A contrastive study of compliment responses among Australian English and Iranian Persian speakers

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Abstract

This study aims at conducting a contrastive study of compliment responses (CR) among Australian English and Iranian Persian speakers within the framework proposed by Chen-Hsin Tang and Grace Qiao Zhang (2009). The data of the study was collected by giving a series of written discourse completion tasks which contained four situational settings (appearance, character, ability, and possession) to a group of Iranian university students. Then, it was analyzed using Holmes' (1988, 1993) classification of compliment responses. The findings of this study were compared with the results of the study carried out by Tang & Zhang (2009).

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1. Introduction

As Searle (1969) claims “the reason for concentrating on the study of speech acts is simply this: all linguistic communication involves linguistic acts. In order to have successful communication, the interlocutors not only should be linguistically but also sociolinguistic ally and pragmatically competent”. Holmes (1986, p.446) defines compliment response as “a speech act that explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some “good” (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) “which has a positive value both for the speaker and the hearer.

Compliment responses can be considered as one type of speech acts worth studying because they can perform different functions. Sometimes using an appropriate compliment and response can help the
communication to be successful. On the other hand, giving a compliment or response without being aware of the community's cultural conventions and compliment norms can be threatening. For example in Iranian culture, taking a compliment on appearance from a socially distant man, will make a woman uncomfortable or may be considered as an insult. So, whether a compliment is to be considered as positive or negative speech act depends on a number of factors like context, cultural protocols and individual interpretation (Tang & Zhang, 2009).

Studying compliment responses across different cultures has shown that there is no universal model using this type of speech act. Golato (2002) compared German and American compliment responses. She concluded that “while rejections and turns containing certain agreement and disagreement features are constructed similarly in German and American English, it is in agreement sequences that the two languages differ. It is suggested that in such sequences, cross-cultural communication can become problematic” (p.547).

Al Falasi (2007) investigated how female Arab learners of English produce target-like compliment responses in English. She also wanted to know if there is any pragmatic transfer in their communication. In her studies, she concluded that female Arab learners didn't produce target-like compliment responses. They unconsciously produced some L1 expressions and strategies which might result in communicative breakdown.

Researchers have presented different frameworks of CR classification. As stated by Tran (2007) it can be said that the classic frameworks of CR categorization are those suggested by Pomerantz (1978) and Herbert (1989). After that, Holmes (1989, 1993) classified the CR strategies into three main acts: Accept, Reject, and Deflect/Evade; each strategy has some subdivided strategies (see Table 1 below for details). This study adopts Holmes' (1989) taxonomy of CRs as shown in Table 1 below. The purpose of this study is to investigate the similarities and differences among Australian English speakers and Iranian Persian speakers using CRs.

2. Methodology

2.1. Data collection device

This study was conducted in a foreign setting and English natives were not accessible, so, the data related to English native speakers was adopted from the previous findings conducted by (Tang & Zhang, 2009), so, in order for the findings to be comparable, the same data collection instrument which was a discourse completion test (DCT) was used. The DCT was a Persian version of an English DCT devised by (Tang & Zhang, 2009) which included four situations. The participants were required to imagine themselves in the situations and respond as they would say in their natural conversations. The topics of situations were: appearance, character, ability and possession (see the appendix).

2.2. The participants

A total of 56 participants contributed to this study, 26 Iranian Persian speakers and 30 Australian English native speakers (The English data had been gathered by Tang & Zhang, 2009). All participants were university students. There were 28 male and 28 female participants, so the gender factor was controlled. They were aged from 18 to 35. The DCTs were completed individually. It took about 10 minutes to complete the DCTs. A total of 102 Persian and 218 Australian responses were collected.
Table 1. Holmes' CR categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Macro level CRs</th>
<th>Micro level CRs</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accept</td>
<td>Appreciation token</td>
<td>“Thank you”; “Cheers”; “Yes”;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agreeing utterance</td>
<td>“Yes, I really like it”; “I know”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Downgrading</td>
<td>“It's nothing”;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Utterance</td>
<td>“I enjoyed doing it”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Return compliment</td>
<td>“It's not bad”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“You've got beautiful too”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reject</td>
<td>Disagreeing utterance</td>
<td>“No, it was not good”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Question accuracy</td>
<td>“Really?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenge sincerity</td>
<td>“Don't lie”; “come on”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evade</td>
<td>Shift credit</td>
<td>“You're polite”; That's what friend are for”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Informative comment</td>
<td>“It was not hard”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Request reassurance</td>
<td>“Really?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3. Data analysis

The Holmes’ (1988, 1993) taxonomy of CR strategies was used to make a contrastive analysis of CRs among Iranian Persian and Australian English speakers. She has proposed three macro strategies and ten micro-strategies as it is shown in Table 1. Her proposed macro strategies were considered in this study. The English and Persian classified data were compared using line graphs.

3. Results

Fig.1 below shows the patterns of Persian and English use of CR strategies at macro levels. It shows that both Iranian and Australian people prefer to use the CR strategies in this order: Accept, Evade and Reject. In regard to Accept strategy, Iranian Persian speakers use this strategy less than their Australian counterparts, while they prefer to use Reject and Evade strategies more than them.
3.1. CRs for appearance

According to findings at macro level pattern in the appearance situation, for Persian speakers the preference is in the order of Accept, Evade and Reject (Fig. 2). But, in English culture, the order of preference is: Accept, Reject and Evade (See Tang & Zhang, 2009).

3.2. CRs for character

In setting of character compliment (Fig.2), the order of preference for Persian speakers is Evade, Reject and Accept strategies. In Australian English culture, as Tang & Zhang (2009) investigated, the order was Accept, Evade, and Reject strategies.

3.3. CRs for ability

As it is shown in Fig.2, in compliment on ability, the most frequently used CRs for Persian speakers are Accept strategies, followed by Reject and Evade macro strategies. In this case, Australian English speakers prefer the same order in using CR strategies (see Tang & Zhang, 2009, Fig.6. for details).

3.4. CRs for possession

Moreover, Fig.2 shows that Iranian Persian speakers prefer to use Evade strategy, followed by Reject and Accept strategies when they take compliment on their possessions. It shows that Persian speakers use the same pattern of order in both character and possession settings. English speakers prefer to use CRs for possession in this order: Accept, Evade and Reject (see Tang & Zhang, 2009, Fig.8 for details).

Fig.2. the Iranian macro pattern of CRs in four situations

4. Discussion

As shown in Figure 1, the general preference for both Iranian and Australian groups is to follow the order of Accept, Evade and Reject strategies. This figure also shows that Australian English speakers
prefer to accept compliments they take more than Iranian Persian speakers. It shows that in Iranian culture accepting compliments is not considered as polite as in Australian culture.

In contrastive analysis of CRs in four situations, it seems that in appearance situation, Iranians’ preference is accepting the compliments (Fig.2) which is similar between them and their Australian counterparts. In character compliment setting, Iranian group prefer to use Evade strategy, their least preference is accepting the compliment while Australian group preferred to accept the compliment.

In ability and possession settings, most Iranian Persian speakers accept the compliments. In this case the two groups followed the same pattern, so they have similar perceptions regarding compliments on ability and possession.

Although it's not the focus of the research, comparing the findings of this study with the results of the study conducted by Tang and Zhang (2009), indicates that there is a great similarity in using CR strategies between Iranian Persian and Mandarin Chinese speakers. It may suggest that they follow the same norm of politeness in responding compliments.

5. Conclusions and Implications

The findings of this study like other previous studies support the hypothesis that there is no universal model in regard to the use of compliment responses (CRs) among communities. Although not so significant, there were some differences in regard to using CRs among English and Persian speakers. The results showed that Iranian Persian speakers use fewer Accept strategies and more Reject and Evade strategies than their Australian counterparts. It is hoped that clarifying such differences between two cultures, help two groups' communication to be more successful.

“It is widely acknowledged that teaching and learning languages involves far more than targeting surface grammatical or lexical systems” (Grossi, 2009, see the abstract). So, it is obvious that teaching cultural differences should be considered as an important goal in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

In designing curriculums and textbooks for English learners, not only teaching language but also culture should be taken into account. Syllabus designers should consider learner's needs considering the understanding and production of speech acts they are likely to come across (Al Falasi, 2007). As Grossi (2009) suggests “[presenting] naturally occurring oral examples of compliments and compliment responses by speakers of different ages, and types of relationships were collected in different settings, including the workplace and the home” can be helpful (see the abstract). Using authentic materials including compliments and compliment responses in classrooms would also help the learners to be made aware of native speakers' pattern of use in different settings.

This small scale research of compliment responses may not extend its generalizability beyond this study; therefore, further investigations are needed. Besides, since the research data was collected using DCTs, replication of this study using naturally occurring data may reveal more reliable findings. Moreover, other social variables such as social class, educational background as well as contextual factors such as social distance and status may be attended.
Table 2. Overall distribution of CRs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Macro CRs</th>
<th>Australian</th>
<th>Persian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accept</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reject</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evade</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


