



A Conversation Analysis on Social Interaction (Compliment and Its responses)

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Abstract

This study examines the speech act of complimenting and its responses in naturally occurring phone conversations between friends, aiming to understand how interpersonal meaning, identity, and social norms are negotiated through language. Compliments function as positive evaluations that enhance face, express solidarity, and perform identity work, while responses reveal politeness orientations and cultural attitudes toward modesty. Using a corpus of audio-recorded conversations, the study analyzes types of compliments, response strategies, and politeness mechanisms. Findings show that intensifiers, both prosodic (e.g., rising intonation, vowel lengthening) and morphological (e.g., so, very) are frequently used to strengthen face-enhancing effects. Responses range from acceptance (Thank you) to rejection (no) and topic shifts, often used to avoid self-praise. These findings are supported by cross-cultural studies and contribute to the field of pragmatics by highlighting how compliments manage relationships and identity. The study also offers practical implications for developing pragmatic competence in language learners.

Keywords: Compliment Strategies, Compliment Responses, Interactional Pragmatics.

DOI:

Introduction

Social interaction plays a critical role in shaping how culture and normative values are expressed and interpreted in communication. Since communication is inherently a cultural act, it reflects the ways in which language users maintain social balance, affirm group identity, and manage interpersonal conflict (Robles, 2013; Wang, 2010). Language is not used in a vacuum; rather, it functions as a tool for negotiating social relationships and sustaining the values of the communities in which it operates.

From the perspective of identity, social interaction serves as a primary arena where membership status is constructed, affirmed, and made meaningful (Tom & John, 2018). Through specific discursive practices, speakers position themselves and their interlocutors in particular social roles, thereby reinforcing their inclusion within a social group. These identity performances are not fixed but are shaped through repeated interactions and choices of language use.

In addition, social interaction helps prevent the rise of conflicting activities, often sources of social tension, by fostering mutual understanding and co-constructing meaning between interlocutors (Xie et al., 2013). This is particularly relevant in classroom contexts, where effective interaction can reduce the intensity of confrontation and support a more collaborative learning environment. Moreover, interaction facilitates the use of politeness strategies, enabling speakers to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships. By doing so, individuals express respect and cooperation, fundamental elements of successful communication (Robles, 2013).

Given the significance of social interaction in constructing interpersonal meaning, this study focuses on the speech act of complimenting and its responses as a form of social action. Compliments, as positive evaluations, serve to enhance social bonds, express solidarity, and perform identity work, while responses to compliments reveal underlying social norms and politeness orientations. To better understand these dynamics, this study aims (1) to examine the types of compliments used in social interactions, (2) to identify the range of response strategies employed by interlocutors when receiving compliments, and (3) to explore the role of politeness and face-enhancing strategies in shaping these exchanges. Through this inquiry, the research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how language is used to manage social relationships and negotiate interpersonal meanings in everyday communication.

Literature Review

A number of studies have yielded insightful and detailed findings on the use of compliments and their responses. For instance, Dendenne (2021) examined compliments in Algerian Arabic, identifying five key features. The first involved topic progressivity, where the complimented element could become a new topic of conversation. Second, speakers often recycled each other's linguistic expressions through formulaic compliments, encouraging co-participants to collectively assess the compliment recipient. Third, self-deprecation paired with compliments served as an interactional resource. Fourth, compliments were frequently intertwined with divine invocations, which, though seemingly less restrictive for the recipient, still imposed limits on co-participants. The data consisted of over 16.5 hours of naturally occurring, audiotaped conversations, both dyadic and multi-party, among relatives, friends, coworkers, acquaintances, and strangers across two Algerian cities.

Focusing on face enhancement, Garcia (2018) found that most compliments in his study served to reinforce face, functioning as face-enhancing acts in informal

DOI:

interactions. These compliments helped express closeness and solidarity and were typically constructed using declarative, copulative, or exclamatory structures, a limited range of positive adjectives, intensifiers, and non-direct acceptance responses. Data were drawn from the Briz and Val.Es.Co. (2002) corpus, consisting of 19 informal Spanish conversations lasting a total of 415 minutes.

Imamura (2022) observed that Japanese speakers often respond to compliments with acknowledgment tokens combined with affiliative talk. These responses not only accepted the compliment but also signaled understanding of prior discourse while maintaining modesty. The study analyzed 40 hours of video-recorded, face-to-face interactions involving both dyadic and group conversations among friends and acquaintances.

Pamela et al. (2010) explored compliments in surgeon–patient interactions. Compliments offered before treatment decisions were used to guide medical outcomes in line with patients’ preferences, while those following recommendations served more as praise, acknowledging expertise without influencing decisions. Data included audio-recorded consultations between 59 elderly patients and 39 orthopedic surgeons in the Midwestern U.S.

Golato (2002) compared German and American responses to compliments in family and friend settings. Both cultures shared similar strategies for rejecting compliments and balancing agreement with modesty. However, Germans used a broader range of acceptance strategies, avoided direct appreciation tokens, and frequently included assessments or confirmation markers. German speakers were also more likely to elicit second compliments than Americans. The corpus included 25 hours of German dinner-table video recordings and 6 hours of American telephone conversations.

Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design using Conversation Analysis (CA) as the primary analytical framework. CA is well-suited for investigating the sequential organization of talk-in-interaction and uncovering how participants co-construct meaning through verbal exchanges. The focus of this research is on identifying the structure and function of compliments and their responses as social actions within naturally occurring discourse.

The data consists of a naturally occurring telephone conversation between two Russian female university students, Joe and Linda, who are currently studying abroad—Joe in Germany and Linda in the United States. Both speakers are close friends, as evidenced by their frequent references to shared knowledge and personal matters throughout the conversation. Their interaction provides a rich context for exploring how compliments and their responses are embedded in casual, everyday talk.

The conversation spans approximately 30 minutes and revolves around the speakers’ experiences of adapting to university life in their respective host countries. Linda discusses feeling overwhelmed by overlapping social and academic obligations, while Joe shares her struggles adjusting to dorm life and academic routines. The conversation naturally transitions to more specific topics, including a discussion about a birthday gift for Joe, which features instances of complimenting behavior.

For this study, three excerpts have been selected for in-depth analysis. Each excerpt ranges from 30 seconds to one minute in length and contains at least one instance of a compliment and its response. These segments were chosen based on their relevance to

DOI:

the research objectives, particularly the occurrence of compliment sequences and the interactional strategies employed by the speakers.

The data was transcribed following CA conventions, focusing on turn-taking, overlaps, pauses, intonation, and speech delivery. This detailed transcription allows for a nuanced examination of how compliments are initiated, responded to, and function within the ongoing interaction.

DOI:

Result and Discussion

Excerpt 1

In this excerpt, a compliment is delivered through a positive evaluation of the addressee's possessions (Golato, 2002), followed by a rejection response aimed at avoiding self-praise (Pamela et al., 2010).

00:01:03	Joe ⁹	: but it's cool I mean I live I like (.) in a dorm it-it is weird living in a dorm <u>again</u>
00:01:06	Linda ¹⁰	: ehm
00:01:07	Joe ¹¹⁻¹⁴	: I- I mean I'm not really like (.) like totally like happy here but I mean it's not
00:01:12		the worst place in my own room and the room is big and you know there's a
00:01:17		kitchen and the kitchen is fine and- there's a good living room (.) place with the
00:01:22		TV
00:01:23	Linda ¹⁵	: that's all yours-
00:01:24	Joe ¹⁶	: =yeah yeah,
00:01:25	Linda ¹⁷	: that's [nice
00:01:25	Joe ¹⁸	: [no, not my room but the kitchen and the living room are communal
00:01:29	Linda ¹⁹	: right,

Figure 1. Extract 1

Prior to this segment, Joe constructs an identity as a fast reader by engaging in a category-bound activity, claiming she can “read in five minutes” (Shrikant, 2018). She tempers this self-praise with a laugh, which is then echoed by Linda. Linda's laughter serves to affirm Joe's positive face needs by treating the statement as humorously exaggerated (Laben, 2018).

In line 9, Joe shares her impression of living in a dorm, juxtaposing a positive and a negative adjective, and employing hedges, a brief pause, and a cut-off, markers of her ambivalence. The emphasis on “again” signals a reference to past experience. Linda acknowledges Joe's comment, offering a space for her to elaborate.

Lines 11–12 show Joe expressing mixed emotions about her dorm life, again using hedging, silences, and cut-offs. She evaluates her dorm as “not the worst place” and describes its features using positive adjectives, possibly indicating her adjustment to the environment. In line 16, Linda initiates a close-class repair (Mauranen, 2006) to clarify if the facilities Joe describes are actually hers. Joe responds with an affirmative minimal reply, “yeah” repeated, signaling confirmation.

Subsequently, Linda compliments the quality of Joe's dorm (Golato, 2002). This praise overlaps with Joe's response, where she quickly issues a rejection using the emphatic “no” to downplay the compliment and avoid appearing self-congratulatory (Pamela et al., 2010). Joe clarifies that the facilities are not exclusive to her room, although she partially acknowledges that areas like the kitchen and living room are shared amenities. Linda concludes with a minimal agreement marker “right” to confirm her understanding (Dendenne, 2021).

Excerpt 2

This excerpt highlights the use of intensifiers through both prosodic and morphological devices to enhance the face-boosting impact of compliments (Garcia, 2018), the employment of appreciation tokens in response to compliments (Golato,

DOI:

2002), and the use of minimal agreement tokens as confirmation markers (Dendenne, 2021).

00:03:16 Linda⁸⁻⁹ : =[yeah so yeah but my most exciting thing is that a publisher is interested in
 00:03:18 my personal ad book (.)
 00:03:21 Joe¹⁰ : wo::w
 00:03:22 Linda¹¹ : yeah [so
 00:03:23 Joe¹² : [that's so cool
 00:03:25 Linda¹³⁻¹⁴ : **thank you**, so I am so excited and I got this letter and I was like I didn't
 00:03:29 know it was a scam or something
 00:03:30 Joe¹⁵ : =yeah,

Figure 2. Extract 2

Prior to this interaction, Linda informs Joe that she sent her an email, an utterance that indirectly functions as a request for a reply (Rossi, 2018). Joe then accounts for her lack of response, citing her university-related busyness. Her explanation is marked by intra-turn pauses and cut-offs, indicating the unexpected nature of Linda's implied request.

In line 8, Linda overlaps with Joe's response by giving a positive evaluation and proceeds to share good news, shifting the topic slightly. Her repeated affirmation "yeah" and use of the superlative "most" signal a new conversational goal, emphasizing that her upcoming news is of greater significance than her previous remarks. She then describes her success in gaining a publisher's interest in her personal ad book (line 9), positioning this as a notable accomplishment. Joe reacts with a surprised "wow," marked by vowel elongation and rising intonation, a prosodic intensifier that magnifies the compliment's face-enhancing quality (Garcia, 2018).

In line 11, Linda responds with "yeah," treating Joe's exclamation as a compliment. Joe continues by offering a more specific praise, overlapping with Linda's previous turn. She uses "so" as a morphological intensifier paired with "cool," reinforcing the compliment's impact (Garcia, 2018). Rather than resuming her previous point immediately, Linda accepts the compliment with an appreciation token (Golato, 2002) and shares her emotional response. She expresses excitement about the publisher's letter, implying it was something deeply desired, and then signals her initial surprise or unawareness of the letter's arrival (line 14). Joe affirms this with another positive evaluation, acknowledging Linda's emotional stance.

DOI:

Excerpt 3

In this extract, two conversational features are observed: the use of morphological intensifiers (Gracia, 2018) and the strategy of ignoring a compliment (Golato, 2002).

- 00:03:59 Linda⁵⁻⁶ : so I asked you on my email I sent a message like asking people looking for
 00:04:03 funny personal ads and I want you to send it like everybody know £hhhh£ (.)
 00:04:06 Joe⁷ : okay
 00:04:07 Linda⁸ : =okay
 00:04:08 Joe⁹ : =okay
 00:04:09 Linda¹⁰⁻¹¹ : and Craig's all busy like coming up with more pictures because I sent pictures
 00:04:11 with the (.) a couple of sample pictures that he di[d,
 00:04:13 Joe¹² : [yeah yeah,
 00:04:14 Linda¹³ : Craig's all busy like coming up with enough for a whole BOOK ð
 00:04:17 Joe¹⁴ : that's cool I am so excited for you,
 00:04:18 Linda¹⁵ : =I hope I get something because I mean that's money and that's all I want £hhhh£
 00:04:23 Joe¹⁶ : =yeah,

Figure 3. Extract 3

Prior to this moment, Linda expresses doubt about whether her book will be published and speculates about the publisher's emotional reaction. In doing so, she downplays her agreement with Joe's earlier compliment to avoid appearing self-congratulatory (Pamela et al., 2010).

In lines 5–6, Linda resumes her narrative using the discourse marker *so*, which functions as a preface to continue her previously suspended interactional agenda, now shifting into a past narrative (see Bolden, 2009). She recounts how she sought help from Joe and others in preparing her advertisement book, closing the turn with laughter and a brief pause. Joe then provides a minimal response, *okay*, signaling acknowledgement (Kendrick et al., 2010). Linda immediately echoes this *okay*, which Joe again repeats—this repetition likely functions as a go-ahead token, offering Linda space to continue her story (line 9).

Linda proceeds to elaborate, explaining that Craig contributed by helping with the illustrations. She also marks shared knowledge about Craig with Joe. This turn partially overlaps with Joe's response in line 10, where Joe provides repeated minimal agreement tokens, *yeah*, showing positive alignment (Dendenne, 2021). Linda continues by highlighting Craig's help, this time emphasizing the word *book* with increased volume and rising intonation to signal her appreciation.

In response, Joe offers another compliment, this time acknowledging the quality of Linda's preparation (Golato, 2002), and expresses excitement about her achievement. She conveys her emotional stance and solidarity with Linda as a close friend, using the intensifier *so* to enhance the praise (Gracia, 2018).

Interestingly, Linda neither accepts nor declines the compliment. Instead, she sidesteps it by ignoring the praise (Golato, 2002) and shifts the topic to her hopes of earning income from the book's publication, ending with a laugh. She then provides a minimal agreement token, *yeah*, as a closing response that signals recognition and alignment with Joe's prior turn.

DOI:

Conclusion & Practical Implication

Conclusion

This study has examined the use of compliments and their responses in a naturally occurring phone conversation between friends. The findings reveal that compliments are commonly intensified through both prosodic features such as vowel lengthening and rising intonation and morphological markers like *so* and *very*, enhancing their face-positive effect. These strategies reflect the speakers' efforts to express solidarity and maintain interpersonal rapport. Responses to compliments vary, with some speakers accepting praise using appreciation tokens like Thank you, while others reject or evade compliments such as through the use of a direct no to avoid appearing self-congratulatory.

Practical Implication

Understanding how compliments function in everyday interactions has practical relevance for teaching pragmatic competence in language learning. Language learners can benefit from being exposed to authentic uses of compliments and their varied responses to develop sensitivity to the social nuances of praise. In particular, recognizing when and how to intensify, accept, or modestly reject a compliment can improve learners' ability to navigate informal conversations and build rapport across diverse social and cultural settings.

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