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A comparative study of compliment responses of female Koreans in Korean-speaking situations and in English-speaking situations

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A comparative study of compliment responses:
Korean females in Korean interactions
and in English interactions

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The first part of this paper reviews previous literature on speech acts, compliments, and compliment responses. Previous research shows that the same speech act is very likely to be realized quite differently across cultures. The second part of the paper examines the compliment responses of Korean females in English interactions and in Korean interactions. The study found that Korean females responded differently when speaking in Korean or English; little evidence of pragmatic transfer was found.

Introduction

From many empirical studies conducted so far on speech acts, it is clear that the same speech act is very likely to be realized quite differently across different cultures. For example, Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1985) show how Japanese and Americans differ in terms of order, frequency, and intrinsic content of semantic formulas when making refusals. Daikuhara (1986) shows how compliment response interactions of Japanese differ from that of Americans. Godard (1977) presents differences in French telephone interactions and American telephone interactions. Eisenstein and Bodman (unpublished) show how expressions of gratitude differ across cultures. All these empirical studies provide evidence that not knowing the sociolinguistic rules of the language being used may cause pragmatic failure. This in turn may cause miscommunication or communication breakdown.

The differences in sociolinguistic rules across cultures cause particular difficulty for second language learners. Even if the learner has developed the phonology, syntax, and semantics of the target language, serious miscommunication may occur if s/he hasn't acquired the knowledge of when to speak what to whom. Especially when

the learner has developed a certain level of linguistic competence in the target language, the native speakers of that language expect the learner to have also developed sociolinguistic competence. As a result, when learners make sociolinguistic errors, native speakers may not be as understanding as they are of linguistic errors.

Empirical studies which describe and compare the speech acts of various cultures are needed. These would increase our understanding of the norms of language use in other cultures and would help reduce instances of miscommunication which might occur in inter-cultural communication situations. Furthermore, the findings from these studies may also help materials developers and teachers of second languages to find effective ways to promote sociolinguistic competence in second language learners (Billmyer, Jakar & Lee, 1989; Billmyer, 1990b).

Research on Compliments

Definitions

Holmes defines a compliment as "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" (1988a:485). She also points out that even when a compliment appears to refer to a third person, it may well be indirectly complimenting the addressee. She provides this example:

> R's old school friend is visiting and comments on one of the children's manners.
> C(omplimenter): What a polite child!
> R(ecipient): Thank you. We do our best.

Since the utterance indirectly attributes credit to the addressee for good parenting, it can be interpreted as paying a compliment to the addressee (Holmes, 1988a:486).

Linguistic Patterns

In an empirical study of compliments of middle-class native speakers of American English, Manes and Wolfson showed that in American English, the syntax and lexicon of the great majority of compliments which had been uttered by various speakers in many different speech situations were remarkably similar. They found that three syntactic patterns accounted for almost all the data (1981:120-121):

NP is/looks (really) ADJ.	(e.g., "Your blouse is beautiful.")	(50%)
I (really) like/love NP.	(e.g., "I like your car.")	(16%)
PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP.	(.e.g., "That's a nice wall hanging.")	(14%)

Manes and Wolfson (1981) also found that compliments of American English fall into two major categories: the adjectival and the verbal. More than two-thirds of the adjectival compliments make use of only five adjectives: nice, good, beautiful, pretty, and great. When a verb is used, the verbs "like" and "love" occur most frequently.

Manes and Wolfson (1981) argue that the very restricted set of syntax and lexicon suggests that compliments in society are formulas like greetings, thankings, and apologies. They assert that since the interlocutors in such interactions may come from very different social backgrounds, it is important that the forms that are used be recognized across social groups. Thus, the fact that compliments are like formulas contributes to the interaction in that it helps accelerate the understanding of the interlocutors.

Functions

Wolfson maintains that the major function of a compliment is "to create or maintain solidarity between interlocutors" by expressing admiration or approval (1983:89). Holmes essentially agrees with this view by treating compliments as "positively affective speech acts directed to the addressee which serve to increase or consolidate the solidarity between the speaker and addressee" (1988a:486).

However, compliments have other functions too. Wolfson points out that they are used to reinforce desired behavior, for example in a classroom situation. They often serve to strengthen or to replace other speech acts such as apologies, thankings, and greetings. They are also frequently used to soften criticism. Thus, compliments may be followed by "but" or "though," and a criticism. Compliments are also used to open a conversation and they may even be used as sarcasm, e.g., "You play a good game of tennis--for a woman." (Wolfson, 1983:86-93).

Holmes also noted that compliments may function as face threatening acts. They may imply that the complimenter would like to possess something, whether an object or skill, belonging to the addressee (1988a:487).

Topics

Manes and Wolfson (1981) found that compliments fall into two major categories with respect to topic: those having to do with appearance, and those which comment on ability. Holmes' study (1988a) on New Zealand compliments supported this. She asserted that her data "demonstrates that the vast majority of compliments refer to just a few broad topics: appearance, ability, or a good performance, possessions, and some aspect of personality, or friendliness" (496). The first two accounted for 81.3% of her data.

Social Distribution

Manes and Wolfson (1981) found that the majority of compliments are given to people of the same age and equal status as the speaker. They also found that a great majority of compliments are given by the person in the higher position in interactions between status unequals. The compliments from higher to lower status interlocutors were found to be twice as likely to be on the subject of the addressee's ability than on appearance or possessions. But when the speaker was of lower status than the addressee, the topic of the compliment was most likely to be on appearance or possession.

In interactions among females and males, Manes and Wolfson (1981) found that women appear both to give and receive compliments much more frequently than do men, especially when compliments have to do with apparel and appearance. Holmes explains possible reasons for this finding. Since "compliments express social approval, one expects more of them to be addressed 'downwards' as socializing devices, or directed to the socially insecure to build their confidence. The fact that women receive more compliments reflects women's socially subordinate status in society" (Holmes, 1988b:5). Furthermore, she asserts that women give and receive compliments more often because compliments serve as expressions of solidarity among women. However, males may not consider compliments the most appropriate way of expressing solidarity; as a result, they may not make use of compliments as often as do women (Holmes, 1988b:5-6).

Compliment Responses

Pomerantz was the first researcher to study the topic of compliment response. She claimed that two general maxims of speech behavior conflict with each other when responding to a compliment (1978:81-82). These conflicting maxims are "agree with the speaker" and "avoid self-praise." Recipients of compliments use various

solutions to solve this conflict, such as praise *downgrade* and *return*. Thus, although prescriptive norms of American speech behavior state that the appropriate response to a compliment is to say, "Thank you," speakers will often downgrade the compliment or return it to the complimenter (Herbert, 1986a:77). However, as Holmes points out, Pomerantz' studies are not quantitative. Holmes argues that although Pomerantz provides many examples of different types of compliment exchanges, she doesn't give precise proportions of each type of response (1988a:495).

Herbert (1986a) provides a quantitative analysis of compliment responses in American English. He distinguishes various types of compliment responses within three categories (Table 1).

Table 1: Compliment Response Types (Herbert, 1986a:80)

Agreement	Appreciation Token
	Comment Acceptance
	Praise Upgrade
	Comment History
	Reassignment
	Return
Non-agreement	Scale Down
	Question
	Disagreement
	Qualification
	No Acknowledgment
Other Interpretation	Request Interpretation

He found that the prescriptive norm responses (*appreciation token* and *comment acceptance* account for only 36%. Almost as many responses fell into the *non-agreement* and *request interpretations* categories. The results clearly show that what people actually say may be very different from the prescriptive norms of language usage (1986b:80).

Similar findings are provided by Holmes (1988a). Holmes believes that "a compliment not only makes a positive assertion, it attributes credit to the addressee in relation to that assertion" (492). Based on this assumption, she develops three categories of compliment responses (Table 2).

Holmes found that the most common New Zealand compliment response type was *accept*, which accounts for 61% of the total responses, and the next most frequent

response type was *shift credit*, which accounts for 29% of the total responses. Only 10% accounted for overt rejection of compliments (1988a:496).

Table 2: Compliment Response Types (Holmes, 1988a:495)

Accept	Appreciation/agreement token
	Agreeing utterance
	Downgrading/qualifying utterance
	Return compliment
Reject	Disagreeing utterance
	Questions accuracy
	Challenge sincerity
Deflect/Evade	Shift credit
	Informative comment
	Ignore
	Legitimate evasion
	Request reassurance/repetition

However, Daikuhara's (1986) findings were quite different. She studied compliment interactions in Japanese and compared the findings with the work of Manes and Wolfson on compliment interactions in American English. Her findings show that there are differences in the aspects of linguistic patterning, praised attributes, order of frequency, functions and responses. The largest difference was found between Japanese and American English compliment responses. Ninety-five percent of all compliment responses fell into what Pomerantz (1965) called "self-praise avoidance," while only 5% fell into what she called "appreciation." The Japanese used various strategies to avoid self-praise. The most frequent responses were "No, no," or, "That's not true," which accounted for 35% of this category. The second most frequent response was a smile or no response at all, accounting for 27%. The third was, "You think so?" which accounted for 13%. These three responses constituted 72% of the total responses (Daikuhara, 1986:119-120).

Daikuhara states that a common function of giving compliments in Japanese is to show deference or respect, which seems to create a distance between the interlocutors. Therefore, the distance created by the person who compliments an interlocutor has to be denied by the recipient. This denial by the recipient serves to sustain harmony between the interlocutors and to emphasize their commonality (1986:127). In contrast, the main function of compliments in American English is to create and maintain solidarity and affirm common ground between interlocutors. This

may be the reason why the majority of compliment responses by Americans take the form of appreciation or agreement.

The Study

The purpose of the present study is to examine compliment responses of Korean females in English interactions and in Korean interactions. The following questions guided the research:

1. What are the major compliment responses of Korean females in Korean interactions?
2. What are the major compliment responses of Korean females in English interactions?
3. Is there evidence of pragmatic transfer from Korean to English?

Based on the research mentioned above (Godard, 1977; Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1985; Daikuhara, 1986; Eisenstein & Bodman, unpublished), it seems likely that Korean female speakers will respond differently when speaking Korean or English. Therefore, the hypothesis is that the compliment responses of Korean females will differ according to the language they are using, and that there will be evidence of pragmatic transfer.

Subjects

Ten Korean female students and eight American female students attending University of Pennsylvania participated in this study. In addition, two American females living in the area of the University of Pennsylvania participated. Of the students, 15 are graduate students and three are undergraduate students. Their ages range from 21 to 29. Status between the interlocutors can be considered to be equal. The Korean female participants in this study speak Korean as their first language, and they have spent at least a year in the U.S. Their English level is advanced enough to pursue their studies in the U.S. without any serious language problem. By using only female students, the influence of gender difference was not considered in the present study.

Data Collection

Fieldnotes and interviews were used to collect the compliment responses of the Korean participants in Korean interactions and in English interactions. Twenty tokens from each situation were considered. The tokens from Korean interactions were

translated into English as accurately as possible. Records of the interlocutors' ages and the contexts in which the interaction occurred were kept. Most interactions took place between status equals in informal contexts, such as in a cafeteria, restaurant, library, classroom, and at home.

After all the data had been collected, participants were interviewed about the responses in each situation. These answers were referred to when analyzing the findings.

Data Analysis

The response types were categorized based on Holmes' (1988a). The frequency of occurrence for each type was quantified, then the results of Korean interactions and those of English interactions were compared.

Findings

Sharp differences were found in the frequency of occurrence of response types used by Korean females in Korean interactions and in English interactions. In Korean interactions, the participants' most common response to compliments was to reject them, accounting for 45% of the total responses. The next most frequent response was to deflect or evade the compliment, accounting for 35% of the total responses. The least frequent response was to accept, accounting for 20% of the total responses. The frequency of occurrence for each response types is summarized in Table 3.

Among the subcategories of the *reject* category, *disagree* occurred most frequently, accounting for 35% of the total responses. This means that one out of three compliment responses of Korean females is likely to belong to the *disagree* type.

A is a 25 year-old Korean; B is a 24 year-old Korean. They are both female graduate students. The conversation took place at B's house.

A: Neo murry olinika yiepuda.
   (You look pretty with your hair up like that.)
B: Yiepugin. Nilgeoboiji.
   (No. I look like an old woman.)

Among the subcategories of the *deflect/evade* category *request reassurance/ repetition* occurred most frequently, accounting for 25% of the total responses.

A is a 24 year-old Korean; B is a 29 year-old Korean. They are both female graduate students. B was wearing a new dress.

A:Ku dress jungmal yiepuda. Neomu jal eouliuyo.
    (Your dress is so pretty. It looks very nice on you.)
B: Kureiyo?
    (Really?)

Table 3: Compliment Response Types According to Language Used

Types	Korean #	%	English #	%
Accept				
Appreciation			12	60
Agreement				
Downgrading	4	20	2	10
Return			1	5
Subtotal	4	20	15	75
Reject				
Disagree	7	35	3	15
Question Accuracy				
Challenge Sincerity	2	10	1	5
Subtotal	9	45	4	20
Deflect/Evade				
Shift Credit				
Informative Comment	1	5	1	5
Ignore				
Legitimate Evasion	1	5		
Request Reassurance/		25		
Repetition	5			
Subtotal	7	35	1	5

Among the subcategories of the *accept* category, only *downgrading* occurred, accounting for 20% of the total responses.

A and B are both 24 year-old Korean female graduate students. The conversation took place at the library.

A: Kongbu cham yiulshimie hashineiyo.
    (You study very hard.)
B: Chunun murryga napunikayo.
    (That's because I am not smart.)

Although there were a few instances of compliment responses belonging to the *accept* category, they were all in the form of *downgrading*, shown above. There were

no instances of appreciation or agreement, which are considered to be the prescriptive norm of Americans when responding to compliments (Herbert, 1986a:77).

In English, the most frequent response to compliments was to accept them, accounting for 75% of the total responses. The next most frequent response was to reject them, accounting for 20% of the total responses. Only one instance of deflection or evasion of compliments was found in the English data.

Among the subcategories of the *accept* category, the most frequent type was *appreciation*.

> A is an American female in her late twenties; B is a 25 year-old Korean female. They are both graduate students, and they are classmates. The conversation took place at school.
>
> A: I like your necklace. It's beautiful.
> B: Thanks.

This type accounts for 60% of the total responses. This is much higher than the 15.3% of the Holmes' studies on New Zealand compliment responses (1988a:495), and the 29.38% in Herbert's study on American compliment responses (1986a:80). This means that Korean females are much more likely to follow prescriptive norms of compliment responses of native English speakers when they are engaged in English interactions.

Among the subcategories of the *reject* category, *disagree* occurred most frequently.

> A is an American female in her mid-twenties; B is 24 year-old Korean female. They are both graduate students, and they are classmates. The conversation took place at the department office.
>
> A: Your English is so perfect. You don't make the mistakes that nonnative speakers usually make.
> B: No, it's not good enough.

These accounted for 15% of the total responses. This is a little higher than the 6.7% of New Zealand compliment responses in Holmes' (1988a) study, and the 9.8% of American compliment responses in Herbert's (1986a) study. The relatively high occurrence of *disagree* in my study may be due to a pragmatic transfer of Korean sociolinguistic rules to English speech behavior.

Discussion

As the results of the present study show, there is a very sharp difference in compliment responses of Korean females depending on the language they are using: Korean or English. When the subjects are participating in Korean interactions, they are most likely to disagree with compliments. Not one instance of *appreciation* was found in the Korean data. The subjects never uttered "Thanks" or "Thank you." Even if the compliments were accepted, all of the acceptances were in the form of a *downgrade*. However, in English interactions, the Korean participants were most likely to accept compliments with responses such as "Thanks" or "Thank you." Even when the participants intentions were to downgrade the compliment, they almost always added "Thanks" or "Thank you."

> A is an American female in her early twenties; B is a 24 year-old Korean female. They are both graduate students, and they are classmates. The conversation took place while they were going to class.
>
> A: Did you get a haircut?
> B: Yeah.
> A: I looks so cute.
> B: Thanks. But I think it's too short.

In this compliment interaction, B thanks A before starting to downgrade herself. This was categorized as a *downgrade* since that was the overall intent.

There was only one instance of *deflect* in my data; it was in the form of an informative comment. Even in this instance, the participant thanked the complimenter before making the comment.

> A is an American female working at a department office; B is a 24 year-old Korean female doing her graduate studies. The conversation took place at the department office.
>
> A: Can I see your ring? It's gorgeous!
> B: Thanks. It's my class ring.

In this interaction, B thanks A before commenting on the history of the ring. However, since the illocutionary force of the example was to evade the compliment by giving an informative comment, it was categorized as *informative comment.*

An interesting point is that "Really?" was uttered by the subjects in both Korean interactions and English interactions. While it was always accompanied by "Thank you" or "Thanks" in English interactions, it was used by itself in Korean interactions.

English interaction

A is an American female in her twenties; B is a 28 year-old Korean female. They are both graduate students, and they are classmates. The conversation took place at school.

A: I love your outfit.
B: Really? Thanks.

Korean interaction

A and B are both 24 year-old Korean females. They are both graduate students. The conversation took place when A and B were going to the library.

A: Neo murry punika yiepuda.
  (You look very pretty with your hair down.)
B: Jungmalyiya?
  (Really?)

The difference between the two interactions is that the addressee in the second example expects reassurance or repetition of the compliment, while the addressee in the first example doesn't expect either. It seems that "Really" was almost unconsciously uttered before accepting the compliment. Therefore, I categorized the response as *appreciation* in the first interaction, but as *request reassurance/repetition* in the second interaction.

Based on my interviews, I also found a few instances where the participants showed surprise at receiving compliments. These all occurred in English-speaking situations. When the participants didn't feel that their appearance was at its best but they received a compliment from an American, they were quite confounded. Even in these situations, they said, "Thanks" or "Thank you."

A is an American female in her late twenties; B is a 26 year-old Korean female. They are both graduate students, and they are classmates. The conversation took place at school.

A: You look so fashionable today.
B: (surprised) Oh, do I? Thank you.

A is an American female in her late twenties; B is a 24 year-old Korean female. They are both graduate students, and they are classmates. The conversation took place just before the class started.

A: Is that a new blouse?
B: Yeah.
A: That looks so nice on you.
B: (surprised) Oh, you think so? Thanks.

The only sign of pragmatic transfer in my data occurred in the *disagree* response type. This was used much more frequently than by New Zealanders in Holmes' study (1988a) or by Americans in Herbert's study (1986a). However, use of this response type didn't cause any noticeable miscommunication. This is probably because the *disagree* response type is not uncommon among Americans: Herbert's study on American compliment responses shows that disagreeing accounts for 9.98% of the total responses.

In terms of other categories, there was a noticeable lack of pragmatic transfer. The Koreans are likely to reject or deflect compliments in order to avoid self-praise in Korean interactions. When receiving a compliment, a Korean would rather put herself down than accept the compliment. Then why did the Korean participants accept compliments in English interactions? I interviewed the participants and found three possible reasons.

First, the lack of pragmatic transfer may be due to the fact that the participants have acquired the norms of the speech community in which they are residing. They have been in the United States at least one year, and they are constantly interacting with Americans in and out of class. This may have resulted in the acquisition of the sociolinguistic rules of the host culture.

Second, the participants may have been influenced by the textbooks that they used when they were learning English in Korea. Almost all English text books used in Korean schools prescribe "Thank you" as the only correct way to respond to a compliment.

Third, Korean participants' stereotypes of Americans may have influenced their interactions. According to interview data, the participants feel that Americans are direct and frank. The Korean participants believed that Americans always accept compliments upon receiving them, although actual studies found that Americans deflect or evade compliments as much as they accept them (Herbert, 1986a). The Korean participants also believe that the most appropriate way to interact with Americans is to behave like them. Therefore, the Korean participants almost always accepted the compliments they received from Americans.

Conclusion

Korean females are most likely to accept compliments in English interactions and reject or deflect compliments in Korean interactions. The only sign of pragmatic

transfer was found in the *disagree* type in the *reject* category. However, this didn't lead to miscommunication.

Due to the limited amount of data and range of participants, generalizing to all Koreans in English interactions would be inappropriate. Furthermore, the scope of the present study is very narrow. A more extensive study which includes forms, functions, and topics of compliments of Koreans, their frequency of occurrence, and gender differences reflected in compliment interaction would be useful.

Compliment responses may be problematic for learners of English as a second language. The participants in this study used "Thanks" or "Thank you" when responding to compliments in English. This response may be appropriate, but studies show that an unadorned "thanks" may unintentionally limit or even end an interaction between status equals, and deflecting compliments may serve to extend the interaction between interlocutors, which may lead to interlanguage development (Billmyer, Jakar, & Lee, 1989:17). Instructing second language learners to say only "Thank you" when receiving a compliment is not sufficient. A textbook or a teacher should also offer some strategies that may help learners engage in more elaborate interactions with the native speakers of the target language (Billmyer, 1990a).

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