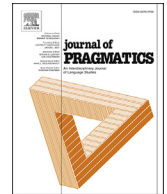


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# Problematizing expressives: The case of magical affirmations in the pick-up artist paradigm

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine positive statements (usually about self) known as ‘affirmations’. Affirmations are employed in positive psychology as an intervention tool but have also become popularised by pop psychology influencers. Our corpus of affirmations stems from the pick-up artist (PUA) paradigm, a community of men revolving around the ‘speed seduction’ of women. We examine affirmation videos posted by ‘expert’ community members to YouTube for their linguistic features and their fit into the speech act taxonomy by Searle. Our results show that most affirmations in the PUA affirmations are of the declaration type and thus diverge from uses of affirmations described in positive psychology literature. They are largely contingent on external appraisal and target a type of world-to-words fit that is impossible to achieve, leading to our designation of them as ‘magical’ affirmations. We argue that this potentially leads to frustration by community members and further radicalisation. Beyond the immediate analysis, we use this data set and our analytical procedure to problematise the notion of the speech act type of expressives, in particular when set in relation with assertives and declarations. As we show, magical affirmations, due to their position on the fuzzy borders between declarations, expressives, and assertives, are a particularly suitable data type to interrogate this taxonomy and especially expressives’ place within it.

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## 1. Introduction

Affirmations are positive statements that are meant to build confidence and self-esteem, for example, “I feel proud” or “I am a successful individual”. In recent years, the idea that affirmations can have a positive effect on one’s mental well-being has been touted by pop psychology influencers on social media, thus undermining its trustworthiness. Nevertheless, legitimate research exists in well-being studies and positive psychology that demonstrates the value of positive self-affirmations, which may promote adaptive functioning, for example, adherence to a drug regimen (Cohen and Sherman, 2014; Howell, 2017; Jaser et al., 2014).

This study looks at the use of affirmations in the repertoire of a specific language community, that is, pick-up artists (PUAs). PUAs are a community that learns and practices speed-seduction of women for short-term, primarily sexual relationships and heavily relies on the pseudoscience of ‘neurolinguistic programming’ (NLP) and therefore linguistic means of persuasion

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(see Dayter and Rüdiger, 2022 for an extensive study of pick-up artist discourse). PUAs belong to the less extreme fraction of the ‘manosphere’ (cf. Marwick and Caplan, 2018) and encourage men to use manipulative strategies to pursue and sexually conquer women. Smaller sections of the community may aim for more traditional outcomes, like a stable relationship. Apart from using language to influence women, PUAs also incorporate linguistic persuasion in talking to their potential recruits and new members. Confidence affirmations constitute PUA-directed language. They are also a part of the NLP-inspired repertoire of linguistic influence but are statements that a PUA repeats to himself<sup>1</sup> in order to, allegedly, enhance his masculine qualities.

Affirmations are wide-spread in the PUA community and can be found, for example, in the form of YouTube videos where the PUA ‘guru’ or a seductive female voice repeats statements such as “I am becoming a natural with the ladies” or “My personality is magnetic”, often on an hours-long loop. In contrast to the practices tested in experimental psychology, these affirmations are meant to be listened to during sleep, as background noise during daily activities, or used as chants at group events. According to their authors, affirmations thus subliminally influence the listener’s personality in the desired manner. PUAs orient to the affirmations as a magical artefact that has a direct impact on the achievement of their seduction aims rather than as a tool of promoting self-integrity.

This study has two aims: to describe a communicative practice and to contribute to pragmatics theory in the study of speech acts. We investigate PUA affirmations from the perspective of speech act theory and provide a description of their linguistic features. Although speech act theory has been criticised, among other things, for an oversimplified view of context, insufficient theorisation of indirect speech acts, and limited possibilities of taking social factors into account, it remains a popular analytical tool among pragmaticians. Its rigid categorisation can be seen both as a drawback, which inevitably results from a high degree of abstraction but also a benefit allowing clarity and providing an analytical starting point for very diverse studies. The present analysis provides insights into the pragmatics interpretation of the phenomenon of magical thinking as expressed in the belief that saying certain words can change external reality. Such a belief has interesting parallels with the function of declaration-type speech acts, which indeed affect extralinguistic reality but do so by means of convention and social contract rather than a supernatural connection between word meaning and physical reality that magical affirmations imply. While declarations are a well-defined and -described type of speech act that is almost synonymous with ‘doing things with words’, another relevant speech act type, expressive, is more difficult to pin down, as reflected in the variable definitions and criteria adopted in existing studies (Norrick, 1978; Ronan, 2015). We believe our study can contribute to the body of research criticising the original speech act theory for the rigidity of categorisation that sometimes fail to capture the hybridity of real-life communicative acts (Mey, 2023). As the present article will demonstrate, magical affirmations, due to their position on the fuzzy borders between declarations, expressives, and assertives, are a particularly suitable data type to interrogate this taxonomy and especially expressives’ place within it.

We analyse a corpus of 412 PUA affirmations transcribed from 10 YouTube videos with the following research questions in mind:

**RQ1.** What is the status of affirmations in the speech act taxonomy?

**RQ2.** What linguistic features does the speech act ‘PUA affirmation’ exhibit?

We begin this paper by outlining the notion of magical speech acts from a historical perspective, followed by a section focusing on declarations as the most pertinent speech act type for our study. We then outline findings on affirmations from positive psychology and consider how these fit the pick-up artist material. Next, we introduce the dataset at the heart of our study and proceed to the analysis centring on speech act categories and the linguistic characteristics of the affirmations. We conclude that use of ‘magical’ affirmations is yet another strategy to attract men to the predatory PUA community, divorced from social and linguistic realities.

## 2. Speech acts

### 2.1. A historical perspective on magical speech acts

In the Middle Ages, people believed that names held magic powers over things and human beings: the name and the object are inherently connected, therefore, inflicting a change on the name would change the object as well. Along with other supernatural beliefs, this connection between words and nature is rooted in the psychological phenomenon of magical thinking. Magical thinking is the belief that a) transfer of energy or information between physical systems may take place solely because of their similarity or contiguity in time and space, or b) that one’s thoughts, words, or actions can achieve specific physical effects in a manner not governed by the principles of ordinary transmission of energy or information (Zusne & Jones, 1989). An example of language-related magical thinking is, for example, the conviction that the Latin wordform for ‘wood’ (Dat.pl.), *lignis*, contains the word for ‘fire’, *ignis*, and that is why wood burns. Similarly, in a Brothers Grimm fairytale, calling the imp Rumpelstiltskin by his name granted the hero the power to counter Rumpelstiltskin’s wiles. There are

<sup>1</sup> Here and below, we will be using a generic masculine pronoun because the community of pick-up artists is primarily male and orients to the values of traditional masculinity in its affirmations.

numerous other folklore examples where labelling, especially knowing a creature's name, is equated with having control over it (perhaps extrapolated from having specialist knowledge of some exotic realia): in the legend of Saint Olaf, learning a troll's name frees a saint from the troll's power (Child, 1965: 95); Scandinavian mythology contains a similar plot regarding the magical beast Nix (Child, 1965: 96). Such beliefs considerably diminished with the scientific discoveries that allowed humans to better understand natural phenomena, as well as with the advent of education worldwide. It has also been shown that magical thinking decreases across childhood as children learn about natural laws (e.g. Phelps and Woolley, 1994).

The use of affirmations within the PUA community provides a unique example of how language and magical thinking intersect, a concept that is deeply embedded in human thought and cultural practices. Magical thinking is a core part of how humans have interacted with the world for centuries (Vyse, 2013). In the PUA world, affirmations are not just used for self-improvement but are treated like spells that can manipulate reality to fulfil the user's desires. For PUAs, phrases like "I am a winner" or "I succeed with women" are meant to transform their reality, making these statements true through repetition. This is similar to how spells, incantations, and witches' curses have been viewed throughout history, where the right words, uttered in the correct way, were believed to have the power to change the physical world (Malinowski, 1935; Culpeper and Semino, 2000; cf. also the use of prayers and incantations in early medieval England, Arnovick, 2024).<sup>2</sup> Folklore studies shed light on this practice, treating it as a contemporary form of old folk ritual that meets psychological and social needs (Dundes, 1965). The way PUAs use affirmations as magical tools mirrors traditional communal rituals designed to empower individuals and strengthen group identity (Turner, 1969). The role of language in magical thinking also involves the principle of similarity, a key feature of magical belief as discussed by Tylor (2010). This principle suggests that the resemblance between things—like the sound of a word and the outcome it describes—implies a causal relationship. For example, saying affirmations that link directly to desired traits or outcomes is believed to actually bring about those traits or outcomes, showcasing a simple causative logic: naming something aloud makes it real.

Linguistics recognises the existence of a less drastic version of this connection between language and extralinguistic world. The idea that language may influence reality in non-magical ways can be found, for example, in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which suggests that the language we use can shape our thoughts and even our worldview (Whorf, 1956). For PUAs, using confident, success-oriented language repeatedly is meant to reshape their mindset to align with their goals. This is a type of linguistic determinism where language deeply influences—and can determine—the speaker's reality. It is important to note that in the decades since this hypothesis was proposed, many critics (such as Pinker, 1994) argued against this strong determinism, suggesting that while language can influence thought, it does not strictly determine cognitive reality, emphasising that human thought is flexible and capable of transcending linguistic constraints.

Finally, and most importantly for the subsequent discussion, the argument that saying things may constitute actions in extralinguistic reality connects to the linguistic theory of performative utterances, first proposed by Austin (1962) and later expanded by Searle (1969). These theories suggest that certain phrases do more than describe reality; they can actually bring it into being.

## 2.2. Speech act types

In speech act theory, each utterance is considered to perform a communicative action and is described as having three components: locution or locutionary act, i.e. the uttering of a meaningful sentence; illocution or illocutionary act, i.e. the intent behind the locution; and perlocution or perlocutionary act, i.e. the characteristic effect of an illocution in an addressee. Speech acts can (but need not) be performed by 'saying that one is doing so' (Searle, 1969), for example, one may promise by uttering the words "I promise". Whether the intent of the speech act can be successfully achieved depends on a number of conditions for its performance, the felicity conditions, which specify what context is appropriate for a particular illocution, what conventional power the speaker needs to have, etc. Felicity conditions are divided into the essential condition (meaning that the locution is not a quote), the sincerity condition (the speaker means what they say), and the preparatory condition (the speaker is socially sanctioned to perform the act).

Using concepts such as direction of fit and conditions of satisfaction, Searle (1969) outlined five kinds of illocution: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. It is the last kind, declarations, that is especially relevant in the discussion of magical speech acts. Declarations are speech acts that have the power to immediately change outside reality; straightforward examples of this category are adjourning a meeting or naming a ship. They are also the kind of speech act that has the most sophisticated set of preparatory conditions, since those are associated with social roles and established conventions. For instance, one cannot successfully marry two people by saying "I pronounce you husband and wife" if one is not an officiant or a justice of the peace explicitly engaged by the willing couple for this purpose at the scheduled moment. This stipulation has critical significance for the present analysis of magical affirmations: the preparatory conditions have the power of social convention rather than any physical link to reality. Therefore, a declaration speech act can only change such extralinguistic reality that can be affected by conventions and norms. Since the laws of physics are not subject to convention, preparatory conditions for a 'magical' speech act like "I am now tall" (said by someone who is of average height) can never be met.

In turn, assertives are speech acts where the speaker commits to the truth of the stated proposition. Unlike declarations, assertives do not require the world to adjust to match their content but the other way round: they exhibit the word-to-world

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, there are correct and incorrect ways of phrasing affirmations, and correct and incorrect ways of listening to them.

direction of fit. Examples include stating, claiming, reporting, and suggesting. The success of these acts also hinges on the felicity conditions, which in the case of assertives depend on the speaker's belief in the truth of the proposition and having sufficient evidence or reasons to support that belief (Searle, 1969).

Finally, the third type of speech act relevant to the present study, expressives, involves expressing the speaker's attitudes and emotions about the proposition. This category includes actions such as apologising, thanking, congratulating, and giving condolences. Expressives sit uneasily among other speech act types due to the difficulty in defining criteria of inclusion. Clark (1996: 134), for instance, observes that assertives can also clarify a speaker's beliefs and express confessions or denials (thus blurring the border between expressives and assertives). According to Norrick (1978: 279), expressive speech acts express psychological conditions that arise in reaction to given states of affairs, and not beliefs or intentions. Searle and Vanderveken (1985: 211) comment that in the case of expressives, illocutionary verbs are always hearer-centred (an aspect which, in our opinion, makes this category impossible to apply in research centred on the linguistic output of speakers). Overall, reviewing existing research on expressive speech acts, it appears to be the case that this category is typically defined through prototypes—thanking, apologising, congratulating, boasting—rather than specific criteria of inclusion. In terms of felicity conditions, the crucial condition for expressives is the sincerity of the emotion expressed. The speaker must genuinely feel the emotions they are expressing for the speech act to be considered successful (Searle, 1969). These acts are not intended to change the external world but to accurately reflect the internal state of the speaker—an action that, nevertheless, may have some positive effect on the speaker's well-being and self-perception. In our discussion of magical affirmations below, we will problematise the category of expressives further.

Research in linguistics has provided significant insights into these categories, enhancing our understanding of how they function in everyday language use and their philosophical implications. For example, Bach and Harnish (1979) built on Searle's classifications and explored the pragmatic conditions under which these speech acts are performed, highlighting the importance of mutual contextual beliefs between the speaker and listener, which affect the understanding and success of communication. Problematizing the form-to-function study of speech act types, Knifka (2024) observed that a wide variety of speech acts (including declarations, assertions, observations, and reminders, which in the context of the present study could all be proposed as candidate categories for PUA affirmations) can be expressed in the form of declarative sentences. There has been extensive research on the role and impact of declarations, particularly in legal contexts where the authority of the speaker, such as a judge or legislator, comes directly from legal powers (e.g. Charnock, 2009). Expressives are a less-studied speech act type due to the difficulty of defining their scope, as discussed above; however, they have also received attention from a corpus-based perspective. For example, Ronan (2015) studied expressives in the SPICE Ireland corpus and described eight subtypes of this speech act. Such research helps illuminate how linguistic practices are underpinned by social structures and power dynamics, offering profound insights into the socio-political implications of everyday speech.

### 3. Affirmations in positive psychology vs. PUA materials

Psychologists have studied the role of affirmations as intervention tools backed by self-affirmation theory. Self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988) postulates that people are motivated to maintain self-integrity, “an image of oneself as able to control important adaptive and moral outcomes in one's life” (Cohen and Sherman, 2014: 336). Researchers argue that when one's integrity comes under threat, one avenue of self-defence available to a person is to change one's appraisal of themselves. This can be done through large, significant self-affirmative acts such as winning a sports competition, but smaller acts can also be meaningful: for example, a nursing home patient asserting control over her daily visits (Schulz, 1976). As such, self-affirmation in psychology encompasses a broad category of actions that demonstrate one's adequacy and is not limited to verbal affirmations. A common language-based intervention is to have patients write an affirmation essay about their core values, stating why the values are important to them and describing a time when that importance manifested in a life situation (see 1 for an example). The underlying reasoning is that “against this broadened conception of the self in the world, a particular threat that confronts a person feels less dire” (Cohen and Sherman, 2014: 339).

(1) My friends and family are most important to me when I have a difficult situation that needs to be talked about. My friends give me companionship and courage. My family gives me love and understanding (Shnabel et al., 2013: 664).

Focusing on the linguistic form of affirmations, Schimel et al. (2004) tested the effectiveness of asserting the aspects of self that are contingent on external reality (by completing sentence prompts such as ‘Others recognise I am a good \_\_\_\_\_ when I \_\_\_\_\_’) vs. non-contingent aspects of self (with prompts such as ‘Being a \_\_\_\_\_ reflects my true \_\_\_\_\_’). Those in the intrinsic (non-contingent) condition performed better on a mental arithmetic test task than those in the extrinsic (contingent on external reality) condition and also produced fewer self-handicapping attributions for their performance. This difference between traits contingent on external reality and non-contingent traits is one crucial aspect in which effective affirmations differ from magical spells and will be of critical importance to our upcoming discussion of PUA affirmations.

Self-affirmation has been shown to be effective in buffering against exam stress (Sherman et al., 2009) or interrupting weight gain cycles (Logel & Cohen, 2012); however, empirical studies show mixed results when testing the effect of self-affirmations in enacting long-term behaviour change (Harris & Epton, 2010), for example, quitting drinking or smoking. In addition, Cohen and Sherman (2014: 337) specify that “a key aspect of the affirmation intervention is that its content is self-generated and tailored to tap into each person's particular valued identity”. These aspects of self-affirmations as defined by

psychology appear to go contrary to the declared characteristics of PUA affirmations, that is, their one-size-fits-all nature, their frequent focus on extrinsic aspirations (as we will show in the analysis), and their aim to achieve a lasting change in one's success with women.

PUA community members hold a number of beliefs regarding the effective and correct phrasing of PUA affirmations and how these should be engaged with. For instance, a post on a German PUA forum specifies that affirmations should a) be short and concise as possible, b) be formulated in a non-abstract but 'figuratively associative' manner, and c) contain only 1–2 statements per affirmation (translated from German).<sup>3</sup> The way affirmations are phrased is considered of utmost importance (as one commenter to the videos in our dataset stated, "The subconscious is a very fickle thing and you need to be very careful with what you feed it"). Thus, an affirmation such as "My most important weapon is my humor" is judged as problematic as it "suggests to the subconscious that it needs to fight" (translated from German). A more adequate version is presented as "I am a very humorous person". We can find similar forms of criticism in the comments to the videos in our dataset; see (2) for an example.<sup>4</sup>

(2) That's actually a poor way to phrase an affirmation.

For one thing, you've got "I am \_\_\_ afraid" in it. You are just reminding yourself of being afraid. Instead, "I enjoy discovering when a woman has bad taste," would be better. Reframe it as NOT a matter of rejection at all.

Or, "I enjoy approaching a woman, regardless of the outcome."

Or, "I know that every girl who says No brings me closer to my ideal girl."

In the present study, we examine PUA affirmations to determine whether they appear to follow the guidelines for self-affirmations that had been shown to be effective in improving self-worth (realised linguistically as assertives and expressives), or whether they represent magical thinking (realised linguistically as infelicitous declarations). We describe the pragmatolinguistic patterns that the PUA affirmations exhibit in terms of how the subject is encoded and what verb tense is used.

## 4. Pick-up artists and their pragmatolinguistic repertoire

### 4.1. Data and method

We look at a sample of 412 PUA affirmations collected from 9 different YouTube channels connected to the PUA scene. The affirmations stem from 10 YouTube videos, retrieved via the search term 'PUA affirmations', posted between 2013 and 2023 (collected in April 2023) that received up to 420,000 views, reflecting their status as a popular PUA genre. The length of the videos varies greatly, from 12 min to 8 h. The longer videos present affirmations in a loop, that is, after a number of affirmations, the utterances are repeated (without any variation). We were interested in affirmation 'types' (unique to each video), that is, each affirmation was included in the corpus only once per video. This means that although the resulting collection of affirmations is relatively small (3,294 tokens), it represents a significant length of practice (with the videos running to a combined time of approximately 16.8 h). The current study focuses on the Anglophone PUA community and all the data is in English, although a preliminary survey of the German online space shows that the same genre exists there as well. The affirmations were orthographically transcribed (until the beginning of the first loop) and the corpus was further enriched through POS tagging using the Wmatrix software (Rayson, 2008). Seven of the videos feature a form of background music, while three employ a 'buzzing' sound throughout.<sup>5</sup> There is also variation regarding the voices and vocals used, with the primary voice being male (eight male vs. two female voices) and various forms of echo being used (male or female, overlapping or clearly distinct).

The videos in our dataset are specifically aimed at pick-up artist audiences, as reflected in titles such as "Affirmations To Gain a Pick Up Artist Mindset" and "PUA Affirmations For Men | Deep Inner Game | Attraction and Seduction Relaxation Meditation". The video descriptions usually provide instructions for listening, specifying when and how to engage in specific affirmation practices. The way these are phrased to resemble medication instructions (see 3) or reference science (see 4) depicts affirmations as a serious and effective community practice.

(3) Listen to these affirmations daily for one month to imprint and rewire your subconscious mind to manifesting your new reality. Listen to these words consciously or alternatively leave the audio to play within the background. [...] DO NOT listen whilst driving or operating and [any] form of potentially dangerous equipment or machinery.

(4) No lasting change is possible without reprogramming your subconscious mind. To boost their effectiveness we have added three extra layers. The first and most powerful of these layers is brainwave entrainment, this you will hear in the recordings as a pulse or a beat in the background. The effect of this beat is to slow down your brainwaves, inducing a light trance in which the affirmations are absorbed more easily into your subconscious mind. As we slow your brainwaves down from your normal beta brainwaves through alpha to Theta brainwaves you will find your body and mind naturally relax allowing you to manage stress more effectively. [...] The second layer is to deliver the power affirmations with a voice that sounds like I am speaking in a cathedral. Research as shown that this type of voice is most effectively absorbed by the subconscious mind. [...]

<sup>3</sup> PUA communities around the globe draw on the use of affirmations. The norms described here are not language-specific (as in that they do not refer to e.g. particular syntactic constructions). Our analysis focuses on English-language affirmations exclusively.

<sup>4</sup> All examples from the comments and video descriptions are reproduced without changes to the original spelling.

<sup>5</sup> As one video description explains "This audio uses a 0.5hz isochronic tone (delta) with a carrier of 100hz to create a deep hypnotic state of consciousness in which the affirmations can take root. Within the background is a pure sine wave, mainly just for ambience".

The method used in this study combines manual annotation of utterance function and goal with the quantification of linguistic features. Existing research problematises the study of speech act types that attempts to match function to a set of specific forms (see e.g. Knifka, 2024). Nevertheless, within one genre that relies on formulaic structures it is possible to identify linguistic patterns frequently associated with each speech act type. For this study, after a manual annotation for pragmatic aspects, we annotated the surface form of each affirmation in order to find out whether such patterns occur.

Thus, as the first step of the analysis, we used POS tagging to describe each affirmation utterance in terms of its subject (expressed as a noun phrase or a pronoun) and verb tense in the main clause (present or future). As the next analytical step, we manually annotated the affirmations according to their desired perlocutionary effect in terms of whether they concern the aspects of self that are contingent on external reality (for example, other people's opinion of the speaker) or the non-contingent aspects of self (for example, the speaker's self-belief). Finally, we annotated the illocutionary force of each utterance to classify the speech act as declaration, assertive, or expressive. Given the unusual dataset, the process of illocutionary force annotation in itself constituted a part of the analytical process and demanded theoretical decisions to be made. These will be presented in Section 4.2.1 below. An overview of our coding scheme can be found in Table 1, example codings are presented in Table 2.

A last important point to be considered here is the particular participant framework enacted in the affirmations in our dataset, especially the speaker roles (Goffman, 1981). While the producer of the video composed the utterances (i.e. inhabits the role of author), the animator (i.e. the person or entity voicing the utterances) is the voice which we can hear when listening to the videos (this can be the voice of the animator, a voice actor, or a computer-generated voice). The role of principal, that is, the person whose opinions or views the utterance expresses, however, is transferred to the listener. It is not the author or animator who are supposed to be influenced by the affirmations but the audience. We can see this reflected in the use of first-person singular pronoun *I* in the affirmation dataset: the *I* in an affirmation such as “I am confident and unstoppable” is localising the hearer at its deictic centre.

**Table 1**  
Coding scheme.

Code	Code variants	Definition
Contingency (coding unit: whole affirmation utterance)	Speaker	Concerns the non-contingent aspects of self (for example, the speaker's self-belief)
	External	Concerns the aspects of self that are contingent on external reality (i.e. the ones that only exist in relation to other people, or other people's opinion of the speaker)
Illocution type (coding unit: whole affirmation utterance)	Declaration	Speech acts that purport to change the external reality and aim at the world-to-words fit. In affirmations, declarations often are statements about the wishful future state, qualities, and outside perception of the PUA. To be felicitous, the preparatory condition must hold.
	Assertive	Speech acts where the speaker commits to the truth of the stated proposition, with the word-to world direction of fit.
	Expressive [ultimately merged with the 'declaration' category, see 4.2.1]	Speech acts expressing the speaker's attitudes and emotions about the proposition; neither world-to-words nor word-to-world but intended to accurately reflect the internal state of the speaker. They express psychological conditions that arise to given states of affairs, not beliefs or intentions. To be felicitous, the sincerity condition must hold.
Subject POS (coding unit: the subject of the affirmation utterance)	1sg.Pron	<i>I</i>
	2Pron	<i>You</i>
	NP	Any noun or noun phrase
	VP	Gerund or infinitive phrase functioning as a subject
	1Pos.Pron + NP	<i>My</i> + any noun or noun phrase
Verb tense and aspect (coding unit: the finite verb in the main clause of the affirmation utterance)	Clause	Clause functioning as a subject
	Present simple	
	Present continuous	
	Future	

**Table 2**  
Example affirmations with coding.

Affirmation utterance	Subject POS	Verb tense and aspect	Illocution	Contingency
My personality is magnetic.	1Pos.Pron + NP	Present simple	Declaration	External
Practice makes perfect.	NP	Present simple	Assertive	Speaker
Women can sense my self-confidence.	NP	Present simple	Declaration	External
I enjoy meeting new women.	1sg.Pron	Present simple	?Expressive >> declaration	Speaker
I am persistent and push through setbacks.	1sg.Pron	Present simple	Declaration	Speaker
I will have beautiful women around me all the time.	1sg.Pron	Future	Declaration	External

## 4.2. Analysis

### 4.2.1. Speech act types as applied to PUA affirmations

As noted in the previous section, the process of assigning the speech act type to the items in this study has in itself necessitated an interpretative analysis of affirmations and interrogating the speech act categories of declarations, expressives, and assertives.

First, we faced difficulty applying the codebook definitions of assertives and declarations to PUA affirmations. Per Searle's (1969) definition, word-to-world vs. world-to-words fit is a distinguishing property of assertives vs. declarations. However, while many of the PUA affirmations resemble assertives because they look like statements describing the state of the world (e.g. "I always go after what I want"), they in fact describe a desired future state of the world which the PUA believes to be bringing about by virtue of producing the utterance. As such, they constitute declarations. If we were to reformulate such an utterance using the 'hereby test' frame, we could suggest a performative along the lines of "I hereby manifest the state of affairs where [I always go after what I want]". Since our aim was to carry out the annotation according to the speaker intention, we used felicity conditions as a tool to assist us in making a distinction between assertives and declarations. If the PUA was using an assertive, he would be knowingly producing an infelicitous speech act because he does not believe in the truth of the proposition. If the PUA's intended illocution is a declaration, it is felicitous because in his magical thinking he believes the preparatory condition is met. Therefore, in contested cases, we decided to annotate such utterances as declarations from the PUA's point of view.

Further problems we encountered in the analysis concerned expressives. Expressive speech acts are usually formulated in the present tense because they by definition express the internal state of the speaker at the present moment. However, since in their magical affirmations PUAs project a desired internal state into a future they intend to actuate through the affirmation, our dataset contains an unusual type of expressive formulated using *will*. An example is "I will be positive and excited when approaching" ('to approach' is a PUA term used both transitively and intransitively to describe starting a conversation with a woman with the aim of seducing her). One possible interpretation is that the intended illocution is to express a genuine emotional state of the speaker; since the situation is projected into a desired future and the projected speaker is one's future self expressing one's emotional state at that projected moment, the affirmation is coached in the future tense. This consideration further led us to consider the defining criteria of expressives and declarations, as summarised in Section 2.2 above.

The question arises as to what criterion is the decisive one when assigning a speech act category. Given that expressives seem to be the most problematic category that previous research did not manage to define with a sufficient degree of precision, it is this one that we chose to discard. Expressives seem to have been defined almost exclusively on the basis of a content criterion of expressing emotion or state of mind.

As a result, we merged the category of expressive into the declaration speech act. The guiding principle in this decision is our orientation to the core feature of a speech act, that is, an action the speaker intends to perform. A useful theoretical distinction in this case is Austin's (1962) notion of illocutionary force as the function or purpose of an utterance in a specific context, indicating the speaker's intention. Illocutionary force can be seen as different from the more theoretically abstract concept of speech act type (see e.g. the discussion in Tsiplakou & Floros, 2013). In this respect, the illocutionary force of affirmations—their main action according to the speaker's assumed intention—is to articulate a desired state of affairs that the PUA aims to achieve. In some cases, this state of affairs may be coached in terms of an emotional state; in others, in terms of speaker-external reality. All of such speech actions that describe a desired future state that a PUA believes can be brought about by repeating the affirmation were annotated as 'declaration'.

Finally, this analytical process has highlighted the tenuous status of the category of expressives within the overall speech act ecology as outlined by Searle, which we will take up in Section 5.

### 4.2.2. Linguistic patterns in the magical affirmations

Overall, declaration is the most common type of speech act found in PUA magical affirmations (388 utterances, or 96% of all utterances in our corpus).<sup>6</sup> Among these, 29 utterances were initially coded as expressives; as discussed in the previous section, we ultimately decided to include these under the 'declaration' category since in all instances, the statements ostensibly describing the speaker's feelings or state of mind were in fact projecting a desired future state to be achieved through the repetition of magical affirmations. Assertives are the distinctly less common type of speech act at 16 utterances or 4% of all utterances in the corpus. This reflects dissatisfaction with the current state of the world and preoccupation with changing it, typically towards one where the speaker is more attractive, masculine, confident, and desired by women.

Linguistic markers in the affirmations serve as contextualisation cues to clarify the intended meaning of the utterances. The majority of affirmations across speech act types is formulated as first-person statements in the present tense (see Tables 3 and 4), although the proportional distribution differs somewhat: declarations exhibit a variety of other subject types, including nominal and verbal subjects and relative clauses. *I*-statements account for 62% of declarations. Assertives also have subjects other than the first-person singular pronoun but are overall more formulaic (i.e. tend to conform to the one preferred pattern and exhibit less variation). Compared to self-affirmations attested in positive psychology experiments, as described in

<sup>6</sup> 8 utterances were excluded from the analysis as after three rounds of coding, the annotators could not agree on an interpretation; therefore, the analysis is based on the total of 404 coded examples.

Section 3, we find a difference in the agents of the affirmations: while affirmative statements in psychological interventions primarily involve the self, PUA affirmations involve a broad variety of other actors (see Table 5). This reflects the magical thinking behind the affirmations, showing that PUAs see them as capable of influencing third-party feelings and actions.

Utterances with the finite verb in the present tenses invoke an existing state of affairs (i.e. “I have always been attractive to women”), as opposed to a change to be brought about by affirmations, expressed using the *will* auxiliary verb/modality marker. The majority of *will* uses occur among the declarations (see Table 4) which underscores their focus on the projected future.

**Table 3**  
Frequencies of subject variants per speech act.

	<i>I</i>	<i>You</i>	3Pron	1Pos.Pron + NP (e.g. <i>my mind</i> )	Clause	NP	VP	Total
<b>Declaration</b>	245	40	5	19	1	66	12	388
<b>Assertive</b>	4	0	3	2	0	5	2	16

**Table 4**  
Frequencies of verb tense variants per speech act.

	Present Simple	Present Continuous	Present Perfect	Future/ <i>will</i>	Total
<b>Declaration</b>	339	34	2	13	388
<b>Assertive</b>	15	0	0	1	16

**Table 5**  
Frequencies of contingency types per speech act.

	Contingent on external factors	Non-contingent on external factors	Total
<b>Declaration</b>	261	127	388
<b>Assertive</b>	7	9	16

To find out whether there is a consistent pattern in the use of linguistic forms and in the actors included in different affirmation speech acts, we conducted four chi-square tests and applied a Bonferroni correction. The results showed a significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) correlation between the speech act type and the contingency type, as well as the speech act type and the subject form. This indicates a strong association between declarations and utterances describing the state of affairs contingent on external factors. Somewhat surprisingly, the verb form does not correlate with speech act type. This indicates that PUA affirmations do not follow the prevalent linguistic pattern of ‘classic’ declarations, which are very commonly expressed as explicit speech acts in the form of “I + performative verb in Present Simple” (consider, for example, textbook examples such as “I declare war” or “I hereby christen this ship Cape Rouge”). This provides further support to the Relevance-theoretic view of illocutionary force as something not lexicalised but arising in context and being contextually and culturally dependent (Lenci, 1995; Tsipakou & Floros, 2013).

Below we will look in more detail at the declaration speech acts involving external contingencies to gain a better understanding of this PUA-specific illocution. It is important to keep in mind that the speaker can only expect such declarations to be felicitous if he follows magical thinking patterns, in which stating things about people’s behaviour or emotions has the potential to make them true, even if they are not true in the moment of speaking.

#### 4.2.3. PUA declarations

In our sample, affirmations coded as a declaration speech act most frequently describe a situation that cannot come to pass through actions of the speaker alone but requires changes in the external reality (that is, is contingent on external factors). Out of the full sample of declarations ( $N = 388$ ), 67% of examples ( $N = 261$ ) were coded as contingent on external factors. Given the values and aims of the PUA community, such changes typically involve women finding the speaker attractive, or, broadly, other people finding the speaker to possess traditional masculine qualities such as confidence, dominance, power, and eloquence (see 5 and 6).

(5) Beautiful women find me irresistibly attractive.

(6) Others see me as a confident and charismatic person.

In this external contingency sample, non-performative utterances using as subject nouns and noun phrases, third- and second-person pronouns, or, possibly, verb phrases and clauses account for 41% of examples. The different types are demonstrated in examples (7)–(10).

(7) Women [N] are attracted to my ability to just be myself.

(8) A field of attraction energy [NP] surrounds you, it creates an attraction no woman can resist.

(9) Approaching women [VP] is just a natural normal part of my life.

(10) What I desire [clause] is already mine.



The remaining 59% of externally contingent affirmations are realised through non-performative *I*-statements (example 11) or using the first-person possessive pronouns in combination with identity aspects, and therefore also the speaker as agent (example 12).

(11) I am super outgoing.

(12) My personality is magnetic.

Examples (5)–(12) illustrate the core type of PUA affirmations, which we dubbed ‘magical affirmations’. Although the majority (54.7%) of such utterances uses *I* as a subject, in line with what we would expect in declaration speech acts, and all of them intend a world-to-words direction of fit, the preparatory conditions for such utterances could never be met. For example, in order for example (12) to be felicitous, there needs to exist a social contract through which it is possible for one person to implant universally or selectively a particular view of their character onto other people. If this ultimate feat of persuasion was not unlikely enough, this act needs to be accomplished without interaction between the speaker and others but simply by virtue of the speaker pronouncing the words (while looking at himself in the mirror at home) or listening to someone else speak those words on his behalf (while listening to them in his sleep).

To round up the discussion of PUA affirmations, it is important to also mention the category of declarations that are only contingent on the aspects of self. This is the type of affirmation that we dubbed ‘genuine affirmations’, since they resemble affirmations discussed in the literature on positive psychology and can at least in theory achieve the world-to-words fit. They account for 33% (N = 127) of all declarations in the sample.

(13) I see myself through the eyes of success.

Example (13) illustrates such an affirmation, which, in line with the discussion in Section 3, attempts to reinforce one’s own feeling of adequacy through a positive appraisal of self. Framing it as a self-evaluation is especially helpful to differentiate between magical and genuine affirmations. However, genuine affirmations in our sample may also be less prototypical, such as example (14), which lacks a self-evaluative framing.

(14) I am fearless today and every day.

All in all, PUA declarations can be meaningfully understood as placed along a continuum with prototypical magical affirmation vs. prototypical genuine affirmation as its cardinal points. The closer an utterance lies to the genuine affirmation end, the less contingent on external factors it is and the more possible it is that its preparatory conditions can indeed be met. The closer an utterance lies to the magical affirmation end, the more contingent on external factors it is and the likelihood of its preparatory conditions being met tends to zero. Fig. 1 sketches several stages of this continuum and outlines the formal aspects that guide the placement of each affirmation closer to or further away from the ‘magic’ end.

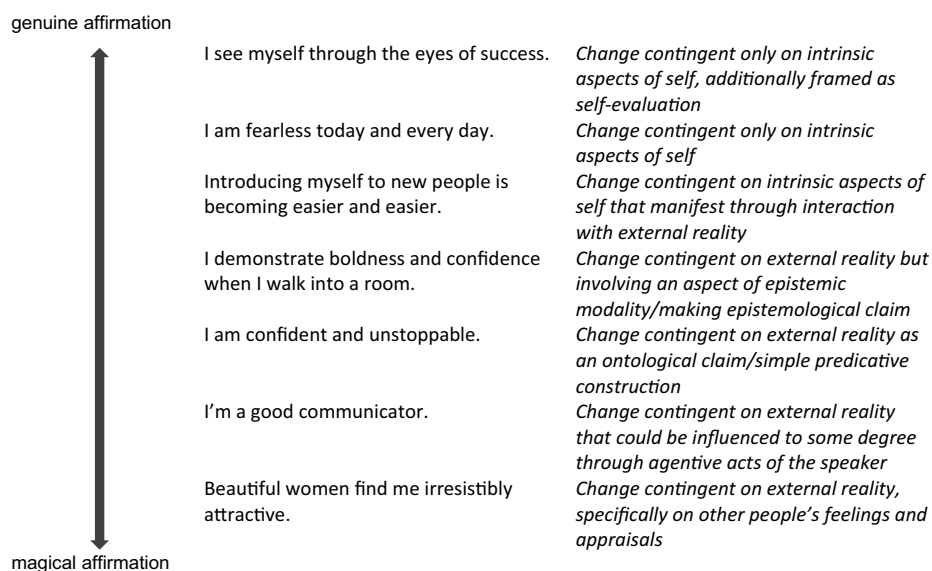


Fig. 1. PUA declarations continuum.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This study set out to descriptively analyse a previously undescribed type of speech activity found within the pick-up artist community: the use of ‘affirmations’ inspired by positive psychology. These affirmations are voice statements about self or aspects of self that are intended to be repeated (and listened to on repeat) to achieve self-improvement results, such as becoming more confident or attractive. Through qualitative and quantitative analysis of 412 affirmations collected from YouTube videos, we were able to gain novel insights into this community’s linguistic practices and their theoretical implications.

Firstly, our analysis revealed that from a speech act theoretical perspective, most PUA affirmations (96%) function as declaration speech acts. This diverges from uses of affirmations described in positive psychology literature, which tend to be self-directed expressives or assertives aimed at bolstering self-integrity. Similar to magical spells, PUA magical affirmations have as their object a third person or some other aspect of external reality, while the object of the psychology affirmations with proven benefit is the speaker himself. By claiming to directly impact external reality through repeating utterances aloud, PUA affirmations reflect the community’s broader assumptions of near-magical control over social outcomes.

Classifying these utterances also required reinterpreting established speech act categories. For instance, we identified a new subtype of future-oriented expressives expressing projected emotional states. More significantly, we had to distinguish declarations from assertives based on preparatory conditions rather than direction of fit alone, since PUA affirmations describe desired future states as accomplished facts. This expands theoretical understanding of fringe illocutionary forces.

Quantitatively, we found declarations most often concern contingencies on external appraisal and target a type of world-to-words fit that is impossible to achieve. Linguistically, they vary in terms of what grammatical element functions as a subject but predominantly use first-person statements. This profile models the community’s aspirations. Although it is conceivable that magical affirmations can be phrased as interrogatives or imperatives, all the examples in our dataset are declarative sentences, and the perceived norms for formulating affirmations (see Section 3) appear to favour declaratives with positive polarity.

In conclusion, studying this novel speech activity through its linguistic expressions raises questions for classic speech act theory. Undoubtedly, the data dealt with in this paper represent a marginal communicative activity and cannot be taken as a starting point for questioning the taxonomy validated on much more ubiquitous types of data over the years. That is not what we propose. However, a survey of linguistic sources attempting to define and describe different speech act types using qualitative as well as corpus approaches shows expressives’ tenuous status in the taxonomy. Unlike other speech act types, they do not have a broadly accepted definition, with various authors disagreeing on what exactly constitutes an expression of emotion or state of mind and how such an expression should be delimited from the assertive speech act type. Expressives also do not lend themselves to linguistic operationalisation, thus indicating a weak construct. On the basis of these observations, we believe it could be a fruitful avenue for further work in linguistic theory to review the scope of assertives and expressives further.

Finally, the study sheds light on the community’s underlying assumptions, revealing that PUA affirmations serve less to empower individuals than to legitimise a harmful ideology. They treat social interaction as magical manipulation estranged from reality. This perspective undoubtedly misleads and frustrates community members (as one comment underneath a video in our dataset notes: “These affirmations don’t work”), potentially pushing some towards more extreme misogyny. The underlying assumption is that the foot soldiers of the PUA community, the ones who consume the gurus’ content, believe in the near-magic powers of these affirmations. This is yet another cornerstone in the pseudoscientific paradigm of pick-up, which relies on giving full power over any social interaction to the pick-up artist (cf. their seduction scripts that treat any woman as an object without agency)—a view that is completely divorced from the realities of the social world. This misleads men and leads to frustration and enables the pipeline to more extreme misogynist communities like incels. Overall, our descriptive analysis provides a case study in how even fringe language practices merit scrutiny for what they reveal about worldviews and their social consequences.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Daria Dayter:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Sofia Rüdiger:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to this article.

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## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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