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Compliments in American English and Chinese: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

Compliment as a speech act is shared by all the nations to create or reinforce the solidarity in communication. However, compliment/response interaction may vary greatly because of the influences and constraints of different cultural factors. This study compares the differences of compliments in American English and Chinese. Topics, linguistic formulas and compliment responses are discussed and special emphasis is laid on some different interpretations of the well-accepted patterns and the changes in the speech act of complimenting/responding to compliments due to the popularization and development of English learning and teaching in China.

Key words: Topic; Linguistic formula; Response; Cultural values; Changes

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INTRODUCTION

Compliments are a form of positive politeness producing or reinforcing a feeling of solidarity and good relationships between speakers in communication. The speech act of complimenting/responding, however, differs from culture to culture in many aspects, and moreover, such expressions are highly formulaic, which has attracted a lot of scholarly attention.

In previous research, much has been studied about the speech act of complimenting/responding to compliments in American English. In an early study, Manes and Wolfson (1981) discovered that compliments are highly formulaic, both in their syntactic form and in the verbs and adjectives that carry the compliment's positive evaluation. Subsequent research in this vein tended to corroborate these general findings, emphasizing the fixedness of compliments. Following the work by Pomerantz (1978), Herbert (1990) has expanded the analysis to encompass both the compliment and its response with the focus on gender differences. Rees-Miller (2011) revisited the gendered nature of compliments on the basis of distinguishing between compliments given in unstructured versus goal-oriented settings.

In addition to the research on compliments among English-speaking natives, some studies have been done among non-native speakers of English, especially ESL speakers (e.g. Cheng 2011; Mustapha 2011; Allami and Montazeri 2012), which investigate the compliment response strategies used by the EFL learners from different speech communities and compare the findings with what has been reported about the native English speakers.

Notably, some systematic contrastive studies have also been carried out from the point of view of speech acts and rules of speaking (Cf. Wolfson 1981). They focus on the ways in which patterns and norms of interaction concerning compliments vary from culture to culture, Chinese and English included (e.g. Zuo 1988; Jia 1997; Tang and Zhang 2009). Several perspectives, such as the way the compliments are realized, their distribution, their frequency of occurrence, and the functions they serve are discussed in most of the comparative research.

In this study, compliment/response interaction in Chinese will be analyzed and compared with the findings from Manes and Wolfson (1981) on compliments in American English and Herbert (1990) on sex difference

of compliments. Moreover, cultural assumption reflected in Chinese compliments will be discussed and contrasted with American values discussed by Manes (1983), who calls compliments “a mirror of cultural values”. Special emphasis is laid on some different interpretations of the well-accepted patterns and rules (the “I LIKE/ LOVE+NP” pattern), and the changes in the speech act of complimenting/responding to compliments (“Thank you” and typical Chinese responses to compliments) due to the popularization and development of English learning and teaching in China.

The data of the study was collected by giving an interview, which mainly focused on the “I LIKE/ LOVE+NP” pattern and the typical responses to the compliments in Chinese and English, to 51 native Chinese subjects. They were divided into 3 groups: Group 1 consisted of 17 college students majoring in English linguistics and literature; Group 2 was made up of 17 well-educated non-English majors; another 17 informants without receiving higher education formed Group 3.

1. TOPICS

While topics of compliments are widely spread in different speech communities, some of them become the focuses. As noted by Wolfson (1981: 90), compliments in American English fall into two major categories: (a) those having to do with appearance (apparel, hairdo, homes, furniture, automobiles, and other possessions); and (b) those which comment on ability in general and those which refer to a specific act well done. It is found that there exists a great similarity in American and Chinese complimentary expressions with regard to the attributes praised. At the same time, however, there are differences in the topics of compliments, which may lead to misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication.

Compliments concerning appearance, for instance, are not exactly the same in the two cultures. While the Chinese, as in (1), would prefer to give comments to the inborn physical attributes, the Americans, as in (2) and (3), usually pay more attention to each other’s clothing and hairdo, which may reflect one’s exquisite taste related to the results of effort (e.g. Zuo 1988; Jia 1997; Du 1999).

- (1) 你皮肤真好。(Your skin is smooth.)
- (2) You look pretty in that dress.
- (3) I like your haircut. That suits you very well.

What is more, compliments on appearance are always given and received between women in Chinese culture. “你今天气色不错”(You look nice today.), a vague complimenting expression, is what a female can receive from a male. It is more phatic than complimentary. Complimenting a man on his wife’s looks would be considered perfectly natural and even highly appreciated by the Americans. “Your wife is so beautiful”, however, would be considered frivolous or even indecent by many Chinese (Deng and Liu 1989).

As to ability/performance, the Americans give most compliments on the other’s achievements through hard work. Concentrating on the results of effort and skills, they do not emphasize talent or some inborn characteristics as the Chinese do (e.g. Zuo 1988; Jia 1997; Du 1999). As shown in (4), what the Americans admire is hard working, because they believe they can get “what Johns have” through their own efforts. On the other hand, compliments in Chinese, as in (5), emphasize more on one’s qualities and dispositions.

- (4) You have done a good job.
- (5) 你好聪明啊! (You are so clever!)

Some well-accepted compliments in Chinese may not be considered to be complimentary by native speakers of English. What is worse, they may sound confusing or even annoying. Westerners are sensitive to variation and difference and they are fond of offering compliments to anything new; on the contrary, the Chinese cherish stability and consistency and variation is less commonly praised (e.g. Zuo 1988; Jia 1997; Du 1999). It is not difficult to imagine how an American feels on hearing (6) while meeting an old Chinese friend.

- (6) 好久没见了, 你还是老样子, 一点儿都没变。

(I have not seen you for a long time. You are still your former self.)

Complimenting those who are intimately related to the recipient, his/her family members, for example, may sound unusual to Americans. It is too implicit for them to interpret what is really intended in the following examples.

- (7) 你丈夫真有福气。
- (Your husband has the blessings of a good wife.)
- (8) 你的学生不错, 真是名师出高徒啊。

(Your student is excellent. A great teacher produces brilliant students.)

Similarly, the Chinese may also feel confused on hearing some complimentary remarks produced by Americans. Let’s look into the compliments with regard to appearance again. In American society, women are encouraged to compliment each other’s appearance due to the strong value placed on it. “You look fantastic today!”, “What lovely earrings!” etc., therefore, are frequently heard from American people. This, however, may cause embarrassment of the Chinese, especially when they do not think they really dress up. It seems that the Americans give an excessive number of compliments in an exaggerated way, which can be perceived as insincerity.

From what has been discussed above, it is easily found that what counts as a compliment may differ greatly from one speech community to another. The attributes relate closely to the cultural assumptions of the speaker. Obviously, “if the cultural values the speaker cherishes are different from those of the addressee or are even unacceptable to the latter, the compliment can even turn out to hurt people.” (Zuo, 1988:124). Furthermore, it is noticeable that the interlocutors’ age, sex, relationships

and the situation (location, and presence of interactional bystanders) also play an important role in choosing topics of a complimenting act.

2. LINGUISTIC FORMULAS

Although compliments in both American English and Chinese are highly standardized and formulaic, the syntactic and semantic differences between the linguistic formulas of the two languages are evident.

2.1 Major Syntactic Patterns

Manes & Wolfson (1981) found that in American English, three syntactic patterns, as illustrated below, are most frequently used. 85 % of the compliments they studied consisted of these core syntactic formulas.

(9) NP + BE/LOOK + ADJ

e.g. Mary, your shirt is very pretty.

(10) I LIKE/ LOVE + NP

e.g. I like your haircut.

(11) PRON + BE + ADJ + NP

e.g. That is a beautiful sweater.

Compliments can be embedded within a larger frame such as “I think...” (e.g. “I think that color’s perfect for you”). “What (a) + ADJ + NP!” (e.g. What a cute hat!) and its minimal pattern “ADJ + NP!” (e.g. Great shoes!) are also formulaic complimentary expressions given by the native English speakers.

In Chinese, the most frequently used syntactic patterns were (Zuo 1988):

(12) You + V + ADV → You + V + ADV (intensifier) + ADV

e.g. 你跑得真快。(You run so fast.)

(13) (Your) + NP + BE + ADV (intensifier) + ADJ

e.g. (你)这件毛衫真漂亮。(Your/ This sweater is (really) nice.)

(14) PRO + BE + ADJ + NP → PRO + ADV (intensifier) + BE + ADJ + NP

e.g. 这/那真是一幅漂亮的油画。(It/This/That is (really) a beautiful picture.)

According to Zuo’s investigation, the first two patterns of Chinese complimentary expressions occur in nearly 80 % of “the compliments in his data. Evidently, most Chinese compliments begin with “you” or “your”. The third sounds like more or less a statement. Moreover, some other patterns are also used by the native Chinese speakers:

(15) You + V + NP + ADV (intensifier) + ADJ

e.g. 你穿这件上衣真漂亮。(You look good in this coat.)

(16) (ADV)(intensifier) + ADJ

e.g. 太棒了! / (真) 厉害! ((Really) great!)

(17) You + BE + (a)(really) + ADJ + (NP)

e.g. 你真是个聪明的孩子。(You are really a bright girl.)

2.2 “I LIKE/ LOVE+NP” Pattern

One of the most remarkable differences between the patterns of complimenting in American English and those in Chinese, actually, is found in the use of the “I LIKE/ LOVE+NP” pattern. It seldom appears in Chinese compliments, but it is one of the most frequently used complimenting formulas in American English.

It is generally believed that the Chinese thought the frequent use of “I LIKE/ LOVE+NP” pattern in American English was rooted in the highly valued self-exposure, uniqueness and freedom, which are based on individualism or “I culture” (Jia 1997). While the Chinese admit that each person has his own identity, they emphasize the relationship between self and others, especially the joint efforts. They are trying to efface themselves in communication to achieve commonality and to show modesty. Different from compliments in American English, “you” or “your” appears in most of the Chinese complimenting remarks. In this study, 33.3% of all the informants attribute the frequent use of “I LIKE/ LOVE+NP” to “I culture” in American English. The percentage is much higher (70.6%) in Group 1, which may be caused by the English majors’ better understanding of the American cultural values.

In addition to “I culture”, there are some alternative interpretations of “I LIKE/LOVE+NP” in this research. Firstly, overuse of “I” for them is somewhat a sign of arrogance or the intention of showing off. 21.6% of the subjects (3 and 8 from Group 2 and Group 3 respectively) think so. Intriguingly, none in Group 1 take this view.

Secondly, complimentary expressions beginning with “I” in some cases are regarded by the Chinese as a hint that the speaker would like to possess it. In this study, 17.6% of the subjects (2 and 7 from Group 2 and Group 3 respectively) think so. None in Group 1 take this view.

Moreover, it is found that the word “love” in Chinese sounds too strong and exaggerated to be used in compliments and in other situations of everyday conversation (Cf. Daikuhara 1986). 27.5% of the subjects in this study take this view, with 5, 7 and 2 members in the three groups respectively. What is interesting is that English learners sometimes would like to say “你这件毛衫真漂亮, 我喜欢。(Your sweater is really nice. I like it.)” The unique combination clearly reveals the influence from the English language, if not the culture.

In the studies of gender differences in complimenting carried out by the native English speakers (Holmes 1986; Herbert 1990), however, it is stated that it is women who relied more heavily on the “I LIKE/ LOVE+NP” pattern, indicating a personal focus. Herbert (1990) noted that the somewhat stereotypical “I LOVE X” occurs only in women’s speech, significantly more often in female---female than female---male interaction. The “subjective” compliments, in which speakers use first person subjects (such as “I think you look great in blue” or “I really like

that shirt”) have less force than a comparable “objective” form (such as “You look great in blue” or “That is a nice shirt”). Similarly, second person compliments are more common from females to males and more common from males to females than males to other males. In male to male interaction, impersonal compliments predominate. It is found that women employ more personal focus than men in many contexts. The fact that women prefer personalized to impersonalized forms, parallels the characterization of women’s style as social, affiliative, other-oriented, socioemotional, supportive, and so forth (Preisler, 1986). It is obvious that the result is drastically different from what the Chinese thought, which in fact will cause communicative interference among interlocutors from the two different cultures.

2.3 Semantic Formulas

The differences between the semantic formulas of the two languages are also evident. In American English, adjectives and verbs are major carriers of positive evaluation. Actually, adjectives are more frequently used than verbs. Of all the compliments in Mane’s and Wolfson’s data (1981), 80 percent make use of adjectives and 16 percent are of the verb type. In the highly restricted set of adjectives, “nice”, “good”, “beautiful”, “pretty” and “great” are most frequently used. “Look”, “like” and “be” are dominant in the selection of verbs.

Zuo’s research (1988) has shown that in Chinese, positive words expressing compliments are mainly adjectives, adverbs and verbs. In the data he collected, 46 percent of the compliments make use of adjectives, 43 percent are of the adverb type and verbs only occur in 7 percent. The frequent use of adverbs could be explained from two aspects. One is that a large number of compliments in “You+V+ADV” pattern make use of adverbs as positive semantic load carriers. The other is that most of the positive adjectives and verbs have adverbs as their intensifiers, without which the expressions are nothing but statement of facts. Moreover, idioms and proverbs, such as “名师出高徒” (a great teacher produces brilliant students), “虎父无犬子” (like father, like son), etc., are sometimes used as compliments in Chinese whereas they are rarely seen in American English.

3. RESPONSES TO COMPLIMENTS

When getting compliments, people are required to respond by social conventions. The acts of complimenting and responding to compliments are obviously linked in crucial ways and they should be understood as a whole compliment event --- both acts serve the function of negotiating solidarity (Herbert 1990). Most common responses tend to be formulaic and the rules and patterns are largely unconscious in American English and Chinese. Some different cultural assumptions can be found between

the formulaic expressions, without the understanding of which communicative interference is inevitable.

3.1 Responses in American English

We are told that for the Americans, “Thank you” is regarded as a suitable response all the time. In fact, responses to compliments, actually, may vary greatly from person to person in different situations.

3.1.1 Different Types of Responses

Herbert (1990) has summarized at least 12 types of responses to compliments in American English, namely, appreciation token, comment acceptance, praise upgrade, comment history, reassignment, return, scale down, question, disagreement, qualification, non acknowledgement and request for interpretation. The examples below, for instance, fall into the category of comment history, reassignment, scale down and return respectively.

- (18) --- I like your shoes. They are cute.
--- I bought these for the trip to Arizona.
- (19) --- That’s a beautiful necklace.
--- It was my grandmother’s.
- (20) --- That’s a nice watch.
--- It is really quite old and I’m getting a new one.
- (21) --- What a lovely dress!
--- So’s yours.

3.1.2 Is “Thank You” Always a Suitable Response?

According to Hebert (1990), only about one third of American responses fall into the category of “acceptance”, that is, two out of three American compliments are met with something other than prescriptively correct answer “Thank you”. Compliments are not literal statements of admiration/praise but rather are offers of solidarity. If the basic claim is accepted, compliment responses other than acceptance may be viewed as similar offers on the part of the addressee. If the function of the compliments is to make the hearer feel good, the function of a response other than acceptance may be the same. The addressee strategy is “I recognize your compliment was intended to make me feel good. I choose to avoid self-praise and thus assert that we are equal.” Such analysis predicts that “acceptance”, especially “Thank you” should occur infrequently among close acquaintances, that is, those in the middle of the social distance scale, where (in fact) it is often indicative of suspicion on the part of the addressee. “Thank you”, therefore, is just commonly used when there is no need of negotiating solidarity, such as in the male-female or female-female interaction to express approval or in the interaction between strangers to make hearer feel good.

For the Americans, besides “acceptance”, especially “Thank you”, scale down, comment history and reassignment, as illustrated in (18), (19) and (20), are commonly used because compliment receiver obeys the modesty principle while accepting the good intentions

of his interlocutor. Return, as in (21), is more frequently adopted by Americans than Chinese, because it could reinforce the solidarity by mutual exchange (and acceptance) of compliments.

3.2 Responses in Chinese

It is generally believed that in responding to compliments, the Americans tend to accept them whereas the Chinese tend to deny or efface themselves (e.g. Zuo 1988; Deng and Liu 1989; Jia 1997; Tang and Zhang 2009). As exemplified in (22), the typical Chinese responses to compliments are “哪里哪里”(I'm flattered./ You are flattering me.), “不行不行”(Not really.), “不敢当”(It's too much of a compliment.), “过奖了”(You flatter me.), etc., which seem to fall into the category of self-praise avoidance.

(22) --- 你穿这裙子真好看! (You look good in that dress!)

--- 哪有, 一般了, 没什么特别的。 (Not really. It is so-so, nothing special.)

OR是吗? 是不是颜色有点暗? (Really? Is the color a bit dark?)

In fact, the interpretation of the responses made by the Chinese deserves more attention, since “no, no” is not necessarily used as a rejecting or avoiding strategy, and moreover, the popularization and development of English learning and teaching in China has caused some changes in the speech act of complimenting/responding to compliments.

3.2.1 “No, no.”--- Self-Praise Avoidance or Indirect Acceptance?

If we look into these frequently used strategies more closely, we may find that it is more proper to regard them as a kind of indirect and tactful acceptance instead of rejection of the compliments (Cf. Daikuhara 1986). 93% of the subjects in this study take this view. It is actually not difficult to differentiate the two cases. While indirect acceptance indicates agreement, which presupposes the observance of the modesty principle, rejection means disagreement with the positive evaluation. The former use of “No, no”, therefore, means nothing more than a way to appear modest. It seems that there exists similarity between scale down in American English and the typical responses in Chinese.

Modesty and prudence are highly valued in Chinese culture. People are encouraged to efface themselves and respect others. The denial of compliments, therefore, not only returns politeness to the giver, but also serves to sustain harmony between the parties and emphasize their commonality. In other words, Chinese culture accounts for Chinese typical responses to compliments. The self-effacing actually could not cause the speaker's doubts about the value of his compliment. He knows the interlocutor has accepted his friendliness and harmony and solidarity are maintained. Function instead

of form should be emphasized. From the functional point of view, both “Thank you” in American culture and typical Chinese responses are highly standardized and formulaic. They cause equally satisfactory results in their respective cultures. “No, no” appears almost automatically when one receives a compliment, just as “Thank you” does in American English. However, in cross-cultural communication, things become more subtle and complicated. The response to a compliment can be embarrassing if its underlying meaning and the cultural values behind it are not realized by the compliment.

3.2.2 Thank You

It is interesting to find that 47 % of one group of the subjects in Jia's research (1997) who are English learners prefer the prescriptively correct “Thank you” to other responses, which is much higher than that in Herbert's study (1990).

52.3%, 29.4% and 6% of the three groups in this study choose “谢谢” (Thank you) respectively as a response when being complimented in Chinese. 82.4% of the informants in Group 1 would like to use “Thank you” while communicating with native English speakers. Moreover, they even prefer “Thank you” to “谢谢” in responding to the compliments in Chinese. It is not unreasonable to argue that, therefore, in China English learners are taught to say “Thank you” in responding compliments from English speakers. It is somewhat overcorrecting and has influenced the addressee strategy even when communicating with the Chinese. What is more, similar to Heber's results (1990), “谢谢”/“Thank you” as a response to compliments is always restricted to the interaction between rather close friends in my study, since it is not that necessary to show deference toward the recipient and create social distance.

While the responses reported above are rather different from that in American English, the others, including scale down, comment history, reassignment and return, are more or less similar to those found in American English (Cf. Tang and Zhang 2009). In fact, responses to compliments not only vary cross-culturally, but also are closely related with the speaker's sex, age, education and relationship with the interlocutor, which make the speech act of complimenting/responding more complicated.

CONCLUSION

The description and discussion above has shown that there exist both similarities and differences between American English and Chinese compliments. As stated by Wolfson (1981), such differences may lead to more serious misunderstanding because of the fact that there is much similarity which may cause speakers to assume that the use of this speech act is identical in the two speech communities. It is obvious that the speech behavior

associated with complimenting/responding interaction in American English and Chinese differs in various aspects, such as their dimensions of praised attributes, the way they are realized, responses to the compliments, among others. Speakers, however, may behave inappropriately if they follow all the rules of their native language unconsciously. The systematic comparison in this study, therefore, is of some significance in the sense of improving the English learners' understanding of the sources of communicative interference which may occur among interlocutors from different cultures.

Further research on compliments and responses could use a different methodology, natural recordings, for instance. The results would be more convincing if the further study could be based on a corpus of the recorded examples of compliments given and received by the informants in naturally-occurring speech situations.

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