

# The Ethnopragmatics of Akan Compliments

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## Abstract

*In this paper I examine compliments in Akan from an ethnopragmatic point of view. I analyse Akan compliments within the framework of politeness. I consider the ethnographic situations within the Akan society where compliments are employed. The areas where my data was collected include Akan adverts, Akan football commentary, classrooms, praise poetry for chiefs, public speeches, folksongs, dance and hunting. I look at types of compliments, namely, (1) appearance, (2) character and comportment, (3) performance and (4) possession. I also examine the structure and language of compliments, response to compliments and functions of compliments.*

## 1. Introduction and Theoretical Framework: Compliments and Politeness

I will discuss Akan compliments under the theory of politeness as outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987) and other scholars like Leech (1983), Ide (1989), Fasold (1990), Fraser (1990), Bonvillain (1993), Holmes (1995), Foley (1997) and Kasper (1997). I will briefly consider politeness and link it with compliments. Politeness has been widely discussed in sociolinguistics, pragmatics, anthropology and social psychology. Politeness is defined as proper social conduct and the tactful consideration for others. Linguistic politeness is the redressing of the affronts to face posed by face-threatening acts to addressees. It refers to ways in which linguistic actions and expressions are properly and appropriately carried out in social interaction so as to be respectful and avoid offensive and face threatening acts (Grundy 2000:146).

Brown and Levinson (1987:101-211) discuss **positive** and **negative** politeness. Positive politeness strategies include statements of friendship, solidarity and compliments, and they list 15 strategies under positive politeness. These include: *attend to H's interests, needs and wants; use*

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*solidarity and in-group identity markers; be optimistic; offer or promise; exaggerate interest in H and his interests; avoid disagreements and joke.* We will analyse Akan compliments along the lines of some of these. One major aspect of positive politeness is exaggeration that serves as a marker of face-redress, and this is manifested in Akan compliments.

Negative politeness is oriented towards the addressee's negative face and his desire for autonomy (Brown and Levinson 1987: 129-211, Foley 1997: 272). Negative politeness strategies typically emphasise avoidance and minimizing of imposition and so the speaker minimally interferes with the addressee. Brown and Levinson (1987: 129-211) discuss ten strategies of negative politeness, but they are outside the main purview of this paper. Politeness is more appropriately seen as adherence to social norms and values.

It is argued that the Brown and Levinson model of face is an exponent of Western culture, which focuses too much on individualistic needs (see Kasper 1997:379). The common objection to Brown and Levinson's model is that the intended universality of the theory is untenable. In discussing face wants, Brown and Levinson emphasized *the speaker, the addressee, the individual and his/her private sphere* (singular). Goffman's (1967) view of face is more compatible with non-Western face constructs, and this is exactly what pertains in the Akan face concept. Goffman's is a sociological notion that sees face as public property on loan from the society rather than as personal property. Akans place much premium on communalistic needs and on the Akan face concept, and Akan compliment expressions are based on these communal and societal needs.

While Akans share standards of "societal behaviour" recognizable to the social distribution of responsibility, Brown and Levinson's face theory focuses strongly on individual behaviour and responsibility. The Akan socio-cultural concept includes a folk audience that shares responsibility for the fulfillment of the act to which the speaker of *face expressions* commits himself/herself. The face indexicalises and reproduces social and pragmatic issues that affect the entire society. The perlocutionary effect of a compliment transcends the individual to his family, cronies and society. Matsumoto (1988) and Ide (1989) complain that Brown and

Levinson's "face constructs" do not capture the principles of Japanese interaction because they do not include the acknowledgement of societal relations. Gu (1990) shares the same sentiments and argues that among the Chinese, politeness is more appropriately seen as adherence to social norms than as attending to the individual's face wants.

Compliment strategies avoid conflict and provide harmony among communicative participants and aim at politeness. Akan compliment expressions strengthen the communal aspect of Akan culture. This tallies with Ide's (1989:225) view of linguistic politeness as being the "language usage associated with smooth communication, realised through (1) the speaker's use of intentional strategies to allow his or her message to be received favourably by the addressee and (2) the speaker's choice of expressions to conform to the expected and/or prescribed norms of speech appropriate to the contextual situation in individual speech communities". It is the first part of Ide's definition that deals with compliments.

Compliments fall under such ethnographic contexts as setting, participants and genres. In the case of participants we could have upward compliments where the compliment comes from a subordinate and is moved up to a superordinate. Compliments could also be downwards from a superordinate to a subordinate. We see such a dichotomy between a chief and his subjects. For compliments to work there should be a certain degree of intimacy between the participants.

### **1.1 Methodology**

In this paper I employed ethnographic methods to find out how compliments as a socio-cultural linguistic routine operate among the Akan of Ghana and whether Akan compliments are unique or similar to those of other societies. I combined ethnosemantics, ethnopragmatics, participant observation, interviews and introspection to study Akan compliments.

During the interviews I used open-ended questions that brought in new ideas and questions as the interviews flowed. Such questions included: Why do people use different compliments and responses at different times to different people? What is the role of compliments? Name some of

the popular compliments about one's appearance and character. I posed similar questions to several people and compared their answers to check their validity.

I collected the data at different times and locations from conversations and other social interactions on occasions such as funerals, religious setups and functions at the palace. I took some of the data from the recorded versions of Akan advertisements on radio and TV and also from Akan fiction, drama and poetry books. A variety of them are from my own intuitive knowledge of Akan folklore, culture and philosophy.

## 2. Definitions and Concept of Compliments

The Akan indigenous term for compliments is *nkamfo*, made up of the nominaliser *n-* and the verb *kamfo*, 'to compliment or praise'. Compliments are expressive speech acts that put emphasis on the perlocutionary effect of the utterance. According to Holmes (1986: 485) "A compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some 'good' possession, characteristic, skill, etc. which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer." In looking at compliments as a positive politeness strategy, Holmes (1998: 100) reiterates her former position on compliments and states that "Compliments are prime examples of speech acts which notice and attend to the hearer's wants, needs or good". We see clearly that a compliment is addressee-oriented since it is meant to enhance the mood and personality of the addressee. Searle and Vanderveken (1985:21) aptly define compliments as follows: "To compliment is to express approval of the hearer for something. Compliments presuppose that the thing the hearer is complimented for is good, though it needs not necessarily be good for him" (see Duranti 1997:253). To Tannen (1995: 68) "compliments are a conventional form of praise, and exchanging compliments is a common ritual". It is important for the complimenter to be very sincere with the compliments so as to avoid a face threatening act.

One of the basic theories of compliments hinges on "meaning" and the sharing of a common socio-cultural and linguistic code (in our context, Akan) by both the complimenter and the recipient. Expressions of

compliments may differ from one cultural background to another. The notions and concepts encoded in the complimentary language should conform to the general cognitive and socio-cultural framework of the culture concerned so as to make processing easier and relevant to the recipient.

Compliments have perlocutionary effects. A perlocutionary act is performed by means of saying something, e.g., getting someone to believe that something is so, persuading someone to do something, moving someone to anger or consoling someone in distress. The use of complimentary language as a perlocutionary act affects the intellect, emotions and reactions of the addressee (see Agyekum 2004:66, Lyons 1977:730). Complimentary language must be polite and devoid of face threatening acts, for in some cases the addressee will respond very nicely to the compliments and in others s/he will refuse the compliments either through utterances or non-verbal communication by gestures or silence (see Levinson 1983:339).

### 3. Contents and Categories of Compliments

Holmes (1998: 111) identifies four major areas under which compliments are expressed and these are (a) *appearance*, (b) *ability and performance*, (c) *possessions*, and (d) *personality/friendliness*. I have adopted these categories, with some changes, in the discussion of domains of Akan compliments. For instance, I prefer to have *character and comportment* in place of *personality* since Holmes' *appearance* and *personality* categories sometimes overlap.

#### 3.1. Appearance Compliments

Appearance compliments talk about physical aspects of the person, including personal structure, height and complexion, the type, colour and style of clothing and jewelry s/he wears, his/her hairdo, eyes and other parts of the body. These compliments are normally used at funerals, weddings, out-dooring ceremonies and durbars. When people are complimenting on the clothes worn by others, they compare them to the most expensive ones. Some of the appearance compliments refer to the

beauty of the complimentee and they include *ahoɔfɛ ni*, “what a beauty”, *ahoɔfɛ na adware wo sei*, “you are soaked with beauty”, *ahoɔfɛ na adura wo sei*, “you are extremely beautiful”, *ahoɔfɛ na Ereku wo sei*, “how can beauty be killing you so”, *wo ntoma yi deɛ enɛ ha*, “your cloth is so glamorous that it is out of place here” and *eye ma wo*, “it is good for you”. Among the Akan, to be killed or soaked by something implies that one has the item in abundance.

Many advertisements by Ghanaian businesses are in the Akan language. There is a considerable number of appearance and beauty compliments in the advertisements below. They were compiled by Kwadwo Dickson of Peace FM.

1. *W'ahoɔfɛ na ekye me sɛ adwamaa yi*. “Your beauty attracts me like a lamb.” (Befa Rock Shop)

In this excerpt the complimenter compares the addressee to a lamb and transfers to him/her the qualities of the lamb, which include its beautiful fur and its peaceful and humble nature. The Befa Rock shop sells clothing and the speaker is complimenting the addressee on how beautiful she looks in a dress purportedly bought from the shop. The speaker has personified beauty by attributing to it the ability to ‘catch’ him. This implies that the addressee’s beauty has attracted the attention of the speaker and he has therefore fallen helplessly into the former’s grips. We can see that the addressee uses a hyperbole.

2. *W'ahoɔfɛ nti mete me ho a, ente*. “Due to your beauty, I cannot dissociate myself from you.” (G and G beauty Products)

This excerpt also talks about beauty and the complimenter describes the beauty of the addressee as the tool that has solidly glued him to her. Her beauty has made the two inseparable. The expression, *mete me ho a, ente*, means that no matter how much he has tried to break the relationship, it has not been possible because of her beauty. The complimenter has personalized and transferred the functions and efficacy of the beauty products to the person who uses them. It implies that if the products can make a person so beautiful, then people should go for them.

3. *Mese wo ho hwam, mente gyae.* “I tell you, the fragrance from your body is so good that there is nothing else I can do.” (Asky Beauty Soap)

As we saw in example 2 above, the complimenter is describing the functions of the Asky soap and provides an agent who uses it to portray how fragrant the soap is. The soap has been applied to the addressee’s body and the resulting fragrant smell is superb. The speaker elevates it to a superlative degree by saying *mente gyae* (lit. ‘I do not hear stop’); that is to say, nothing can stop me from smelling the fragrance of the soap. Since the soap now refers to the person’s body, it connotes that even if the addressee told the speaker to stop moving with her, he could not, due to the sweet smell from her body.

4. *Afua, wei dee merəkɔtwere wo din wɔ mmaa ahoɔfe akansie no mu.* “Afua, now I am going to write your name on the list of competitors for the women’s beauty pageant.” (Maxi Light Beauty Cream)

Again, we see how the advertisement compliments the beauty cream by referring to what the cream has been able to do. The speaker makes an indirect compliment by not saying directly that Afua is beautiful. Instead, he says that he is going to add her name to the competitors for the beauty pageant in which only beautiful ladies are eligible to compete. This means that Afua’s beauty goes beyond the ordinary.

5. *Ɛfiri nne rekorɔ mɛfrɛ wo Akosua Sɔɔnɔ; enam wo ho fe a aye nti no.* “As from today, I will start calling you ‘Akosua the Glamorous One’ due to how beautiful you have become.” (Africana Collections)

The complimenter (male) in this excerpt is using a temporal frame to highlight the beauty of the addressee by saying, “as from today, I will start calling you ‘Akosua the Glamorous One’ due to how beautiful you have become.” This means that the lady had not looked as beautiful before, as she did at the time the compliment was paid her. This elevates the status of the addressee, and her beauty results from the use of the cream and lotions from Africana Collections.

6. *Agyaaku na hwan na oyii woɔ yi? Enne dee wokyen Akyem polisi.*  
 “Agyaaku, may I know the one who cut your hair? As for today, you are more handsome than the weaver bird called Akyem Polisi.”  
 (Mascaponi Barbering Shop)

In this excerpt, the complimenter (female) compliments the addressee by referring to the agent who has made him so handsome. The complimenter is so amazed by the sudden change in the appearance of the addressee that she uses the focus marker, *dee* (“as for”), to imply that the man had never before been as handsome as he appeared “today”. His handsome nature is compared to the weaverbird that stands out among other birds. The complimenter is wondering who in this world could have given Agyaaku such a glamorous haircut that has made him so extraordinarily handsome. Such adverts are meant to draw customers to the barbering shop.

7. *Me do hemmaa, danedane wo ho ma menhwe w'akyi. Wopa ho a, obi foforo biara ho nye me fe bio.* “My sweet heart, turn round and let me look at you. I cannot think of any other as beautiful as you.” (Angel Cream)

The (male) complimenter uses the honorific *me do hemmaa* (“my sweet heart”) as a persuasive device to lure the complimenter to turn round (see Agyekum 2004 on persuasion and 2003 on honorifics). When the addressee turned round and the speaker saw her, he complimented her by using the exclusive expression “apart from” in the statement, “apart from you I cannot think of any other beautiful woman like you”. The compliment elevates the addressee and places her in a special class and no other person’s beauty (from the speaker’s point of view) is comparable to hers.

8. *Nku ben na wosra a ama wo wedee rete gya nyinamnyinam sei?*  
 “What lotion have you been using such that your skin is sparkling so?” (Pharmadem)

The complimenter (male) addresses the skin of the (female) addressee by saying that her body is sparkling like flames or light. As usual, the compliment goes to the person as a whole and not only to the body. This is a metonymy and the state of the skin also depicts the powerful nature of the lotion that was applied to the skin.



9. *Ɛye a home gu me so, efiri se wohome koraa a, ema me da nnaħħ.*  
*Afei Close-Up a wode twitwiri wo se no Ɛye a, tɔ no nnaka mu na metua ka.* “Just breathe on me, because your breath gives me a sound sleep. Now, just buy the close-up you have been using in boxes and I will pay for them.” (Close-Up Tooth Paste)

The complimenter exaggerates the efficiency of the toothpaste called Close-Up. According to him it is so good that it makes the addressee (female) breathe so well and the scent from the mouth is so good that it makes him sleep soundly. He elevates the Close-Up toothpaste by advising the addressee to buy it in boxes and he will pay for it.

There are certain cultural taboos on the use of appearance compliments. For example, in the Arab world it is generally inappropriate for a male to give appearance compliments to an unmarried female. Among the Akans, it is rather a taboo to give too much appearance compliments to a married woman, for such an action can be misconstrued as an intention to have an affair with her.

### 3.2 Character and Comportment

Certain compliments target the character and comportment of a person and also relate to his/her moral life. Character and comportment compliments are directed at specific traits such as wit, courage, intelligence, politeness, friendliness, kindness, patriotism or more general positive remarks about the person as a whole (e.g. “a good” person”). Such compliments may also extend to the person’s relatives and family ties, including husband, wife, children, friend, roommate, classmate, colleague, pastor or boss (see the communalistic nature of face in section 1).

Character and comportment compliments elevate the person, sometimes in an exaggerated form. Examples are compliments like *mahunu se woye onipa papa pa ara* [“I have seen that you are really a good person”] and *ɔye nipa se* [“he is really a human being”]. These imply that the person has all the qualities and virtues of a human being. A person who is sociable gets the compliment, *n’anim te se* [“s/he has such a brightened face”]. Bright things attract people, while a gloomy face frightens people. The *se* here is an intensifier that denotes the highest degree one can think of. Other

character compliments include *wonye fo* [“you are not a nonentity”], *wonye nnipa ketewa* [“you are not any mean person”], and *honorifics* like *ɔkeseɛ* [“Big Boss”], *ɔpanin* [“Elderly Person”], *onimuonyamfoɔ* [“a dignified person”] and *ɔdeɛfoɔ* [“the magnanimous one”]. Some Akan honorifics are based on character and these are usually deployed in funeral dirges where the dead are well praised.

In some ways a compliment is just a special type of positive assessment directed towards an involved party. For example, if I say to my friend, “It’s a great book”, this statement would be considered a simple assessment. On the other hand, if I said the same sentence to the author of the book he would probably respond to it as a compliment.

### 3.3 Ability and Performance

Some compliments target a person’s ability, skills and performance. They cover a spectrum of things that a person does, including academic laurels, tasks, utterances, speech, preaching, teaching, eating, business, driving and trade. In academic terms, parents whose ward has performed very well can say, *mo woate yen anim* [“Well done, you have brightened our faces”]; “We are proud of you; people can point to us as the parents of this bright girl or boy”. When people perform tasks like weeding and other manual work, the normal compliment in Akan is, *mo ne adwuma* [“well done”]. A person who has completed the pouring of libation is complimented with, *mo ne kasa*, [“congratulations on a good speech”]. The compliment for an artisan like a carpenter, weaver, mason, tailor or seamstress is, *wo nsa ano adwuma ye fe* [lit., “works coming out of your hands are superb”]. This means that you are very skilful and your handiwork is good. Ability and performance compliments are also showered on chiefs, pastors and directors to indicate how well they are doing in their office.

A football player who manipulates the ball and plays very well attracts compliments like, *wonim twetwe* [lit., “you know how to pull the ball to your feet”], and *wonim fam* [lit., “you know the ground”]. They connote that the player has a fair knowledge of the terrain on which the ball is played. There was one good striker of the Asante Kotoko football

team called Opoku Afriyie, and anytime he played very well people complimented him with the title, *bayie* [“wizard”]. He was called football wizard, because according to his admirers his performance transcended the physical into the spiritual world. Akan football commentators also use a lot of ability and performance compliments to describe how well players perform. Examples include *wabɔ no fɛɛfɛɛfɛ* [“he has played it very beautifully”], *wakye no kua/fam/kama* [“he has caught the ball very firmly/nicely”] and *wato ne ho sɛ ɔkra* [“he has swung himself like a cat”]. The last two examples describe the agility of a goalkeeper, and in the last one a simile is used to compare the goalkeeper to a cat.

Akan also uses a lot of compliments for good speech and public speaking. These include *w’ano tene* [lit., “your lips are straight”], *w’ano huam* [lit., “your lips are fragrant”], *wonim kasa* [“you know how to talk”], *dwidwam* [“split the chunks of words”], *paepae mu* [“analyse it/be candid”], *mo ne kasa* [“well done; you made a good speech”] and *ɛsɛ wo, ɛfata wo* [“it befits you, you are good”]. All these expressions are meant to encourage the speaker to continue with his good speech and also indicate how the complimenter admires the speaker. For example, to have fragrant lips implies that the words falling from the lips are good. Most of these expressions often come from close associates and family members. Sometimes the family members use in-group identity expressions by mentioning the speaker’s clan and using terms like *Asonaba mo*, *Asona nana mo* [“grandsire of the Asona clan, well done!”]

There are certain compliments that are often used at the palace to show the performance of the chief. They include the following: *atene* [“it has been straight”], *watena ase kama* [“you have sat down very well”], *watena ase ama aye fɛ* [“your sitting has been very beautiful”], *enne dee aye fɛ akyɛn daa* [“as for today your sitting has been marvellous and more fantastic than any other day”], and *enne dee woafira ntoma a obi mɛfiraa bi da* [“as for today you have worn a cloth that nobody else has worn before”]. Anytime the chief is sitting down in public there is a group of people in charge of protocol who comment on his sitting. In all the above the Asante king is complimented by his own servants and they portray his appearance, comportment and performance on this day as more glamorous and more splendid than any other person’s or on any

other day. The compliments relate to his manner of walking and sitting as well as to his clothing. If the chief is swearing an oath, the *akyeame*, or “chief’s spokesmen”, give him compliments such as *wie*, *ampa*, *turodoo*, *ɛwom* [“this is true, factually reliable”] (see Akuffo 1976:20).

In dance, we meet compliments like *ɛɛ wo*, *ɛfata wo* [“it fits you well”], *danedane wo ho ɛ* [“just keep turning yourself”], *mo Osua*, *Amu*, *Amen*, *Asɔn*, [“well done Osua, Amu, Amen”]. These expressions are responses to particular clans and are used hypocoristically to show appreciation and to encourage the dancer to continue to dance well (see Obeng Gyasi 1997 on Akan Hypocoristic day-names). In most cases the complimenter raises his/her right hand and waves to the dancer or makes a “V” shape with the index and middle fingers. A complimenter can also use a handkerchief to wipe the face of the addressee, spread a cloth for him/her to step on it, or cover his/her neck with a piece of cloth to show appreciation. The latter can be referred to as **semiotic or non-verbal compliments**.

The performance of hunters, especially when they kill big game like the elephant or the buffalo, attracts some compliments, including *mo ne toɔ* [“well done for a good shot”], *mo ɔpeafo* [“well done, holder-of-the arrow”] (see Nketia 1973 Abɔfɔdwom).

Compliments are also used after funeral donations, whether in cash or in kind. The speaker asks the audience to praise or thank the donor using expressions like *X aye adee* [“X has done well”] and *mompene no ɛ* [“praise him/her”] and the response is *hmmm* or *Mommɔ no akurum ɛ* [“shout with a joyful voice”].

Teachers usually give performance compliments to encourage their students to work harder and for the weaker ones to buck up and be recognized. In Akan, we clap for good students with an ideophonic clapping accompanied by *mo! mo! woaye adee* [“congratulations! congratulations! You have done well”].<sup>1</sup> In our schools, girls who perform well, especially in mathematics, science and technical subjects, are often given compliments. This confirms the assertion by Holmes (1998:107) that even in classrooms it seems that females receive more praise or positive evaluations than males.

One can use a sarcastic performance compliment to imply the opposite of the compliment. An example is if one does a shoddy job and somebody says, “you have really done well”. There are also ironic compliments on performance. In Akan the expression *woaku me* [“you have killed me”], rather implies that what you have done to me is superb, marvellous and beyond description. There is another indirect performance compliment, *wote se mawu a, didi* [“when you hear that I am dead, eat”]. Culturally, this means that you have performed so creditably well that I am exempting you from fasting when I die. Among the Akans, when a person dies close relatives and friends refrain from eating *fufuo*, the normal menu.

### 3.4. Possessions

Compliments that relate to possession are praises on personal property and belongings, e.g., house, boat, store, building, business, car and computer. Examples are *wo fie yi dee ense ha yi o* [“as for your building, this is not the place for it, it should have been somewhere else”],<sup>1</sup> *wo X yi nye fo* “your X is not bad at all”. The X can refer to any item possessed by the addressee. Peer group members also use the slang *wo X yi nye kye* [“your X is not a child”]. The term *kye* is a shortened derivation from the English word “children”. Among the Akan items possessed by adults are supposed to be of good quality.

One can also compliment a friend on his/her family, spouse or children, by saying, *ah mma dee woawo bi* [“you have really got great children”]. Another example is *wei dee woawo adehyee* [“you have indeed given birth to royals”]. It is assumed that people from the royal family are very beautiful or handsome, for they need such qualities to be chiefs. One can also give compliments to another’s spouse by saying, *ah saa dee woaware* [“you have actually married”]. With regard to marriage, the complimenter is saying that the addressee has good eyes to make a good choice. Sometimes the compliments are put in indirect forms like *woreko dwa a, memane wo*, [“if you are going to the market, I will ask you to buy me something”] or *w’ani so aboa ye fe* [“your eyes can see beautiful things”]. All these compliments depict the admiration of the speaker for the addressee’s possession.

There are certain prohibitions on the use of compliments in some societies and these are culture specific taboos. For example, in some societies in Denmark, it was considered improper to praise children when they were present. In the Arabian Gulf, praising someone's possessions too directly or too strongly might force that person to offer them to you. If s/he does, you should decline at least twice before finally accepting. This is a taboo because it becomes a face threat and an imposition on the part of your addressee. Holmes (1998: 112) therefore states that "compliments on possessions are much more vulnerable to interpretation as face-threatening acts, since there is the possibility that the complimenter will be heard as expressing the desire for or envy of the object referred to".

#### **4.0. Participants in Compliments**

This section will look at the people who use compliments in terms of gender and find out whether men give compliments to men or to women more often, or whether women give more compliments to their fellow women or to men. We also want to find out whether compliments move from subordinates to superiors or vice versa, and whether compliments are predominant among peer groups.

Generally speaking, we give compliments to people of our age and status. Teenagers thus compliment other teenagers while adults mostly compliment adults. Within the chieftaincy domain, however, we see that in Akan, subordinates give more compliments to chiefs, the compliments ranging from character, comportment and appearance to possession and performance. When chiefs compliment their subordinates it is often based on the performance of the subjects.

Compliments and gender research by Wolfson (1983) and Holmes (1998) indicates that women gave and received more compliments than men did. In two different American studies by Wolfson (1983) and Hebert (1990), the results show that women use compliments more frequently and are complimented more often than men. Among the Akan today, women tend to lavish more of their compliments on other women than on men. The reason is that women interact more with other women than with men, and naturally their compliments will go to their female counterparts. Women

are also much more likely to receive compliments on their appearance than men.

In the traditional Akan system, it was men who were complimented more, and the compliments came from both sexes. Most of these compliments were on performance and possessions. This was so because apart from some aspects of farming, women did not do the most tedious tasks like hunting, felling trees, going to war and mining; these were done mostly by men. In most folk musical traditions like *nnwonkorɔ*, *adenkum*, *osoode* and *apatampa* in which women feature prominently as composers and singers, there are lines that are compliments for men, even though the female singers can also lavish compliments on their fellow women. Traditionally, Akans do not compliment on the taste of food. It means therefore that the major times women were complimented were after child delivery, and since most men would not visit mothers during the first few days, the compliments on child delivery came mostly from other women.

In the modern Akan system the picture has changed, with women attracting more compliments than men, especially on appearance and performance. Since women are fighting for equality in modern Ghana the performance put up by women in fields which hitherto were reserved for men, is highly recognized. Female professors, administrators, judges, lawyers, bankers, heavy truck drivers, mechanics and artisans are highly complimented. Men who take the jobs that were traditionally for women, like cooking and child-care, and those who take nursing as their professions, are highly complimented.

In finding an answer to why people compliment women more often than men, Holmes (1998:106, 1995: 125) states that (1) women value and appreciate compliments and (2) since compliments express social approval and in most societies women occupy a subordinate social position, compliments are used to build the confidence level of women. Compliments thus serve as encouragement for them to continue with their approved behaviour and patronize activities towards socialization. Notwithstanding the differences above, some men and women seem to give praise equally to both men and women.

Some female students on the Legon campus of the University of Ghana pointed out that when they compliment their male counterparts on their appearance, possession or performance the latter do not respond favourably. Sometimes they just nod their heads. Conversely, their female counterparts appreciate compliments and respond amicably.

### 5.0. Responses to Compliments

When a compliment is given, it demands a response. A sincere response demands an acceptance and an appreciation from the addressee, which is typically, “thank you”. In most societies the acceptance can take various forms, most of which are ritualistic and thus seem to be universal. In contemporary Akan, as in languages like English, we can have (a) a ritualistic thank you (*meda wo ase*)<sup>2</sup> and a smile, or (b) being pleased and showing pleasure in the object/skill praised. The use of *meda wo ase* as a response is an influence from the English and American cultures. Traditionally, the complimentee would not say anything.

It is also possible for the addressee to accept the compliment with some amendment. We can have any of the following: (a) minimized acceptance (“*Thanks, but...*”, “*Yeah, but...*”, i.e., weak agreement). The Akan can respond with the saying, *wei deɛ woregoro me ho* [“as for this, you are flattering me”]; (b) a return compliment (“*You too!*”); (c) magnified acceptance (“*I’m not just good, I’m great!*”); or (d) a request for confirmation (“*Really?*”, “*Would you like some more?*”).<sup>3</sup>

If the addressee sees that the compliment is insincere, s/he refuses to acknowledge it, and can employ silence to evade the compliment. This is however very rare in conversations. The worst scenario is where the addressee denies the compliment and probably attacks the complimenter. This happens in antagonistic situations where the complimenter uses the compliment as sarcasm. This happens on Legon campus, where male students use compliments as verbal harassment. More than half of all compliment responses fall into the category of “acceptance”, with “acceptances with amendments” being the next largest group. Very few responses are in the categories of no acknowledgements and denials.



## 6.0. Language of Akan Compliments

Compliments are politeness expressions that have some perlocutionary effects on the psychological state of the addressee. Compliments employ persuasive language and other forms of rhetorical expressions to enhance the personality of the individual.

Compliments can be explicit or implicit. In an explicit compliment, the utterance contains words that carry the positive evaluation of the complimentee (see Yi 2002:84). An implicit compliment, on the other hand, is often a general statement about the addressee where the positive evaluation can be inferred from the context. For example, if a friend sees his colleague in a glamorous uniform/dress and remarks, *enne dee wo nse ha* [“as for today, you should have been somewhere else better than here”] or *woreko dwa a, memane wo* [“if you are going to the market, I will ask you to buy me something”], he implies that the uniform/dress is splendid. On the average, however, people use more explicit compliments than implicit compliments that have ambiguities and hidden meanings.

The most frequent word class used in compliments are adjectives like *papa*, [“good”], *fɛfɛ* [“beautiful”], *mono* [“new”], *kyaao* [“brand new”] and *sokoo* [“fresh”].

We also use focus markers like *dee* [“as for, really, indeed, truly”] to isolate the quality which is the target of the compliment. Examples are *wo fie yi dee ense ha yi o* [“as for your building, this is not the place for it”, i.e., it should have been somewhere else], *ah mma dee woawo bi* [“you have indeed got great children”], *wei dee woawo adehyee* [“you have really given birth to royals”], *ah saa dee woaware* [“you have surely married”], and *eba pa ara ni* [“what a lovely child”]. The use of the focus marker heightens the degree of the compliment and foregrounds the special nature of the entity commented on. In addition, we use the copula verb *ye* [“to be”] to assign a quality to the addressee, or put the copula in the negative to say that the addressee has not got the negative quality specified. Examples of these are *w'ataadee yi ye fe* [“your dress is beautiful”], *wo dan yi nye fo* [“your house is not bad”], and *wonye nnipa ketewa* [“you are no mean person”].

Another linguistic tool used in compliments is rhetorical patterns in which the addressee puts the compliment in a form that seems like a question but has an emotional undertone. These patterns are ended with words like *sei* ["like this"], *nie/ni* ["this is"] and *yi* ["this"]. The common denominator in all these words is the determiner "this", which has the semantic features [+ specific, + proximity]. The determiner restricts attention to the item complimented and makes it specific and closer in the minds of the addressee or audience. Examples of such patterns are, *adee na eye fe sei* ["how can a thing be nice like this"], *ahɔɔfe pa ara nie!* ["what real beauty you do have!"], *ahɔɔfe na ereku wo saa yi!* ["what an absolute beauty!"], *ahɔɔfe bafua ni!* ["is this a single beauty!"] and *ahɔɔfe na adware wo sei!* ["how well have you been soaked with beauty"]. To be soaked with something implies that your whole body is covered with the substance, and in the cases above it means your beauty is total and overwhelming.

In Akan we use the particle *o* ["really, indeed, actually, surely"], at the end of a sentence to indicate how surprised we are about an object or a situation. In view of this, the particle is used as a tag for compliments to indicate that the object is splendid and superb. Examples are *Asantefo moasi hene o* ["you Asantes have indeed installed a chief"], <sup>4</sup> *woatɔ kae o* ["you have really bought a car"], *woasi fie o* ["you have surely built a house"].

Compliments are often initiated with the second person singular pronoun, *wo* ["you"] or its possessive (still) *wo* ["your"] that refers to the addressee. It means that compliments are not often targeted at a third person outside the setting of the compliment. Performance compliments usually begin with *mo* ["well done", "congratulations"] as in *mo, woaye adee* ["you have really done well"], *mo ne awoɔ* ["congratulations on your childbirth"]. In these constructions the action verb is nominalised; for example, *to* ["shoot"] becomes *toɔ* ["shooting/shot"], as in, *mo ne toɔ* ["well done for your shooting"] and *wo* ["to give birth"] becomes *awoɔ* ["childbirth"].

## 7.0 Positive and Negative Roles of Compliments

Compliments play both positive and negative roles in interaction, and these are based on the theories of politeness as outlined in section 1 of this paper.

### 7.1 Positive Role of Compliments

Compliments are aspects of positive politeness strategies meant to enhance the personality of the addressee and also to show rapport and solidarity (see Foley 1997:271). The primary **interaction goal** of giving compliments is to create **affiliation**, i.e., a feeling of closeness and friendliness. On the other hand, the giver might want to create affiliation in order to later make some sort of request; in other words, the function of compliments might be to “soften and pave the way up”. This is certainly one of the reasons why people often feel uncomfortable when they receive a compliment, for they know that they have to respond with something and this becomes a face threat and an imposition on the part of the addressee.

Compliments attend to the addressee’s interest and are meant to redress the affronts of the face of the addressee, which otherwise could have been threatened. To Wardhaugh (1985: 190), “A compliment calls for some indication of appreciation; in compliments the speaker says good things in appreciation of the addressee” (see also Wierzbicka 1987: 201). Compliments act as a tool to (a) evaluate the person being praised, and (b) show the pre-existing relationship between the item which is the target of praise and the addressee. For example, if I praise a friend’s shirt, I am implying that there is a strong link between the niceness of the shirt and his neat appearance.

Scholars on speech acts claim that compliments are positively affective speech acts that serve to increase and/or consolidate the solidarity between the speaker and the addressee. Holmes (1998:101) therefore states, “The primary function of a compliment is most obviously affective and social rather than referential or informative”. We see then that one of the ingredients of compliments is relationship. Compliments act as social lubricants that help to propel the smooth running of the engine of social ties and rapport. A compliment could be considered as a positive

politeness strategy used as a kind of social accelerator to boost the level of intimacy between the complimenter and the complimentee (see also Pomerantz 1978). The complimenter tries to establish or strengthen a cognitive, affective, or social relationship with the recipient of the compliments. When such a stand is adopted, the speaker will be able to get the addressee to fulfil his/her intentions.

Compliments can be considered as a persuasive device to induce the addressee to do something. To persuade is to cause another to believe something, or to convince another to adopt a particular idea. Compliments as a form of persuasion constitute an attempt to cause a person to act in a certain way, sometimes against his/her will. The intentions of the complimenter are to engender action(s) towards a change in the behaviour or mind of the complimentee.

## 7.2 Negative Role of Compliments

Compliments may also have adverse effects on the addressee. In using compliments, the speaker may exaggerate the use of address and honorific terms and other expressions and may be negative and face threatening. When a compliment is exaggerated it becomes embarrassing and sarcastic. Holmes (1998:103) supports this claim by saying that “when the content of a compliment is perceived as too distant from reality, it will be heard as sarcastic or ironic put down”. An exaggerated compliment is referred to in Akan as *fewdie* [“sarcasm”] or *ngoroho* [“flattery” (insincere praise)]. We can thus argue that when misused and misapplied, a compliment becomes embarrassing and a face threat (see Pomerantz 1978). Compliments must be reasonable in order that their perlocutionary effect will be realised.

Compliments may also show some aspects of envy that are also face threatening. Some compliments may depict that the complimenter envies the addressee or something belonging to him/her (see Holmes 1998:103, 1995:119). If a woman who has an irresponsible husband tells the friend *ei wo tiri ye o, woanya kumpa* [“you are very lucky, you have a good husband”], it may imply that the speaker would have wished to have such a husband.

Brown and Levinson (1998: 66) suggest that a compliment can be regarded as a face-threatening act when the complimenter envies the addressee in some way, or would like something belonging to the addressee. In Akan one can say to a friend whose job one envies, *saa dee eye ma wo* ["it is indeed good for you"]. This is an expression said with a pinch of salt. One can also compliment food that one would like to taste by saying *w'aduane yi dee eye huam o* ["as for your food, it smells very good"].<sup>5</sup>

Among the Akan, compliments meant to obtain a favour may take place between people and their poor counterparts. Some poor people will intentionally praise rich people to get some favours and gifts. Such compliments may be face-threatening if they show some unwarranted and false intimacy.

In oral literature performance, we also see this in folksongs where a singer cites the appellation of a dancer or a renowned person within the audience with the intention to receive some money from them. In *nmwonkorɔ*, a female folksong tradition, there are young girls whose duty is to look round a funeral gathering and find out the names of dignitaries, which are then cleverly cited in songs just to attract gifts. These aspects of imposition tally with the Akan maxim, *se obi ye wo papa a, na waha wo* ["if somebody does good things for you, then he or she has given you problems"], for there is nothing like a free lunch.

Some compliments may show some degree of embarrassment. This happens especially in compliments from men to women. Legon male students use "insincere compliments" as sarcasm and verbal harassment. When they see women in red dress they shout *kɔkɔ o, kɔkɔ* ["red oo, red"]. On Legon campus some male students see their female counterparts and remark, *etoɔ ni o!* ["what buttocks!"] Some women may consider such compliments positive, but looking at the context of usage, the male counterparts use these to tease them and call them all sorts of names. In most cases, the females become embarrassed and feel uncomfortable; compliments then change into verbal harassment (see Holmes 1998:104).

### Conclusions

Compliments are universal pragmatic speech acts that carry perlocutionary effects on the addressee, but there are some cross-cultural differences based on the sociocultural fabric of a particular society. Compliments are aspects of linguistic rituals and routines that form part of politeness. We have seen that the use of compliments draws the speaker (complimenter) closer to the addressee (complimentee). We also notice that compliments are positive politeness strategies that express goodwill and solidarity between the speaker and the addressee. Compliments directly or indirectly attribute credit to or approval for the addressee. In the case of performance compliments, they serve as critical evaluative mechanisms and a feedback valve for the addressee to assess how people see and perceive him/her. Compliments can be targeted at four areas of a person's life, namely, *appearance, character and comportment, performance and possession*.

We saw that Compliments as a positive politeness strategy are prime examples of speech acts that notice and attend to the hearer's wants, needs or good. Compliments are addressee-oriented since they are meant to enhance the mood and personality of the addressee. Two major functions of compliments were identified, namely, *positive* and *negative*. The positive function enhances the image, expresses approval of the addressee and says good things about him/her. In their negative role compliments are regarded as face-threatening acts, for they may imply that the complimenter envies the addressee in some way or would like something belonging to the addressee. In other cases, we saw that compliments constitute verbal harassment, especially when they involve some degree of sarcasm. Thus, although ideally we might expect people to formally accept compliments, in some cases there are insincere compliments and addressees may not accept them. The complimenter and the complimentee should work on how to give and how to accept sincere compliments, respectively.

In the case of gender, compliments are directed at women more than they are at men. In Akan, there has been a change from the traditional system of compliments that were directly targeted at men, to the current state where women are now more complimented than men. We emphasized

that this has resulted in a change in the social stratification between men and women.

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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> In my elementary school days, anytime the dull girls in the class did well, our teachers gave compliments like "excellent, excellent, and excellent." However, the boys shouted ntonkoms to mean that this was just a random guess. This is a verbal harassment that depicts envy on the part of the boys who wanted to receive the compliments.
- <sup>2</sup> For instance, if the house is in some of the outskirts of Accra, the person would say "this house should have been at East Legon, Airport Residential, Cantoments, Ridge or Labone.
- <sup>3</sup> The use of *meda wo ase* as a response to a compliment is very new and it is a western influence, so are responses like *me tiri da wo ase* 'my head thanks you', that comes after the compliments on childbirth *wo tiri nkwa*, 'life to your head'.
- <sup>4</sup> Yi (2002:210) listed the following semantic formulas that are used as responses to compliments, acceptance, explanation, return, appreciation, upgrade, reassignment, invitation, suggestion, confirmation seeking, down grade, disagreement and opt out (with a smile).
- <sup>5</sup> This a compliment by a non-Asante senior member of the University of Ghana targeted at the performance of the Asantehene.
- <sup>6</sup> The envy may also show up in some cultures like the Samoan culture where an expression of admiration or compliments for an object imposes an obligation on the addressee to offer it to the complimenter as a gift.