

MODELS OF WELL-WISHING AS A REFLECTION OF CULTURAL VALUES IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE (BASED ON INFORMAL WEDDING CONGRATULATIONS)

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Abstract

The article examines the genre of congratulations in English as a specific type of speech act characterized by stable structural, semantic, and pragmatic features. Based on corpus analysis (COCA, BNC) and discourse analysis, typical lexico-grammatical patterns, communicative strategies, and cultural features of English-language congratulations are identified. It is demonstrated that this genre reflects key values of English-speaking culture – individualism, positivity, and ritualization – while performing an important function in maintaining social ties and interpersonal interaction.

Keywords: Congratulation, well-wishing, speech genre, speech act, cultural values, individualism, collectivism, politeness, pragmatics, wedding congratulations, social distance, gender, age.

Introduction

Speech genres of “congratulations” are traditionally regarded as a specific type of communicative practice associated with celebratory events and the expression of positive emotions. According to M. Bakhtin (1986), congratulations belong to the category of everyday genres of greeting and leave-taking, characterized by a relatively fixed canonical structure and variable intonational features [3, p. 79]. They vary in terms of formality – from formal-register forms (“Congratulations on your appointment”) to friendly and informal ones (“I’m happy for you!”). Within the framework of speech act theory [10], congratulations are classified as expressive acts that both acknowledge a positive event and convey the speaker’s emotional response. P. Brown and S. Levinson (1987) emphasize that such acts contribute to maintaining the addressee’s “face,” particularly their positive face, thereby strengthening social bonds through the expression of approval [4].

In English-speaking culture, the nature of congratulations is shaped by a combination of individualistic and religious-cultural traditions. For example, constructions of the type “May X be Y,” employing the modal verb may, originate from historically religious forms of blessing and function as markers of sincerity and warmth. At the same time, direct expressions such as “I’m so happy for you” highlight the speaker’s personal involvement, reflecting the individualistic dimension. Understanding these cultural underpinnings is essential for linguists and practitioners alike, particularly in the fields of intercultural communication, translation, and language teaching.



METHODS

A methodological framework was employed in the study. The descriptive-analytical method was used to systematize theoretical approaches to the study of speech genres; the corpus method (based on COCA and BNC) was applied to identify frequent lexical units, recurrent constructions, and typical usage patterns; discourse analysis was used to determine communicative strategies and pragmatic orientations of congratulations in various sociocultural contexts. The application of the contextual-interpretative method made it possible to reveal semantic and stylistic features of the analyzed units.

RESULTS

The most frequent lexical markers are the noun congratulations and the verb congratulate. According to data from the COCA and BNC corpora, the construction “congratulate X on Y” is the most widespread (COCA – 451 occurrences, BNC – 157), while the variant with to is virtually unattested [6].

Typical adjectives used in congratulatory messages include happy, wonderful, best (as in “best wishes”), and amazing. Forms of address, such as kinship terms or titles (e.g., dear, friends), are also frequently employed.

Congratulatory expressions are primarily focused on:

- love and happiness (love, joy, happiness), e.g., “Wishing you a lifetime of happiness”;
- well-being and prosperity (health, prosperity), often accompanied by blessings such as “May God bless you”;
- positive evaluation (compliments such as wonderful, amazing).

Politeness markers are widely used: most utterances contain polite constructions such as please, kindly, wish you well. Both formal formulas (“Congratulations on your promotion.”) and emotionally colored expressions (“Wow, congratulations!”) are attested.

The most typical structures include constructions with the modal verb may (subjunctive meaning), e.g., “May you have a long and happy marriage,” which are syntactically analogous to ancient blessings in the historical English tradition. Direct address with the addressee’s name (“John and Mary, congratulations!”) is also frequent, functioning as a strategy for establishing personal connection. Declarative sentences tend to avoid antithesis or negative forms; even when referring to possible difficulties, a positive tone is maintained (“Even through challenges, your love will shine”).

From a pragmatic perspective, congratulations are in most cases positively framed face-threatening acts (FTA): the speaker deliberately enhances the addressee’s positive face by expressing support. As noted by Leech (1983), this act is “intrinsically oriented to minimization of the speaker’s own credit,” meaning that the speaker emphasizes the addressee’s success while modestly backgrounding their own role [8, p. 16].

In social media congratulations, narrative elements are reduced; formulaic expressions such as “Congrats!” or “So happy for you!” and emojis (hearts, champagne) prevail. This observation is supported by the findings of Ammari et al. (2024), who note that “young users tend to prefer concise formulaic expressions on Facebook and WhatsApp, perceiving them as modern and informal” [1, p. 329].

We analyzed the frequency of congratulatory vocabulary in the COCA and BNC corpora. The



results show that units such as happy, wedding, love, best, bless, and wish are among the most frequently used words within the semantic field of congratulations. In the corpus of wedding congratulations (greeting cards and social media), a higher frequency of religious vocabulary (bless, prayer, church) and “warm” adjectives (perfect, happy, beautiful) was observed.

Discourse analysis revealed three main discursive patterns of congratulations:

Formal-business (e.g., “Congratulations on your appointment”), typical of English-language media and professional correspondence;

Personal-emotional (“I’m so thrilled for you!”, “We’re overjoyed!”), characteristic of communication among friends and family;

Ritual-blessing pattern (“May your life together be blessed”), emphasizing the perception of marriage as a sacred union.

English congratulations, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, reflect an individualistic orientation: they emphasize personal achievements, frequent use of the pronouns I and you, and the active involvement of the speaker in the addressee’s success. As noted in cross-cultural studies [5], Americans tend to express personal joy (“I’m so happy for you!”), whereas in less individualistic cultures the focus shifts toward the collective or the family. Our corpus analysis showed that the pronouns I and you occur in 90% of congratulatory messages, while references to a collective (“our joy”) are extremely rare. This confirms the notion that congratulations function as an expression of approval aimed at strengthening social intimacy through satisfying the hearer’s want to be liked [2, p. 2; 4].

Congratulations constitute a ritualized form of greeting. As M.M. Tsilipakou (2001) notes, they perform a socially supportive function and may be viewed as a kind of “ritual of support” [9]. This ritualization is especially evident in wedding congratulations, which are often standardized (conventional phrases, blessings) and involve a performative dimension, implying an extended response (toasts and return toasts, exchange of greeting cards, etc.). At the same time, many American and British congratulations retain elements of formality even in informal contexts.

As M. Bakhtin points out, the social situation determines the form of the congratulatory utterance [3, p. 80]. Corpus data demonstrate that formal congratulations (addressed to colleagues or superiors) consist of full sentences without emotive interjections: “Please accept my warm congratulations on your outstanding achievement.” In contrast, friendly messages are short and expressive: “Yay, congrats, buddy!” Formality is typically accompanied by titles and surnames, whereas informality involves diminutives and minimal forms of address. This supports the thesis that the genre includes official, friendly, and intimate variants.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that English congratulations constitute a genre deeply embedded in culture: they both reflect and reinforce fundamental cultural values such as individualism, positivity, and ritualization. The “embracing word” model [11] demonstrates that congratulation differs from a simple wish: the speaker shares in the addressee’s joy over the event, a feature typical of collectivist-oriented rituals, yet in English-speaking culture it is adapted to individualistic motives.

It is also important to highlight the specific features of English-language congratulations that distinguish them from traditions in other cultures. In particular, there is a pronounced contrast



between formal and informal styles, illustrating the coexistence of bureaucratic and personal ritualization within the genre. Moreover, the frequent use of religious formulas points to the influence of Christian tradition.

CONCLUSIONS

At the lexico-semantic level, units with positive connotation (happy, love, best, bless, wish) dominate, along with standard formulas such as congratulations and the construction congratulate X on Y, which ensure genre recognizability. Syntactically, constructions with the modal verb may, rooted in religious blessings, as well as direct forms of address, are characteristic.

Pragmatically, congratulations function as expressive speech acts aimed at maintaining the addressee's positive "face," as evidenced by the high frequency of the pronouns I and you and strategies minimizing the speaker's own role.

In English-language discourse, congratulations reflect key cultural orientations – individualism, emotional openness, and the preservation of ritual elements (especially in wedding congratulations). Discourse analysis has identified three main types of congratulations: formal-business, personal-emotional, and ritual-blessing patterns. Therefore, the genre of congratulations serves not only as a means of expressing joy but also as an important mechanism for maintaining social bonds and transmitting cultural values.

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