're Right* is the commissive act. For example, in the line "I will never bother you," the speaker makes a promise not to disturb or interfere with the listener. This can be seen as a convivial act, which, according to Leech (1983), is a type of speech act that aims to maintain social harmony by being polite and considerate. However, other commissive lines such as "I will never promise to," "I will crawl away for good," and "I will move away from here" reflect a conflictive function. These are rejecting or withdrawing commitments, where the speaker's future actions involve separation or emotional detachment. This aligns with Cobain's personality and his discomfort with fame and human connection.

The only directive act found in "You Know You're Right" is in the line "Let's talk about someone else". This utterance is a suggestion, where the speaker directs the conversation away from himself. It functions competitively, meaning the speaker's goal may conflict with social norms or expectations. Leech (1983) states that competitive functions occur when the speaker's intention competes with politeness or empathy.

Expressive acts also appear in this song, as seen in the lines "Pain" and "I'm so warm and calm inside". Both lines function collaboratively, sharing the speaker's emotions without placing pressure on the listener. Cobain's interview with Rickey & Carr (1993) supports the depth behind these lyrics: "I was in pain for so long that I didn't care if I was in a band, I didn't care if I was alive... it had been going on and building up for so many years that I was suicidal". Declarative acts are not found in either song. As defined by Searle (1969), declaratives require institutional authority to bring about a change in the external world. Since Cobain's lyrics are personal and introspective, they do not involve institutional power or formal declarations.

The collaborative function accompanying depressive statements serves as an outlet for emotional expression, but as a strategy to formulate an alternative reality for subjects marginalized by mainstream hegemony. On the contrary, the emergence of conflict-oriented and competitive functions, evident in lyrics such as "You Know You're Right" or "Let's Talk About Someone Another", highlights a tangible clash of symbolic power. The interplay of these functions demonstrates that the language employed seeks no resolution, instead, it

responds to the majority's normative expectations with cynicism and defensiveness, aiming to preserve a dwindling sense of individual autonomy.

Based on this lyrical analysis, the commissive illocutionary act, specifically the variant involving a refusal to commit, emerges as the most ideologically significant type for this study. Although representative acts dominate quantitatively, Cobain deliberately employs negative commissive acts (such as "I will never follow you" and "I will crawl away forever") as a definitive means of breaking the cycle of social domination. The songwriter adopts this approach not to forge promises that foster harmony, but to declare an absolute withdrawal from an oppressive social system. Through these confrontational commissive acts, the minority voice reclaims power in the most radical manner possible: by refusing to participate and consciously withdrawing consent from the majority's narrative.

The Relation between The Types and The Functions of Illocutionary Acts

The analysis reveals that *Come As You Are* primarily features directive acts, where Cobain often invites, suggests, or guides the listener's actions through language. On the other hand, *You Know You're Right* is characterized more by representative acts, in which Cobain asserts or describes his beliefs and personal reality. When looking at both songs together, representative acts appear most frequently, followed by commissive, directive, and expressive acts. These types of speech acts reflect Cobain's overall tendency to use language not just to communicate ideas, but to state what he perceives as true about himself and his world. Many of these acts function collaboratively, which means they are used to share thoughts and experiences without demanding agreement or obedience. Others, however, serve conflictive purposes, which shows emotional resistance, rejection, or inner struggle. Cobain's use of language throughout his lyrics suggests a desire for honesty over harmony. In his 1992 interview, he said, "My songs have always been frustrating themes, relationships that I've had" (Kelly, 1992), indicating that his lyrics were deeply rooted in personal and emotional experiences. His words often reflect his discomfort with societal expectations and his difficulty in maintaining personal relationships. Rather than writing to entertain or satisfy an audience, Cobain used illocutionary acts as a tool to process complex emotions, present his inner reality, and navigate the space between vulnerability and self-protection.

In *Come As You Are*, the author employs directive acts not to establish traditional authority, but to expose and critique the contradictions inherent in mainstream societal expectations. The songwriter's primary linguistic strategy involves the use of conflicting imperatives within the same utterance. For instance, the lines "Take your time, hurry up" and "Choice is yours, don't be late" serve as a direct mockery of the illusion of free will within a highly structured, consumerist society. By juxtaposing words that denote autonomy and relaxation ("Take your time," "Choice is yours") with strict, anxiety-inducing temporal demands ("hurry up," "don't be late"), the directives create a deliberate sense of cognitive dissonance and paralysis. The specific lexical choices mirror the hypocritical demands that mainstream culture imposes on minority subcultures: the pressure to be authentic while simultaneously conforming to rigid standards. Consequently, these directives do not function to guide the listener's actions; rather, they operate as a subversive mechanism. By adopting and immediately contradicting the authoritative voice of societal norms, the songwriter effectively dismantles the symbolic power of those expectations, transforming a simple command into a profound act of resistance.

By juxtaposing words that denote autonomy and relaxation "Take your time," "Choice is yours" with strict, anxiety-inducing temporal demands "hurry up," "don't be late", the directives create a deliberate sense of cognitive dissonance and paralysis. The specific lexical choices mirror the hypocritical demands that mainstream culture imposes on minority subcultures: the pressure to be authentic while simultaneously conforming to rigid standards. Therefore, these directives do not function to guide the listener's actions; rather, they operate as a subversive mechanism. By adopting and immediately contradicting the authoritative voice of societal norms, the songwriter effectively dismantles the symbolic power of those expectations, transforming a simple command into a profound act of resistance.

While directives are used to expose external societal pressures, representative acts in Cobain's lyrics function as a strategic defense mechanism to assert a marginalized reality against dominant narratives. In *You Know You're Right*, the songwriter heavily relies on representative acts to describe a state of emotional withdrawal and internal struggle. Lines such as "I have never failed to fail" and "Things have never been so swell" demonstrate a clear pattern of utilizing severe self-deprecation and sarcasm to reject the mainstream ideology of success and compulsory happiness.

The specific phrase "failed to fail" is a highly calculated lexical strategy. It reclaims 'failure' not as a societal deficit, but as an absolute, authentic state of being, thereby rejecting the normative expectations of progress and achievement. Furthermore, in *Come As You Are*, the representative act of labeling someone "As a trend, as a friend" critically examines the commodification of identity. By stating these observations as factual propositions, Cobain formally detaches his inner reality from the superficiality of public performance. The strategy employed through these representative acts is one of absolute honesty over harmony; the songwriter commits to uncomfortable truths, using language to build a protective boundary around the alienated self while simultaneously establishing a shared reality for the disenfranchised minority.

Discussion

This study aims to uncover the hidden messages and power dynamics in the lyrics of Nirvana's songs *Come As You Are* and *You Know You're Right* through speech act analysis. The main findings show that Kurt Cobain strategically used linguistic tools to reject mainstream social expectations and give voice to the alienation of subcultural groups. The lyrics are dominated by directive, representative, and commissive illocutionary acts that serve dual functions. Language is used to build solidarity among marginalized minority groups, while simultaneously offering sharp resistance to the hegemony and uniformity of mainstream society.

The most notable finding from the song *Come As You Are* is the high frequency of contradictory directive speech acts. Instead of providing clear instructions, the songwriter juxtaposes contradictory commands, such as telling listeners to relax while simultaneously demanding that they hurry. This linguistic strategy goes beyond ordinary wordplay and transforms into a sharp critique of paradoxical social pressures. The lyrics reflect the absurdity of mainstream societal demands, which often force individuals to appear authentic while simultaneously requiring compliance with rigid norms.

In contrast, the song *You Know You're Right* exhibits a different pattern through the dominance of negative representative and commissive speech acts. The statements in this

song frequently convey a depressive and cynical tone. The choice of phrases that actively withdraw from social commitments indicates a form of psychological protection. By openly declaring failure or refusing to participate in the system, the subject revokes their consent to the dominant group's rules of the game. This demonstrates that emotional withdrawal can serve as a powerful instrument of resistance when direct confrontation is no longer possible.

From a communicative function perspective, the shift between collaborative and conflictual interactions in both songs carries profound meaning. The collaborative function is frequently employed to share vulnerability, creating a safe space free from judgment for listeners who feel alienated. On the other hand, the conflictual function is deliberately invoked when the subject directly confronts the values of authority. The clash between these two functions reflects the psychological reality of minority groups who must constantly navigate the narrow space between the need for peer acceptance and the necessity to resist systemic oppression.

The focus of this study becomes increasingly relevant when considered alongside previous pragmatic studies on power negotiations and social criticism. Risnawati et al. (2025) found that directive speech acts accurately reflect hierarchical imbalances between superiors and subordinates in interactions within online transportation apps. Meanwhile, Rangkuti and Maulida (2023) as well as Rahmatika (2024) highlight how representative and expressive speech acts are highly effective when used as satire or open criticism of authority. In line with these findings, this study confirms that speech acts serve as a tool for negotiating social status, persistently employed by subordinates to challenge structural domination.

In the realm of art and music, this work expands upon the insights previously established by Carbone and Mijs (2022) regarding popular music as a medium for framing issues of inequality. More specifically, this approach echoes the research by Paundrianagari and Arifin (2025), which demonstrates that song lyrics can function as weapons of social criticism and as shapers of collective solidarity. The novelty of this study lies in the application of a critical sociopragmatic framework to the *grunge* genre. This research reinforces the argument that lyrics which appear highly personal and depressive actually harbor strong political content as a voice of resistance from a minority subculture.

Theoretically, these findings expand the boundaries of pragmatics by demonstrating that alternative song lyrics can function as a complex arena for power negotiations, no less significant than speech discourse or formal interactions. Practically, this understanding provides crucial insights for educators, sociologists, and cultural practitioners in interpreting the artistic works of marginalized groups. Expressions of anger, sarcasm, or withdrawal in popular cultural texts should not be viewed as signs of deviant individual pathology. These manifestations must be understood as logical and strategic responses to inequality and the intense pressure of social expectations.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the illocutionary acts within Nirvana's *Come As You Are* and *You Know You're Right* transcend mere emotional expression, functioning instead as strategic linguistic tools for symbolic resistance. Rather than simply directing listeners or stating facts, Kurt Cobain utilized speech acts to navigate the intense friction between a marginalized subculture and the normative expectations of mainstream society. Specifically, while *Come As You Are* weaponizes paradoxical directive acts to expose the contradictions of societal demands, *You Know You're Right* relies heavily on representative and commissive acts to

formalize a radical emotional withdrawal. Across both tracks, the dominance of collaborative functions serves not to control, but to forge solidarity among alienated listeners, creating a shared alternative reality free from hegemonic pressure.

The broader significance of these findings lies in bridging structural pragmatics with critical social analysis. By applying Searle's and Leech's frameworks to alternative rock lyrics, this research redefines grunge music as an active site of power negotiation. It reveals how seemingly introspective or depressive language operates as a calculated rejection of societal conformity. This challenges the assumption that popular music lyrics are purely aesthetic or commercially driven, positioning them instead as vital sociolinguistic artifacts that document the ongoing struggle for identity, equality, and autonomy within a rigid social order.

Despite these insights, this study is constrained by its exclusive focus on textual analysis, which inherently omits the pragmatic force conveyed through Cobain's vocal delivery, aggressive instrumentation, and live performance contexts. Future research should adopt a multimodal pragmatic approach to examine how auditory and performative elements interact with textual speech acts to amplify social critique. Additionally, investigating the perlocutionary effects of these lyrics through audience reception studies could illuminate how minority subcultures interpret and act upon these messages. Ultimately, this research affirms that Nirvana's lyrical legacy is not defined solely by its musicality, but by its enduring communicative power to articulate defiance and provide an uncompromising voice for the profoundly alienated.

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