Critical Strategies Featured on the "Arab Idol" and "American Idol" Shows

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Abstract—This study assesses the strategies with which judges on the "Arab Idol" and "American Idol" shows offer criticism to contestants with a particular focus on the differences between male and female judges. To ensure a comprehensive behavioral examination, this study looks at 60 comments stemming from the audition phase of each program, resulting in a total of 120 comments. This study employs Nguyen's (2005) coding scheme of criticism as the foundation of its analysis. The results show that female judges on both the Arab and American shows use more indirect strategies in their criticisms while male judges prefer direct strategies. Additionally, the results indicate that the direct strategies typically entail the 'negative evaluation and identification of a problem,' while the indirect strategies often provide 'advice about change and suggestions for change.'

Index Terms—criticism, criticism strategies, speech acts theory, Arab Idol show, American Idol show

I. INTRODUCTION

Speech act theory plays a crucial role in the field of pragmatics. This paper consists of a sociopragmatic study of the critical speech acts used across Arabic-speaking and English-speaking cultures. According to Yule (1996, p. 3), pragmatics is the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker and interpreted by a listener. The study of speech acts hinges upon an understanding of pragmatics, which studies meaning in use and in context (Thomas, 1995). In a sense, pragmatics is concerned with what a speaker means to imply and what a listener infers based on various factors, such as situational context, the individuals' mental states, and the preceding dialogue, among others.

Speakers use language to perform various speech acts, ranging from promising and complimenting to threatening and criticizing. Of course, criticizing is one function that judges of all varieties need to make use of, including the judges on the "Arab Idol" and "American Idol". Nguyen (2013, p. 106) defines criticism as a speech act that entails a negative evaluation of the hearer's actions or choices, for which they may be held responsible, with the aim of expressing dissatisfaction or influencing the hearer's future behavior in pursuit of improvement, as perceived by the speaker. Robinson et al. (1987, p. 57) propose that criticism involves "a negative evaluation of a person or an act for which he or she is deemed responsible." They also suggest that effective criticism includes a positive message and that critics should use positive language.

In summary, speakers use criticism to provide feedback to the hearer with the hope that they will improve in the future. This study explores cultural variations in male and female judges' approaches to criticism across Arabic-speaking and English-speaking cultures. More specifically, it investigates Arab Idol and American Idol judges' comments on contestants' singing performances with a focus on their critical elements.

II. RESEARCH SUMMARY

This study assesses the critical strategies adopted by the judges on the "Arab Idol" and "American Idol" with a particular focus on gender as an influential variable. This research incorporates comparative, quantitative, and qualitative elements. First, it compares and contrasts two different singing programs as well as the approaches taken by male and female judges. Second, it collects data on the frequencies and proportions of various critical strategies, enabling proper quantitative analysis criticism strategies. Third, it qualitatively codes the judges' comments in line with Nguyen's (2005) coding scheme of criticism.

To ensure a comprehensive examination of the judges' critical strategies, this study considers 60 comments from Arab male and female judges and 60 comments from American male and female judges. Of course, to avoid bias, it also ensures an equal number of comments from male and female judges. Each comment consists of one piece of feedback provided by a judge to a contestant about their performance, appearance, or stage presence.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Studies on Arab Criticism

Darweesh (2011) investigates the speech acts of criticism in Arabic journal articles, aiming to uncover the linguistic strategies used by Arabs to overcome the impact of criticism. The results of the study suggest that Arabs use indirect

strategies far more often than direct strategies (83% and 17%, respectively). It concludes that "off-record" is the most common indirect criticism strategy employed by Arabs.

Al-Shara (2013) examines the critical strategies used by participants on "The Opposition Direction," a program on Al-Jazeera Satellite Channel. This study asserts that the program's political nature influenced participants' approach to criticism. Brown and Levinson (1987) employ conversational analysis to study the notion of politeness. The findings indicate that there are four types of criticism: first, direct/indirect address to the criticized person. Second, direct/indirect address to the criticized person via a third party. Third, indirect/indirect address to the criticized person, and fourth, indirect/indirect address to the criticized person via a third party. They also suggest that direct criticism is more common than indirect criticism, with "negative evaluation" being particularly prominent.

Moreover, Al Kayed and Al-Ghoweri (2019) investigate the strategies of the speech act of criticism in Jordanian Arabic. Its sample consists of 120 undergraduate Jordanian students living in Jordan sampled randomly regardless of gender, social class, or major using the Discourse Completion Test. The study shows that Jordanian students are more inclined to use indirect critical strategies than direct critical strategies.

Alshkhanbeh and Alghazo (2022) present a pragmatic analysis of the speech act of criticism over Facebook and Twitter against Jordanian government policies. The study examines the effect of gender on choice of critical strategies by analyzing 300 public posts, comments, and tweets using Nguyen's (2005) framework of critical strategies. The results indicate that Jordanians' most frequently used strategies are sarcasm, identification of a problem, grievance/complaint to God, and negative evaluation. The results also highlight the fact that men and women use different critical strategies. Men tend to lean on expressions of uncertainty and asking/presupposing, while women tend to use grievance/complaint to Allah and emoji/pictures. The study concludes that language used on social media is a strong indicator of distrust in the government-citizen relationship, especially with regard to expressions of uncertainty and distrust.

B. Studies on English Criticism

Nguyen (2013) explores how a group of English as a foreign language (EFL) students offer criticism in everyday situations in relation to native English speakers. The study collects data from five native English speakers from New Zealand and five intermediate ESL students with various native languages via eight role-playing situations. The findings show that the two groups adopted significantly different approaches to criticism. Unlike the native speakers, who made regular use of all strategies, the learners relied predominantly on direct criticism and requests for change. EFL students were far less likely to vary their critical strategy based on context. The groups also varied in their reasoning behind avoiding criticism in situations where both groups felt it inappropriate to offer criticism.

El-Dakhs et al. (2019) examine the realization of the speech act of criticism among university professors toward their students. The study collects data through role-playing with 60 professors (30 males, 30 females) at a private Saudi university characterized by its multicultural staff and the use of English as its lingua franca. The study analyzes its data using an adapted version of Nguyen's (2005, 2013) model of critical strategies, ultimately revealing that professors prefer indirect criticism over direct criticism. It also suggests that gender and experience have very little impact on strategy, while the severity of each particular situation constitutes the primary factor behind professors' critical strategy.

C. Cross-Cultural Studies on Criticism

Nguyen (2005) investigates criticism and responses to criticism among Vietnamese EFL students. The study's sample consists of 36 Vietnamese EFL students (12 beginners, 12 intermediate, 12 advanced), 12 Vietnamese native speakers of English, and 12 Australian native speakers of English all of whom were provided with a written questionnaire. The results show that the Vietnamese EFL students criticized and responded to criticism in a very different way than the Australian native English speakers. Notably, proficiency had little influence on the use of these two speech acts, and pragmatic transfer affected the learners' production. The study's interviews highlight four basic resources with influence on pragmatic decision-making: insufficient L2 pragmatic knowledge, transfer of communication and learning, processing difficulty, and learning experience.

Cao (2005) explores the ways in which Chinese lecturers perform the speech act of criticism and the ways in which students respond to this speech act. The study employs an ethnographic approach to data collection, enabling the researcher to collect spontaneous speech. The study uses Austin (1962) and Searle's (1969) speech act theory and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness principle as its theoretical framework. Ultimately, it concludes that the choice of critical strategy is mainly influenced by social and cultural factors.

Hoa (2007) investigates the use of the speech act of criticism among Vietnamese and Americans using a questionnaire with a focus on three aspects of criticism: the topics of critics, the factors affecting criticism, and the frequency of criticism. This study offers a solid comparison between the two groups, revealing the varying rankings that Vietnamese and Americans assigned to the factors driving their critical strategies. Distance between interlocutors and the effect of criticism on the relationship were both crucial factors to Americans, while the Vietnamese were mainly influenced by the goal of criticism, the age of the hearer, and the severity of the offense.

Furthermore, Hosseinizadeh and Moqadm (2019) investigate the cross-cultural perceptions of Persian and American speakers and the critical strategies that they employ on Facebook. The study outlines 17 strategies, ten of which are used by both Persians and Americans. Using content analysis, it demonstrates that Persian speakers employ more

indirect strategies, while American speakers prefer direct strategies. Moreover, it investigates underlying sociocultural norms through interviews, revealing that Persians prefer to save the hearer's face and respect their "Shakhsiat" ("character"). Additionally, Persians observe the cultural schema of "adab va ehteram" ("politeness and respect") when criticizing others, while Americans try to politely frame their direct criticisms.

Ali (2020) shows that criticism, as an evaluative criterion, is a significant speech act that EFL students must improve to succeed in their academic life. However, this personal development is realized differently across different cultures. Hence, the study investigates the cross-cultural similarities and differences between Iraqi and Malay university students in the use of critical strategies, using the Discourse Completion Test and focus group interviews to obtain data. Like this study, it employs Nguyen's (2005) coding scheme of criticism. Ultimately, it uncovers that the two groups use similar critical strategies, though Iraqis leaned more toward direct criticism while Malays opted for more indirect strategies.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis revealed differences in how Arab and American male and female judges approached criticism. Tables 1 and 2 below present the frequencies and percentages of each strategy on Arab Idol and American Idol, respectively.

TABLE 1
FREQUENCIES AND PERCENTAGES OF CRITICAL STRATEGIES USED ON ARAB IDOL

Strategy	Male	Male	Female	Female
Direct Strategy	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Negative evaluation	6	10%	2	3.3%
Disapproval	3	5%	6	10%
Identification of a problem	19	31.7%	7	11.7%
Consequence	0	0%	0	0%
Expression of disagreement	6	10%	10	16.7%
Statement of difficulty	0	0%	0	0%
Threat	0	0%	0	0%
Severe criticism	0	0%	0	0%
Total	34	56.7%	25	41.7%
Indirect Strategy				
Correction	5	8.3%	3	5%
Preaching	0	0%	0	0%
Indicating standard	0	0%	0	0%
Advice about change	4	6.7%	3	5%
Demand for change	10	16.7%	2	3.3%
Request for change	0	0%	5	8.3%
Suggestion for change	5	8.3%	14	23.4%
Expression of uncertainty	0	0%	0	0%
Asking/presupposing	0	0%	0	0%
Other hints	2	3.3%	8	13.3%
Total	26	43.3%	35	58.2%
Total (direct and indirect)	60	100%	60	100%

Table 1 shows that "identification of a problem," a direct strategy, was the most prominent strategy among male judges on Arab Idol, reaching 19 occurrences and accounting for 31.7% of the total. The next most common strategies among male judges were "negative evaluation" and "expression of disagreement," both direct strategies, at 6 occurrences and 10% each. "Demand for change" was the most prominent indirect strategy among male judges despite it only reaching 10 occurrences and accounting for 16.7% of the total. Among female judges, the most common strategy was "suggestion for change," an indirect strategy, at 14 occurrences and 23.4%, pointing to a clear discrepancy. The most common direct strategy among female judges was "expression of disagreement" at 10 occurrences and 16.7%. The next most common direct strategy was "identification of a problem" with 7 occurrences and 11.7% of the total. Evidently, criticism in Arabic can be realized through various strategies, including both direct criticism (e.g., identification of a problem, negative evaluation, and expression of disagreement) and indirect criticism (e.g., demand for change, suggestion for change).

Table 2 presents the frequencies and percentages of each strategy on American Idol.

TABLE 2
FREQUENCIES AND PERCENTAGES OF CRITICAL STRATEGIES USED ON AMERICAN IDOL

Strategy	Male Freq.	Male %	Female Freq.	Female %
Direct Strategy				
Negative evaluation	25	41.7%	0	0
Disapproval	0	0%	12	20%
Identification of a problem	8	13.3%	0	0%
Consequence	0	0%	0	0%
Expression of disagreement	6	10%	6	10%
Statement of difficulty	0	0%	0	0%
Threat	0	0%	0	0%
Severe Criticism	0	0%	0	0%
Total	39	65%	18	30%
Indirect Strategy				
Correction	0	0%	0	0%
Preaching	0	0%	0	0%
Indicating standard	0	0%	0	0%
Advice about change	2	3.3%	16	26.6%
Demand for change	13	21.7%	2	3.3%
Request for change	0	0%	4	6.7%
Suggestion for change	0	0%	11	18.3%
Expression of uncertainty	0	0%	4	6.7%
Asking/presupposing	0	0%	0	0%
Other hints	6	10%	5	8.3%
Total	21	35%	42	70%
Total (direct and indirect)	60	100%	60	100%

Table 2 shows that "negative evaluation," a direct strategy, was the most prominent among male judges on American Idol, reaching 25 occurrences and accounting for 41.7% of the total. The next most common direct strategy among male judges was "identification of a problem" at 8 occurrences and 13.3%. The indirect strategy "demand for change" was relatively prominent among male judges, with 13 occurrences accounting for 21.7% of the total. As with Arab Idol, indirect strategies were more prominent among female judges on American Idol, with "advice about change" and "suggestion for change" reaching 16 and 11 occurrences and accounting for 26.6% and 18.3% of the total, respectively. The most common direct strategy among female judges was "disapproval" at 12 occurrences and 20%. The next most common direct strategy "expression of disagreement," only had 6 occurrences accounting for 10% of the total. Evidently, criticism in English can be realized through various strategies, including both direct criticism (e.g., negative evaluation, expression of disagreement, and demand for change) and indirect criticism (e.g., advice about change, suggestion for change).

The data analysis showed judges' criticism strategies vary by gender, region, ethnicity and language.. The most striking finding is that female judges prefer using indirect critical strategies. On Arabic Idol, female judges used indirect strategies 35 times (53.2%), while those on American Idol used indirect strategies 42 times (70%). Male judges, in contrast, prefer using direct critical strategies. On Arabic Idol, male judges used direct strategies 34 times (56.7%), while those on American Idol used direct strategies 39 times (65%). This suggests that both Arab and American female judges are aware of the fact that criticism is a face-threatening act. Therefore, they employ more indirect strategies. The following sections individually explore the most prominent strategies.

A. Direct Strategies

According to Nguyen (2005), direct critical strategies are those that are used to explicitly point out problems with the receiver's choices, actions, or performance. Similarly, Shang-Chao (2008, p. 74) states that criticism can be classified as direct or indirect, with direct criticism being the explicit, unreserved expression of a negative evaluation. The data show that male judges in the "Arab Idol" and "American Idol" Shows use more direct strategies than female judges, with 39 and 34 direct comments, respectively.

(a). Negative Evaluation

Through this strategy, the speaker directly expresses their disapproval of something the hearer says or does using evaluative adjectives with a negative meaning or evaluative adjectives with a positive meaning alongside negation (Nguyen, 2005). The results show that Arab male judges used negative evaluation 6 times, while American male judges used it 25 times. Below are some examples of this strategy from both Arab Idol and American Idol.

(Arab Idol / Season 1)

Example 1: Shafei's Feedback   أنا لأ. خامة صوتك مش عاقباني
No, the quality of your voice is not good.

Example 2: Ragheb's Feedback: لأ.. ما مشي الحال.. انت ما غنيت منيح
You didn't sing well! This is effortless. No.

In example 1, the male judge Shafei criticized the contestant for his bad singing voice. The judge used the positive adjective 'ʕajbni' ("good") with the negative particle "MIʃ" ("no") to negatively evaluate the contestant's voice.

In example 2, the male judge Ragheb used the positive adjective 'Mni:Ħ' ("good") with the negation 'ma:' ("not") to criticize the contestant's performance.

(American Idol / Season 1)

Example 1: Simon's Feedback: Steven, Steven, Steven. Stop. Stop. That was terrible. I mean seriously terrible.

Example 2: Randy's Feedback: I think it is really bad.

Example 3: Simon's Feedback: Chris, that was absolutely tritful.

Example 4: Randy's Feedback: I don't think that your singing is really good.

The American male judges Simon and Randy criticized the contestants for singing poorly using the negative adjectives "terrible," "bad," and "tritful" as well as the positive adjective "good" alongside the negation particle "not."

(b). Disapproval

According to Nguyen (2005) this strategy entails the speaker explicitly expressing their negative attitude toward the hearer. The results show that this strategy was used 12 times (20%) among American female judges but only 6 times (10%) among Arab female judges. Below are some examples of this strategy from both Arab Idol and American Idol.

(Arab Idol / Season 1)

Example 1: Ahlam's Feedback: حتى لو كنت تعبان.. ما سمعنا طرب.. ما حبيت صوتك

Even if you are tired, I did not feel the melody in your voice. I did not like your voice.

In this example, the female judge Ahlam criticized the contestant directly by expressing her disapproval using the phrase 'ma: Smiʕna tarab' ("I did not feel the melody in your voice"). Evidently, the judge felt that something about the contestant's performance was unconvincing.

(American Idol / Season 2)

Example 1: Paula's Feedback: No, I am sorry I don't think that you did a great job.

Example 2: Paula's Feedback: Sorry, you didn't sing well.

Example 3: Paula's Feedback: Sorry, you don't look ready.

In these examples, the female judge Paula explicitly expressed her disapproval to the contestants using the negation particles "don't" and "didn't."

(c). Identification of Problem

According to Nguyen (2005), this strategy entails the speaker directly stating the mistakes or problems that they perceived in the hearer's performance. This strategy was 19 times (31.7%) by the male Arab judges but less than eight times by the male American judges (13.3%). Below are some examples of this strategy from both Arab Idol and American Idol.

(Arab Idol / Seasons 1 & 2)

Example 1: Ragheb's Feedback: أنا عن نفسي بدي أعتزر, بدك شغل ع ئفلاتك وصوتك, وعندك خامة الصوت موجودة

On behalf of myself, I do apologize. You need to work on your outros and voice, you have a good voice quality.

Example 2: Ragheb's Feedback: انا بعتئد غنيتي اشياء صعبة و عم تعفأ صح شوفي يا مناد غنيتي بأسلوب صعب .. للأسف لأ

I think that you chose the hardest songs, and your melody is fluctuating. Look, Manad—you sung in a difficult way. Sorry, no.

In example 1, male judge Ragheb identifies the mistakes he detected in the contestant's voice by saying 'BIDAK ʃUɣUL ʕ ʔAFLATAK w SAwTAK' ("You need to work on your outros and voice"). Similarly, in example 2, Ragheb directly identifies the problem by saying 'ɣanITI ʔʃi:aʔ SAʕbIh w ʕAm tʕfAʔ SaĦ fwfi' ("you chose the hardest songs, and your melody is fluctuating"). However, it is worth noting that Ragheb ended his remarks in example 1 with a positive remark: "even if you do have a good voice quality".

B. Indirect Strategies

According to Nguyen (2005), indirect criticism enables the speaker to merely imply the problems that they detected from the hearer. Shang-Chao (2008, p. 74) describes indirect criticism as the illocutionary force of criticism that utilizes the performance of other speech acts to partially conceal the interlocutor's true intentions. The results show that Arab and American female judges employed indirect strategies of criticism more often than male judges. Table 1 shows that the most frequent indirect strategy employed by male Arab judges was "demand for change," while the most common indirect strategies among female Arab judges were "suggestion for change" and "request for change." Table 2 shows that the most frequent indirect strategy employed by male American judges was "demand for change," while the most common indirect strategies among female American judges were "advice about change" and "suggestion for change." These prominent indirect strategies are discussed in the following sections.

(a). Demand of Change

To demand something is to ask something of others while framing it as a requirement (Nguyen, 2005). This strategy was frequently employed by the American judges through phrases like "you have to," "you must," and "you need to" and by the Arab judges through phrases like 'يجب عليك/لازم' "yadʒib ʕali:k" ("you have to"), 'ضروري' "Đaru:ri:" ("it is necessary"), and 'تحتاج الى' "taĦta:dʒ ʔIla" ("you need to"). Tables 1 and 2 show that Arab male judges used this

strategy 10 times (16.7%), while American male judges used it 13 times (21.7%). Below are some examples of this strategy from both Arab Idol and American Idol.

(Arab Idol / Seasons 1 & 2)

Example 1: Ragheb's Feedback: لازم تتمرني كتير ليمشي الحال.. بعتئد ما رح يمشي الحال

You have to practice more and more; this does not work at all.

Example 2: Shafei's Feedback: انا للأسف الشديد لأ.. تحتاق تتمرن كتير

I am so sorry. For me, no-you need to practice a lot.

Evidently, the Arab male judges used this strategy to demand contestants to practice more and continue to work on their vocal skills. Notably, the judges sought to soften their criticism by making frequent use of the word "sorry."

(American Idol / Seasons 1 & 2)

Example 1: Randy's Feedback: You have to start with some talent. So terrible and awful.

Example 2: Randy's Feedback: You never stayed in a melody. I think you have a pretty voice, but you need a lot of training.

In these examples, the American male judge Randy similarly used this strategy to urge the contestants to either practice more or find another line of work.

(b). Advice About Change

This strategy is used by a speaker to inform the hearer what they should do to overcome a problem (Nguyen, 2005). It is sometimes used alongside performative phrases like "I advise you" or words like "should." The results show that this strategy was used by American female judges more than Arab female judges (16 and 3 occurrences, respectively). Below are some examples of this strategy from both Arab Idol and American Idol.

(American Idol / Seasons 1 & 2)

Example 1: Paula's Feedback: I think you should come back and be yourself. Come back to Hollywood. I think you'll be the next Hollywood idol.

Example 2: Paula's Feedback: You should work on yourself.

In examples 1 and 2, Paula used advice about how contestants could address their vocal problems. Notably, she consistently used the modal verb "should."

(Arab Idol/ Season 2)

Example 1: Shafei's Feedback: عاوز نصيحتي غني نفس النوته بالعربي.. انا حزين بديلك لأ

If I were you, I would sing with the same tone.. I am sad to say no

Example 2: Shafei's Feedback: انا عندي حاقة وحده انا لما اعمل حاقة لازم الأساس تبعها يكون موجود

I have one thing in my mind, if Iam to do something I should have its basic and simple rules.

In the examples above, Shafei used advice about change strategy to show contestants how they could overcome their vocal and singing problems. Notably, he consistently used the modal verb "should" and the phrase "If I were you".

Overall, this analysis of the critical strategies of Arab Idol and American Idol judges revealed that both Arab and American judges and both male and female judges make use of direct and indirect strategies to perform the speech act of criticism, though in varying degrees of prominence. The results indicate that male judges—both Arab and American—prefer direct critical strategies (Arab: 56.7%; American: 65%), while both Arab and American female judges prefer indirect critical strategies (Arab: 58.2%; American: 70%). These findings align with those of several other researchers, including Al Kayed and Al-Ghoweri (2019), Alshkhanbeh and Alghazo (2022), and Shang-Chao (2008). However, this study's results do not match those of El-Dakhs et al. (2019), who examined the critical strategies of university professors. They found that professors typically prefer indirect critical strategies regardless of gender. Instead, variation was typically driven by the severity of each particular situation.

V. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the strategies underlying criticism across Arabic-speaking and English-speaking by looking at criticisms levied by judges on Arab Idol and American Idol. It employed Nyguen's (2005) taxonomy for categorizing critical strategies. The results of the study show that the critical strategies of both Arab and American judges vary by gender, with female judges employing less direct strategies and male judges offering more direct criticism. These findings suggest that female judges view criticism as a face-threatening act. This study also found that direct criticism generally entailed the 'negative evaluation and identification of a problem,' while indirect criticisms often consisted of 'advice about change and suggestions for change.'

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