



## From Strangers to Sun Bleached Flies: A Speech Act Analysis in Ethel Cain's Lyrics

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Received:</b> 2024-09-12 <b>Revised:</b> 2024-11-25 <b>Accepted:</b> 2024-12-02</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Ethel Cain; Figurative Language; Lyrics; Songs; Speech Acts</p>	<p>This research aims to explore the use of speech acts in Ethel Cain's Strangers and Sun Bleached Flies from her acclaimed album Preacher's Daughter. This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design that focuses on the analysis of Searle's speech act classification—declaratives, representatives, directives, expressives, and commissives—to uncover how Cain conveys complex emotional narratives related to trauma, identity, and familial relationships. This research uses library research to collect data from the lyrics of two of Ethel Cain's selected songs, Strangers and Sun Bleached Flies. The data analysis process aligns with typical approaches in speech act analysis within linguistics, particularly in contexts where John Searle's taxonomy is applied to literary or artistic works like song lyrics. The findings reveal that speech acts are very useful for deciphering the complex meaning of music lyrics and suggest that Cain's nuanced use of language not only enhances the emotional depth of her music but also invites listeners to engage with themes of vulnerability and resilience. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of contemporary songwriting as a form of expressive communication.</p>

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### INTRODUCTION

Language is a communication tool that not only conveys information but also takes action. Through the theory of speech acts introduced by Austin (1975) and Searle (1969), language is understood as a medium for "acting," such as stating, ordering, promising, or expressing emotions. This approach has been applied in various disciplines, including linguistics, literature, and music, to explore the function and meaning behind language use. In the world of music, song lyrics are a complex form of linguistic expression (Coats, 2016; Fitria, 2022; Fornäs, 2003). Apart from conveying a narrative, lyrics also build an emotional connection between the songwriter and the listener. As one of the main elements in music, lyrics can create deep meaning, especially when related to big themes such as love, loss, or identity (Frith, 1996; Moore, 2016; Mursyidah et al., 2024). This makes song lyrics a rich object for linguistic analysis, especially through speech act theory. This approach not only reveals linguistic complexities in music but also broadens understanding of how language is used in art to convey profound messages.

Ethel Cain, stage name Hayden Anhedonia, is an American singer, songwriter, and music producer. Born on March 24, 1998. She is known for her unique narrative ability in conveying deep themes through atmospheric music. Her music is often categorized into the dream pop, alternative, and Southern Gothic genres, reflecting a distinctive dark and emotional aesthetic. Ethel Cain's album, *Preacher's Daughter* offers a deep narrative about trauma, forgiveness, and self-identity, with lyrics that have both a poetic and conversational quality. The songs *Strangers* and *Sun Bleached Flies* are striking examples of how speech acts are used to convey these emotional themes. The researcher has carefully selected these two songs as they perfectly capture the gist of lore in the *Preacher's Daughter* album in the briefest possible way. By analyzing the speech acts in the lyrics of these two songs, this research aims to reveal how the language in the lyrics creates a narrative, strengthens emotional dynamics, and builds a relationship between the personal experiences of the singer and the listener.



Several studies were conducted that same about this topic. The first study was from Asroriyah and Nurhana (2022) study published in the *Nusantara Hasana Journal* analyzes the speech acts present in the lyrics of various songs by the band Muse. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method to categorize different types of speech acts, including representatives, directives, expressive, commissives, and declaratives. The findings reveal both similarities and differences in how these speech acts are utilized across different songs, highlighting the complexity of lyrical communication in music. Another research article from Setyawati et al. (2024), focuses specifically on the song *Perfect* by Ed Sheeran, examining commissive speech acts within its lyrics. This study identifies various forms of commissive acts such as promises and offers, emphasizing how these acts serve to persuade and engage listeners emotionally. The analysis reveals that promises are particularly prevalent, reflecting the singer's intention to connect with his audience through future commitments.

This study focuses on Ethel Cain's lyrics in her first album *Preacher's Daughter*, a subject that hasn't been covered in great detail in the literature. Her songs are examined as performative acts using speech act theory, which reveals nuanced feelings and social criticisms. The study looks at how listeners including the researcher interpret various speech acts, such as representatives, declaratives, expressives, directives, and commissives. It advances our knowledge of modern music as a literary art form that tackles emotional and cultural concerns. This method improves the lyrical content of Ethel Cain's songs and contributes to the conversation about contemporary songwriting. Through analysis of speech acts in these lyrics, this research aims to reveal how language is used to construct narratives and evoke emotional responses. This research places Ethel Cain's work in the context of broader linguistic and artistic explorations and shows how her music bridges personal stories with universal themes in human experience.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The main theoretical problem discussed in this research is the complexity of meaning in song lyrics, especially how Ethel Cain's lyrics convey deep emotional and psychological themes through speech acts. This includes investigating how the lyrics reflect interpersonal relationships, trauma, and identity, as well as the implications of these themes in a broader social context. The challenge lies in analyzing how various speech acts (such as statements, questions, and commands) function in the lyrics to create meaning and evoke a response from the listener. This research is grounded in speech act theory, primarily developed by philosophers like Austin (1975) and Searle (1969). This theory posits that language is not just a means of conveying information but also a tool for performing actions. In the context of Ethel Cain's lyrics, this theory will help analyze how her words function as performative acts that express emotions, convey identity, and critique societal norms. By applying this theoretical framework, the research aims to uncover how Cain's use of language shapes listener interpretation and emotional engagement.

### What is Literature?

Hornby et al. (2000) states that "literature is one of the types of art creation that has a value compared to other types of writing creation". The same meaning of literature is proposed by McFadden (1978) who states that literature consists of works that help a community define itself throughout its history, including both artistic and less aesthetically focused works. Moreover, literature is regarded as a feature of any human culture at any time and place (Miller, 2003).

Literature, which includes a broad variety of written works distinguished by creativity and profound emotions, is a singular form of human expression. It contains artistic works that are a reflection of the author's character and life experiences, supporting the historical self-definition of communities.

### Songs and Lyrics

Songs are defined as short pieces of music that usually contain lyrics that are intended to be sung. According to Griffie (1992), "The word song refers to a piece of music that has words, especially popular songs such as those heard on the radio." He notes that songs have similarities to speech and poetry, in that they are vocally produced, meaningful, and melodic. Songs consist of various components, including verses that tell a story and refrains that are repeated for emphasis. They serve as a powerful form of artistic expression, capable of evoking strong emotions and connecting with listeners on a personal level.

Lyrics are the words that make up a song, usually consisting of a verse and chorus that convey emotion, tell a story, or express an idea. According to Griffie (1992), "Lyrics are the words in a song, and they often play an important role in conveying the message and emotional impact of the song." Lyrics can be poetic, often

reflect personal feelings and experiences, and are important to enhance the overall meaning of the music. They can vary in complexity, from straightforward expressions of love to thought-provoking abstract concepts. Ultimately, lyrics serve as an important component of a song, allowing listeners to connect with the music on a deeper level.

### **Speech Acts**

A speech act is defined as an utterance that serves a function in communication, going beyond merely conveying information to acting. According to Austin (1975), speech acts include various functions such as making statements, asking questions, or issuing commands. He emphasized that words could perform actions, like when someone says "I do" during a wedding ceremony, which brings about the marriage. Searle (1969) first classified speech acts in his seminal work, "Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language". He expanded on Austin's earlier work, refining and formalizing the concept of speech acts. Five classifications of speech acts categorize utterances based on their intended functions in communication. He identified five main types of illocutionary acts:

1. **Directives:** These are attempts by the speaker to get the listener to do something. The speaker expresses a desire for the listener to take a specific action, such as requests, commands, and invitations.
2. **Commissives:** In these acts, the speaker commits to a future course of action. They express intentions or promises to perform a certain act, such as pledges or vows.
3. **Expressives:** These speech acts convey the speaker's emotional state or feelings about a particular situation. They include apologies, congratulations, and expressions of gratitude or regret.
4. **Declaratives:** These acts bring about a change in the external world simply by being spoken. The utterance itself acts, such as pronouncing someone married or resigning from a job.
5. **Representatives:** These statements reflect the speaker's beliefs about the world, such as assertions, claims, or descriptions.

### **METHODS**

This study employs a descriptive-qualitative research design, focusing on the analysis of Ethel Cain's lyrics in the songs *Strangers* and *Sun Bleached Flies* through the lens of speech act theory. A descriptive method in qualitative research is an approach to analysis where the researcher stays close to the data, uses limited frameworks and interpretations for explaining the data, and catalogs the information into themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The qualitative approach is chosen as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the meaning and context behind the lyrics, particularly in identifying the illocutionary forces and their contribution to the narrative structure of the songs.

The primary data of this research are the lyrics of the two selected songs, *Strangers* and *Sun Bleached Flies*, written and performed by Ethel Cain. The lyrics are examined as textual artifacts, which are readily available from official sources, including streaming platforms and the artist's website. As this research relies entirely on textual analysis, no human participants are involved. Instead, the study employs theoretical frameworks and prior literature as secondary sources to support the analysis. Data collection was conducted by compiling the official lyrics of the selected songs and reviewing relevant books, journal articles, and studies that discuss speech act theory, as well as previous analyses of song lyrics and narratives. These secondary sources are gathered from libraries, academic databases, and credible online platforms.

The instrument used in this study is the researchers themselves, functioning as the primary tool for analyzing and interpreting the data. By employing John Searle's speech act theory as the guiding framework, the researchers identify and categorize the speech acts found in the lyrics. Supporting tools include notebooks, annotation software, and reference management software to organize and synthesize the gathered literature. The data analysis process aligns with typical approaches in speech act analysis within linguistics, particularly in contexts where John Searle's taxonomy is applied to literary or artistic works like song lyrics. The data analysis process involves multiple steps: (1) Identification: The lyrics are read and segmented to identify individual utterances or speech acts; (2) Categorization: Each utterance is classified based on Searle's taxonomy of speech acts (e.g., assertive, directive, expressive, commissive, declarative); (3) Interpretation: The identified speech acts are interpreted within the context of the lyrics to uncover their illocutionary force and the broader meaning they convey; (4) Theoretical Integration: Insights from the analysis are integrated with existing literature to support the findings and offer a nuanced interpretation of the speech acts in the selected songs.

## FINDINGS

The findings of this research are classified based on the types of speech acts found in the two song lyrics in Ethel Cain's *Preacher's Daughter* album and they are presented as follows:

**Table 1.** Speech Acts in *Strangers* Song Lyrics

No	Speech Acts	Lyrics
1	Representative	<i>How funny, I never considered myself tough Am I making you feel sick?</i>
2	Expressive	<i>I just wanted to be yours I'm happier here 'cause he told me I should be, oh I tried to be good, am I no good?</i>
3	Directive	<i>Don't talk to strangers or you might fall in love</i>
4	Commissive	<i>While you were torn apart, I would still wait with you there Mama, just know that I love you, and I'll see you when you get here</i>

**Table 2.** Speech Acts in *Sun Bleached Flies* Song Lyrics

No	Speech Acts	Lyrics
1	Declarative	<i>God loves you, but not enough to save you</i>
2	Representative	<i>But I still feel like they all know, and that's why I can never go back home They talk all about that money and how their babies are always changing While they're breathing in the poison of the paint</i>
3	Expressive	<i>I can't let go when something's broken</i>
4	Directive	<i>If they strike once then you just hit 'em twice as hard</i>

From the data presented above it is clear that in the *Strangers* song lyric only 4 out of 5 speech act types are found and no declarative type of speech act while in *Sun Bleached Flies* lyric no commissive speech act is found. It is one of the clear distinctions of the two song lyrics in relation to the types of speech acts used. A more in-depth analysis of the use of speech acts will be discussed in the following discussion part.

## DISCUSSION

### The Analysis of Speech Acts in *Strangers* Song Lyric

#### 1. *Representative*

Data 1: *How funny, I never considered myself tough*

The speaker's self-perception is reflected in this lyric, which is a declaration of reality. Given that the entire album is a collection of stories about a character named Ethel Cain being murdered by her ex-lover, the speaker claims that she did not previously believe herself to be tough. She sings to her killer, "*Freezer bride, your sweet divine, you devour like smoked bovine hide,*" before adding the one-liner that has two meanings: "*How funny, I never considered myself tough.*" Only at this point does Ethel Cain's actual fate become clear; she was not only killed but also cannibalized. The propositional substance of the lyric is about the speaker's self-perception or belief, which she communicates to the audience about her inability to oppose the obscene event that occurred to her. The speaker is not directing the interlocutor to do something, and it is not directly expressing an emotion. It expresses a specific view of her previous self-image. It is a claim about her own belief or viewpoint, which is consistent with the basic definition of a representative speaking act.

Data 2: *Am I making you feel sick?*

Throughout the song, love and anguish churn like stomachs. Cain's wailing stops as he asks, "*Am I making you feel sick?*" to her killer as he swallows her, dealing with both the act of cannibalism and the question of whether he is repulsed by his acts. The encounter appears to be aimed directly at the listener. The terrible and brutal finale to an album that deals with extremely dark subjects like abuse, pedophilia, prostitution,

and drugging appears to question the audience whether they are similarly repulsed. Representatives pledge the speaker to the truth of the stated proposition or query about it. They describe, affirm, or inquire about a fact. The speaker is attempting to establish the genuine feelings of the person she is speaking with, the killer, by asking if he is experiencing sickness towards her. As a result, the lyric matches the category since it inquires about the true status of her killer (if he is sick), attempting to reconcile Cain's perception with reality.

## 2. *Expressive*

Data 3: *I'm happier here 'cause he told me I should be, oh*

The lyric can be understood as an expressive speech act that contains aggressive characteristics. It is vital to notice that expressive convey the speaker's psychological condition or emotions toward a circumstance. The line "*I'm happier here*" plainly expresses Cain's emotional state.

Data 4: *I just wanted to be yours*

Even when she is going through the worst conceivable situation, the song has a mournful, imploring voice as she continues to seek approval or affection as the nice girl. "*I just wanted to be yours*," Cain screams repeatedly, culminating in a heartbreakingly terrible plea as her mission for love led to her gory death. The goal of expression is not to proclaim facts or influence others, but to convey how the speaker feels. This lyric goes toward expression because it portrays a feeling, including the yearning to be someone despite the tragedy.

Data 5: *I tried to be good, am I no good?*

The line represents the conflict played out in the repeat, a terrible concluding reflection on this character's life as she grapples with the impact her strict religious upbringing has had on her, even from beyond the grave. Cain is expressing self-doubt and seeking confirmation, exposing her hesitation and need for reinforcement.

## 3. *Directive*

Data 6: *Don't talk to strangers or you might fall in love*

'Strangers' gives Ethel Cain her voice back to narrate the story; according to its sequencing, it is the album's 13th or last track, whereas earlier tracks 'Ptolemaea' and 'August Underground' are intended to soundtrack her death. It's a blink-and-you'll-miss-it moment as she blends lyrics about love and loyalty with a terrible double meaning. "*Don't talk to strangers or you might fall in love*" is sung so softly that it seems like a love ballad, threatening to distract listeners with rose-tinted adoration as the next stanza grows scarier with the darkest of humor. The lyric advises or instructs, making it suited for use as a command. This warns the listeners about the danger of being in love with a stranger, where it's followed up by the lyrics of her saying she turned to become a victim of a homicide.

## 4. *Commissive*

Data 7: *While you were torn apart, I would still wait with you there*

Commissive displays a commitment to future action. The speaker shows her readiness to be with the listener throughout a tough period, even if the person she loves is "torn apart." The phrase "*I would*" denotes a hypothetical or conditional promise of future action, depending on the situation. Commissives necessitate that the speaker intends to carry out the expressed commitment. In this line, honesty appears to be inferred because the speaker's statement is emotionally charged and supportive.

Data 8: *Mama, just know that I love you, and I'll see you when you get here*

As the song comes to a close, Cain sings the final line of her story. She delivers her final words to her mother through the lyric above, whether from the hereafter or the bloody basement. With that, Ethel Cain is laid to rest. This song expresses a firm commitment to a future event: meeting with the interlocutor, who is now her deceased mother when she arrives in heaven. The phrase "*I'll*" (short for "I will") is a clear indication of the speaker's desire. This is a promise or pledge, which is the central feature of a commissive speaking act.

## The Analysis of Speech Acts in *Sun Bleached Flies* Song Lyrics

### 1. Declarative

Data 9: *God loves you, but not enough to save you*

The tune, which laments Cain's estrangement from religion while still yearning for belief, explores how religion can be both a symbol of abuse and optimism throughout the album. Cain's fragile connection with God is explored in the song. This is supported by the fact that the actual singer uses this song to reveal her relationship with God. Thus, the lyric expresses a reality or belief regarding God's love and its inadequacy to result in salvation. Declarative speech acts are commonly employed to affirm or announce something about the world, and this lyric achieves exactly that. It says that God loves His servants but does not save them, implying a divine relationship or theological perspective. The word-to-world direction of fit applies here because the speaker asserts a belief or interpretation of how things are (in this example, the relationship between God and His servants; the listeners), and the words attempt to match or represent that reality. The phrase "*but not enough to save you*" introduces a negation that contrasts with the first half of the statement. This negative composition adds to the lyric's thought-provoking quality by challenging the listener's idea of divine love.

### 2. Representative

Data 10: *But I still feel like they all know, and that's why I can never go back home*

Representatives are used in speech act theory to express views, facts, or propositions that the speaker holds to be true or believes to be true. Cain claims that she is experiencing something ("they all know") and that this sensation directly impacts her actions or decisions.

Data 11: *They talk all about that money and how their babies are always changing, while they're breathing in the poison of the pain*

As a disclaimer, the full version of the beginning of this song starts with:

*Sun bleached flies sitting in the windowsill*

*Waiting for the day they escape*

*They talk all about that money and how their babies are always changing while they're breathing in the poison of the pain*

Cain compares sun bleached flies lying on a windowsill to a Christian Mother, waiting for the day they can flee. Speaking about their children while they are subjected to hazardous activities such as poisonous paint. In this scenario, the lyric portrays the actions and circumstances of specific persons. Cain is monitoring them and presenting what she sees as fact. This can be applied to representative speech acts, which often include remarks that explain the world or affirm facts about it. This lyric contains a nuanced judgment of the people being depicted, which may be incorrect even if the speaker says so.

Data 12: *I can't let go when something's broken*

Besides the meaning mentioned earlier in the first point, this song also spares appreciation from Cain for the man she never stopped loving, Willoughby. These final two lines speak to the result of what Cain has been through. Because of the trauma and abuse she has encountered; she has developed these detrimental behaviors that she discussed in other tracks. However, there may be a part of her that longs for the sliver of good that she has experienced in her brief time on earth. Most of these moments were spent with Willoughby, her first love. He is the item in question, and even in death, all she wants is Willoughby Tucker. This line expresses Cain's difficulty in emotionally separating from something damaged, whether it's a tangible object, a relationship, or an abstract notion such as trust or hope, which is entirely referring to Tucker. The lyric focuses on the speaker's struggle ("I can't let go"), making it a representation of internal agony. This is consistent with the expressive function of communicating emotions like grief, connection, and displeasure.

### 3. Directive

Data 12: *If they strike once then you just hit 'em twice as hard*

This lyric is between the following lines:

*So I said fine, 'cause that's how my daddy raised me*

*If they strike once then you just hit 'em twice as hard*

*But in the end, if I bend under the weight that they gave me  
Then this heart would break and fall as twice as far*

Cain's reaction in the face of danger or disrespect is to fight back, but she now recognizes that doing so will just perpetuate the cycle of violence she has experienced, and it will come back to hit her much harder. "Hit 'em twice as hard" is a command or instruction that encourages listeners to respond forcefully when struck. This meets the definition of a directive in that Cain wants to influence the listener's actions, however she subsequently regrets the command after realizing the cycle of abuse.

Based on the the discussion above, this study shows the difference of speech act analysis with Asroriyah & Nurhana (2022) and Setyawati et al. (2024). Although they studied similar topic but the findings of Asroriyah & Nurhana (2022) reveal both similarities and differences in in the use of speech acts across different songs, highlighting the complexity of lyrical communication in music while Setyawati et al. (2024) only focused specifically in examining commissive speech acts within Ed Sheeran's *Perfect* lyrics. This study tried to uncover not only to examine songs as performative acts using speech act theory but also to reveal nuanced feelings and social criticisms implied in the song lyrics. It brings into social implication where the song lyrics are not just utilized to obtain music excitement but also to express social criticism in its particular way.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study examined two of Ethel Cain's songs from a single album. As was covered and examined in the previous chapter, the researcher discovered five different categories of speech acts: declarative, representational, directive, expressive, and commissive. The singer, Ethel Cain's personal life via interviews and lore, which she verified throughout the album, has also been explored by the researcher. Cain's point of view in storytelling, which concentrates on a horrific love story and overall pain, is best described by the three speech acts that dominate this study: directive, expressive, and representative. Declarative and commissive speech acts follow, emerging as the second type of speech act. They enhance the viewpoints derived from the album's full contextual meanings. It becomes clear from a close reading of the lyrics that expressive speech acts capture the emotional turbulence present in her narration, while declarative and representative speech acts serve to express personal experiences and opinions. Furthermore, her conflicts and needs for healing and connection are reflected in directives and commissives. Speech acts are therefore beneficial for deciphering the complex meaning of music lyrics. They give listeners the ability to decipher not just the song lyrics but also the music's underlying intentions, feelings, and social messages. The researcher expects that this research will be valuable to those who are interested in literature analysis, particularly song lyrics. Furthermore, the data can be used as a reference for future academics who want to delve deeper into the text analysis, as well as to make the reader think critically about text analysis.

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