

Compliment: A Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Awareness: A Pilot Project Report

PENG Xiamei^{[a],*}, ZHAO Yushan^[b]

^[a]Lecturer, Master of Arts in Linguistics. English Department, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

^[b]Professor, Dean of School of Foreign Languages. English Department, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

*Corresponding author

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Abstract

Based on the findings and researches on compliments proposed by Brown and Levinson, Leech and Holmes, the present pilot project designs questionnaire for three subject groups: Chinese native speakers, English native speakers, and Chinese interlanguage speakers, to investigate compliments from a cross-cultural point of view and compare the different speech act awareness. The findings include three points: (a) The three groups have different awareness of compliments; (b) Power and social distance play different roles in the three groups' communication; (c) Gender is also an important variable in offering compliment. Furthermore, the project also provokes some thinking on English Language Teaching (ELT).

Key words: Compliment; Cross-Cultural; Speech act awareness; English Language Teaching (ELT)

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INTRODUCTION

Compliments have been said to “grease the social wheels” and thus to serve as “social lubricants” (Wolfson,

1983, p.89). In our everyday life, we occasionally give compliments to others and receive them from others. Therefore, compliments and compliment responses have received great attention from a wide range of researchers working in different fields and with very different languages. For American English, a lot of research has been done by Pomerantz (1978), Wolfson and Manes (1980), Wolfson (1981b, 1983), Knapp et al. (1984), Herbert (1986, 1989, 1990), Holmes (1986, 1988), Herbert and Straight (1989) respectively. For English of African Americans, Henderson (1996) has done some survey on this part. Similarly, for British English, Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1989) and Ylänne-McEwen (1993) have made some breakthroughs. For South African English, Herbert (1989, 1990), Herbert and Straight (1989) and Chick (1996) have done their research in this field. Likewise, a lot of work has been done by Cordella et al. (1995) for Australian English; by Holmes (1986, 1988), Holmes and Brown (1987) for New Zealand English; by Nelson et al. (1993, 1996) for Arabic; by Yang (1987), Chen (1993), Liu (1995) and Fong (1998) for Chinese; by Ylänne-McEwen (1993) for Finnish; by Kerbrat-Orecchioni ((1987) and Wieland (1995) for French; by Barnlund and Akari (1985) and Saito and Beecken (1997) for Japanese; by Han (1992) for Korean; by Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1989), Herbert (1991) and Jaworski (1995) for Polish; by Brezolin (1995) and Barbosa (1996) for Brazilian Portuguese; by Valdés and Pino (1981) and Moore (1996) for Spanish; by Golato (2002) for German respectively. Finally, a variety of other languages are addressed in Manes (1983) and in Wolfson (1981a; Quoted from Andrea Golato 2002, p.548).

The study on compliments by Chinese native, English native, and Chinese interlanguage speakers (whose native language is Chinese and who study English as their foreign language), however, is rather scarce. Although Chen (1993) reported on a study of American English speakers' and Chinese speakers'

verbal responses to compliments, her paper focused on compliment responses, not compliment itself. The present pilot project investigates compliments from a cross-cultural point of view and compares the different speech act awareness among three subject groups: Chinese native speakers, English native speakers, and Chinese interlanguage speakers. Due to differences of culture, language, and gender, the three groups of subjects are different in terms of compliment awareness and degree of their compliments. To be specific, the ranking of the three groups' awareness in terms of compliment degree is as follows: English native speakers, Chinese native speakers, and interlanguage speakers. Additionally, some implications for English Language Teaching (ELT) in China will be raised.

1. THEORETICAL BASES

Brown and Levinson's (1978/1987) face-saving view assumes, however, that the motivation behind not talking strictly in accordance with the cooperative principle is politeness. Brown and Levinson distinguish between two types of politeness: positive and negative. Positive politeness "is approach-based; it 'anoints' the face of the addressee by indicating that in some respects, S wants H's wants" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.70). Negative politeness, on the other hand, "is oriented mainly toward partially satisfying (redressing) H's negative face, his basic want to maintain claims of territory and self-determination. Negative politeness, thus, is essentially avoidance-based, . . . the speaker . . . will not (or will only minimally) interfere with the addressee's freedom of action" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.70).

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), there are sociological variables that can influence politeness and exist in perhaps all cultures: "(i) the relative 'power' (P) of Speaker and Hearer; (ii) the 'social distance' (D) of Speaker and Hearer; and (iii) the absolute ranking (R) of impositions in the particular culture" (p.74). "P is an asymmetric social dimension of relative power, that is, P (H, S) is the degree to which H can impose his own plans and his own self-evaluation (face) at the expense of S's plan and self-evaluation" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.77). "D is a symmetric social dimension of similarity/difference within which S and H stand for the purposes of this act" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.76). "R is a culturally and situationally defined ranking of impositions by the degree to which they are considered to interfere with an agent's wants of self-determination or of approval" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.77).

Leech (1983) distinguishes relative politeness from absolute politeness and primarily deals with absolute politeness. Differing from Brown and Levinson, Leech emphasizes the normative (or regulative) aspect of politeness. His politeness principle includes six maxims,

that is, the Tact Maxim, the Generosity Maxim, the Approbation Maxim, the Modesty Maxim, the Agreement Maxim, and the Sympathy Maxim (Leech, 1983, p.132). Among them, we would concentrate our attention on the Approbation Maxim that can also be called "the Flattery Maxim". This maxim says "avoid saying unpleasant things about others, and more particularly, about H" (Leech, 1983, p.135). And this maxim includes (a) Minimize dispraise of other; (b) Maximize praise of other (Leech, 1983, p.132).

Brown and Levinson (1987, pp.65-66) categorize compliments as intrinsic face-threatening acts. In relation to this function, they claim that a compliment primarily threatens the Hearer's negative-face. But Brown and Levinson's account of compliments neglects other functions that a compliment can achieve, and also, they do not provide any definition of compliment. Holmes' (1995) definition of a compliment is therefore adopted here: "a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attribute 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" (p.117).

In addition, Holmes also describes four kinds of compliments that are used, (a) to express solidarity; (b) to express positive evaluation, admiration, appreciation, or praise; (c) to express envy or desire for the hearer's possessions; (d) as verbal harassment.

According to Holmes and other researchers, gender plays a weighty role in the different linguistic behavior patterns between male and female. Men and women are socially different in that society lays down different social roles for them and expects different behavior patterns from them. As for compliments, women tend to "perceive and use compliments as positively affective speech acts and expressions of solidarity" (Holmes, 1998, p.117), whereas men may be more likely to "interpret compliments as face-threatening acts" (Holmes, 1998, p.117).

2. RESEARCH PROCEDURE

2.1 Methodology

The way our project designed and carried out is qualitative-based. That is to say, a hypothesis is made in our mind at first. Then after the procedure of data collection and data discussion, already-established theories will be employed to testify the feasibility of that hypothesis.

2.2 Designing Questionnaire

The reasons for choosing compliment as the topic in our questionnaire are twofold. Firstly, as a speech act, compliment is widely used in our daily life. Different people use different types of compliment under different cultural contexts. Secondly, in Brown & Levinson's

Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage, compliment is only confined to the third type according to Holmes' (1995) classification. Thus we intend to include other types of compliment in our questionnaire so as to make hypothesis more convincing.

In order to explore the influences to the degree of compliment awareness, we consider about variable parameters: relative power, social distance, and absolute ranking of imposition during the procedure of designing questionnaire.

The type of questionnaire that we adopt is discourse completion test. The general pattern is that subjects are to complete an unfinished discourse according to a given situation and corresponding conversational pair. For the purpose of getting valid data back, a written direction is provided for the subjects to follow.

At the very beginning, eighteen situations were designed by us. Considering language appropriateness and convenience to finish, ten situations were deleted, and eight were remained in our final draft. Taking notice of objective principle, we did not leave any hints or clues about pragmatics in the questionnaire. Besides, a Chinese version of the questionnaire was also designed with respect to equivalent translation.

2.3 Subjects

The subjects involved in the project are can be divided into three groups: English natives, interlanguage speakers who take English as second language, and Chinese natives. The first two groups should complete the questionnaire of English version, while the Chinese version is for Chinese-natives. Since age, occupation, and education degree can not be in agreement among all the three groups, what we endeavor to achieve is to make

these factors compatible within each group. Of all the three, English-natives are difficult to find. Most of them are foreign professors around 40. We delimit the scope of Chinese-natives within workers of a timber plant aging from 25 to 30. The interlanguage speakers are English postgraduates in Nankai University.

The gender difference is the only property of the subjects we concern about. Based on some knowledge in Sociolinguistics, we assume that there will be some findings in this aspect and one of our hypotheses is about how compliment awareness differs between male and female. Thus in the project, the number of male is near to that of female within each group.

The following chart is a general account of the subjects.

Table 1
Social Groups Variable

Subject	Age	Occupation	Male	Female	Total
English natives	35--40	professors	5	4	9
Interlanguage speakers	20--23	students	6	8	14
Chinese natives	25--30	workers	10	15	25

2.4 Data Collection

We altogether handed out 60 questionnaires to all the subjects. After collecting them back, we found that 12 were invalid because these questionnaires were not completely finished. The 48 questionnaires in total were corresponded to our requirements. The rate of validness reached 80%, which was a satisfactory result and can well pave the way for data discussion.

3. DATA DISCUSSION

Table 2
Compliment Distribution in Different Language Groups

Subject	Situations Number	Situations							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
N.E.S	9	9	9	9	8	9	9	7	9
		100%	100%	100%	88.9%	100%	100%	77.8%	100%
I.S	14	11	14	10	13	12	14	9	14
		78.6%	100%	71.4%	92.9%	85.7%	100%	64.3%	100%
N.C.S	25	22	16	20	23	21	23	17	25
		88%	64%	80%	92%	84%	92%	68%	100%

Note. N.E.S stands for native English speakers, I.S. stands for interlanguage speakers, and N.C.S. stands for native Chinese speakers.

The data showed that Leech's Approbation Maxim was widely applied in communication. When there was opportunity, most people would try to compliment others. In our project, most subjects in most situations used compliments. The reason may be that compliment is a kind of positively affective speech act. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), it is in everyone's interest to maintain each other's face. Through compliments, the speaker positively values the hearer's appearances, possession, skill, and so forth to express appreciation.

Therefore, compliments can satisfy others' positive face wants. "Compliments are usually intended to make others feel good. The primary function of a compliment is most obviously affective and social. They are generally . . . serving to increase or consolidate the solidarity between the speaker and addressee" (Holmes, 1998).

3.1 Compliment Awareness

The data indicates that the degree of compliment awareness varies among the three groups. In all the nine native English

speakers' responses, only three were not compliments. They had no obstacle in understanding the situation and the speech act. They used more compliments than the other two groups. Interlanguage speakers have certain language awareness, but they still cannot get free from their own culture's control. In most cases, their percentage of using compliments was more similar to that of native Chinese speakers. Particularly in situation 3, almost 30% of them did not realize that there needed a compliment. But when they used compliments, their language pattern was very similar to that of native English speakers. Native Chinese speakers had a good sense of compliments. On the whole, regarding to the ranking of compliment degree, native English speakers come to the first, native Chinese speakers take the second, and interlanguage speakers go last.

3.2 Relative Power (P), Social Distance (D) and Absolute Ranking (R)

According to Brown & Levinson, three variables will determine the seriousness of face threatening acts (FTAs), which are called P. D. R., that is, relative power, social distance, and absolute ranking. In our questionnaire, situation 1, 4 and 6 mainly concerned social distance. In situation 1, we wanted to test how the three groups used compliments to strangers. The data showed that all the native English speakers used compliments, while the percentage of compliments used by interlanguage speakers and native Chinese speakers were 78.6% and 88% respectively. Situation 4 and 6 happened between classmates or colleagues. The percentages of using compliments were similar among the three groups. This shows that the large social distance hinders interlanguage speakers and native Chinese speakers from using compliments, while native English speakers pay little attention to social distance. Also, all the three groups could easily use compliments to friends or acquaintances.

Table 3
Gender Variable in Compliment Distribution

Situations		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Gender	Number								
Female	27	24	24	22	25	24	27	18	27
Male	21	18	15	17	19	18	19	15	21

Comparatively speaking, among the three groups, female subjects used more compliments than male subjects. Also, female subjects used more adjectives and direct forms in their compliments. For example, in situation 4, female subjects used lots of adjectives like *cool, young, fashionable*, 新潮, 靓丽, and so forth. While most male subjects employed the adjective *different*, or indirect compliments like 险些没认出你来. Moreover, female subjects tended to use phatic foreshadowings in their expression of compliments like 几天没见, 好久不见, 你越来越... as in situation 4. One possible

In the questionnaire, situation 2, 3, 5 and 8 mainly concerned power. Situation 2, 3 and 5 were for how to use compliments to super-ordinates. For situation 2, all the native English speakers and interlanguage speakers used compliments. However, the interlanguage speakers and native Chinese speakers used different compliments from native English speakers. Most interlanguage speaker used words like *charming, beautiful, and beauty* in their compliments, and most native Chinese native speakers use similar expressions like 漂亮, 贤惠, 秀外慧中. Their compliments were direct and impressive. By comparison, most native English speakers used more delicate compliments like *I enjoyed talking with your wife*. Only one subject used *lovely* in her compliment. For those native Chinese speakers who did not use compliments, they used expressions like 请代我向您夫人问好, 并祝她身体健康 or 这个包是您太太昨天晚上忘了拿了. Moreover, nine native Chinese speakers used address term 老板 or 先生 at the beginning. Also in situation most native English speakers used compliments like *nice shot, great, wonderful*, and so forth. In contrast, some interlanguage speakers and native Chinese speakers used indirect compliments like *Can I do that like you?* or 这个动作我不知能不能做到. All these indicate that native English speakers may not care about power as much as the other two groups. For native English speakers, the concept of individualism and equality firmly stands in their heart. Therefore, they do not like to flatter their superordinates. While for interlanguage speakers and native Chinese speakers, they care much more about the hierarchical social order, and power plays an important role in their life. So they usually use more direct and more impressive compliments to their superordinates to show their respect.

3.3 Gender

The influence of gender difference to the linguistic form of compliments seems universal.

explanation for this phenomenon may be that female subjects are more sensitive to compliments. They take compliment as a kind of positive politeness strategy. Consequently, they used compliments more frequently to express appreciation, solidarity, and rapport than male subjects. On the contrary, male subjects took compliment as a face-threatening act. For them, using compliments may indicate envy or desire for the hearer's possessions, ability, and so forth, especially when the hearer is also a male. Therefore, male subjects are more constrained in using compliments.

CONCLUSION

In the project, we investigate three different groups' awareness of compliments. Through our analysis, three findings can be drawn. Firstly, the three groups have different awareness of compliments. Secondly, power and social distance play different roles in the three groups' communication. Thirdly, gender is also an important variable in offering compliment.

Our project also provokes some thinking on ELT. Since most of the interlanguage subjects are English postgraduates, they show a strong linguistic competence in their response, that is to say, they have reached a comparatively high level in English learning. However, they are still inclined to think in Chinese way, which means their pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence is not enough. As a result, sometimes they cannot choose the right strategy in communication.

The interlanguage speakers should learn more about the pragmatic rules that are applied in English culture. Our English language teaching should pay more attention to the language use. In oral course, intensive reading, and western cultural course, teachers should take a more interactive teaching methodology, and give students more information about foreign cultures and patterns of naturally occurring talk.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire (English Version)

Sex: male__ female__ Mother tongue: English__ non-English__

Directions: Please complete the following conversations according to the situation and corresponding conversational pair.

Situation 1: *On the train, you sit opposite to a woman, who has a lovely baby in her arm.*

You: _____
The woman: Thank you. Some of my friends say it more resembles my husband.

Situation 2: *You work in a large company. Last night, there was a party in your company. Your boss, with his wife, also attended that party. You had a nice talk with them. This morning, you met your boss in the elevator.*

You: _____
Boss: Thanks on behalf of my wife.

Situation 3: *You are a new basketball player. Your coach is showing you how to shoot at the basket. He makes a skillful and standard shoot.*

You: _____
Coach: Ok. Now you have a try.

Situation 4: *You met with your former classmate on the street whom you haven't seen for years. He noticed your new hairstyle.*

He: _____
You: Really?

Situation 5: *In a clothing shop, you are hesitating to buy a dress that fits you best. After you try on a new and expensive Chanel dress, the shop assistant comes up and says*

Shop assistant: _____
You: Thanks, but ain't I?

Situation 6: *You are a lead actor in a drama. But unfortunately before the day of performance to the public, you fell ill. Another actor took your place and performed successfully. Today, you meet him and say*

You: _____
He: If you performed it, it would have been better.

Situation 7: *At the World Cup 2002, Korea defeated Italy by 2: 1, which surprised a lot of spectators. After the match, a Korean student talks with an Italian student about it in the dorm.*

Korean student: _____
Italian student: Thanks. I wish our team would be luckier next time.

Situation 8: *You work in a small company as secretary of the boss. Recently, you did a project very well. One day, after the meeting, the boss talked with you.*

Boss: _____
You: I feel glad that I could be of any help to you.

Thanks For Your Cooperation