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# Differences in English Compliment Responses Between Native English Speakers and Chinese English Learners

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This research discusses the compliment responses of Chinese-speaking English learners in the United States by using the conversation analysis methods. I compared the examples collected for this study to Pomerantz's (1978) data for compliment responses made by native speakers of American English. The participants were sixteen Chinese ESL learners. The primary result was that some compliment responses used by Chinese-speaking English learners were similar to those of native speakers of American English. Most of the time, Chinese-speaking English learners chose to accept the compliments with or without referent shifts. Even though they sometimes chose to disagree with the speaker, they would incorporate other-than-you references in their expressions. Nevertheless, Chinese-speaking English learners used "really?" or "oh really?" as one of their responses, which is quite different from American English.

Speech acts are often analyzed in terms of function—for instance, requesting, refusing, apologizing, and complimenting. Second language (L2) learners display noticeably different L2 pragmatic competence (defined as language users' knowledge of communicative action and how to carry it out appropriately according to context) than native speakers, both in production and comprehension (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). One possible explanation is that learners may hesitate to transfer L1 strategies that they are not certain are universal. A second possibility is that they mistakenly transfer strategies that they wrongly assume to be universal (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). Speech acts reflect cultural values. If second language learners fail to perceive cultural meanings behind surface syntactic meanings, the potential for conversation

breakdowns or miscommunication increases.

Pragmatic transfer, an area related to the development of pragmatic competence, was defined as the use of first language (L1) speech norms in the speaking or writing of an L2 (Wolfson, 1989). Pragmatic transfer consists of two main categories: positive and negative transfer. Positive pragmatic transfer occurs when an L2 learner successfully conveys his/her intended messages by transferring conventions of usage shared by L1 and L2 (Al-Issa 1998; Kasper, 1992); in contrast, negative pragmatic transfer refers to L2 learners' use of their L1 speech norms in inappropriate L2 contexts (Felix-Brasdefer, 2004), thus committing pragmatic failure—failing to understand interlocutors' intentions. Thomas (1984) pointed out that pragmatic failure is much more serious than linguistic errors.

That is, learners who make linguistic errors seem to be thought of as less proficient language users, whereas those who fail to conform to the target language pragmatic norms tend to be considered unfriendly or impolite (Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, & Reynolds, 1991).

Cross-cultural aspects of speech acts have gained increased research attention over the past three decades (Cohen, 1996; Wolfson, 1981, 1989). Wolfson is considered one of several pioneers in research on cross-cultural distinctions regarding compliments. She observes that comments considered to be compliments by Americans can be viewed as insulting by people from other cultures. For example, an intended compliment made by an American speaker that an addressee looks unusually attractive can be viewed by French receivers as implying that the reverse is true (Wolfson, 1981).

Knowing how to compliment is important, but it is equally important to know how to respond to a compliment (Nelson et al., 1996). For non-native English speakers (NNEs) living in the United States, knowing how to respond to compliments appropriately is considered important because of the higher frequency with which Americans give compliments. Pomerantz (1978) has completed several studies on compliment responses in English-speaking countries, but little research exists on responses used by NNEs in ESL contexts. Yu (2004) investigated how Chinese EFL and ESL learners responded to compliments given by native English speakers. The results showed evidence of pragmatic transfer: A high percentage of rejection was found. Rejection of compliments is regarded as having good manners in Chinese culture but improper or even rude in American

culture. More research on compliment responses used by NNEs and pragmatic transfer is required.

In light of the above background, I set out to investigate similarities and differences in compliment responses between Chinese learners of English and American native English speakers. A central goal was to identify factors that can assist L2 instructors. Throughout this paper I will refer to four types of compliments: on appearance, on possessions, on ability, and on personality traits (Nelson, Al-Batal & Echols, 1996; Wolfson, 1989).

### *Compliment Responses*

Pomerantz (1978) is responsible for two conversational principles governing compliment responses. The first states that most recipients agree with and/or accept compliments, and the second states that most recipients avoid self-praise. She classified realization patterns of compliment responses into two categories: (a) acceptance, which can be divided into the categories of appreciation tokens (Excerpt 1) and agreement, where acceptance tokens are followed by agreement components (Excerpt 2), and (b) rejection, including disagreement (Excerpt 3). For acceptance, appreciation is preferred over agreement. Rejections are routinely associated with disagreement.

Excerpt 1: Acceptance (Pomerantz, 1978, p. 84, Excerpt 4)

- A: Well-I-I wannid to say I enjoyed your class so this morning, and too.
- B: Well, thank you.

Excerpt 2: Agreement (Pomerantz, 1978, p. 85, Excerpt 8)

- A: Oh it was just *beautiful*.
- B: Well *thank* you Uh I thought it was quite nice...

Excerpt 3: Disagreement (Pomerantz, 1978, p. 87, Excerpt A)

- H: Gee, Hon, You look nice in that dress
- W: Do you really think so? It's just a rag my sister gave me.

Excerpt 4: Evaluation shift (Pomerantz, 1978, p. 94, Excerpt 33)

- B: I've been offered a full scholarship at Berkeley and at UCLA.
- G: That's fantastic
- B: Isn't that good

Excerpt 5: Evaluation shift (Pomerantz, 1978, p.100, Excerpt 46)

- K: Those tacos were good!
- B: You liked them...
- K: I loved 'em, yes.
- B: I'm glad, but uh, next time we have 'em we'll, the uh, the tortillas a little bit more crispy...

Although the preferred response is for the recipient to accept a compliment with what Pomerantz calls an *appreciation token*, this conflicts with the self-praise avoidance constraint. There are two solutions to this conflict: *evaluation shifts* and *referent shifts*. Evaluation shifts are praise downgrades, with recipients using evaluative descriptors that are less positive (Pomerantz, 1978.). Recipients can do this by either agreeing (e.g., Excerpt 4) or disagreeing (e.g., Excerpt 5) with a compliment, using scaled-down or more moderate praise terms.

Referent shifts include compliment responses in which "recipients of praise proffer subsequent praises of other-than-self referents" (Pomerantz, 1978, p. 107). In Excerpt 6, F credits K by focusing on K as the weaver of the blanket in question. Later in the sequence, F admires the blanket with a positive assessment. K initially responds with a scaled-down agreement (line 10), and then with a credit shift away from herself as the weaver (line 12).

Excerpt 6: Referent shift (Pomerantz, 1978, p. 102, Excerpt 2c, p. 103, Excerpt 2d)

- 1 F: ..What ayou making?
- 2 K: It's a blanket
- 3 F: Did you weave that
- 4 [yourself
- 5 K: [I wove this myself
- 6
- 7 D: She wove [all of this herself
- 8 F: [Ya kidding
- 9 F: That is [beautiful
- ↓10 K: ['N that nice
- 11 R: Yah. It really is.
- ←12 K: It wove itself. Once it was set up

In the Manes and Wolfson (1981) corpus (cited in Wolfson, 1989), other-than-self referents occur at high frequencies. In Excerpt 7, A responds to S's compliment by shifting the credit to her mother.

Excerpt 7: Referent shift (Manes & Wolfson, 1981)

- S: That's a pretty sweater.
- ← A: My mother gave it to me.

Excerpt 8: Referent shift (Pomerantz, 1978, p. 107, Excerpt 52a)

- E: You lookin good
- G: Great. So'r you.

A second type of referent shift is returning compliments, as in Excerpt 8. According to Pomerantz (1978), returns are most frequent in interaction openings and closings.

In summary, Pomerantz (1978) observed that "praise downgrades are prevalent subsequent to compliments with other-than-you references incorporated, and appreciation tokens show a priority positioning over agreements and disagreements" (p. 108)

### **The Present Study**

The motivation for the present study is to investigate similarities and differences in compliment responses between Chinese learners of English and American native English speakers. Toward this goal, I compared the examples collected for this study to Pomerantz's (1978) data for compliment responses made by native speakers of American English.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The sixteen Mandarin-speaking participants (eight males and eight females) were all enrolled at a large Midwestern university in the United States in Spring 2008; two were exchange undergraduate students and the rest were graduate students. These ESL learners were all native speakers of Mandarin Chinese from Taiwan. All of them had received English instruction before coming to the United States. All had minimum scores of 213 on the CBT.

### *Procedure*

Data were collected by audio recording individual interviews between the researcher "K" who is a female Taiwanese graduate student in her 20s and each participant in a language lab

for approximately 3 to 5 minutes. Each interview started with some demographic questions (e.g., age, major, hometown, and length of U.S. residence), followed by free conversation. During the course of conversation, the researcher initiated compliments according to the four above-listed categories (i.e., compliments on appearance, possessions, ability, and personality traits) and later analyzed participant responses. At the end of each interview, each participant was asked whether he/she realized the purpose of the interview. No participant reported any awareness of the focus of the study.

### *Data Analysis*

Audio files were transcribed by the researcher. All data were transcribed using Jefferson's notation system (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984) and subjected to conversation analysis (see Appendix A).

## **Results and Discussion**

Upon receiving possession compliments, the Chinese participants tended to accept them, but the same was not true for ability compliments, which generally elicited disagreement. Responses to appearance compliments were mixed between acceptance and disagreement. Only one instance of a personal attribute compliment was noted; the recipient disagreed at first and then incorporated an other-than-self referent and evaluation shift.

### *Similarities*

The main similarities between compliment responses made by the Chinese learners of English in this study and native speakers of American English in Pomerantz's study were acceptance of prior compliments and the incorporation of referent shifts and/or evaluation shifts into responses. Some

Chinese learners accepted compliments by using appreciation tokens such as “thanks” or “thank you” in the same manner as Americans. In the conversation leading into Excerpt 9, K wants to know the required qualifications for becoming a TA like S. S responds by saying that applicants need to pass a speaking test. K compliments S on his English speaking ability, and S responds with an appreciation token.

## Excerpt 9

- 1 K: Wow, that’s why your  
2 speaking is so good.  
•3 S: Oh, thanks.

Pomerantz (1978) notes that “appreciation tokens and agreement components may be used in combination and/or as alternatives by recipients” (p. 86)—a phenomenon also observed among Chinese learners of English. In Excerpt 10, K gives two compliments, and Hu responds differently to each: with appreciation to the first and agreement to the second, adding an appreciation token both times.

## Excerpt 10

- 1 K: I like your sweater,  
2 [it looks ] great=  
•3 Hu: [thank you ]  
•4 Hu: =yeah, thanks.

*Referent shifts*

Some participants incorporated referent shifts in their responses to compliments. In Excerpt 11, K learns that B has drawn a picture and asks B to show it to her. B finds the drawing and gives it to K, and K compliments B on her drawing ability. B responds with

both acceptance and agreement, and then shifts the credit to her mother.

## Excerpt 11

- 1 K: Wow, so cute, [wow ]  
2 B: [thanks]  
3 K: I like your drawing.  
4 B: Thank you. Yeah  
5 K: And, so have you learned  
6 <how to draw before?>  
7 B: No, I didn’t. I just, you know,  
8 draw whatever I want and  
9 then it turns out to be like  
10 this.  
11 K: Uh huh. Yeah I think your  
12 skill is quite good.  
13 B: Thanks. (.) Yeah. I think it’s  
14 (.) probably: I have  
•15 this:(.) >I don’t know< ability  
16 from my mom?

Other Chinese participants used referent shifts when accepting compliments on appearance. In Excerpt 12, L shifts the credit for the shirt he is wearing.

## Excerpt 12

- 1 K: I- I think you look great in this  
2 shirt.  
3 L: Look great?  
4 K: Yeah, looks more younger=  
5 L: =Oka[y  
6 K: [no, much younger  
•7 L: Only when I wear this shirt?  
8 K: I don’t [know  
9 L: [hh h [.h  
10 K: [hh h .h but I  
11 think, really=  
12 L: =[okay, thank y[ou.  
13 K: [your [style is good-  
14 great.

Referent shifts were also observed in responses to compliments on possession.

In Excerpt 13, R accepts K's compliment and then shifts the credit to her mother.

Excerpt 13

- 1 K: Oh, this is your pajamas!  
2 R: Yeah.  
3 K: I like it. It looks so goo:d. hh  
4 h .h  
•5 R: Thank you. My mother got  
6 this from um: Indonesia.

In addition to other-than-self referents, the Chinese learners of English in this study also returned compliments in the same manner as Americans in Pomerantz's study. In Excerpt 14, M accepts K's compliment and then returns it to the speaker.

Excerpt 14

- 1 K: Wow, nice jacket, you look  
2 great in it.  
•3 M: Thank you very much (1.0)  
4 you too. hh h .h

*Evaluation shift plus referent shift*

As mentioned above, praise downgrades with other-than-you references are prevalent in American English (Pomerantz, 1978); I found that the Chinese participants in this study also applied this strategy. In Excerpt 15, Y is a new exchange student, and K compliments him on his English speaking ability. Y responds with disagreement using an other-than-you reference, shifting the credit to his need to get a passing score on the TOEFL. Next, he downgrades the credit to the level of "a little" English speaking ability.

Excerpt 15

- 1 K: This is- this is your first time

- 2 in United States?  
3 Y: Yeah.  
4 K: but I think your English is  
5 very good.  
•6 Y: Oh, no. uh: .hh uh: but we  
7 need to pass the TOEFL  
8 exam when we want to::  
9 >exchang- get exchanged<  
10 here  
11 K: Uh [huh.  
12 Y: [So, uh: but I think (.)  
13 that's- that's why I have  
•14 a:- a little English speaking  
15 ability, I think. hh h .h

Another example of this kind of response is given in Excerpt 16, in which K and C discuss the GRE and K discovers that C got a very high score. K credits C for a personal trait (intelligence), and C shifts the credit to hard work. When K reasserts the compliment, C shifts the credit to her memory, and then downgrades that same characteristic in the last line.

Excerpt 16

- 1 K: You must be very smart.  
•2 C: No, but I- I memorize so lot  
3 of vocabulary be- before  
4 I actually take the test.  
5 K: But I still think you're very  
6 smart=  
7 C: =hh h .h w[hy,  
8 K: [because you get  
9 high on GRE s- test  
•10 C: Um. I don't know, maybe  
11 memory is great.  
12 K: [hh h .h  
•13 C: [hh h .h But now I- I don't  
14 remember at all hh h .h

In the final excerpt for this section, H accepts K's compliments on her appearance, and then downgrades the credit by saying the jeans she is wearing

are cheap (specific problems related to this compliment category will be discussed in a later section).

#### Excerpt 17

- 1 K: I think your- your jeans looks
- 2 great, you look great in you-
- 3 this jeans.
- 4 H: Oh, thank you. hh h .h (1.5)
- 5 It' s really (.) cheap.

#### Differences

The primary differences in compliment responses between the Chinese learners of English who participated in this study and native speakers of English in Pomerantz's study were the use of agreement, rejection, and "Really?" / "Oh, really?" as compliment responses.

#### Agreement

Pomerantz (1978) argued that agreement in American English is less frequently expressed than appreciation, and that agreement has more restrictions on production—that is, most agreement comments emerge from second assessments “which are systematically altered relative to the prior compliments, containing scaled-down or more moderate praise terms than the priors” (p. 94). Results from the present study conflict with Pomerantz's. In addition to finding several instances of agreement among the Chinese participants, I noted that they seldom used a second assessment with scaled-down terms, preferring instead to use such words as “yeah” to express agreement (see Excerpts 10 and 11 above). In Excerpt 18, K tastes a bowl of soup cooked by H, and compliments H on her cooking ability. H responds with agreement in the form of “yeah” and reconfirms the compliment with “I like to cook.”

#### Excerpt 18

- 1 K: Wow, it's so good
- 2 H: Really? hh h .h
- 3 K: Yeah, you must very- be very
- 4 good at cooking
- 5 H: Yeah. I like to cook.

#### Rejection

According to Wolfson (1989), simple disagreement with a compliment is less frequent among American native English speakers, who prefer to show disagreement by downgrading. I noted several strong examples of praise downgrades among my Chinese participants (Excerpts 15, 16, and 17) and fewer instances of simple disagreement. In Excerpt 19, K hears from her friends that P's application has been accepted by one of Taiwan's top four universities. P rejects K's compliment of her ability with an explicit “No.”

#### Excerpt 19

- 1 K: You have been accepted by
- 2 Chiao Da? =
- 3 P: =Yep.
- 4 K: Wow, you are so great
- 5 P: No: hh h .h

Excerpt 20 is another instance of a compliment for ability. W wins a scholarship funded by the Taiwan National Science Council and receives a compliment from K. W rejects K's compliment with simple disagreement rather than downgrading.

#### Excerpt 20

- 1 K: So you must be outstanding.
- 2 W: Uh:: .hh (0.8) hh uh:: I don't
- 3 know, but, in their point of
- 4 view, maybe, but I don't

5 think so.

Some of the participants showed the same tendency for compliments on appearance. In Excerpt 21, K compliments F on being slim, which is considered a positive value among Chinese. F rejects the compliment by saying “no” three times with rising intonation. This is very different from Pomerantz’s finding (1978) for native English-speaking Americans, who tend to respond by reducing the compliment. Furthermore, Pomerantz noted that Americans tend to challenge or disagree with rejections and reassert their compliments. Note that in Excerpt 21, K insists on the compliment two times, but F keeps rejecting it.

Excerpt 21

- 1 K: I just want to say even  
2 though you come- you come  
3 to [A- America for half- um:  
4 F: [um hum  
5 K: for eight months you always  
6 look so slim, yeah.  
•7 F: ↑ No, no, no, that’s not true.  
8 Because you know, I have  
9 gained weight for five kilos  
10 so far  
11 ((unintelligible sounds))  
12 K: But compared to me, you-  
13 you really look slim I think,  
14 and I envy you.  
15 F: hh[h .h  
16 K: [hh h .h  
•17 F: No, you didn’t see the fat  
18 here you know, here  
19 ((F showed her fat to K))  
20 F: hh[h .h  
21 K: [hh h .h  
22 F: You know  
23 K: But I really think so.  
•24 F: No: I don’t think so.

Chen (2003) asserts that Taiwanese are more likely than American native English speakers to use the Chinese language equivalent of “Really?” or “Oh, really?” to respond to compliments given by other Taiwanese. I found that the Chinese participants in this study transferred this strategy to their second language—an instance of what Wolfson (1989) calls pragmatic transfer: the use of L1 speech norms when speaking or writing an L2. Schegloff (2007) describes the interjection “oh” as a “change-of-state token” used to mark or claim information receipt, and “Really?” (with or without a preceding “oh”) as a request for further information. Schegloff also writes:

Several of the turn types which can be used for other-initiation of repair can also be used to mark some utterance or part utterance as of special interest, and worthy of further on-topic talk. Among these forms are repeats or partial repeats, “pro-repeats” (such as “He is?”), and “really,” all with or without a preceding “oh” ... “Oh really?” marks the answer as “news,” and provides for further expansion of its telling. (2007, p. 155, 157)

Chinese participants in this study used “Really?” and “Oh, really?” in their responses to compliments on appearance, possession, and ability. In Excerpt 18 above, after K tastes some soup cooked by H and compliments it, H responds by saying “Really?” After K provides more information, H agrees with the compliment. In Excerpt 22, A responds to K’s compliment with “Oh, really?”, K provides more information, and A finally accepts the compliment.

Excerpt 22

- 1 K: I like your hairstyle. I think



- 2           this one fits you.  
•3 A:    Oh, re- really?  
4 K:    Yeah, you look so cute, yeah,  
5           very cute. hh h .h  
6 A:    Okay, thanks.

In contrast to Shegloff's finding, I noted that my Chinese participants sometimes used "Really?" or "Oh, really?" as markers of received information, thus requiring no further response. In Excerpt 23 (a compliment of possession), E responds to K's "I like your jacket" comment by saying "Oh, really?" E does not wait for K's response, but goes on to express his acceptance of K's subsequent compliment, "It looks so great" with a thank you.

#### Excerpt 23

- 1 K    Wow, I like your jacket,  
2           [it looks so great  
•3 E    [>oh, really?<  
4 E    Thank you.

#### Excerpt 24

- 1 K:    Oh, I just think your English  
2           is quite goo:d. It's very fluent  
3           and native- like [I think]  
•4 Z:                   [hh .h]  
          Really? Thank you. hh h .h

Another example of this finding is Excerpt 24, an instance of a compliment on ability. Again, Z does not wait for K's response to his "Really?", but instead continues to express his acceptance of K's compliment.

#### **Pedagogical Implications**

The study findings can be used to assist language teachers and learners. For teachers, they can support efforts to develop teaching materials for compliment/compliment response

sequences; since they provide knowledge of what authentic Chinese conversations sound like and identify two kinds of response strategies that should be taught: (a) appreciation tokens over agreement and disagreement, and (b) praise downgrades and/or other-than-you references when expressing agreement or disagreement with compliments.

For Chinese learners of English, the study results will support their perceptions of similarities and differences in compliment responses between them and native speakers of American English. The data can also help them understand what kinds of response strategies they need to learn in order to respond to compliments in culturally appropriate ways. The findings can reinforce the idea that when expressing agreement or disagreement with compliments, it is proper to incorporate praise downgrades and/or other-than-you references in their responses. In addition, Chinese learners of English can also benefit from learning that the phrase "Oh really" performs a different function for native English speakers than it does for Chinese.

#### **Suggestions for Future Study**

Pomerantz (1978) never explicitly categorized compliment responses according to compliment type, and described few instances of responses to compliments for reasons other than personal attributes; in contrast, I only collected one example of this type of compliment. My plans are to collect a much larger body of data on responses to all four compliment types mentioned in the Introduction section, for both native speakers and Chinese learners of English.

I found several instances of two compliments being made within a single turn, thus making it difficult to categorize compliment responses. For example, in Excerpts 14 and 17 it was difficult to tell which compliments the recipients were responding to. In both cases I categorized them as responses to the second compliment, but future researchers may find other ways to distinguish among multiple compliments and responses. Another topic that researchers may be interested in analyzing is the function of laughter, which was commonly heard in many of the recordings I made. Laughter may have some function in compliment/compliment response sequences that requires further analysis.

Finally, Pomerantz (1978) discussed how the compliment-givers she observed frequently reasserted praise when their recipients showed disagreement. However, she did not offer data about how addressees responded to reasserted compliments. My data suggests that addressees may change their responses when speakers insist on reasserting compliments (as in Excerpt 22) or they may be equally insistent in their responses (as in Excerpt 21). This competition is a topic for future study.

### Conclusion

In this study I analyzed similarities and differences in compliment responses between Chinese learners of English and native speakers of American English. By and large, the Chinese participants followed Pomerantz's (1978) two conversational principles: "One is supportive actions, that is, responses which legitimate, ratify, affirm, and so on, prior compliments, and the other is self-praise avoidance" (p. 106). Most of the time the Chinese

participants chose to accept compliments with or without referent shifts. Despite occasionally disagreeing with a compliment-giver (especially when the compliments referred to ability), they incorporated other-than-you references in their responses. Praise downgrades were also observed in their compliment responses.

Unlike native speakers in Pomerantz's study, the Chinese learners of English in this study used "Really?" with or without a preceding "oh" as a common compliment response. Based on analyses of the use of the Chinese equivalent of "Really?" in studies of Chinese speakers of Mandarin (e.g., Chen, 2003), this strategy is considered a L1 transfer. Americans use "Really?" in their conversations, but rarely as a compliment response. Americans may perceive a Chinese learners' use of "Really?" as an invitation for further information, whereas Chinese consider it a culturally acceptable compliment response—a potential scenario for cross-cultural miscommunication.

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**Appendix A**

## Transcription Conventions

[	the point where overlapping utterances begin overlapping
]	the point where overlapping utterances stop overlapping
=	linked speech
(o.o)	pauses or gaps in what is approximately tenths of a second
(.)	micropause
-	truncated word, self-editing marker
...	medium pause
:	an extension of the sound or syllables it follows
::	a longer extension of the sound or syllables it follows
italics	syllables stressed by amplitude, pitch and duration
•	draws attention to location of phenomenon of direct interest to discussion
> <	an utterance is delivered at a pace quicker than the surrounding talk
< >	Inaudible utterances
↑	marked rising shifts in intonation
.	falling intonation
,	maintained (continuous) intonation
?	rising intonation
!	an animated tone
hh	audible aspirations
.hh	audible inhalations
(( ))	used to specify “some phenomenon that the transcriber does not want to wrestle with” or some non-vocal action, etc.