"IS That What You Mean?"
Exploratory Study of Syntactic Pattern
in Complement Responses

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Abstract

Complimenting behavior, as a common speech act of human beings, has become an intriguing topic in linguistics and its sub-branches. Compliment responses can be seen as solutions for maintaining a balance between (1) a preference to avoid self-praise and (2) a preference to accept or agree with the compliment (Pomerantz 1978). In the present study, the definition of a compliment draws on the work of Holmes (1988).The present study explored compliment responses in of 454 Iranian university students according to the Manes & Wolfson's (1981) study that demonstrated compliments are highly Formulaic. Therefore the main concern in this study was to determine the basic syntactic forms and categories that carry the compliment's positive evaluation in Farsi. The Collected data were analyzed according to the syntactic patterns and topics of the compliments in relation to the sex of the participants.

Keywords: Syntactic Pattern, Complimenting Behavior

1. Introduction

Communicating is a kind of complex behavior that requires both linguistic and pragmatic competence. Whether one speaks in a first or second language, he is influenced by sociocultural norms and constraints that affect the way one communicates. Rizk (2003) points out that what is considered appropriate in one language might not be so in another. Praising a girl of being fat, for instance in a Western African community is considered a compliment; while in an American context it is perceived as an insult.

A compliment is one form of speech acts and can be defined as "an utterance containing a positive evaluation by the speaker to the addressee" (Liu,1997). There is an infinite number of words that could be chosen to compliment, but the set of lexical items and grammatical patterns one uses in his daily interaction when complimenting and have high frequency in his daily

discourse are very restricted. According to Wolfson (1986), two thirds of English compliments use the adjectives "nice, good, beautiful, pretty, great", and 90% make use of just two verbs "like and love" (p.116). The lack of creativity in the form and content of English compliments is related to their function in discourse. Herbert (1986) demonstrates that compliments are used to "negotiate solidarity with the addressee" (p.76). Their aim is to make the addressee feel good and their formulaic nature minimizes the chance that they will be misinterpreted by the addressee.

Pomerantz (1978) also, suggested that compliments offer a difficulty for those who receive them. When responding to a compliment, the compliment recipient is confronted with two conflicting preferences. On one hand, people are inclined to (a) avoid self-praise, on the other hand they are inclined to (b) accept or agree with the compliment. Acceptance of or agreement with a compliment ratifies praise of the complimentee and

implicitly equates to an act of self-praise. On the other hand, the avoidance of self-praise requires that the complimentee reject or at least refuse to accept a compliment. Thus, an unequivocal expression of acceptance or agreement will tend to conflict with the preference to avoid self-praise, while an unequivocal expression of self-praise avoidance will similarly tend to conflict with the preference to accept or agree. As a result, compliment responses tend to fall somewhere in between the two extremes of unequivocal acceptance/agreement and unequivocal self-praise avoidance. Pomerantz concluded that compliment responses can be seen as solutions or resolutions for maintaining a balance between complete avoidance of self-praise and complete acceptance or agreement.

Many researchers also, studied the distribution of compliments between women and men. Holmes (1995) did a study in New Zealand that examined differences in the way men and women use compliments. She found that New Zealand women gave and received significantly more compliments than men did. Compliments between males were relatively rare. It seems that complimenting is a speech behaviour occurring much more frequently in interactions involving women than men. The differences in the distribution of compliments between women and men may result from different perceptions. Women may give the greater weight to the affective meaning of compliments, for instance, expressing solidarity and positive politeness, while men may give the greater weight to the referential meaning, as evaluative judgments, or to the potentially negative face-threatening features. It is widely accepted that women regard compliments as a means of expressing rapport and solidarity, while men regard compliments as face threatening or controlling devices, at least in some contexts, (Holmes, 1995:125).

Perhaps men compliment women more often than they compliment other men because they know women value compliments. Wolfson (1984:243) believes that compliments addressed to women have the same function as praise given to

children. Compliments serve as encouragement to continue with the approved behaviour.

This study is based on Manes & Wolfson's (1981) study that demonstrated compliments are highly formulaic, so the main concern in this study is to determine the basic syntactic forms and categories that carry the compliment's positive evaluation in Iranian university students. In addition, the researchers are also interested in the role of gender in complimenting, so the treatment here focuses on sex-based differences in compliments and compliment responses.

2. Method

The researchers investigated a corpus of 454 compliments collected by the authors and their students at the different Universities of Ahvaz from a wide range of everyday interactions. This study utilized recordings of naturally occurring talk-in-interaction for reasons highlighted by Golato's (2005) in-depth analysis of collection methodology. Principally, recordings of naturally occurring talk-in-interaction provide the benefit of repeated and detailed analysis of spoken utterances. Compliment responses gathered from the conversation recordings were first transcribed and then classified based on different syntactic patterns.

3. Results

In the present study, the definition of a compliment draws on the work of Holmes (1988). The core of Holmes's definition is the act of attributing credit. Compliments normally attribute the value "good" to the addressee, and even when a compliment apparently refers to a third person, it may well be indirectly complimenting the addressee. As (1) has illustrated, Utterance 1 can be interpreted as a compliment since it indirectly attributes credit to the addressee5

F: man gahi too khoone cake mipazam
F: I   sometimes in home a cake bake
M. shoharet kheyli khosh shanse
M: your husband really lucky is
F: are, shansesh bad nis
F: yes, his luck bad is not

3.1. Compliments and Compliment Responses

The corpus of compliments upon which this analysis rests consists of 454 examples. There is an interesting methodological consideration which is relevant here, namely the sex of the data collectors. Because in this study a large majority of the data collectors were female students8, the most obvious pattern revealed by the data is that women gave and received significantly more compliments than men did. Moreover, a high proportion of the compliments recorded were addressed to females.

In this research, 49.1% (i.e. 223 out of 454) of the compliments occurred between female participants, and 28.8% (i.e. 131 out of 454) of them were given by

females to males. By contrast, men gave 12.1% (55 out of 454) of the compliments to women and 09.9 % (45 out of 454) to other men. From the data, we can infer that women might use such speech behavior more frequently than men, but this conclusion needs to be investigated further.

3.2. Syntactic Patterns

Manes and Wolfson (1981) pointed out that compliments are noticeably formulaic speech acts in that a very small number of lexical items and syntactic patterns account for the great majority of them in their corpus. Because the compliments in our data appear to occur more frequently between females and to be given most commonly by females, the researchers like to see whether there are differences in the linguistic patterns and lexical items between males and females. Holmes (1986, 1988) reported broadly similar patterning for New Zealand English. She found that the pattern NP BE (INT) ADJ/LOOK ADJ appeared to be the most widely used English compliment formula regardless of dialect or sex, accounting for at least 40% of her data in the samples analyzed. Adapting Manes and Wolfson's (1981) classification, the researchers categorized our data into 8 syntactic patterns, and an example for each type is given below.

1. NP (BE) (INT) ADJ
Lebasat kheyli ghashange
Your clothes very pretty are
'Your clothes are very pretty.'

2. (PRON/NP) LOOK ADJ
Khoshkel shodi
Beautiful are you
'You look good.'

3. (INT) ADJ
Kheyli Baa haale
Very cool
'Very cool!'
4. NP/PRON V (*DE*) (INT) ADV
Emrooz shik lebas pooshidi
Today very nice are dressed you
'You are dressed very nicely today.'

5. NP/PRON V (INT) ADV
Sare kelas kheyli fa'ali
In class very active are you
 'You are very active in class.'

6. NP/PRON (INT) V NP
Mohre maar dari
Charming are you
'You have charm.'

7. ('I') (INT) V (NP)
Kheyli Tahsinet mikonam
Very much admire you I do
'(I) admire you very much.'

8. PRON BE (INT) ADJ NP
To hamsare khoobi hasti
You wife good are you
'You are a good husband.'

Table 1. *Syntactic patterns of compliments*

	Syntactic formula	female	male	No	%
1	NP (BE) (INT) ADJ	174	61	235	51.7
2	(PRON/NP) LOaOK ADJ	19	6	25	5.5
3	(INT) ADJ	61	29	90	19.8
4	NP/PRON V (*DE*) (INT) ADV	24	23	47	10.3
5	NP/PRON V (INT) ADV	17	4	21	4.6
6	NP/PRON (INT) V NP	18	8	26	5.7
7	('I') (INT) V (NP)	4	1	5	1.1
8	PRON BE (INT) ADJ NP	1	1	2	.04
9	other	3	0	3	.06
10	Total	321	133	454	100

The first pattern NP (BE) (INT) ADJ accounts for 52.9% of the compliments given by both the female and male subjects, which is the most commonly used syntactic pattern.

As Table 1 reveals, the syntactic pattern "I like/love NP" occurred much less than the pattern NP/PRON V (INT) ADV In addition, most of the compliment patterns in the data make use of adjectives to express the positive evaluation of the complimenters. The researchers found that the most frequent types of compliments belonged to the adjectival category. The five most frequently used adjectives were 'good-looking,' 'not bad,' 'pretty,' 'good,' and 'terrific,'.

Akin to English *nice* and *good*, most of the adjectives lack specificity and are usable with almost any compliment subject. Among the five adjectives in our data, 'not bad' and 'good' were used by males or females in compliments on any topic to a man or woman. This fact has to do with that they have 'weak semantic

load' (Manes and Wolfson 1981) so that they can hardly be said to have any meaning more specific than positive evaluation.

3.3 Compliment Topic

Examining the distribution of compliment topics by gender, we found that there was a significant difference in the compliment topics used by women and men. In this research, 47.3% of all the compliments related to aspects of the complimentees' appearance, and 26.2% related to their ability and performance. There is a clearly observable tendency for both women and men to give compliments on their appearance (i.e., 45.3% in female to female interaction, 60.1% in male to female interaction, and 43.5% in male to male interaction). Both genders use compliments on appearance as the most frequent topic for males and females. Compliments on appearance were the dominant topic for both women and men, which confirms Holmes' (1988:458) observation that appearance is the most frequent topic for compliments between equals, close friends and intimates, regardless of gender. However, women praised men's ability/performance (33.1%) more often than their appearance (31.6%). The second highest proportion concerned compliments related to ability/performance in female to female (26.5%), female to male (36.1%), and male to male (30.9%) interactions,

4. Discussion

Compliments are remarkably formulaic speech acts. Most draw on a very small number of lexical items, and a limited number of syntactic patterns because compliments in society are formulas like greetings, thankings, and apologies,(Manes and Wolfson,1981).The lack of creativity in compliments is related to their function in discourse. Their aim is to negotiate solidarity with the addressee; to make the addressee feel good and their formulaic nature minimizes the chance that they will be misinterpreted by the addressee. Compliments in iranians are usually intended to have a positive effect on interpersonal relations, yet for the outcome actually to be positive, both the compliments and compliment responses need to be handled appropriately. It has been argued that compliments reflect cultural values and norms of behavior (Manes 1983).

The great majority of compliments uttered by a variety of speakers and in a number of quite different speech situations were remarkably similar both in their syntactic and lexical forms. The farsi data exhibit a great preference for the syntactic pattern NP (BE) (INT) ADJ, just as the American English data do. However, the second most commonly used syntactic pattern in English, "I (really) like/love NP," is a rather unusual form for a compliment in Farsi.

It appears that iranians do not want their complimentee to interpret a compliment as an invasion of personal privacy or as a request for the object complimented. Therefore, in one sense, the compliment mainly functions to make the hearer feel good. This might suggest that compliments uttered by college

students in iran are not literal statements of admiration/praise, but rather offers of solidarity.

As for the compliment topics, since compliments are usually employed by Iranian university students to increase the solidarity between them and their addressees, they compliment their addressees on their appearance or ability rather than on their belongings or personalities. In particular, the vast majority of compliments focus on personal appearance (e.g., hair, skin, clothing and figure). That is, Iranian university students like to compliment one another on any change in their appearance, such as a thinner appearance, loss of weight or a new hairstyle. This lends support to Wolfson's (1989:114) argument that when the quality of newness is highly valued in society, then a compliment is appropriate whenever an acquaintance is seen with something new. A compliment indicates that the speaker has noticed a change, thereby proving that he/she considers the addressee worthy of attention. As a result, the compliment receiver might be pleased by the compliment on his/her appearance, even if he/she does not accept it verbally. Finally, from the compliment data, the researchers find that speakers consider modesty when paying compliments in order to maintain or increase solidarity.

5. Conclusion

A compliment is an utterance which refers to something that is positively valued by the participants and attributed to the addressee. The majority of compliments refer to just a few broad topics: appearance, ability or performance, possessions, and some aspect of personality or friendliness. Compliments are social lubricants which create or maintain rapport, i.e. strategies that aim to establish or reaffirm common ground, mutuality or social solidarity. They are remarkably formulaic speech acts. Most draw on a very small number of lexical items, and a limited number of syntactic patterns. Women give and receive compliments more than men do. This difference may result from different perceptions. Women regard compliments as a means of expressing rapport and solidarity, while men regard compliments as face threatening or controlling devices, at least in some contexts.

As a whole, the data show that modesty plays a role in both giving and receiving compliments. Specifically, the study suggests that iranians seldom use the 'I love/like NP' pattern to avoid the compliment being interpreted as an invasion of personal privacy or as a request for the object complimented. Since an obvious function compliments serve in our data is to increase and maintain solidarity between interlocutors, there is a clearly observable tendency for both women and men to give or receive compliments on their appearance, especially in greeting contexts. The data also indicate that compliments on appearance are generally perceived as most appropriate between those who know each other well. Hence, 'appearance' among the four types of compliment topics is most frequently used in the Iranian university students. The results of this study show that both males and

females most commonly compliment others on their physical appearance, and on abilities next. In particular, compliments on a person's appearance may be felt to presume friendship and intimacy. Therefore, both male and female compliments tend to be adjectival. Likewise, the data reveal that the compliment receiver often chooses to appear reluctant or overwhelmed and proffers gentle nonagreement.

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