

# Arabic Compliment Responses: A transfer of Strategies?

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## ملخص البحث

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى الكشف عن ما اذا كان الناطقين بالعربية من العرب ينقلون ستراتيجياتهم العربية التقليدية المستخدمة في الرد على الاطراء عندما يقوم شخص لغته الام هي الانكليزية الامريكية بالثناء عليهم. تم اخذ الفروقات بين الجنسين بنظر الاعتبار. جمعت البيانات عن طريق استخدام الاستبيانات والتي اعطيت لمشاركين عرب من مختلف الدول العربية والذين يعيشون في الولايات المتحدة الامريكية من مدة اقلها شهرين. على العموم، لم يظهر المشاركون نقلا لستراتيجياتهم العربية وانما قاموا باستخدام ردود الاطراء الامريكية التقليدية بدلا عنها. تم مناقشة وتحليل النتائج من وجهة نظر لغوية- اجتماعية مختلفة الثقافات واخذ بنظر الاعتبار مال هذه النتائج من اثر في ابراز اثار اختلاف الثقافات ومضمونات التربية.

## Abstract

This study aims at finding out whether Arabic speakers transfer their L1 strategies in responding to compliments when complimented by Native American speakers. Gender- based differences are also taken into consideration. The data is collected by means of DCTs (discourse completion tasks). The subjects are native Arabic speakers, from a variety of Arabic speaking countries, who have been living in the United States for at least two months. In general, the participants did not show much of a transfer of L1 strategies and more use of the typical American compliment responses. The results are discussed and analyzed from a cross- cultural and sociolinguistic point of view. They are also looked upon in terms of highlighting cross- cultural and pedagogical implications.

## المقدمة

### 1. Introduction

This study aims at finding out whether Arabic speakers transfer their L1 strategies in responding to compliments when complimented by Native American speakers. The reason why I am conducting this study is because Arabic compliments and especially their responses tend to be very different from the American responses; a matter that can easily cause misunderstandings between speakers. Although much research was conducted on compliment responses, the focus of that research was mainly on classifying the responses into different types like acceptances, mitigations and rejections, and subtypes of these responses. The rest of the research was focused either on comparing English and other languages compliment responses or looking at gender based differences but all within the above mentioned framework of response types and subtypes. The very small body of research that was done on L1 strategy transfer and my own being as non native speaker of English who don't transfer L1 strategies motivated the current study in an attempt to bridge any gap that could be a reason for misunderstanding at least for Arabic and English speakers.

Among the studies that compared American and Arabic compliment responses is that of Nelson, Al- Batal, and Echols (1996). In this study, and following the above mentioned framework, Nelson et al. found no rejections in the Arabic data and only (3 %) in the American data. They also found that the rate of acceptances for both American and Arabic speakers was (50 %) and (67 %) respectively. More importantly, (40 %) of the Arabic acceptances took the form of a combination of an acceptance+ formula; a strategy that was completely absent in the American data. Looking at whether Arabic

speakers transfer their L1 strategies when complimented by an English speaker, Al Falasi (2007) looked at the responses of Emirati female learners of English. The findings of her study showed that L1 strategies were sometimes transferred into English suggesting a lack of awareness of the socio-cultural norms and a misunderstanding of these strategies as being universal among the different languages rather than their being language specific.

The relation of gender to compliments and compliment responses was also investigated. Herbert (1990) and Farghal& Al-Khatib(2001) looked at the effect of gender on the compliment behavior in American and Jordanian data respectively. In both studies, they looked at male- male, female- female, and male- female compliment responses. What is of concern to this study is the male- male and female- female behavior<sup>(1)</sup>. The findings for both studies showed that, in general, men are more likely to accept a compliment than women. Yet, women were applying more strategies in their acceptances. In other words, women were using more “complex” responses than men. For Herbert (1990), the rate of acceptances was (40 %) between men and (22 %) between women whereas the complex responses formed (25 %) of men’s acceptances and (50 %) of women’s. As to Farghal& Al-Khatib (2001), there was a (91 %) of acceptances among men and (71 %) among women with a (16 %) and (36 %)of complex responses respectively. Given these results, I assume that if there will be any strategy transfer in this study, women will be the leaders simply because transferring Arabic L1 strategies equals a complex acceptance which is defined by Farghal& Al-

(1) The reasons for this choice are mentioned in the speech community section below.

Khatib (2001) as thanking + a formula such as, for example, offering.

Given this review of literature above, two research questions will be looked at in this study:

- Do Arabic speakers transfer their L1 strategies in responding to compliments given by Native American speakers?
- Are there any gender- based differences with regard to the L1 strategy transfer?

## 2. Methodology

The methodology I used here to collect the data is that of DCTs “discourse completion tasks”. Since compliments can be produced in various occasions complimenting different things like possessions, character, appearance, ability, etc., it will be impossible to cover all these things by means of discourse completion tasks. So, for the DCTs, I decided to select only “appearance” and “possessions” whose responses are still different from the American responses. I invented two tasks; each has a different scenario and four multiple choices. The multiple choices in both tasks are divided into two groups. The last two choices are the ones with the Arabic strategies transferred in them whereas the first two are typical American responses. According to Herbert (1989) and Pomerantz (1978) a typical American compliment response is either “thank you” or “(thank you)<sup>(1)</sup> + short formula”. They classified the responses into different categories which I will not go through here since I will not be following the same schema. Yet, what must be mentioned here is that the “thank you + short formula” compliment response contains things like “thanks, yours are nice too”, “I bought it at REI” and “I think so too”. Because the responses with the Arabic

(1) “Thank you” is not always used. Sometimes the response is only with a short formula.

strategies sounded a bit unnatural, I gave the original response in Arabic beneath the English translation in order to give the participants a sense of what was intended in case they get confused.

Another methodological issue to be mentioned here is related to the gender of the person giving the compliment. In order to avoid any social effects that may interfere in responding to the compliment, I formulated the tasks' instructions so that both the person giving the compliment and the one receiving it are of the same gender. I chose to do this because according to Al Falasi (2007), it is usually the case that Arabic women either just say "thank you" or even ignore a compliment given to them by a male unless he is familiar enough to the woman.

### 3. Social Description of the Speech Community

The speech community of this study consists of a group of Arabic speakers from a variety of Arabic speaking countries like Iraq, Egypt, Yemen, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and Palestine. As we have seen above, compliment response strategies in both Arabic and English communities differ importantly despite of some shared similarities. Compliments and compliment responses in the Arabic communities tend to be longer and more genuine. Unlike in English where "thank you" by itself is considered a suitable answer for most compliment situations, in Arabic it is not usually sufficient and needs to be supported by more words. Yet, this doesn't mean that only saying "thank you" in Arabic communities would be impolite, but it may sound flat or awkward (Nelson et. al., 1996).

The types of strategies applied by Arabic speakers may seem bizarre to a non native speaker simply because they interpret the words only at a semantic level without considering, or may even knowing, the socio-cultural norms of that society. For example, a common strategy

that is applied in responding to complementing an object is to offer that object. This is not a case of a “genuine” offer and nobody would take it to be so; on the contrary, this would result in another response from the person who gave the compliment saying something like “thanks, it looks nicer on its owner”. The same holds true for a case like saying “thanks, that’s because I dipped my sweet finger in it” as a response to complimenting one’s cooking. This response is just a way of saying “that’s because I cooked it myself” and can’t be taken only at the semantic level. What is needed to understand those kinds of strategies is a knowledge of the socio-cultural norms of the specific society or otherwise they can easily cause a pragmalinguistic failure between the speakers of different societies (Al Falasi, 2007 & Nelson et al., 1996).

### 3.1 Subjects

Using social networking sites, I was able to get my acquaintances willingly participate as subjects for this project. The tasks were administrated to them via email. The 21 participants are native speakers of Arabic from the above mentioned countries. Twenty of the participants are students who are pursuing their post graduate studies in the different Universities of the US. The age factor ranges between (24- 38) years old and the period of time they spent in the US ranges from two months to almost four years. The other participant is an employee who holds a BA degree. They are all at a good level of fluency, the students had taken at least one TOEFL test scoring at least 550 in order to get into graduate schools, that enables them to transfer their L1 strategies without having a problem in translating them. According to Takahashi and Beebe (1987), the speakers’ proficiency of L2 is correlated with pragmatic transfer. The more proficient the speaker is the more s/he can transfer their L1 socio-cultural norms at the pragmatic level. Though this may not really be a problem in this project as the DCTs are

already translated to English, I think this is a good thing to be considered in written DCTs. The following table summarizes the subjects:

**Table 1**  
***Subjects' Distribution According to their Social Information***

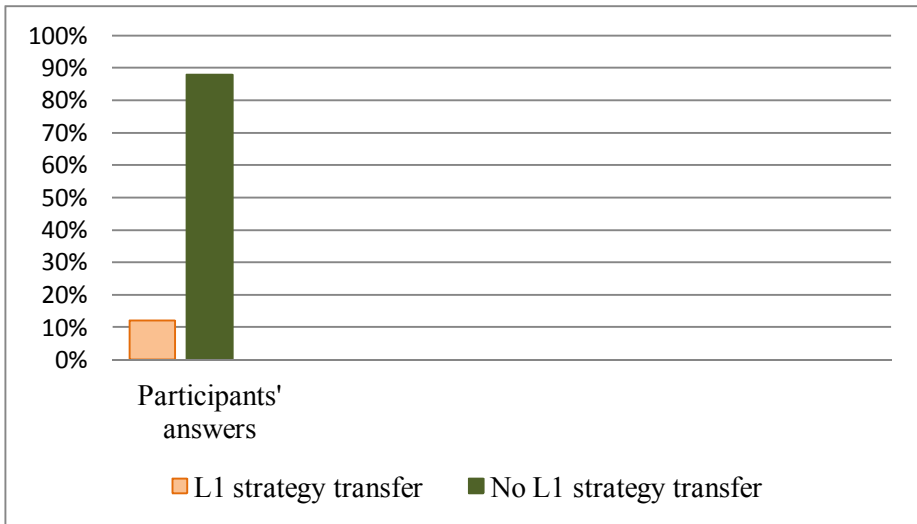
Country	Gender		Time Spent in the US
	Male	Female	
Algeria		1	a year&4 months
	1		2 months
Egypt		1	3.5 years
		1	4 years
	3		3 months
Iraq		1	5 months
	2		a year & 3 months
		1	a year & 3 months
		2	a year & 4 months
		1	2.5 years
Palestine	1		3 years
		1	a year & 4 months
Saudi Arabia		1	2 months
	1		3 years
		1	4 years
Yemen		1	3 months
	1		a year & 4 months
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>12</b>	



#### 4. The Results

Because I formulated two different discourse completion tasks to be filled in by the participants, here I will be dealing with the total number of answers I got; i.e. two answers per participant and will make reference to certain examples in the discussion.

As to the first research question looking at whether native Arabic speakers transfer their L1 strategies or not, we can see that (n.37, %88) of the participants' answers did not show a transfer of their L1 strategies and only (n.5, %12) of the participants' answers did show L1 strategy transfer. The following figure summarizes the results:

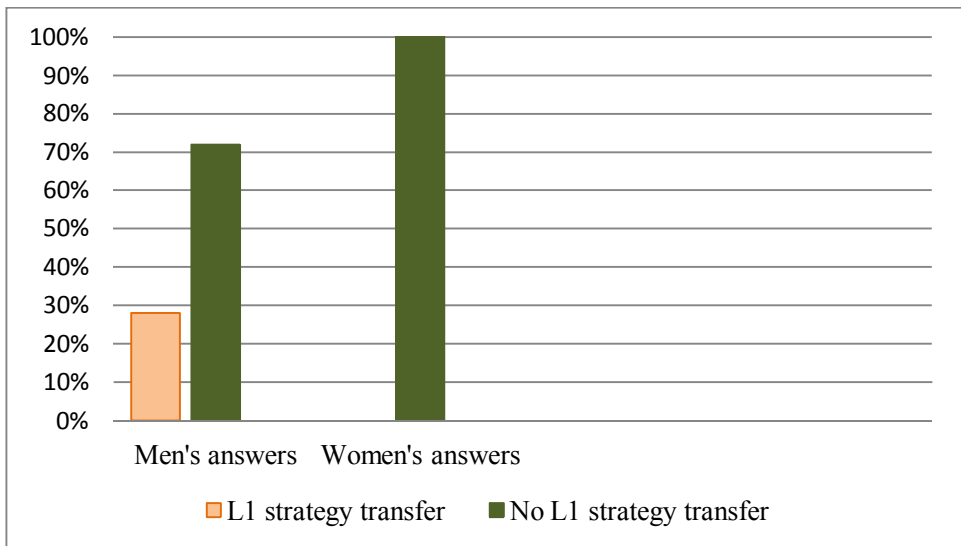


*Figure 1.* The distribution of the participants' answers according to L1 strategy transfer.

Given these results, it seems that there indeed is an awareness of the differences in the socio-cultural norms between the Arabic and American communities among the participants. Yet, this needs to be further supported by having a bigger number of participants.

The results for the second research question showed that the prediction, based on previous research,

that women will tend to transfer their L1 strategies more than men was not supported. There was a (zero) L1 strategy transfer in women's answers. The (n.5, %12) of the answers that had strategy transfer in them were all produced by men. In spite of its being a small percentage compared to the total, these answers constituted a somewhat bigger proportion (n.5, %28) of the (n. 18) answers of men. The following figure summarizes the results for the second research question:



*Figure 2.* The distribution of the participants' answers according to gender and L1 strategy transfer.

## 5. Discussion

In this section, I will first discuss the results in general; then, we'll have a closer look at the factors that may have had an effect on the participants to transfer their L1 strategies, and finally end up by referring to pedagogical implications, and the limitations of the study.

Looking at the results in general, and unlike what is reported in Al Falasi (2007), there does seem an awareness among the participants about the socio-

cultural norms of the two societies. Why do I claim so? So far I've been referring to the total number of answers; here I will refer to specific examples that support this claim. Away from the significant difference of percentages shown in *figure 1* and which by itself supports the claim, some of the participants, who did not show strategy transfer, expressed their awareness explicitly after filling in the tasks. Two of the participants (from Iraq & Algeria) said that they will chose a different answer depending on who that friend is and the one from Algeria went into saying "I sometimes use Algerian expressions and explain to my American friends that this is what we say in Algeria. I like to say "Allah ysalmak"<sup>(1)</sup>, but only "occasionally" with close friends or classmates". A third participant (from Iraq) questioned the possibility of himself offering "his watch" in the first scenario of the task saying that this is not to be done in America; we don't have the same social "habits".

Even by looking at the four male participants who did transfer their L1 strategies, there still seems some kind of awareness among two of them (from Yemen & Iraq). They showed L1 strategy transfer only in the second scenario and not the first; may be they wanted to avoid the kind of a transfer that may have some "consequences" in it. According to Thomas (1983) the pragmatic transfer of one's L1 to L2 can result in a pragmatic failure because L2 speakers do not understand what is meant by what is said; they don't understand the illocutionary force of the utterance. In other words, offering an object as a response to a compliment is so language specific strategy and thus can wrongly be interpreted as a real offer by a non native speaker easily

(1) *Allah ysalmak* means "may God keep you safe" and it is also common in other Arabic speaking countries like Iraq, Syria, Palestine, and Jordan.

resulting in a problem. These two participants could have chosen (d.) in the first scenario but they did not; as if they wanted to totally avoid transferring in that context. Cases of this kind definitely need to be further investigated in a largerset of data.

Out of the 21 participants 4 males selected answers with the Arabic strategies transferred in them. Females did not show any kind of transfer at all. There doesn't seem an obvious reason why gender is an important factor here. The only possibility is that may be women get complimented more than men and so they are more aware of the target like responses<sup>(1)</sup>. The participants' "home country" doesn't seem to be the factor or the reason behind their transfer because the 4 of them are from different countries (Iraq, Yemen, and Egypt). At the same time, there are other participants from the same countries and did not show a transfer. Also, it seems that the politeness strategies in the different Arabic speaking countries are the same as is shown in the above mentioned studies on Emirati, Syrian, and Jordanian Arabic, the Algerian female comment, and my own knowledge of Iraqi Arabic. The factor that seems to have the most effect on the participants' transfer is the time they spent in the US, though it is not consistent for all them. Three of the four males have been in the US for 2-3 months. Only one of them (from Egypt, 2 months) transferred in both scenarios. The fourth participant (from Yemen, 16 months) transferred only in the second scenario which may indicate some kind of awareness as I discussed earlier.

Given this discussion, I am tempted to say that the lack of awareness among the Arab participants is a matter

(1) I did some search looking for studies that compare who gets more compliments but found nothing. So, what I mentioned above is just a personal opinion based on observing the society around, at least the Arabic society.

of individuals rather than a whole society. What can be done to avoid this kind of pragmatic failure is to implement both L1 and L2 strategies in second language classes. If strategy differences between two societies are obvious and can be identified, second language teachers can pay more attention to these areas where different pragmatic and linguistic abilities are needed. An Arabic speaker of English can be taught that “thank you” is an appropriate response to a compliment in English speaking community. The same holds true for an English speaker of Arabic. S/he can be exposed to the type of strategies used in Arabic and that s/he may encounter (Meyerhof, 2006 & Nelson et al., 1996).

In general and throughout the studies conducted on Arabic compliment responses, they always seem to take the form of acceptance with pretty long formula and no rejections. Arabic speakers seem to pay attention to their interlocutors’ positive face by sharing them the same opinion and accepting the compliment.

Finally, though this study was restricted to a small number of participants, it was a good representative sample from different countries. Yet, it will definitely be more informative with a bigger number of participants. The other thing that could have given a better picture is conducting sociolinguistics interviews with the participants after having them fill in the tasks. In those interviews, the participants can be asked about the reasons behind their specific choices and assess how much of a knowledge they have about the target society.

## Appendix 1

**Gender:****Time spent in the US:****Home Country:****Instructions:**

The following is a couple of situations where you got complimented by your “same gender” American friend. Select one answer for each situation. Please try to imagine and relate to the scenario so that you can give as natural an answer as possible.

**Scenario 1:**

Few days ago you bought a new watch. You are walking with your **AMERICAN** friend and s/he asks you about the time. Having looked at your watch, your friend says: “Wow, how elegant! Your watch is really great!”. You:

- a. Thanks/ thank you with a smile😊.
- b. Thanks, I bought it last Monday.
- c. Offer/ present the watch; you can take it if you liked it. Nothing would be too precious for you.  
(*c. is intended for a response like: خذها/ خذها ما تغلى عليك*)
- d. Thanks, may God keep you safe. This is because you have a good taste.  
(*d. is intended for a response like: شكرا، الله يخليك. هذا من (نوقك)*)

**Scenario 2:**

You and your friends have organized a party to celebrate graduation. You've dressed up for the party. As you arrived to the party one of your **AMERICAN** friends says: "Hey, you look great! You are really handsome/beautiful today". You:

- a. Thanks/ thank you with a smile☺.
- b. Thanks, you too.
- c. Thanks, it is the beauty of your eyes that they see everything beautiful.  
(c. is intended for a response like: شكرا هذا جمال عيونك)
- d. Thanks, may all your days be beautiful.  
(c. is intended for a response like: شكرا الله يحلي ايامك)

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