

DO FEMALES PAY MORE COMPLIMENTS THAN MALES? A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF COMPLIMENT USAGE IN MALTA

LYDIA SCIRIHA

Abstract - Politeness is an important characteristic in every day conversations. We all strive to be polite so as to depict a good image of ourselves and to be liked by others. According to Brown and Levinson (1987) persons can either be positively or negatively polite. This study analyses aspects of positive politeness through the use of compliments paid by the Maltese in different settings. The data for this study was obtained through an ethnographic approach in which a corpus of naturally occurring compliments paid to individuals in different contexts was collected.

Introduction

Politeness is an important aspect in every day conversations. We all strive to be polite so as to portray a good image of ourselves and to be liked by others. Politeness has been defined as 'an expression of concern for the feelings of others' (Holmes 1995: 4) and this can be shown in many ways both linguistically and non-linguistically. Brown and Levinson (1987) have written extensively on this subject and have split politeness into two: (i) positive politeness in which individuals interact in order to create rapport with other people and (ii) negative politeness which is referential, in that it serves mainly to convey information and facts. Whereas positive politeness strategies, such as paying compliments, occur in informal or low formality settings, negative politeness strategies such as apologies are indicative of formal or high formality settings. Thus, negative politeness is employed when one feels the need to distance oneself from another person, while positive politeness minimises distance.

Conversations are not as easy as one thinks. On the contrary, Schifffrin (1994) considers conversations to be hard work. An important dimension related to conversation is the power relation between the interlocutors. Power may be derived from several sources and is also dependant on the context. It tends to attract deferential behaviour and forms of negative politeness. But at times, although an individual has power over another, solidarity takes over and the superior employs forms of positive politeness.

Tannen (1984; 1986; 1990), Coates (1986; 1996) and other researchers have shown that women's conversations are geared towards creating 'rapport' with other people, while men's conversations are 'report talk'. For women, conversations act as 'social lubricants' to facilitate relationships with others, while men mainly interact to give and obtain information. In view of such research, the logical conclusion would be that positive politeness strategies are employed more by

women than by their male counterparts. But is this the case when studying the use of compliments in Malta? Do females give more compliments than males? How do recipients of such compliments react to the compliments given to them?

Research methodology

In order to discover the different kinds of compliments that are both given and received by the Maltese, in 1999 the present researcher gave an assignment to her university students. They were asked to write down snippets of conversations in which interlocutors of different age groups and in different settings gave and received compliments. The students were also specifically told not to initiate any compliments themselves. They just had to write down the compliments as they overheard them. To ensure respondent anonymity, this team of data collectors was also asked to change all names in the examples that they had obtained. No set quota was given because the present writer wished to discover whether males or females are predominantly the initiators and/or receivers of compliments. Following this exercise, a corpus of 280 naturally occurring compliments in both Maltese and English was collected.

This paper will seek to discover whether the process of paying compliments in Malta is fundamentally similar to what is described in Holmes (1988; 1995). For this reason it is divided into the following sections: (i) direct and indirect compliments; (ii) who pays compliments to whom? (iii) what are the compliments about? (iv) compliment responses (v) compliments and power and (vi) compliments and superstition.

Direct and indirect compliments

A compliment is a speech act that expresses praise, admiration or flattery to the addressee. Goody (1978) and Lakoff (1975) argue that compliments operate within the framework of conversation and their function is to make people feel good and a means to become closer and friendlier with people. Compliments are instances of positive politeness strategies and in general, people enjoy receiving and giving compliments. Usually, compliments are direct, as in examples 1 and 2 from the researcher's corpus of compliments:

Example 1

Maria compliments her female friend:

Maria: That dress really suits you. You look really posh!

Example 2

Daniela compliments her female friend:

Daniela: You're looking good tonight!

Both examples clearly reveal that the complimenters wish to make their addressees feel good. Compliments also convey the intimate relationship between the interlocutors since Monica feels she can trust her friend (example 3):

Example 3

Sandra and Monica meet at the Valletta bus terminus:

Sandra: Hi, good morning. That top really suits you, especially that colour. It gives light to your face.

Monica: It's true? Thanks. Am I looking fat today because that is how I'm feeling?

Sandra: No not at all, those trousers make you look slim.

Compliments are usually viewed positively when they express praise, admiration and solidarity. However, not all compliments are well received. Compliments that are uncalled for, are considered to be instances of verbal harassment, as in the case of 'stranger compliments' or 'street remarks' (Kissling & Kramarae: 1991), where the complimenter is a complete stranger to the addressee as in examples 4 and 5. In these two separate scenarios the complimenters are both men, one of whom is working at a building site and the other is washing his car, while the two female addressees happen to be passers-by:

Example 4

A man is working at a building site:

Male 1: X'par saqajn ghandek! [*What a lovely pair of legs you have!*]

Female 1: (ignores the compliment)

Example 5

A man is washing his car outside his house:

Male 2: Aw sabiha! X'ahna sexy illum! [*Hi darling! Aren't we sexy today!*]

Female 2: (ignores the compliment)

On these two occasions, both addressees ignored these compliments and walked away as if they had not been spoken to. Though the vast majority of compliments are direct, some are also indirect. There are times when the complimenter pays an indirect compliment to the addressee as in example 6.

Example 6

A mother is discussing her children with a female friend:

Mother: Irrid noqghod attenta x'nghidilhom, u x'inweghdhom it-tfal ghax ma jinsewx, ta. Ghandhom mohhhom veru... [*I need to be very careful about what I say and what I promise my children since they do not forget what I tell them, you know. Their brains are really...*]

Friend: Eh it-tfal ma jinsewx. Intelligenti hafna. Imbaghad tieghek xi haġa aktar. [*Children, don't forget. They are very intelligent. And your children are even more intelligent.*]

Although the complimenter directly praises the addressee's intelligent children, she is also indirectly complimenting her friend, who is after all, the children's mother.

There are also times when compliments are not spontaneously given. In fact, as is evident in example 7, the receiver of the compliment had to fish for the compliment and her dismay is understandable since she had to beg for the compliment from her boyfriend:

Example 7

A young woman is talking to her boyfriend:

Girlfriend: X'jidhirlek minn xaghri? Għoġbok jew le? L-anqas għidtli xejn. [*How do you like my hairstyle? Do you like it? You haven't passed any comments about it.*]

Boyfriend: Iva għoġobni [*Yes, I liked it.*]

Girlfriend: Mela għidli li għoġbok. Kieku qatt tagħmilli kumpliment!. [*Well, then, do tell me that you like it. You never pay me a compliment!*]

Though both males and females give and receive compliments, there is a gender difference in this respect. Sociolinguistic research by Herbert (1990), Pomerantz (1978), Holmes (1988), Wolfson (1981a; 1981b;) shows that women tend to compliment more and to receive more compliments than men.

Who pays compliments to whom?

From the corpus of compliments collected, the overwhelming majority of the examples revealed that in Malta women pay the most compliments and are in turn, complimented by both men and women. Of particular note is the fact that though men do compliment women, males pay fewer compliments to other men. It is important to document the fact that although a sizable corpus was collected, in no way is this corpus representative of the compliments received and given by the Maltese. However, as is evident in Figure 1, it is somewhat indicative that from a corpus of 280 naturally occurring examples, 67% of the compliments were given by females to both male and female addressees. Men paid only 13% of the compliments to other men, while 20% of the compliments were given by men to women.

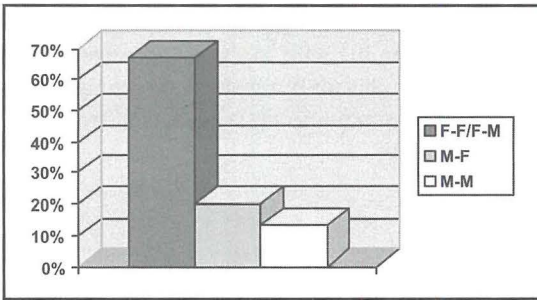


Figure 1: Compliments given by Female-Female/Female-Male; Male-Female and Male-Male dyads

Thus, overwhelmingly, women are both givers and receivers of compliments. For this reason, since they find it so easy to compliment others, it is quite understandable that they get somewhat upset and hurt when their friends and family members do not pay them compliments, especially when they expect them to do so. The following example reveals this. The wife, who had prepared the meal for her family, practically had to beg her family members to compliment her on her culinary expertise.

Example 8

A family has just had dinner:

Wife: Tajjeb? [*Is it good?*]

Husband: Iva. [*Yes*]

Wife: Mela tkellmu! [*Then say so!*]

Husband: Mela qatt ma rajtu r-riklam ta' Parla Agnesi? Is-skiet jitkellem wahdu! [*Haven't you ever seen the Parla Agnesi advert? Silence speaks volumes!*]

The wife interprets her family's silence negatively. According to her, the meal she had prepared was good, and could not understand why her family did not pass any comments whatsoever. For this reason, she resorts to being direct when she asks her family members whether they had liked the meal. Her husband's cut and dry 'iva' [*yes*] exasperates her further and she bursts out by saying, 'mela tkellmu!' [*Then say so!*]. Her husband swiftly repairs the damage and appeases her by wittingly referring to a popular Italian TV pasta advertisement in which the family members are so engrossed in enjoying their pasta, that they remain silent. By extension, the Maltese family is doing likewise. In example 8, the husband would like his wife to interpret silence positively. According to him, it would have been superfluous to compliment her, since the meal she had prepared was so good that those partaking of the meal were speechless. However, since silence is a double-edged sword it is open to different interpretations and the wife chose to interpret silence negatively and not positively as the husband intended it to be.

Men also react when an expected compliment is not given. Example 9 is a case in point. Joe had to beg for a compliment from his wife Mary. He expected to be complimented on his immaculately clean car, but only received the compliment after asking her a direct question. Mary tries to repair the situation herself by saying that she was so stunned that she remained silent.

Example 9

Mary is given a lift by her husband Joe:

Joe: M'intix qed taraha nadifa l-karozza? [*Can't you see how clean the car is?*]

Mary: Iva, nadifa hafna. Prosit! [*Yes, it is very clean. Well done!*]

Joe: Meta tkun mahmugħa biss tghidli! [*You only comment when the car is dirty!*]

Mary: M'ghidt xejn għax bqajt imbellħa bl-indafa tal-karozza! [*I didn't say anything because I was stunned by the car's cleanliness*].

What are the compliments about?

The corpus in this study reveals that the compliments given focus on three main areas: (i) appearance (example 10); (ii) possessions (example 11) and (iii) ability (example 12):

Example 10

Two female mature students at the university canteen:

Student A: You look much younger than 42.

Student B: Thanks.

Example 11

Joe and Jason who are 18 and 19 years of age respectively, are on their way to Paceville:

Jason: That watch is really cool, Joe!

Joe: Thanks

Example 12

Three young teachers at an English school are complimented by their male Director of Studies:

Director: You are three of my best teachers. I always keep that in mind.

Teacher: Thank you. Anyway we really love it!

Though most of our examples fall under these three categories, it is important to remark that several compliments relate to 'appearance' and interestingly so, these compliments are usually directed towards female addressees. Overwhelmingly, females are complimented on their appearance and complimenting someone on their hairstyle is a very common occurrence since it is not usually considered a face-threatening act as examples 13, 14 and 15 reveal.

Example 13

A female caretaker aged 50 is talking to a female student, aged 21:

Caretaker: Illum ha mmur naghmlu perm. [*Today I am going to perm my hair*]

Student: Iva? [*Really?*]

Caretaker: Tieghek perm xaghrek jew minnu hekk? [*Did you perm your hair or is it naturally so?*]

Student: Minnu [*It is natural*]

Caretaker: Kemm hu sabih [*It is so lovely*]

Student: Thank you!

Example 14

Two female friends aged 21 met on a bus on their way to work:

Friend 1: Kemm hu helu xaghrek illum. [*Your hair looks lovely today*]

Friend 2: Thank you. Ghadni kemm hsiltu u ġbartu għax dejjaqni mnizzel. [*I have just washed it and I tied it back because it bothered me*]

Example 15

Two young female colleagues meet on campus:

Woman 1: Kemm ghandek qatgha ta' xaghar sabiha! [*What a lovely haircut you have!*]

Woman 2: Thank you.

Nevertheless, such seemingly innocuous hair-related compliments may have a darker side to them and become face-threatening acts, especially when the complimenter's remark is considered to be an invasion of the addressee's privacy as shown in example 16:

Example 16

At a family gathering, distant cousins meet after a long time. One of them complimented the other on her new hair colour:

Cousin 1: Veru ġièk sabih minn mindu żbajtu. [*Your hair really looks lovely ever since you've had it dyed.*]

Cousin 2: Eh? [*Eh?*]

Cousin 1: Xeraqlek miżbugħ... sewwa ghamilt. [*Your dyed hair really suits you... well done!*]

Cousin 2: eh... (turns to another person)... Meta nizzlin Ghawdex? [*Eh... When are we going to Gozo?*]

In the above example, the recipient of the compliment perceived the compliment given to her by a distant cousin to be face threatening and her reaction to the compliment reveals this. She probably felt that her stylistic makeover was too personal a matter to be discussed by a distant relative whom she rarely meets. Thus

she abruptly shifts the topic and totally ignores the complimenter by turning round to speak to someone else.

Particular aspects in the 'appearance' category especially for females, reveal that a slim figure (example 17), a nice hair-do (example 18) and being well-dressed (example 19) are very popular reasons for being given compliments, as in the following examples:

Example 17

Two female clients at a slimming centre:

Client 1: Ghandek figure sabiha! [*You have a lovely figure!*]

Client 2: L-anqas int m'int hoxna! [*You're not fat either!*]

Client 1: Eh, imma int ghandek figure vera pulita. [*But your figure is really elegant.*]

Client 2: Saqajja ghadhom hoxnin. Irrid innaqashom. [*My legs are still fat. I need to slim them.*]

Example 18

Mary and Frances aged 21 meet on their way to work:

Mary: Jixraqlek xaghrek miġbur Frances. [*Your hair suits you when you tie it back, Frances.*]

Frances: Thank you.

Example 19

Two women meet at a hotel

Woman 1: Kemm ghandek libsa helwa! [*What a lovely dress you have!*]

Woman 2: Thank you.

'Ability' is another category under which some compliments fall. In our corpus, males tend to compliment other males on their 'ability' rather than on 'appearance' and this fact also applies when females compliment males. In the 'ability' category, whereas women are most often complimented on their culinary expertise as is evident in examples 20 and 21, men are complimented on their skills as carpenters or handymen as shown in example 22:

Example 20

Maria and Rita are good friends and have just had dinner:

Maria: Kemm taf issajjar Rit! [*What a great cook you are Rit!*]

Rita: L-hena tiegħi! [*I just love it!*]

Example 21

Boyfriend compliments his girlfriend while he is eating a plate of spaghetti:

Boyfriend: Mmm, it's really good.

Girlfriend: You like it?

Boyfriend: It's delicious, veru, [*really*], it's really good.

Girlfriend: Thank you.

Example 22

Joe, a carpenter has just finished polishing a desk and his male employer comments:

Employer: Tajba giet l-iskrivaniġa. [*The desk looks good.*]

Joe: Veru, ma stajtx għamiltha aħjar. [*That's true. I couldn't have made it better.*]

The third category of compliments regards the 'possession' of objects. Not too many compliments in our corpus focus on this topic as such compliments may be perceived to be face threatening, since compliments regarding possessions might be interpreted by the addressee to reveal the complimenter's latent envy. For this reason, some compliments are couched in a particular way so as not to put the complimenter in an embarrassing situation.

In this study's Maltese corpus, compliments on possessions are not as frequent as those on appearance. Of particular note is the fact that compliments on possessions such as cars, motorcycles or cameras are frequent among male-male dyads. Example 25 regarding the addressee's new camera is not as direct as the compliments in examples 23 and 24. But the very fact that in example 25, John asks Robert whether the camera is new, is considered to be a compliment since Manes (1983) notes that new objects are viewed positively.

Example 23

Jason is given a lift by Joe:

Jason: Tigrì din il-karozza ta... [*This car is quite a fast one...*]

Joe: Tiċċajta! [*You bet it does!*]

Example 24

Jake is admiring James' motor-cycle:

Jake: Dan il-mutur tiegħek? [*Is this your motor-cycle?*]

James: Iva. [*Yes.*]

Jake: X'inhū faqa! [*It's great!*]

James: Thank you.

Example 25

John and Robert discuss the acquisition of a new camera:

John: L-aħħar mudell tal-Canon? [*Is this the latest Canon model?*]

Robert: L-aħħar mudell tad-ditta... nahseb mudell wara ta' Trevor. [*It is the latest one... it is probably a newer model to Trevor's.*]

Compliment responses

The way recipients of compliments respond when receiving compliments is an important aspect that needs to be addressed. The majority of recipients in our corpus accepted the compliments and only a few of them rejected the compliments given to them. Rejecting a compliment is in itself a face-threatening act and when this happens the addressee is usually the complimenter's superior. In our corpus, recipients of compliments who rejected compliments are those who hold superior positions or are close family members as in the following examples:

Example 26

A ten-year old female pupil compliments a twenty-one year old female teacher in class:

Pupil: How nice! (Touches the teacher's necklace)

Teacher: (Ignores comment and changes the subject)

Example 27

A daughter compliments her father:

Daughter: Din hi l-kaxxa li ghamiltlu l-van? [*Is this the box you've made for the van?*]

Father: Iva [*Yes.*]

Daughter: Sabiha [*It's nice.*]

Father: Dik mhux biex tkun sabiha imma ghax bzonnjuża. [*I did not do that box so that it looks nice but because it is necessary.*]

Instead of rejecting a compliment, recipients of compliments usually resort to reducing the force of the compliment received by deflating it or by changing its focus. In Malta, as in most other countries, one is expected to be modest about one's appearance, abilities and possessions. Thus, though in the previous examples, the overwhelming majority of the compliments were accepted, even then, some of the recipients of such compliments tended to reduce the impact of the compliments they received. While in examples 28 & 29, recipients did not hesitate to accept the compliments and graciously thanked their complimenters, in other examples the recipients of the compliments deflated the compliments received by changing the focus of the compliment. Thus, as in example 30, the recipient of the compliment shifts the focus of the compliment from the aesthetics of the recipient's hairstyle to the practicality of the hairstyle. Also, in example 31, the complimenter paid a compliment on the colour and make of the addressee's car. The young female recipient accepted the compliment, yet simultaneously changed the focus by noting the utility of having a car and how dependant she had become on her car.

Example 28

After the cabin-crew have finished bar service, the steward who is 36 years old, compliments a new 21 year old stewardess on her performance:

Steward: ... ha nghidlek.... mhux ghax f'wičček imma l-vera ghogobtni. [...to let you know... and not because I am addressing you face-to-face, but I really liked your performance.]

Stewardess: Thank you.

Example 29

Catherine and Carmen are two friends:

Catherine: Kemm taf torganizza Carmen! [What a great organizer you are, Carmen!]

Carmen: Thanks

Example 30

Mary and Cynthia, two teenage friends meet:

Mary: Xi hlew... bdilt il-hairstyle? [How nice...have you changed your hairstyle?]

Cynthia: Qaxxartu. [Had it cut very short.]

Mary: Xeraqlek... fih style. [It suits you... it has style.]

Cynthia: Kien dejjaqni. [It had bothered me.]

Example 31

Two female friends meet and one of them is complimented on her new car:

Female 1: Ara kemm saret issuq! [You're really getting used to driving now!]

Female 2: eh? [eh?]

Female 1: Sabiha hi, nice colour. [It's lovely, nice colour.]

Female 2: Ma noqghodx minghajrha.. kif tidrahom hux? [I cannot do without it ... it's amazing how one gets used to them.]

Once again, there is a tendency for recipients of compliments to reduce the force of the compliment as in example 32. Though Mary and Cynthia, are obviously impressed with Lorna's swimming outfit, the recipient of the compliment at first accepts the compliment made by Mary, however, when Cynthia joins in reinforcing her friend's compliment by remarking that the colour of the bikini is very becoming, out of modesty, Lorna feels the need to reduce the force of the second compliment by jokingly remarking that if her friends were going to continue complimenting her on her appearance, she will get all swollen and alas, then, the bikini will no longer fit her. It is apposite to note that metaphorically in Maltese, a proud person is said to be swollen (*minfugh* or *minfugha*) and Lorna's response to the compliments she received is in keeping with the metaphorical nuance shown when someone becomes 'inflated' or 'big-headed'.

Example 32

Three female friends are at the beach:

Mary: Ara. Lorna x'faqgha ta' bikini faqqajtilna! [My goodness! Lorna what a terrific bikini you're wearing!]

Lorna: Eh thank you.

Cynthia: Vera sabiha u lilek dak il-kulur jixraqlek. [*It is really lovely and its colour really suits you.*]

Lorna: Thanks, imma toqghodux sejrin hekk ghax inkella ser nintefah u ma tibqax tigini! [*Thanks, but don't over compliment me, otherwise I'll become inflated (big-headed) and the bikini will no longer fit me!*]

Another way to reduce the impact of compliment is by ricocheting the compliment to someone else as in examples 33 and 34. The two male recipients of the compliments react to the compliments received by indirectly complimenting a third party. It seems that men are quite embarrassed when complimented on their appearance and deflate such compliments accordingly as shown in examples 32 and 33.

Example 33

Mario and Joe are two good friends:

Mario: What a nice tie, Joe!

Joe: (blushing) Doris gave it to me.

Example 34

Tony is a thirty year old animation company director. He is chatting with one of his employees, Michael, a nineteen-year old Junior College student.

Michael: That costume is really nice

Tony: My wife sewed it for me. When she sews, she's incredible.

At times, as shown in example 35, the recipient's response to the compliment is rather witty.

Example 35

Two male teenagers, Mark and Matthew meet in Valletta:

Mark: X'int 'cool' illum! [*You look 'cool' today!*]

Matthew: Qisni silġa! [*Just like an ice cube!*]

Though in the previous three examples the male recipients deflate the compliments they received, females also tend to deflate compliments as in examples 36 and 37. Stephania's reaction to Claire's comment in example 36 and the older client's response in example 37 are in line with previous examples given in which the recipients of compliments attenuate the force of the compliments.

Example 36

Claire and Stephania are both clerks who are working in the same office. Claire is 33 years old while Stephania is 23 years of age:

Claire: Kemm hu helu dak id-dublett! [*How nice that skirt is!*]

Stephania: Dan jien ghamilitu taf, biċċa drapp tal-monti. [*I sewed it myself you know, I bought the material from the flea market.*]

Example 37

At a health-fitness centre, two female clients aged 35 and 21 are chatting:

Older client: Kemm għandu kulur sabih il-flokk. [*What a nice colour your sweater has.*]

Younger client: Twessa' kollu imma. [*It's all stretched, though.*]

Older client: Forsi ma hsiltux kif suppost. [*Perhaps you did not wash it in the right way.*]

Compliments and power

Holmes (1995) points out that at times compliments may be face-threatening and for this reason are rarely directed upwards. When such occasions do occur, the complimenterers are viewed as flatterers as in example 38.

Example 38

At a party a female employer receives a compliment from a male employee:

Male employee: Ara, x'ahna young il-lejla! [*My goodness, aren't we looking young tonight!*]

Female employer: We can all relax when it is time to....

The employer's reaction to her employee's comment was abrupt and she shifted the topic completely. The complimenter probably felt that the informal setting gave him the liberty to compliment his superior. Unfortunately, he miscalculated the impact of his action and instead, his employer perceived the compliment as face-threatening, since as a subordinate, the employee was assuming a role of equality and the employer felt it necessary to re-dress the power balance between the two. A similar example where the power balance was temporarily tipped is evident in the following example.

Example 39

Mary is a policewoman in her late twenties. She is checking out the necessary permits for a race and inquires about them to the race organiser. Andrew is in his early thirties and is her friend. Mary is accompanied by her another colleague Joe:

Mary: Do you have the required permits for your race?

Race-organiser: I was going for them. You know, you look really sexy in your uniform.

Mary: (angry) Joe, this is Andrew.

Compliments and superstition

This study has revealed that the act of complimenting one another is a frequent occurrence among the Maltese, especially among females, even though it is apposite to record the fact that some Maltese sayings do not view compliments positively. Some of these sayings such as, *min ifaħħar irid jieħu* [whoever praises others wishes to gain something], or *fahħru u itfġhu fin-nar* [praise him and throw him into the fire], reveal that the Maltese view people who praise them with suspicion. They are also somewhat superstitious if someone compliments their children or their good health.

Although these sayings are not as popular as they were a few decades ago, the fact that they are still occasionally heard evidences that even though compliments are both given and received, at times recipients of such compliments reject them because they are superstitious and believe that such compliments might affect them adversely. It is indeed noteworthy that from the corpus of Maltese compliments, direct compliments about children are indeed very few and far between. On the very rare occasions when such compliments are given, the givers of these compliments usually tag along 'Alla jbierek' [God Bless] to ensure that no harm befalls the recipient of such a compliment. This notwithstanding, it is usually the case that the children's parents counteract such compliments by ignoring them completely (example 40). The same applies with regard to compliments on someone's health. It is indeed noteworthy that in our corpus of compliments there was only one example of a health related compliment (example 41).

Example 40

Two women meet at a supermarket in a small village. The complimenter is in her early fifties while the addressee is in her mid-thirties.

Older woman: Ara ġibt liż-żgħir mieghek illum? Kemm hu helu! Alla jbierek. X'tifel ghandek! [*Oh, have you brought the little one with you today? How sweet he is! God Bless. What a lovely boy you have!*]

Younger woman: (ignores the compliment)

Example 41

Niece greets elderly uncle whom she had not seen for a long time.

Niece: Zi, tidher tajjeb, Alla jbierek! [*Uncle, you look well! God Bless!*]

Uncle: Tghidx hekk ghax ma rridx nimrad! [*Don't say so, because I don't want to fall ill.*]

Conclusion

This study has revealed that though the Maltese praise one another and pay each other compliments, women are the ones who lavish the most compliments on others. As research by Tannen (1986) and Coates (1996) has shown, women are focussed on

rapport building strategies and complimenting others may be viewed as one such strategy, while men interact with one another for referential purposes. They seek to obtain information from their interlocutors. Thus, since men interact differently from females, it is expected that men also pay fewer compliments.

While females readily give compliments, men are not as forthcoming in this regard. The dearth of compliments by male partners tends to make women feel unappreciated and taken for granted. It is thus not surprising that women often lament the fact that their partners never compliment them as in example 7 when the girlfriend in question exasperatedly exclaims to her boyfriend 'Kieku qatt taghmilli kumpliment!' [*You never pay me a compliment!*]. The fact that a person needs to beg for a compliment obliterates the magical effect that a compliment usually has on the recipient. Silence is indeed a powerful weapon since it is a double-edged sword. It is open to different interpretations. In example 8, one may, of course, but does not usually interpret silence as in the *Parla Agnesi* advertisement. On the contrary, remaining silent when a compliment is expected reveals that all is not well and that people prefer to choose the path of least resistance and say nothing, rather than say the truth and risk hurting others. After all, it is indeed 'easier to undo silence than it is to undo words' (Jaworski: 1993: 25).

This study has also revealed that at times, men also ask for compliments. Example 9 is a clear case in point. Though Joe expected his wife to compliment him when he asked her 'M'intix qed taraha nadifa l-karozza?' [*Can't you see how clean the car is?*], the metamessage carried more than just a bait for a compliment. Her husband was also directly drawing her attention to a feature of feminine behaviour namely nagging, which according to Pease & Pease (2002: 14) men rank 'at the top of their pet hates' and which females repeatedly use when communicating with family members and close associates. Joe was referring to the fact that his wife tended to be negative and often nagged him on the lack of cleanliness of his car.

Tannen (1986) lists two of the five most common complaints that women have about their husbands as reported in a popular American newspaper, namely that: (i) they do not listen to them and (ii) they do not talk them. Complimenting a person is one way of interacting with another person; it is a manner in which to break the ice or to patch things up after a quarrel.

Essentially, compliments cost nothing to give, but are worth a lot to the receiver. This study has confirmed Holmes (1995) extensive study on compliments in New Zealand. In Malta, males and females also assign different values to compliments. Whereas men might view compliments as instances of mere verbal frippery, women consider compliments to be the essential ingredients to help maintain and cement relationships with others.

LYDIA SCIRIHA obtained her first degree in languages from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Malta. As a Commonwealth scholar she followed postgraduate studies at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada, where she was awarded a Ph.D. in 1986. Professor Sciriha has been teaching in the Department of English at the University of Malta since 1987. She has also taught in foreign universities in Cyprus and Australia. She is the editor of *Humanitas - Journal of the Faculty of Arts* and is the author and co-author of a number of books and papers in sociolinguistics and other related areas.

References

- Brown, P. and S. Levinson. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Coates, J. (1986). *Women, Men and Language*. Essex: Longman.
- Coates, J. (1996). *Women Talk: Conversation between Women Friends*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Goody, E. (ed.). (1978). *Questions and Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Herbert, R. (1990). 'Sex-based differences in compliment behaviour'. *Language in Society*, 19: 201-24.
- Holmes, J. (1988). 'Paying compliments: a sex-preferential positive politeness strategy'. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 12, 3: 445-65.
- Holmes, J. (1995). *Women, Men and Politeness*. London: Longman.
- Jaworski, A. (1993). *The Power of Silence*. London: Sage Publications.
- Kissling, E. and C. Kramarae. (1991). 'Stranger compliments: the interpretation of street remarks'. *Women's Studies in Communication*, Spring: 77-95.
- Lakoff, R. (1975). *Language and Women's Place*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Manes, J. (1983). 'Compliments: a mirror of cultural values'. In N. Wolfson and E. Judd (eds.), *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition*. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House.
- Pease, A. and B. Pease. (2002). *Why men lie and women cry*. London: Orion.
- Pomerantz, A. (1978). 'Compliment responses: notes on the co-operation of multiple constraints'. In J. Schenkein (ed.), *Studies in the Organisation of Conversational Interaction*. New York: Academic Press.
- Schiffrin, D. (1994). *Approaches to Discourse Analysis: Language as Social Interaction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Tannen, D. (1984). *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk Among Friends*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Tannen, D. (1986). *That's Not What I Meant! How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships*. New York: Ballantine.
- Tannen, D. (1990). *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. New York: Ballantine.

- Tannen, D. (1994). *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men in the Workplace: Language, Sex and Power*. New York: Avon.
- Wolfson, N. (1981a). 'Compliments in cross-cultural environment'. *TESOL Quarterly*, 15, 2: 117-24.
- Wolfson, N. (1981b). 'Invitations, compliments and the competence of the native speaker'. *International Journal of Psycholinguistics*, 24: 7-22.