

Compliments and positive politeness strategies

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Introduction

Compliments are speech acts which maintain, improve or support the addressee's face. They are used as a positive politeness strategy which notices the addressee's interests, wants, needs and goods. People give and receive compliments on various topics, such as appearance, ability, performance and possessions.

his study tries to examine the complimenting behaviour of English speakers, as a strategy to express positive politeness. It tries to describe the linguistic structures of compliments, functions of compliments, types of compliment responses, and the differences between men and women in paying compliments.

Politeness Principle

Human beings interact with each other everyday. In order to reduce friction and maintain smooth verbal communication, people have developed politeness rules. **Politeness** means expressing respect towards the person you are talking to and avoid offending them. Brown and Levinson (1987) describe politeness as showing concern for people's face. **Face** is defined as the public self-image that one shows or intends to show to the other participant(s). People generally cooperate in maintaining each others' face, and partially satisfying each other's face needs. Face has two aspects: negative and positive. **Negative face** is reflected in the desire of every individual to be independent, to have freedom of action, and to be unimpeded by others. **Positive face** is reflected in the desire of every individual to be liked and admired, (Yule, 1996:61-2). Behaviour which avoids imposing on others is described as evidence of **negative politeness**, while sociable behaviour expressing warmth towards an addressee is **positive politeness** behaviour, (Holmes, 1995:5).

Politeness is regarded as a symbol of man's civilization. In social communication, people should respect another party's positive face and take care of another party's negative face as well. The concept of politeness in nature is strategic to keep faces for both parties.

Politeness can be expressed in many ways but paying a compliment is one of the most obvious. Compliments are prime examples of speech acts which notice and attend to the hearer's interests, wants, needs, goods, the first positive strategy identified and discussed by Brown and Levinson (1987:102). Everyday people give and receive compliments on appearance, ability, possession, and some aspect of personality or friendliness. People like persons who give approval to them.

What is a compliment?

People pay compliments in order to start a conversation, smooth an interaction, strengthen an emotional exchange and enhance the mutual understanding and friendship of the people who are involved in the conversation.

Compliments are speech acts that are primarily aimed at maintaining, improving, or supporting the addressee's face. Newton and Burgoon (1990:509) define compliments as "statements that are intended to make the other feel good about himself/herself". Holmes (1986b:485) has defined a compliment as a "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". Generally, a compliment means that you are giving a positive evaluation about the addressee's appearance, behaviour, manner, skill, etc., as illustrated in example 1.

Example 1

You're looking good. Is that a new suit?

Compliments can be considered as a type of speech acts through which a speaker expresses positive attitudes towards another speaker. Within the same culture, compliments have different types according to the ways of using them and their roles in context. The main target of using a compliment is not to lose one's face which is likely to be lost if a compliment is misused in context.

Performing a successful compliment requires the following conditions:

- a- Hearer (complimentee) has a certain quality
- b- Speaker (complimenter) believes that the quality is admirable.
- c- Speaker wants Hearer to know/believe that Speaker admires the quality.

Functions of compliments

Language serves many functions, but two are basic referential and affective functions. The referential function of language is its function in conveying information, facts, or content. The affective function refers to

the use of language to convey feelings and reflect social relationships. The main function of compliments is affective and social rather than referential. Compliments are social lubricants which create or maintain rapport, i.e. strategies that aim to establish or reaffirm common ground, mutuality or social solidarity.

Example 2

Rhonda is visiting an old schoolfriend, Carol, and comments on one of Carol's children.

Rhonda: What a polite child!

Carol: Thank you. We do our best.

Compliments can be described as clearly positive politeness devices which express goodwill and solidarity between the speaker and the addressee. Wolfson (1989:171) states that one of the functions of compliments as used by speakers of American English is to encourage or reinforce desired behaviour. Women are expected to be preoccupied with their appearance and matters concerning home and children. Woman is treated a woman regardless of her professional level. Wolfson (ibid:173) states that "What we see in these analyses of speech behavior to women is that the way a woman is spoken to is, no matter what her status, a subtle and powerful way of perpetuating her subordinate role in society".

Herbert (1990) suggests that some compliments serve as expressions of praise and admiration. Praise is often directed downwards from superordinate to subordinate, and appears only in face to face interaction. So the teacher's compliment about a student's work would generally be considered as praise.

Example 3

Teacher: This is excellent Jennie. You've really done a nice job.

Tannen (1990a:69) states that compliments may have the function of patronizing. When compliments are experienced as ways in which the speaker is asserting superiority, they will be unwelcome. On the other hand, compliments directed upwards from subordinate to superordinate are often labeled 'flattery'. Flattery lacks sincerity and is given to get benefit.

A compliment will be heard as a sarcastic or ironic put-down when the content of a compliment is perceived as too distant from reality. There is no doubt of the sarcastic intent of the speaker's comment "You play so well" on someone was playing football badly.

Brown and Levinson (1987:66) suggest that a compliment may be regarded as a face-threatening act, when the compliment implies an element of envy and desire to have what the addressee possesses. This case

is clear in cultures where an expression of admiration for an object imposes an obligation on the addressee to offer it to the complimenter.

Example 4

John: What an unusual tie. It's beautiful.

Smith: Please take it.

In analyzing the function of a particular compliment, the relationship between the participants is a crucial factor. Compliments presuppose a certain familiarity with the addressee; otherwise they are experienced as face-threatening acts.

Wolfson (1983:88) states that compliments are speech acts that apart from having a status and function of their own; therefore they can strengthen or even replace other speech-act formulas such as apologies, thanks and greetings and can downgrade the force of face-threatening acts such as criticism, reproaches, and directives of various types.

Why do people use compliments?

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.

Holmes (1995:131) states that women give and receive compliments on appearance more than men do. Women prefer to compliment each other on appearance more often than on any other topic because they consider it as most appropriate between equals, friends and intimates, and least threatening acts. While men prefer to compliment other men, but not women, on possessions. For men, compliments on possessions can be interpreted as face-threatening acts because of the possibility that the complimenter will be heard as expressing desire for or envy of the object referred to. Compliments on appearance are remarkably rare between American males, (Wolfson, 1983:93).

Example 5 (Appearance compliment)

I like your outfit Beth. I think I could wear that.

Example 6 (Ability/performance compliment)

Wow you played well today Davy.

Example 7 (Possessions compliment)

Is that your flash red sports car?

Example 8 (Personality/friendliness)

I'm very lucky to have such a good friend.

It has been commented that one of the reasons for the scarcity of appearance compliments between men is fear of the possible imputation of

homosexuality. To compliment another man on his hair, his clothes, or his body is an extremely face threatening thing to do, both for speaker and hearer. It has to be very carefully done in order not to send the wrong signals, (Holmes, 1995:133). For men compliments on appearance seem to cause embarrassment. In example 16 the recipient's response to the second overt compliment is acute embarrassment followed by rejection.

Example 9

Male 1: You've got a new tie in the meantime.

Male 2: It's a very old one actually.

Male 1: It's quite splendid anyway.

Male 2: (Looks extremely embarrassed) No no. What have you been up to anyway.

Women or men pay more compliments

Many researchers 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. The two different American studies Wolfson (1983) and Herbert (1990), and in research on compliments between Polish speakers (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 1989) supported these results. 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.

The majority of compliments occur in informal interactions between people of the same age and status (friends), (Wolfson, 1983:91). A small

proportion of compliments occur between people of different status, and these compliments are given by superiors to subordinates.

Example 10

Manager to her secretary

You are such a treasure Carol. What would I do without you!

Complimenting a higher status male is a risky business by both genders. In example 11, note the male's discouraging reaction.

Example 11

Young woman to Minister's personal secretary at a reception.

Woman: What an interesting job you have. You must be very bright.

Man: I just do my job.

The linguistic characteristics of compliments

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.

Five or six adjectives, such as *good, nice, great, beautiful* and *pretty* are often used in compliments.

Example 12

You're looking nice today.

Example 13

What great kids!

Example 14

That's a beautiful skirt.

Manes and Wolfson (1980) state that the verbs which are frequently used in compliments are only *like* and *love*.

Example 15

I love those socks. Where did you get them?

Example 16

I like those glasses.

Holmes (1995:128) proposes a schema based on her analyses of compliments uttered by males and females in New Zealand English with six syntactic patterns, as illustrated in table 1.

Table 1 Syntactic patterns of compliments

Syntactic Formula	Example
1- NP BE (LOOKING) (INT) ADJ	That coat is really great.
2- I (INT) LIKE NP	I simply love that skirt.
3- PRO BE (a) (INT) ADJ NP	That's a very nice coat.
4- What (a) (ADJ) NP!	What lovely children!
5- (INT) ADJ (NP)	Really cool ear-rings.
6- Isn't NP ADJ!	Isn't this food wonderful!

Notes: Copula BE represents any copula verb; LIKE represents any verb of liking: e.g. *love, enjoy, admire*; ADJ represents any semantically positive adjective; and INT represents any boosting intensifier: e.g. *really, very*.

Manes and Wolfson (1980) investigated a corpus of 686 compliments collected by the authors and their students at the Universities of Virginia and Pennsylvania from a wide range of everyday interactions. They identified nine syntactic patterns that account for the majority of the structures in their data. In particular the first three patterns cover 85% of the compliments in their data-base. The patterns are the following:

1. NP is/looks (really) ADJ *Your sweater is really nice*
2. I (really) like/love NP *I like your car*
3. PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP *That's a good question*
4. You V (a) (really) ADJ NP *You did a great job*
5. You V NP (really) ADV *You sang that song very well*
6. You have (a) (really) ADJ NP *You have a beautiful living room*
7. What (a) ADJ NP! *What a pretty shirt!*
8. ADJ NP! *Good shot!*
9. Isn't NP ADJ! *Isn't that ring pretty!*

Since compliments are used to initiate a conversation, or are independent of the previous topic. Deixis is used to identify the referent of the compliment clearly, (Manes and Wolfson, 1981). Therefore, the majority of the complimenter make use of second person pronouns (You look great), or demonstratives (That's a nice shirt). Otherwise, the complimented object was clear from the context (You bought a new dress? it's a great colour.). The identification of the referent is crucial, and the deixis in compliments serves an important function in this role.

Having analyzed over one thousand American compliments, Herbert (1990:206) found that women tend to use linguistically stronger forms than men's (I love x compared to I like x). Johnson and Roen (1992) found that

women preferred the use of intensifiers (such as really, very, particularly) more than men did. They also found that 83 per cent of female-female interactions used personalized forms, while only 32 per cent of male-male compliments. These results support the view that women's style is interpersonal, affective and interaction-oriented, while men's style is impersonal, instrumental and content-oriented (see Swacker, 1979; Aries, 1982).

he linguistic features of women's compliments differ from men's because women regard compliments as positive politeness devices which can be used as ways of establishing and maintaining relationships, while for men, and especially between men, their function may not be so clear-cut.

Compliment responses

Herbert (1989:5) states that in those English-speaking societies "thank you" is considered as the appropriate response to a compliment.

Example 17

At a party. Joan has had hair cut very short.

Margie: Your hair looks so nice.

Joan: Thanks. It feels really good like this.

Compliment responses can be classified into three general categories: agreements, non-agreements and evasions.

(i) Agreements

In social exchanges, both men and women are under some pressure to agree with the complimenter and accept the compliment, and avoid self-praise. People use various ways to solve this dilemma, such as praise downgrade and return.

Within the general category of agreements six subtypes of responses are distinguished:

- Appreciation Tokens
- Comment Agreements
- Praise Upgrades
- Comment History
- Praise Downgrades
- Return

(1)Appreciation Tokens

The acceptance of compliments is usually expressed through tokens such as *thank you, thanks, thank you so much, well, and thank you*, or non-verbal ones like smiles and nods,(Pomerantz,1978).

Example 18

AA: Um, that's a nice shirt!

BB: Thank you.

Example 19

AA: I really like your dress!

BB: Oh, thanks.

Example 20

AA: I'm looking forward to reading this!

BB: (smiles)

(2) Comment Acceptances

The complimentee accepts the compliment with an appreciation token (Thanks) and adds relevant comments about the item being complimented.

Example 21

AA: You look really nice!

BB: Oh, thank you. It's because I'm teaching.

(3) Praise Upgrades

The complimentee does not only accept the complimentary force of the speaker's positive evaluation of the speaker, but considers it as being insufficient and s/he increases the evaluation.

Example 22

AA: You look very nice today, Matt!

BB: Of course!

Praise Upgrade response flouts the Avoid Self- Praise norm. Herbert (1989:13) suggests that Praise Upgrades typically have a joking or playful connotation, and they may occur only among close acquaintances.

4- Comment History

In this type of compliments response the complimentee agrees with speaker's original assertion and adds a History Comment.

Example 23

AA: The colour of this bowl is fantastic, eh. Good choice!

BB: I know. I have one already and all my friends like it, so I'm buying one for one of them. I always get compliments on it.

5- Praise downgrades

Praise downgrades or Scale-down agreements show an awareness of the dilemma of accepting a compliment and avoiding self-praise at the same time, (Pomerantz, 1978). The complimentee agrees with the prior praise assessment but reduces its complimentary force, by replacing the strong-positive evaluative terms offered by the speaker, with more moderate-positive terms.

Example 24

AA: I think that's the best chocolate cake in Edinburgh.

BB: Yes. It is very good, isn't it? We make it ourselves. Our chefs are upstairs, in the kitchen.

6- Return

A compliment return consists of two parts: an acceptance of the compliment of the response and praising the complimenter. The complementee returns the praise to the complimenter. By returning the compliment, the complementee contributed to the equality of the relationship and maintained rapport. Chen (1993:58) explains that "Returning compliment" can be seen as a direct result of the indebted nature of compliment. It helps the complementee to get out of the debt by returning the verbal gift to the complimenter.

Example 25

AA: You've got beautiful eyes!

BB: So have you!

Example 26

AA: Your hair looks really nice!

BB: Thanks. So does yours.

Pomerantz (1978:80) explores that in spite of the speakers are under the social pressure to accept a compliment, there is a strong pressure on speakers to avoid or minimize self-praise, a pressure towards being modest, (Leech, 1983:136). The social pressure to be modest may lead people to disagree with the complimenter, and this disagreement is regarded as a polite response.

Example 27

After a meal at Fiona's flat.

Alice: You're such a good cook.

Fiona: No no not at all. Just ordinary, nothing special.

(ii) Non-agreements

It was relatively rare for a person to overtly reject a compliment or evade it than to disagree with it. The speaker changes the topic, for instance or responds to some other aspect of the previous speaker's utterance.

Example 28

After a soccer match.

Liam: You played well today Davy.

Davy: You must be joking. I missed a couple of sisters.

Within the category of non-agreements five subtypes of response are distinguished:

- Scale Down
- Question

- Disagreement
- Qualification
- No Acknowledgement

1- Scale Down

The complimentee scales down the praise of the compliment by minimizing its force, (Herbert, 1989:15).S/he does not deny the complimentary force of the speaker's assertion, but intends to mitigate the force of the compliment.

Example 29

AA: I like your shirt.

BB: It's really quite old.

2- Question

This type of response has the following pattern;

A compliments B

B questions A about compliment assertion + (asks for repetition, clarification, or expansion of compliment assertion)

A repeats, clarifies, or expands compliment assertion

This type of response permits the complimentee to seem modest by displaying uncertainty about the subject of the compliment and obliges the complimenter to repeat the compliment and, with such a repetition, ends the compliment sequence,(Valdes and Pino,1981:61).In the following examples, the complimentee requests for an expansion of the positive assertion.

Example 30

AA: Your plan is very good!

BB: Really?

AA: It's excellent! I really enjoyed reading it!

BB: Thanks.

Example 31

AA: You look really well today!

BB: Oh, do I?

3- Disagreement

The main way of showing disagreement is by uttering a direct contrastive counterassertion.

Example 32

AA: You are a very good person, John.

BB: No, I'm not.

4- Qualification

Pomerantz (1978:101) suggests that this type of nonagreement is shown with qualifications of the prior evaluative terms. It usually contains markers like *though*, *yet*, and *but*.

Example 33

AA: Nice hair cut!

BB: Oh, thanks, but it's a bit short maybe.

5- No Acknowledgement

This subcategory includes two different attitudes. Either the complimentee gives an indication of not hearing the complimentary assertion, or chooses not to respond to it. Example (34) occurred between a shop assistant and a customer, the latter did not acknowledge the positive evaluation by the former. She giggled nervously, instead.

Example 34

AA: Oh, good taste! This is my favourite tartan pattern.

I think it's lovely!

BB: (giggles)

Example (35) was taken from a conversation between a babysitter and a child, who did not respond to the compliment.

Example 35

AA: Those are great drawings!

BB: (silence)

(iii) Evasions

This category includes:

- Shift credit
- Informative comment
- Ignore
- Request reassurance

1- Shift credit

The complimentee transfers the praise to a third party.

Example 36

AA: That's a lovely blouse!

BB: My mother knitted it.

2- Informative comment

The complimentee provides additional information about the admired quality; s/he impersonalizes the complimentary force by giving impersonal details.

Example 37

AA: You look great! I mean it. You look wonderful.

BB: I can hardly believe I'm going to be 54 It sounds very old I can actually remember when I was going to be 30

Herbert (1989: 14) notes that occasionally, in the informative comments, the complimentee ignores the praise aspect of the compliment and treats the previous utterances as a mechanism for introducing a topic. This phenomenon occurred in the example below.

Example 38

AA: That's really a good quality!

BB: Well, I read about it in developmental psychology I can tell what people are up to and then I usually give them my motivation speech. I mean, like most teachers, I don't like people who don't do work, who, at least, don't read the material.

3- Ignore

The complimentee does not provide a response to the compliment; s/he tries to change the topic of the compliment to something else.

Example 39

AA: I like your dress.

BB: I heard that you were not well last time. So do you feel well know?

Example 40

AA: You've got beautiful eyes!

BB: It's time we were leaving.

4- Request reassurance

The complimentee requested additional reassurance that the compliment was genuine. Such responses were ambiguous; it was difficult to know the intention of the speaker. Did s/he want an expansion or repetition of the original compliment, or did he want to question the sincerity of the complimenter.

Example 41

AA: I like your address.

BB: You don't think so it's too bright.

Example 42

AA: Nice shoes!

BB: Do you really like them?

Pomerantz (1978) classified compliment responses into four categories: acceptances, agreements, rejections, and disagreements. Her analysis indicated that acceptances were relatively infrequent when compared to Rejections and Disagreements (e.g. 'it's just a rag my sister gave me'). She suggested that self-praise avoidance accounts for the frequency of Rejections and Disagreements in compliment responses.

Herbert (1989) compared the compliment/compliment response interchanges of American university students with South African university students. He grouped the responses into three groups:

agreement, non-agreement, and requesting interpretation. Nearly 66 per cent of the American compliment responses were broadly classified as agreements, 31 per cent as non-agreements, and 3 per cent as requesting interpretation. In contrast, 88 per cent of the South African compliment responses were categorized as agreements.

Chen (1993) compared the compliment responses of American and Chinese speakers. His findings suggested that the strategies used by the American English speakers were largely motivated by Leech's (1983) Agreement Maxim maximize agreements between self and others and minimize disagreement between self and others. In Chen's sample, 39 per cent of the US compliment responses were categorized as Acceptances, 19 per cent as Compliment Returns, 29 per cent as Deflections, and 13 per cent as Rejections. The Chinese speaker strategies, on the other hand, were governed by Leech's Modesty Maxim minimize praise of self and maximize dispraise of self. Of the Chinese compliment responses, 96 per cent were categorized as Rejections.

Nelson et. al. (1996) conducted a study of Syrian Arabic speakers' and American speakers' verbal responses to compliments. The results of the study suggested that both Americans and Syrians were much more likely to either accept or mitigate the force of the compliment than to reject it outright. These results were supported by a case study conducted by Enssaif (2005) on the compliment behaviour by the Saudi female students of Department of English.

Conclusion

Compliments are speech acts which explicitly or implicitly attribute credit to the addressee for some good (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.). They are speech acts that are primarily aimed at maintaining, improving, or supporting the addressee's face. 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. Compliment responses can be divided into three general categories: accept, reject and evade. 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.

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المجاملات وأساليب التأدب

تعد المجاملات أفعال كلامية تحافظ وتحسن وتدعم الصورة العامة للشخص . تستخدم المجاملات كأسلوب مؤدب يراعي مصالح ورغبات وأحتياجات المخاطب. تمارس المجاملة في مواضيع مختلفة مثل المظهر والأمكانية والأداء والممتلكات.

تحاول هذه الدراسة فحص سلوك المجاملة لمتحدثي اللغة الأنكليزية حيث أنها تسعى الى معرفة التراكيب اللغوية للمجاملة ووظائف المجاملة وأنواع أجابات المجاملة ,فضلا على معرفة الاختلافات في سلوك المجاملة للرجل والمرأة.