

# **A Cross-Cultural Study of Compliments and Compliment Responses in Conversation**

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## **Abstract :**

This article examines previous studies of compliments and compliment responses in different cultures and languages. Compliments are speech acts that are used to negotiate solidarity in daily conversation, which are related to the concepts of face work in politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1978; Herbert, 1986; Holmes, 1986). They are formulaic since particular positive verbs and adjectives tend to be used (Holmes, 1986; Manes and Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson, 1981).

However, practices associated with giving and receiving compliments differ across cultures, and this can become a source of cross-cultural miscommunication. For example, Western speakers tend to use and accept compliments more often than Asian speakers. In addition, some speakers might compliment different objects; for example, Polish people tend to give compliments on possessions while Americans tend to compliment people's characteristics, especially in conversation with someone close to the speaker (Barnlund and Araki, 1985; Herbert, 1991). Japanese tend to give compliments on the ability and work of acquaintances rather than people with whom they have a close relationship (Barnlund and Araki, 1985; Daikuhara, 1986). Therefore, this article emphasizes the importance of understanding different uses of compliments among cultures because speakers might misunderstand each other in cross-cultural communication.

**Key words:** compliment, compliment response, cross-cultural comparison, discourse analysis, Japanese conversation

## **1. Introduction**

People in different cultures might misunderstand each other because they express themselves differently and might misread what others have said. In order to clarify these differences, discourse analysis has been carried out to study the meanings of speech interaction and written texts.

In this approach, differences in the ways people give and respond to compliments cross-culturally, and the use of compliments in conversation, have been examined across cultures since the 1980s. For example, Herbert (1986) studied American and South African data, Chick (1996) analysed South African compliments, Holmes and Brown (1987) examined New Zealand data, and Wolfson (1981, 1983) compared American compliments with other cultures. In addition to cultural differences, speakers' different social backgrounds, including gender, might also show disparate compliment behaviour.

Therefore, this article will examine previous studies of compliments in speech interaction. First, the previous literature on compliments across cultures will be discussed. Second, compliment behaviour in Japanese conversation will be examined in order to determine differences of compliment behaviour across cultures. Politeness might work differently depending on the society, culture, and speech situation. Many previous researchers have claimed that these aspects can cause misunderstandings among speakers.

## **2. Compliments in conversation**

Compliments are used to negotiate solidarity with an addressee in order to make people feel good (Herbert, 1986). Holmes (1986, 1995: 117) states that 'a compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some 'good' (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer'. Additionally, Herbert (1986: 77) claims that compliment responses seem to express that recipients acknowledge the kindness and/or offer of solidarity in the compliment.

A compliment is often described as a face-threatening act in previous studies. Lorenzo-Dus (2001) explains that compliments are a type of speech act and relate to the theory of linguistic politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978). In this speech act, speakers have to decide whether to foreground either positive or negative politeness when giving and/or receiving compliments. There are both positive and negative aspects to using compliments. For example, compliments can attend positive politeness by giving positive comments or can cause embarrassment to interlocutors, including a face-threatening act (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001). Holmes (1986: 487) explains that compliments can be used as a positive politeness device when a speaker pays attention to a listener's interests, needs, and wants, while a compliment can work as a face-threatening act when they are understood as a cause of embarrassment. Holmes (1988) defines the function of compliments as a positive speech act that serves to increase solidarity between speakers and addressees. She also adds that almost every act has the potential for being perceived as a face-threatening act because of the diversity among cultures. Thus, responding to a compliment poses a dilemma for speakers (Pomerantz, 1978) since they have to balance two conflicting conversational principles, such as agreeing with one's conversational co-participants and avoiding self-praise (Herbert, 1989).

### **3. Giving a compliment**

The way in which people give compliments is generally formulaic, since particular verbs, syntactic forms, and adjectives, which describe positive evaluations, are often used (Manes and Wolfson, 1981). Wolfson (1981: 120) states that American Compliments reveal a total lack of originality and include many repetitions. In the study, 80% of her data used adjectives to show positive semantic value, and the top five adjectives were 'nice', 'good', 'beautiful', 'pretty', and 'great' (Wolfson, 1981). Example sentences from her data are shown below :

- (1) Your apartment's nice.
- (2) That's a good question.

- (3) You have such a beautiful baby.
  - (4) You look pretty today.
  - (5) That was a really great meal.
- (Wolfson, 1981: 121)

In Wolfson's (1981) data, two particular verbs, 'like' and 'love', frequently occurred. Moreover, 86% of compliments used positive verbs, and 56% of compliments used simple syntactic patterns, such as 'is' and 'looks'. In another study, Manes and Wolfson (1981) also showed that nearly 90% of compliments used positive verbs such as 'like' and 'love' in their data.

- (6) I like your bookcase.
  - (7) I love your outfit.
  - (8) Your tie is really beautiful.
- (Wolfson, 1981: 121-122)

Comparing Wolfson's American data and Holmes' New Zealand data, it is clear that four common syntactic patterns are used (see Table 1). Moreover, the most commonly used adjectives in New Zealand English were 'nice', 'good', 'lovely', 'beautiful', and 'great' (Holmes, 1986), and similarly, five common adjectives in American English were used: 'nice', 'good', 'beautiful', 'pretty', and 'great' (Wolfson, 1981).

**Table 1. Syntactic Patterns of Compliments**

	Syntactic formula	NZ	USA
1	a. NP BE (INT) ADJ e.g. Your hair is really great. b. BE LOOKing e.g. You're looking terrific.	41.4%	53.6%
2	I (INT) LIKE / LOVE NP e.g. I simply love that skirt.	15.9%	16.1%
3	a. PRO BE a (INT) ADJ NP e.g. That's a very nice coat. b. PRO BE (INT) (a) ADJ NP e.g. That's really great juice.	13.0%	14.9%
4	(INT) ADJ (NP) e.g. Really cool earrings.	7.7%	1.6%
	TOTAL	78.0%	86.2%

(Holmes, 1986)<sup>1</sup>

#### 4. Receiving a compliment

Compliment responses have also been widely studied among different cultures. This chapter discusses American and South African compliment responses. Pomerantz (1978) investigated compliment responses and stated that two conditions need to be achieved, which are agreement and acceptance. To accomplish this, compliment receivers are required to produce modest responses by using rejections and disagreements in order to avoid self-praise such as saying 'Thank you'. Pomerantz (1978: 88) explains: 'if self-praise is performed by a

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<sup>1</sup> NP means noun phrase; ADJ means adjective; INT means intensifier; and PRO means pronoun.

speaker, that is, if a speaker does not enforce upon himself self-praise avoidance, a recipient may in the next turn make notice of the violation and enforce the constraints' (see Example (9) below).

- (9) K : . . . Y'see I'm so terrific,  
 A : Y'see folks, he is *very vain*, an'he realizes his mature talents compared to our meagre contents of our mind.  
 (Pomerantz, 1978: 89)

Herbert (1986) categorized compliment responses by Pomerantz (1978) into three groups: A, B, and C (see below). This categorization differs from Chick (1996), whose categorizations consist of accepting, deflating, deflecting, rejecting, questioning, ignoring, and reinterpreting.

<i>Response Type</i>	<i>Example</i>
A. Agreement	
I. Acceptances	
1. Appreciation Token	Thanks; thank you ; [smile]
2. Comment Acceptance	Thanks, it's my favorite too.
3. Praise Upgrade	Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?
II. Comment History	I bought it for the trip to Arizona.
III. Transfers	
1. Reassignment	My brother gave it to me.
2. Return	So's yours.
B. Nonagreement	
I. Scale Down	It's really quite old.
II. Question	Do you really think so?
III. Nonacceptances	
1. Disagreement	I hate it.
2. Qualification	It's all right, but Len's is nicer.
IV. No Acknowledgement	[silence]
C. Other Interpretations	
I. Request	You wanna borrow this one too?

(Herbert, 1986: 79)

Under this categorization, Herbert (1986) claimed that one-third of compliment responses are acceptances, approximately 66% of responses are agreements, and over 31% of responses are non-agreements in his data collected from undergraduate students at the State University of New York.

Moreover, compliment responses can differ according to speaker's race. Chick (1996) studied compliment responses at the University of Natal in Durban, South Africa, and found that approximately 40% of compliment responses by Indians and Whites were acceptances, while only 27% of responses by Blacks were acceptances. In addition, to show disagreements, Indian students (10.4%) used more disagreements than Whites (3.6%) and black students (3.1%). As such, this difference could lead to intercultural miscommunication among different races of speakers.

For example, Indian disagreements tended to be very direct while the white speakers tended to use hedges for solving a conflict among speakers (see Examples (10) and (11) from Chick (1996)). The Indian speakers' overt disagreement in (10) might be interpreted as being rude although the speaker does not intend offense (Chick, 1996).

(10) Disagreement by an Indian speaker

A: Your hair looks nice today.

B: It's a mess.

A: No, it's not.

(Chick, 1996: 335)

(11) Disagreement by a white speaker

A: You look very bright today.

B: Well, I don't feel very bright.

(Chick, 1996: 335)

## **5. Compliment behaviour among different cultures**

Previous research on compliments has been widely carried out among cultures including the previous examples of America, New Zealand, and South Africa. In addition to English-speaking cultures, German, Spanish, Polish, Chinese, and Japanese languages have also been investigated. In this section, previous studies of compliments will be examined in order to determine any differences among languages and cultures.

In the literature, South African and New Zealand English have been compared in terms of compliments and compliment responses. For example, Herbert (1986) originally examined university students in South Africa and Britain, and found similar results, in which one in four speakers gave agreement responses while non-agreements accounted for 12% of the responses by both South Africans and British university students (Herbert, 1986).

However in a different study by Herbert and Straight (1989), South Africans were less willing to offer compliments than Americans, as they considered compliments less necessary than Americans. South African students tended to mildly reject nearly a quarter of the compliments they received in order to avoid engaging in self-praise (Herbert and Straight, 1989).

In Holmes' (1995) study conducted in New Zealand, New Zealanders tended to accept compliments (60%), and approximately 30% were deflections (evasions) and only 10% were rejections. She also analysed compliments in relation to several social characteristics including gender, social status, and intimacy, between speakers and addressees. In her data, a relationship between speakers and addressees, and the degree of speakers' intimacy, accounted for the rejections after receiving compliments. This was the case because people were honest with others who they had an intimate and close relationship with, and solidarity overrode differences in social status (Holmes, 1995).

German compliment responses were analysed by Golato (2002) in a study of conversational data from German speakers ranging in age from 23 to 70 years old. In the results, Golato (2002) claims that German



native speakers overwhelmingly accepted compliments; however, they did not use appreciation markers such as ‘Thank you’. Instead, they simply accepted by saying ‘Yes’, which suggest Germans did not tend to disagree with the compliments they received. Golato (2002) states that the Germans in the study only offered compliments when they really admired addressees and/or objects because the truthfulness of compliments was important. Consequently, they offered compliments much less than Americans did (Golato, 2002).

- (12) A: ihr habt ja so en schönes    zwiebelmuster hier,  
          you have m. p.<sup>2</sup> so a nice    onion pattern here,  
          *you have such a nice onion pattern here,*  
      B: joa :  
          ye: s  
          ye: s  
      (Golato, 2002: 557)

Compliment responses differed between Spanish and British university students (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001). Lorenzo-Dus (2001) states that Spanish students offered compliments in a more direct way than British students did because Spanish students explicitly showed their emotions. British and Spanish students liked humour and they often returned compliments ironically; however, Lorenzo-Dus (2001) suggested that different uses of ironic responses could lead to misunderstandings. For example, Spanish male speakers tended to use ironic compliments too frequently and they further continued with three or four different compliment responses (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001). On the other hand, British students provided only one or two socially appropriate compliment responses, thus Lorenzo-Dus (2001) concluded that British people would misunderstand Spanish speakers as they were exceedingly confident and boastful.

Polish compliments were studied by Herbert (1991) using data

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<sup>2</sup> m.p. = modal particle. (Golato, 2002: 557)

collected from university students in Poland. His study showed that over half of compliments were adjectival compliments, such as ‘nice’, ‘great’, and ‘lovely’, and these type of compliments appeared among Polish speakers less frequently than Americans. Moreover, Polish speakers often gave compliments on possessions, which accounted for approximately 50% of the data, whereas only 11% of the data were in the same category as Holmes’ (1995) data from New Zealand. Herbert (1991) explained that the acquisition of goods in everyday life was regarded as an accomplishment for the Polish, and the complimenter personally expressed admiration for the object and the addressee’s judgment in choosing to acquire it (see Examples (13) and (14)). However in response, Polish people tended to disagree with the compliment and tried to avoid self-praise more so than Americans did (Herbert, 1991).

(13) *To piękny dom.*

That’s a beautiful house.

(Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 1989: 74)

(14) *To nowa koszula? Ladna.*

Is that a new shirt? Nice.

(Herbert, 1991: 392)

Chinese compliments have been also widely analysed. Yu (2005) collected conversational data in Taipei and Boston, and he found differences between Chinese and American compliments and compliment responses. In his result, both Chinese and Americans offered compliments directly rather than indirectly, although the Chinese used them less than half frequently than the Americans did. For the Chinese, supportive moves and small talk were important for Chinese politeness behaviours and face concerns (Yu, 1999). Therefore, Chinese speakers often gave compliments as part of supportive moves and/or small talk, while the Americans did not use many compliments in supportive moves and/or small talk (Yu, 2005). The Americans used compliments in order

to show their friendliness, while the Chinese tended to find compliments embarrassing and consequently used them much less frequently than the Americans did. Compliments reflected genuine admiration among the Chinese people rather than solidarity, and as a result, they tended to compliment on the ability and/or performance of addressees (Yu, 2005). Yu (2005) also emphasized that addressees' social status was an important factor for Chinese speakers, and they often gave compliments to friends and colleagues who were in the same position as the speakers. Consequently, there were more downward compliments than upwards compliments among the Chinese speakers, suggesting that sociocultural meanings in society influenced the use of Chinese compliments. Thus, Yu (2005) concluded that the influence of cultural norms could never be ignored. As a result, the words 'like' and 'love' were not usually used in compliments by the Chinese, suggesting that the meaning of these words were not equivalent and they were not used in the same way in the Chinese and English languages (Yu, 2005).

The way in which Chinese people use compliments has been changing since the early nineties. Chen and Yang (2010) compared previous studies of compliments in the Chinese language, including Chen (1993) and Yu (2003), and suggested that the drastic change in responding to compliments was a result of the influence of Western cultures. For example, in the study conducted by Chen in 1993, acceptances of compliments represented only 1.03% of the data and rejections were 95.73%. Meanwhile, in the study in 2010, acceptances increased to 62.60% and rejections decreased to 9.13%. These differences suggested that the notion of self-image and self-confidence had significantly changed because of contact with Western culture. As a result, Chen and Yang (2010: 1960) state that Chinese people have given up much of their modesty for the sake of agreeing with others when responding to compliments.

## **6. Previous studies of Japanese compliments**

Japanese compliments have also been investigated and compared to the English language. For example, Barnlund and Araki (1985)

conducted questionnaires and interviews among 56 American and Japanese university students, and their results indicated that compliment behaviour was culturally different and that Japanese students tended to offer compliments nonverbally and indirectly.

In their study, American and Japanese students used compliments for different purposes and different types of addressees. American students tended to give compliments on appearance (34%) and personal traits (33%), whereas Japanese students tended to give compliments praising one's skills (31%), work and study (19%), and appearance (19%). Americans tended to praise their partner's personal traits (33%), while Japanese people did so less frequently and less directly commented on the personality of their associates (11%). Furthermore, Americans tended to give compliments to close friends (49%) rather than acquaintances (15%) while Japanese people tended to offer compliments to acquaintances (34%) rather than to close friends (16%). Thus, Daikuhara (1986) claimed that Japanese compliments showed strong cultural values that are related to formal attributes in modern Japanese society, such as going to famous schools, coming from well-bred families, and owning money. Therefore, Japanese people rarely gave compliments to their spouses, and avoided self-praise and showed disagreement (over 70%) (Daikuhara, 1986).

To what extent speakers show their feelings with compliments also differs between American and Japanese people. For example, Barnlund and Araki (1985) found that Americans used a larger variety of adjectives and many superlatives, such as 'fantastic' and 'great', while Japanese often used limited vocabulary to praise, and they were less confident and more humble than Americans. Daikuhara (1986) also found that Japanese people used simple words when giving compliments, such as *ii* (good), *sugoi* (great), *kirei* (beautiful and clean), and *kawaii* (pretty and cute), and over 80% of adjectival compliments included these words in her study.

In addition, previous studies showed that Japanese people tend to praise acquaintances and prefer to respond to compliments nonverbally or with questioning and denying, while Americans prefer to praise

people explicitly in their close relationship (Barnlund and Araki, 1985). Example (15) shows types of Japanese compliment responses when a compliment receiver finds it difficult to accept the compliment, denies it, and returns another compliment. Only a few cases in Daikuhara's (1986) study showed an appreciation, such as saying 'Thank you', and she proposed that showing one's deference to someone by giving compliments was a politeness strategy that helped create harmony and solidarity.

- (15) JJ1 : *Iie. Ano sukoshi murishite katta n desu kedo...*  
(denial-mitigation)  
(No. Well, I bought (his house) although it was a little more than I could afford but...)
- JJ2 : *Iie. Sensei mo nakanaka umai desu yo.* (denial-return)  
(No. You (Professor) are pretty good, too. )
- AJ1 : *Ie ie.* (denial)  
(No, no.)
- AJ2 : *Sonna koto nai desu.* (denial)  
(Not really.)  
(Saito and Beecken, 1997: 372)

These differences among American and Japanese people would make it difficult for them to acquire pragmatic competence in the target language. In fact, the different strategies used for compliments by Japanese speakers and Americans have influenced the way in which American learners use compliments in the Japanese language (Saito and Beecken, 1997). Saito and Beecken (1997) found that American learners of the Japanese language showed pragmatic transfer when offering compliments in the Japanese language. For example, American learners of the Japanese language tended to accept compliments rather than avoid agreeing with compliments from both teachers and friends, when the compliments matched with their own self-evaluation. Saito and Beecken (1997) concluded that both pragmatic transfer and a lack of language proficiency influenced this result.

Furthermore, Wolfson (1981) provided an example with Americans and

Japanese speakers where compliments could not be fully comprehended by addressees who had a different cultural background. She explained that American people could not understand why Japanese people used money and school as compliments, and why these topics related to someone's attractiveness (see Example (16) below). She claimed that some Japanese compliments would not be considered complimentary by speakers of American English (Wolfson, 1981: 119).

(16) S: Your earrings are pure gold, aren't they?

A: Yes, they are. They must be pure gold when you put them on.

S: Money is a necessary condition to become attractive, indeed.

A: I think so too.

(Wolfson, 1981: 119)

## **7. Conclusion**

This article has illustrated the diverse studies on compliments and compliment responses in different languages and cultures. Since Pomerantz (1978) first investigated compliment responses, the study of compliments and compliment responses has been widely carried out in American English, British English, South African English, New Zealand English, German, Spanish, Polish, Chinese, and Japanese. Compliments have been said to be formulaic, since compliments often contain similar verbs, such as 'like' and 'love', and positive adjectives, such as 'nice', 'beautiful', and 'great' in English (Holmes, 1986; Manes and Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson, 1981). Compliment receivers tend to behave in a certain manner because they hesitate or do not give self-praise when they receive compliments in speech interaction (Herbert, 1986; Pomerantz, 1978).

However, both giving and receiving compliments differ culturally, and people in Asian countries, such as Taiwan and Japan, generally receive compliments far less than people in Western countries (Barnlund and Araki, 1985; Chen and Yang, 2010; Daikuhara, 1986; Yu, 1999, 2005). They tend to behave humbly and reject compliments, while Germans tend to say 'Yes' when receiving compliments (Barnlund

and Araki, 1985; Chen and Yang, 2010; Daikuhara, 1986; Golato, 2002; Yu, 1999, 2005). Spanish and British students tend to use ironic statements differently and Spanish students tend to persist in giving more compliments compared to British students (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001). Moreover, the objects of compliments have been also culturally disparate, and Polish people tend to give compliments on possessions while Americans tend to offer compliments on personal characteristics, especially to people with whom they are in a close relationship with (Barnlund and Araki, 1985; Herbert, 1991). Japanese people tend to use less variety of adjectives when giving compliments, and they give compliments to acquaintances rather than close family members (Barnlund and Araki, 1985; Daikuhara, 1986).

These cultural differences have often been pointed out since cross-cultural miscommunication might occur among speakers (Chick, 1996; Herbert, 1986, 1991; Holmes, 1986; Saito and Beecken, 1997). In fact, pragmatic transfer has been observed in the study of American learners of Japanese when receiving compliments; Americans speaking Japanese accepted compliments more often than Japanese people did (Saito and Beecken, 1997; Wolfson, 1981).

Pragmatic transfer can be seen in everyday cross-cultural communication, since speakers' speech patterns and behaviours are highly influenced by their own habits and cultural background. Although speakers and learners may not pay much attention to pragmatic factors in their native language when communicating with people in different languages, this aspect needs to be highlighted in order for speakers to fully acquire a target language and its use. Understanding pragmatics transfer is also important for achieving successful communication with people across the world.

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