

THE COMPLIMENT: ITS CONCEPTS, FUNCTIONS, COMMON TOPICS, AND TYPICAL RESPONSES IN COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The compliment expressions are frequently used in communication. Delivering and responding compliment is one of media to build and create good relationship between and among people when communicating. It is also considered as a politeness strategy in order to make the communication run in harmony. Generally, when someone is complimented, he or she naturally and psychologically feels excited and happy. However, few people are not really excited due to many reasons. These two different feelings of responses probably happen because responders have different perceptions and personal trait regarding to the compliment itself. Also the compliment and its typical responses are assumed likely influenced by culture to culture. This paper is an attempt to elaborate theoretically the concepts, functions, common topics, typical responses of compliment, and compliment and culture in communication and interaction.

Keywords: compliment, functions, responses, and culture value

Introduction

Situation : Jonathan is a teacher in an adult school class in the United States. After class, he is speaking to Anh, one of his students.

Jonathan : Anh, your English is improving. I am pleased with your work.

Anh : (looking down) Oh, no. My English is not very good.

Jonathan : Why do you say that, Anh? You are doing well in class.

Anh : No, I am not a good student.

Jonathan : Anh, you are making progress in this class. You should be proud of your English.

Anh : No, it is not true. You are a good teacher, but I am not a good student.

Jonathan : (He is surprised by her response and wonders why she think her English is so bad. He does not know what to say and wonders if he should stop giving compliment)

Levina. R.D., Baxter, Jim., McNulty, Piper (1987)

Referring to the quoted dialogue, there are some points which can be implied regarding to the compliment, its functions, responses, and topics.

First, it shows that the speaker (teacher) tries to appreciate or praise to the addressee (student) due to his achievement in English. Second, the topic/theme of the compliment delivered by the teacher is about an achievement or performance, or skill. Third, the typical response of compliment is regarded no-agreement with the response “*Oh, no. My English is not very good.*”

As a matter of fact, in any social occasions and circumstances and in every moment, people often give and receive compliments. People usually deliver compliment for many reasons such as respect, admiration, praise, etc. In addition, in communication setting, giving compliment may to smoothen and or to start or strike up the conversation between speaker and hearer.

In terms of responses of the compliment, people have a diverse number of ways how to respond it. The responses, of course depend on the social context, occasion, circumstance, and psychological condition of the hearer. One may response directly by saying ‘*thank you,*’ or another one may prefers having ‘*not really,*’ or the other one responds ‘*you want it?*’ etc.

This paper is an attempt to elaborate theoretically the concepts and definition, functions, common topics, and typical responses, and compliment and culture of compliment in communication and interaction.

Discussion

The Nature of Compliment

In terms of world class, the word compliment can be as noun and as a verb. The use of compliment whether it is a verb or a noun; of course it depends on the sentence. The sentence “*The teacher almost never gives the compliment to his student*”⁽¹⁾. “*The teacher almost never compliments his students*”⁽²⁾. In sentence (1) the word compliment is as a noun but in sentence (2) it is as a verb.

While in by definition, textually the compliment is defined as an expression of praise, or respect (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1978)). Then, a slight different definition proposed by Webster's New World College Dictionary (1995) defining the compliment is a formal act or expression of courtesy or respect, or something said in admiration, praise, or flattery, or courteous greetings; respects, or to present something to (a person) as an act of politeness or respect. In addition, compliment also means good wishes, congratulation, gesture of civility, and showing fondness (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/compliment>)

By above textual definitions, the word compliment actually provides a number of similar, related and relevant words such as praise, respects, admiration, courtesy, flattery, courteous greetings, speech act, and act of politeness. This shows that the compliment is very powerful word and complex by its meaning, usage, and function as well. This also means that compliment is a matter good will of the speaker to the hearer.

In order to provide more comprehensive and contextual definition of compliment, Holmes (1986) defines a compliment as a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than speaker, usually the person addressed, for good (possession, characteristics, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and hearer. He, then further states that compliments are commonly regarded as positively affective speech acts that are meant to the addressee, which can be used as a powerful device for mutual solidarity and support.

Then, Ye (1995) defines that compliments are positive expressions, commendation that can boost one's morale. In addition, Morales (2012) defines compliments to be more comprehensive. He states that compliments are not only convey honest admiration or positive qualities but they are also used to substitute greetings, thanks, apologies, and minimize face-threatening acts.

Functions of compliments

Compliments are used for a variety of purposes and reasons. One of the most primary and frequent functions of compliments is to consolidate and increase solidarity between speaker and hearer. In line with this, Manes and Wilson (1981) states that the primary purpose of compliments is to create and reinforce solidarity between the speaker and addressee. Regarding to function of compliments, Wu (2008) sums up the functions of the compliments from different experts.

Table 1 Functions of compliments (adapted from Wu, 2008)

No	Function	Example	Explanation
1	To express administration or approval of someone's work, appearance, taste.	<i>I like your new mobile phone.</i>	This compliment praises someone's possession and shows the admiration of the speaker.
2	To establish, confirm, and maintain solidarity	<i>I really like your dress.</i>	When a stranger comes into a group and make compliment, it can be regarded as a method to establish rapport in the group.
3	To replace gratitude, greetings, congratulations, and apologies	<i>How nice you are today!</i>	When two friend meet with each other, this utterance has the same function of the greeting as "How are you.?"
4	To soften a face-threatening act such as apologies, requests and criticisms	<i>Your dress is too much but I like your shoes.</i>	If the speaker makes some offence to the hearer, he could use a compliment to change the topic and soften the tensed atmosphere.
5	To open and sustain conversation (conversational strategy)	<i>Hi, your English is very good, when did you begin to learn?</i>	If the interlocutors are strangers, they can begin their conversation from the compliment to open the dialogues.
6	To reinforce desired behavior	<i>How nice your earnings are! Where did you buy them?</i>	These two sentences show not only the speaker's admiration, but also the speaker's strong hope to buy the same earrings.

Then, actually compliment is used to express admiration or approval of someone's work, appearance taste such as in '*I like your dress*' (Herbert, 1990). In line with the function of compliment, (Walfson, 1983) proposes four types of compliments.

First, to establish, confirm, and maintain solidarity such as in '*I like your dress.*' This function is similar to function of compliment no. 2 in table 1 above. But if no 1 and 2 examples in table 1 above are analysed, they are slightly the same in terms of realization by linguistic features but the situation and circumstance may

different. The first example (*I like your new mobile phone*) means to express admiration or approval when the speaker and hearer know one another. However, the second example (*I really like your dress*) may refer when a stranger comes into a group and make a compliment, he actually would find out a method or strategy of communication in order to establish rapport in the group. Then, Walfson also adds that the compliment is a kind of an affective speech act serving to increase and consolidating the solidarity between the speaker and addressee. Then, it also enable to grease the social wheels and thus to serve as social lubricants that creates or maintains rapport.

Second, to replace gratitude, greetings, congratulation, and apology like in the sentence '*How nice you are today!*' as shown by table 1 above. This compliment may occur when the two friends meet with each other. This expression is actually having similar function of greeting such as '*How are you?*'

Third, to soften a face-threatening act such as apologies, requests, and criticisms for example, '*Your dress is too much but I like your shoes.*' This type of function of compliments is commonly used when the speaker make some offence to the hearer, he could use a compliment in order to change the topic and soften the tensed atmosphere.

Finally compliment is also used to open sustain conversation or it is called conversation strategy such as in expression '*Hi your English is very good when did you begin to learn it?*' This typical function of compliment is commonly used when the speaker is stranger, and he or she can begin his/her conversation from the compliment as the opening gambit to open the dialogue or conversation. However, to some extent, it is also often used when the speaker and listener know each other.

In line with the function of compliment, Manes (1983) adds that the compliment also function to reinforce desired behaviour such as in sentences '*How nice your earrings are! Where did you buy them?*' If it is analysed well, the sentences show that the speaker does not only admire but also he or she has strong hope that she/he can buy the same earrings.

To have more complete and wider horizon regarding to the functions of compliment, Hatch (1994) proposes four types of functions of compliment such as (1) to establish rapport and smooth the transition from greeting to the first topic conversation, (2) to reinforce and encourage good performance like a coach's compliment to an athlete, (3) to be used for thanking like saying '*great dinner*' to a cook, and (4) to soften the criticisms.

As stated previously that the compliment is as a kind of affective speech act which can change hearer's mind and mood when it is truly and correctly used by the speaker and it matches with the hearer's real existing condition. In http://www.interventioncentral.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/pdfs_interventions/prutor_lesson2.pdf/9/5/2015, it is also stated that when correctly used, compliments can motivate people to do their best. Remember that paying compliments is not a habit that comes naturally to language user but the compliment is a kind of skill and or competence must be taught and practiced in communication.

Topics of Compliments

As generally known that in our daily communication and transaction, people deliver compliments due to many reasons and intentions. One may compliment for the shake of greetings and gratitude, the other one may compliment because he or she would like to start conversation, and the rests may deliver compliments because he/she is eager to soften the criticism, etc. However, when one wants to compliment, he/she needs to choose topics or theme or issue for compliments. Topics of compliments may vary and they depend on the social context and culture. Here, culture and society seem to be determining factors why topics are different from one another.

Holmes (1996) in his research reports that there are a number of topics for compliments. She states there are four common topics for compliments. (1) It is about appearance-dress, looks, make up, etc such as in '*Jodha always look exquisite in everything she wear.*' (2) It is about possession-cars, albums, watches, mobile phones, etc like '*Your watch is really expensive.*' (3) It refers to performance/ability/skill- job or competencies such as skills of acting, playing music, etc as shown by '*You are the talented actor.*' (4) It is about the personality-internals, traits, emotions, etc such as in '*O'hara has such a kind heart.*'

Then, Levina. R.D., Baxter, Jim., McNulty, Piper (1987) adds that particularly, The American people commonly choose the following topics to compliment others such as (1) physical appearance, (2) personality, (3) family member, (4) abilities, (5) people's things (possessions), and (6) meal and food. Still in American English and culture, a limited number of words, mostly adjectives are often used when people give compliments such as nice, wonderful, fantastic, interesting, etc.

The Compliment Responses

The compliment responses are the important point regarding to compliment. Even though in the realization of the compliment responses are typical distinctive among others, theoretically the responses are constrained by two general conditions-agree with the speaker and avoid self-praise (Pomerantz, 1978). This condition leads to two distinctive poles for the recipient. Then, the recipient is faced with dilemma. On the one

side, the recipient is expected to agree with the complimenter and thus, he/she accepts the compliment. On the other hand, there is also a strong pressure on how the recipient can accept it without seeming to praise oneself or to be proud of.

In line with compliment responses, Holmes (1988) argues that three are main categories of compliment responses based on the credit attribution component of compliments namely accepting, rejecting, and deflecting or evading. Her point of view, is actually based on Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory and considered compliments to be, on the one hand, positively affective speech acts, and other hand, potentially face-threatening acts.

Then Pomerantz, (1978) further states that the two-agree with the speaker and avoid self-praise become the rules in responding compliments. By this condition, the recipient often gets confused to respond the compliment whether to accept or agree or avoid self-praise. In Brown and Levinson (1987) terms, failing to do so may 'hurt the speaker's face' and hence, compliment responses can be seen as potential face threatening acts. However, simple response like '*Thank you,*' is a prescriptively correct answer to a compliment (Herbert, 1986,1990).

It seems that responding compliment is not actually only a matter of linguistic domain, but it is also due to its complex psychological and mental reasoning. '*Agree*' with the speaker and *avoid self-praise* (Pomerantz, 1978); *accepting, rejecting, and deflecting or evading* (Holmes, 1988) become the conditions and basic principles of responding the compliment.

In line with the compliment responses, Herbert proposes a taxonomy of compliment responses known as Herber's Taxonomy of Compliment Responses. A detail taxonomy of compliment responses is shown by table 2 below.

Tabel 2 Herber's Taxonomy of Compliment Responses (Yusof and Hoon, 2014)

No	Types of Responses	Meanings	Language Expressions
1	Agreement Acceptance	Appreciation token Comment acceptance Praise upgrade	<i>Thank you</i> <i>Thanks, it's my favourite too.</i> <i>Really! Brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?</i>
2	Comment history		<i>I bought it from a trip to Arizona.</i>
3	Transfer	Reassignment Return	<i>My brother gave to me</i> <i>So is yours</i>
4	Non-agreement	Scale down Question Non-acceptance Disagreement Qualification No acknowledgment	<i>It's really quiet old.</i> <i>Do you really think so</i> <i>I hate it</i> <i>It's all right but Len's is more beautiful.</i> <i>(silence)</i>
5	Other interpretation	Request	<i>You want to borrow this one too?</i>

Then, the types of compliments responses also can be analysed by meaning, descriptions, and the expressions as shown by table 3 below.

Table 3 Compliment responses based on (Herbert,1990) adapted from Yousefaand (2010).

No	Meaning	Descriptions	Examples
1	Appreciation token	A verbal acceptance of a compliment, acceptance not being semantically fitted to the specifics of that compliment.	<i>Thank you</i>
2	Comment acceptance	The addressee accepts the complimentary force by means of a response semantically fitted to the compliment.	<i>It's one of my favourite too.</i>
3	Praise upgrade	The addressee accepts the compliment and asserts that the compliment force is insufficient,	<i>I always look young.</i>
4	Comment history	The addressee, although agreeing with the complimentary force, does not accept the praise personally, rather he/she impersonalize the complimentary force by giving impersonal detail.	<i>The song is from my first solo album; created by Iwan Fals.</i>
5	Reassignment	The addressee agrees with the compliment, but the complimentary force is transferred to some third person or to the object complimented itself.	<i>My brother gave to me</i> <i>Alhamdulillah-Praise to God</i>

6	Return	The praised is shifted the addressee/complimenter	<i>You are excellent too.</i>
7	Scale down	The force of compliment is minimized or scaled down by the addressee.	<i>It is just about \$ 100.</i>
8	Question	The addressee might want an expansion or repetition of the original compliment or question the sincerity of the compliment.	<i>Oh ya?</i>
9	Disagreement	The addressee directly disagrees with the addresser's assertion.	<i>No, I think so.</i>
10	Qualification	The addressee may choose not to accept the full complimentary force offered by the qualifying that praise, usually by employing but yet, etc.	<i>But, I prefer having the first cell phone.</i>
11	No-acknowledgment	The addressee give no indication of having heard the compliment, that is he/she employs the conversational turn to do something other than responding to the compliment offered for example shift the topic.	<i>Silence</i>
12	Request	The addressee interprets the compliment as a request rather than a simple compliment.	<i>Do you want to have it?</i>

Compliment and Culture

The distinctive and various responses of the compliment are not only a matter of individual preferences and choices but it also a matter of societal group. By individual, it tends to be stylistic showing that he/she has a different way of responding to one another while by society, the typical responses reflect the norms, tradition, and ethic of the people.

Generally when someone delivers a compliment, truthfully someone tends to be happy and feel appreciated and respected however his/her response frequently does not use a positive responses such as 'Thank you' or 'You too' but they tend to say 'I don't think so,' or 'Not really.' In fact, conceptually one of the purposes of the usage of the compliment is to make the conversation and communication flow smoothly like a 'ping-pong' match.

Regarding to various types of responses of the compliment across society and culture Manes (1983); Herbert (1989) states that the compliment and its responses can be most likely influenced by the modesty values or any culture elements rooted in particular domain. He further states that a compliment is a structured speech act that reflects social values in culture. This means that the typical types of responses of the compliment will show the value system, identity, character, norms, tradition, etc., of the people of a certain culture.

In accordance to responses of compliment and culture, Chen (2003) and Daikura (1986) reports in their research that South East Asian people such Malay, Chinese, Vietnamese tend to avoid accepting compliments and rather rejecting them compared to English speakers. This condition may happen because they have difficulties in responding compliment in an appropriate way (Al Falasi, 2007).

On the other hand, the Southern Asian people such as Arabic and South Africa people tend to respond compliment by accepting and more openly rather than them. Chen then also states that Chinese society normally prefers to be humble by rejecting the compliment while the native people of English such as American and English normally react to compliments by gracefully accepting it. Such a different way of responding is attributed to social values of the culture.

This means that there is strong relationship of types of responses uttered by the hearers with their cultural values, norm, and tradition as well. By analysing one's typical response of compliment, his character can be justified and valued. For example, if one responds the compliment indirectly by saying 'I don't think so.' He or she could be regarded having introvert character. On other hand, if he or she replies the compliment with 'Thank you' it could be concluded that he/she is extrovert, fair or open individual etc.

In addition, responding compliment by using expression 'I don't think so' actually can be regarded that he/she is hypocrite because naturally human being is normally happy when appreciated or complimented.

Conclusion

To sum up, there are some important points which can be taken into conclusions. First, the term of compliment is closely related to showing appreciation. The two expressions may be used simultaneously meaning that when one delivers the compliment, he/she is actually showing his/her appreciation to the addressee. Second, the compliments are actually used for variety of reasons for, example to praise, to admire, to show appreciation, etc. In any different context, to strike conversation, the compliments are frequently used by the people, particularly when they don't know each other. Third, as a kind of speech act, compliment is actually powerful and meaningful in communication because by delivering a compliment because it can smoothen the

communication, can magnify hearer' strength, but not their weakness, build and create solidarity and harmony in communication etc. Fourth, Typical responses of compliment may vary from individual to individual, sex, topics, and situation, and culture to culture. For instance, one may respond compliment directly but the another one may respond indirectly, and the other may reject the compliment. Finally, compliment is a kind of typical efficacious 'panacea' because it can motivate the spirit of the hearer and soften a face-threatening act such as apologies, requests and criticisms. Overall, compliment is important and frequently used in daily communication because of its various topics and wide functions and roles.

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