

Cross-Cultural and Intercultural Variations in Compliment Behavior

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Introduction

Between any given set of communities, use of social language may vary considerably. Social language may also vary in context depending on setting as well. Particularly, social language in the form of speech acts that consist of compliments and compliment responses also tend to vary, especially when approached individually. The work of Robert Herbert (Herbert, p. 4, 1989) calls attention to the diversity of speech acts and why it is important for researchers to specify the community from which identified speech acts originate. Using isolated speech acts without identifying the communities from which they originate poses a potential issue of a loss of coherence concerning context and relevance. Herbert maintains the field of sociolinguistics needs more research that uses specific methodologies, which can be used to contrast various specified communities. Building robust sources of literature pertaining to the contrasting of speech communities will help sociolinguists identify patterns and reduce speech generalizations.

The 1989 research conducted by Herbert contrasting compliments and compliment responses between students at a United States university and a South African university served to contribute to the body of literature that he hoped would be built upon. In his contrastive analysis between the two universities, Herbert was able to identify certain differing social strategies. For instance, non-agreement responses were used much more in the United States university when compared with the South African university. Considering the reality that the two universities contained speech communities that were located on two separate continents in separate nations, it seems logical that there would be a gulf of differences in their speech acts even though English was spoken in both communities. Expanding on the research done by Herbert, it seems that similar research conducted between two universities located in the same nation and proximally closer to each other would produce a smaller number of differences due to a greater likelihood of

cultural uniformity. The key aspect in this hypothesis is the nature of linguistic differences seen between speech communities sharing the same language based on proximity to each other.

Speech communities that are geographically further away from each other will produce greater linguistic variation than speech communities that are geographically closer.

Review of Background Literature

The contrast between the university in the United States and the one in South Africa shows how, cross-culturally, compliments and compliment responses can have overtly marked differences (Herbert, 1989). This results because although the average individual physically shares the same set of linguistic resources as the next individual, in the context of culture, speech communities use those resources in varying ways (Riley, p. 93, 2007). Nessa Wolfson mirrors this assumption that speech acts differ, when examined in cross-cultural research, “not only in the way they are realized but also in their distribution, their frequency of occurrence, and in the functions they serve” (Wolfson, p. 123, 1981). Factors that can contribute to the differing uses and functions of compliments and compliment responses cross-culturally may be the result of divides in geographic locations, socioeconomic distribution, and cultural values.

Herbert and Wolfson are not the only researchers who recognize complimenting behavior variation cross-culturally with regard to cultural values. Sociolinguistic research conducted by Janet Holmes in New Zealand on compliments and compliment responses also supports the assumption that the prevalence of cross-cultural variation is due in part to differing cultural values. The discussion on compliment behavior in New Zealand when contrasted with other cultures notes that cultural differences can exhibit a complex array of differences such as “appropriate frequency of compliments, the recognition of utterances which count as compliments, the cultural values assumed by compliments, and knowing when and who to

compliment, and on what topics” (Holmes, p. 502, 1986). The complexity of cultural values seen between speech communities, especially ones separated by large distances, shows why compliment and compliment response data exhibits marked variations cross-culturally.

Contrasting speech communities within a single culture may show more similarities between two communities than that of communities contrasted cross-culturally. Within the context of a singular culture, Wolfson suggests that in American English, compliments manifest from a small repertoire focused primarily on personal appearance, skill, and possessions. Herbert notes that Wolfson’s observations are “functional interpretations of language behavior” and are becoming a normative sociolinguistic research focus (Herbert, p. 76, 1986). As such, compliments and compliment responses serve particular functions that in part contribute to identity construction and social solidarity. Self-identity construction also is dependent on how a culture broadly defines the self. In an individualistic culture such as American culture, the self is seen as a distinct separate entity from other individuals and therefore utilizes and responds to compliments differently than an individual would who is from a collectivistic culture (Siy & Cheryan, p. 88, 2013). This overarching characteristic of American culture likely contributes to linguistic similarities between speech communities, especially ones that are closer in proximity and maintain similar identities such as between universities, religious institutions, and business corporations.

Methodology

In order to determine the accuracy of the hypothesis of this research project, the methods used to approach this subject closely mimicked those used by Herbert where possible in his contrast between the universities in the United States and South Africa. The purpose of the methods is to confirm suspected broad similarities in compliment responses used by students

between universities strictly within the United States as contrasted with the differences seen in the cross-cultural research done by Herbert. Two American universities were compared and contrasted for the present analysis; the data from State University of New York at Binghamton (SUNY) in Herbert's 1989 research were used and juxtaposed with data collected in 2014 from students attending Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI).

The IUPUI data used for analysis was collected by 22 students participating in a sociolinguistics course assignment. The purpose of the assignment was to use rapid anonymous observation to gather data pertaining to compliments and compliment responses in various settings over the course of a few weeks. Because the focus of the hypothesis for this research required the narrow setting of the IUPUI campus and interactions between students, data failing to meet the criteria were omitted. Like Herbert's data, the compiled IUPUI data made use of all interactions between genders including M-M, F-M, M-F, and F-F. Additionally, no distinctions were made between socioeconomic class, ethnicity, or age.

Once the data from the 22 sources was refined to meet the necessary criteria, each interaction between two students was divided into the full range of categories that Herbert used. The two broad categories of compliment responses are agreements and non-agreements. Within these two categories are separate sub-categories.

Agreements were divided using Herbert's sub-categories: Appreciation Token, Comment Acceptance, Praise Upgrade, Comment History, Reassignment, and Return.

1. Appreciative Tokens acknowledge the stated compliment and are considered "text book" responses such as *Thanks*, smiles, and nods.
2. Comment Acceptances semantically conform to the stated compliment.
3. Praise Upgrades inflate the stated compliment and may have playful intentions.

4. Comment Histories elaborate on the past of the subject in the stated compliment.
5. Reassignments transfer or redirect the praise of stated compliment to another source or sources.
6. Returns reciprocate the stated complement by providing a similar compliment

Non-Agreements were divided into the sub-categories: Scale Down, Disagreement, Qualification, Question, and No Acknowledgement.

1. Scale Downs “minimize the force of the compliment” (Herbert, p. 15, 1989).
2. Disagreements deny any relevance of the stated compliment.
3. Qualifications only partially accept the content of the stated compliment.
4. Questions typically inquire about the motivations behind a compliment or request clarifications.
5. No Acknowledgements either involve no response to a stated compliment or a response that does not relate at all to the stated compliment.

Once each of the sets of data was divided into the above sub-categories, percentages were calculated to reflect the frequency of each occurrence. Each student from the sociolinguistics course whose set of data was used was given credit in the raw data (see appendices). An effort to note the situational context within the IUPUI campus was also made. Finally, the percentages from the IUPUI data were examined side-by-side with the percentages from the SUNY data and the data from the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg (UWJ), South Africa in order to determine the accuracy of the research hypothesis.

Analysis

Ultimately, the result of the analysis between the data from IUPUI and SUNY seems to support the research hypothesis. From the 22 sets of data submitted by the sociolinguistics

students, 80 instances of compliments and compliment responses occurred that fit the criteria for this research, which were then used for the final compiled data set. These 80 exchanges, once categorized and put in percentages, were finally placed side-by-side with the percentages from the 1062 exchanges of Herbert's data. As expected, the differences between the two United States universities were not nearly as marked as the differences seen in Herbert's research that contrasted SUNY with UWJ. For instance, between IUPUI and SUNY, the occurrence of *appreciation token* was most commonly used at 32.5% and 29.38% respectively. Use of *appreciation token* in UWJ, however was the second most commonly used at 32.86% (Herbert, p. 20, 1989). Overall, the differences in percentages between both IUPUI and SUNY across each of the categories were mostly small when compared with the differences seen between SUNY and UWJ.

Percentages that were closer between IUPUI and SUNY than that of SUNY and UWJ were *return*, *appreciation token*, *comment acceptance*, and *comment history*. These similarities and differences can be seen in the frequency of distribution (see appendices). The largest percentage difference seen in the data was that of *comment acceptance*. Between IUPUI and SUNY comment acceptance had a 7.5% difference. *Comment acceptance* between SUNY and UWJ had a much larger 36.5% difference. Another stark difference was the 8% difference in *comment history* usage between IUPUI and SUNY whereas there was a larger 14.5% difference between SUNY and UWJ. As noted in the review of literature, possible reasons for the large differences in compliment responses between SUNY and UWJ could be related to differing cross-cultural values between the two speech communities.

The overall similarities between the percentages of IUPUI and SUNY do seem to support on the surface the hypothesis that the types of compliments and compliment responses seen

between universities in closer proximity would bear a closer resemblance to each other than a comparison of two universities that are located on different continents and in different nations. This conclusion is not as simple as it appears though. Many factors need to be accounted for before this theory can be verified.

Indeed, the geographic proximity of IUPUI to SUNY is likely of some importance. Although both are located in the United States and therefore closer in geographic, linguistic, and social relationship than, for example, to South Africa, far more important may be the fact the data is not chronologically proximal. The data used from Herbert's research was gathered in the early 1980s whereas the data from IUPUI was collected during 2014. That is a 30-year gap between the two sets of data. During this 30-year gap, American college culture has likely changed to some degree in terms of linguistic characteristics relating to compliments and compliment responses. Therefore, the comparisons between the two universities likely should have been adjusted to account for these linguistic differences. Another factor related to time that was not accounted for was the quantity of data collected in each university. In the case of SUNY, the data was collected over a three-year period. The IUPUI data was collected over three weeks. Because of the difference in length of time allowed for data collection, the SUNY study collected over thirteen times more data than IUPUI. Both factors, chronological proximity of the two studies and the significant difference in the amount of data collected, could potentially cause the results of this analysis to have been compromised.

Examining further gaps in quantity as factor that likely affected the reliability of this research, the data gathered from the IUPUI sociolinguistics students did not strictly focus on occurrences of compliments and compliment responses on the IUPUI campus. Instead, the data ranged from a diverse variety of locations other than at IUPUI such as workplace exchanges,

retail exchanges, and exchanges at residences. Thus, out of the approximately 550 data sets submitted, only 80 sets were usable for this research project. The data Herbert used for the SUNY comparison included over 1,000 sets, over 13 times the amount of data gathered from IUPUI. Because Herbert had a larger pool of data to refer to, his conclusions were likely more representative of the exchange percentages than that of the data from IUPUI.

Although the limitations of the IUPUI data are indeed worth noting, this should not take away from the assumptions stated in the hypothesis. A comparison of the two data sets from IUPUI and SUNY, two universities proximately close to each other, indicate that certain categories of compliments and compliment responses such as appreciation token and comment history are employed with similar distribution when contrasted with the data from South Africa, a university proximately further away. The evidence suggests speech communities that are closer geographically to each other are likely to utilize similar forms of compliments and compliment responses.

Conclusions

In Herbert's contrastive study, he claims that his data demonstrates the diversity between speech communities using similar linguistic resources. In Herbert's case, both speech communities used English as their linguistic resource. Despite both using English to communicate, each speech community in the data provided by Herbert employed compliments and compliment responses in starkly differing ways. While Herbert's analysis is revealing on many levels, there is little discussion about the gap in geographic locales between the United States and South Africa.

The analysis in this research project attempts to explain at least one reason why Herbert found large differences between SUNY and South Africa. Linguistic differences between speech

communities tend to become more pronounced the further away they are from each other relative to proximal location. Speech communities that are proximately closer such as IUPUI and SUNY tend to employ compliments and compliment responses with similar distribution. Although the methodology and available data for this project indeed neglects necessary attributes such as a gap in time between Herbert's research and this research, the available data provides the hypothesis with evidence to support its claim. More evidence is certainly warranted; however, speech communities that are geographically closer to each other will likely employ similar forms of compliments and compliment responses when compared with speech communities that are geographically further apart.

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Appendices

See attached

Frequency of Distribution (IUPUI)

Complement Response	# of Occurences	% CR Total
AGREEMENT		
Appreciation (Token)	26	32.5
Comment Acceptance	9	11.25
Praise Upgrade	2	2.5
Comment History	9	11.25
Return	3	3.75
Reassignment	6	7.5
NONAGREEMENT		
Scale Down	7	8.75
Disagreement	5	6.25
Qualification	2	2.5
Question	1	1.25
No Acknowledgement	10	12.5
Request Interpretation	0	0
TOTALS	80	100

Compliment Response Raw Data

Compliment Response	Interactions - Compliment (C) and Compliment Response (CR)	Context	Data Origin (Collector/Origin)
AGREEMENT			
Agreement (Token)			TOTAL: 26
F-F (20s)	C: Seriously the coolest shirt ever. CR: Haha thanks!	school hallway	KD/4
M-M	C: Hey, your shirt, plaid looks good on you. CR: Ah, thanks	Prior classmates in Student Center	HW/7
M-M (20s)	C: Dude, tight socks. CR: Thanks.	school cafe	KD/6
M-M (20s)	C: Nice shirt. CR: Haha, thanks.	school elevator	KD/11
F (20s)-M (30s)	C: Your accent is awesome! CR: Thanks? I guess.	school hallway	KD/22
M-M (20s)	C: Heeeeey dem Nikes dore. CR: Ooooh.	School stairs	KD/23
M-F	C: Thanks for remind me to this little hangout thing. That was nice of you. CR: Yup.	Campus Center	KA/3
F-F (20s)	C: Sarah, you look beautiful today. CR: Aww, thank you.	College campus	SD/4
F-F (20s)	C: Sarah, I really like your shirt. CR: Thanks.	College campus	SD/5
F-F (20s)	C: I love your nails. CR: Thank you!	classroom	SD/8
F-F (20s)	C: I like your shirt. CR: Ah... thanks!	Campus Center	SD/9
F-F (20s)	C: I really like your shorts. They're really cute! CR: Oh, thank you!	Campus Center	SD/18
F-F (20s)	C: Hey girl, that's a good one you came up with! CR: (smiles)	classroom	KA/22
F-F (20s)	C: Hey I like your skirt...or maybe it's a dress... whatever it is, I like it! CR: Yeah, it's a skirt, and thank you.	somewhere on campus	VA/21
F-F	C: Oh my gosh you have such pretty handwriting! CR: Thanks but don't look at my text.	Classmates in classroom	KA/19
F-F (20s)	C: Did you dye your hair? It looks super cute. CR: Oh my god thank you.	somewhere on campus	DF/1
F-F (20s)	C: Cute shoes CR: Thanks.	school hallway	LD/16
M-F (20s)	C: That's very good. CR: Thanks.	Cavanaugh Hall	SD/17
F-F (20s)	C: Hey, nice drawing. CR: Ah, thank you.	somewhere on campus	SD/5
F-M (20s)	C: Your pants are amazing! CR: Thanks you!	somewhere on campus	SD/16
M-F (20s)	C: You had good use of narrative in your essay. CR: Oh, thanks.	classroom	HW/10
F-F (20s)	C: Nice shirt! CR: Thanks.	Cavanaugh Hall	SD/5
F-F (20s)	C: Hey, you look great! I love your new outfit! CR: Thanks hon.	somewhere on campus	SD/6
M-F (20s)	C: Hey I like that design. CR: Thank you!	Campus Center	SD/17
F-F (20s)	C: I love that ring! CR: Thanks!	Campus Center	SD/18
F-M (20s)	C: That was good! See, no need to worry. CR: Heh. Thanks.	Classmates in classroom	DF/8
Comment Acceptance			TOTAL: 9
M (20')-M (28)	C: For the last few days I noticed that you lent Jessica your book. That is a good thing you did. CR: Yea, I try. Thanks, man.	Classmates in classroom	AW/5
F-F (20s)	C: Oh my gosh that is so cute! CR: Ha, I know right?	School hallway	KD/3
M-M (20s)	C: Thanks! CR: I know!	Pointing out student's hair in hallway	KD/9
F-F (20s)	C: It's so sparkly! CR: I know!	comment on a ring in school hallway	SD/24
F-F (20s)	C: Is that scarf connected to your shirt? It's really cool, I like it. CR: Thanks, no it's not connected.	School event	SD/2
F-F	C: But you're so nice and smart and pretty! CR: I know.	somewhere on campus	SD/1
F-F (20s)	C: This is perfect thank you! CR: No problem glad you like it.	Campus Center Starbucks	DF/12
F-F (20s)	C: Your hair is really pretty. Is it natural? CR: Yeah, it is. Thanks.	somewhere on campus	SD/25
M-M (20s)	C: I think you have a strong paper. Lots of good points. CR: Thanks, I tried.	Cavanaugh Hall classroom	SD/13
Praise Upgrade			TOTAL: 2
F-F (20s)	C: Where did you get those adorable looks? CR: Kohls I'm obsessed!	School cafe	KD/5
F-F	C: You are soo good at gift giving! CR: I know, I pride myself on it.	somewhere on campus	KA/22
Comment History			TOTAL: 9
M-F (20s)	C: Hey I like your necklace! CR: Thanks, my boyfriend got it for me.	School hallway	KD/1
F-F (20s)	C: I love your hair! CR: Thanks! I just got it cut!	somewhere on campus	KD/7
M-F (20s)	C: I really like that! CR: Thanks! I worked hard on it!	School study table	KD/19
M-F (20s)	C: Hey that's an awesome tat. CR: Oh thank you! I go to a place back home in Greencastle.	Classroom	VA/9
F-F (20s)	C: Oh, your nails are cute. CR: I did them myself!	University bus	VA/16
F-F (20s)	C: I almost bought the dress you're wearing... you have good taste in fashion! CR: Yea I love this dress. Definitely worth the money I dropped on it.	somewhere on campus	VA/22
F-F (20s)	C: I love the style of things you're wearing. CR: Yea! I got them at Urban.	Outside a classroom	DF/1
F-F (20s)	C: Oh, my god, that's a cute top. CR: Thanks, it's from Forever 21.	Campus Center	SD/3
F-F (20s)	C: I like your boots. Where did you get them?	Campus Center	HW/4
Reveal			TOTAL: 3
F-F (20s)	C: Cute scarf! CR: Your's too!	School hallway	KD/2
F-F (20s)	C: Glad I got to spend time with you. CR: I'm glad I got to hang out with you too and meet your brother.	somewhere on campus	SD/6
M-M (20s)	C: It was great to meet you! CR: It was great to meet you too!	somewhere on campus	SD/7
Reassignment			TOTAL: 6
F-F	C: Your collarbone looks good in that picture. CR: Only a true Tumblr fan would know the significance of that.	at the Ragatta	KA/4
M-M (20s)	C: Hey, we couldn't have done this without you. CR: We all helped though.	Football game	SD/7
F-F (20s)	C: You look really pretty! CR: Thanks! You do too!	Classroom	SD/3
M-F (20s)	C: Well, you look nice today. CR: Yea, I have a presentation in my class.	Cavanaugh Hall classroom	HW/9
F-F (20s)	C: I like your shirt. It's cute! CR: Thanks! It's my brother's.	Cavanaugh Hall	SD/7
F-F (20s)	C: This cake is tasty. CR: It's my mother's recipe, happy birthday!	Cavanaugh Hall	HW/15
NONAGREEMENT			
Scale Down			TOTAL: 7
F-F (20s)	C: Why are you so freakin pretty??? CR: I meanns, I try.	School hallway table	KD/10
F-F (20s)	C: I think you should study at Harvard. CR: Maybe.	school campus	SD/22
F-F (20s)	C: Hey you look cute today! CR: Oh, thanks, I actually tried somewhat today.	Campus library	VA/2
M-F (20s)	C: You're smart enough, double majoring won't be hard for you. CR: Yeah I guess but I still get nervous about it.	Outside Nursing Building	VA/20
F-F	C: A cheerleader and you have curly hair? I want to be you! CR: Oh, it's not that great.	somewhere on campus	KA/12
M-F (20s)	C: Yea nice job, this really made well. CR: Thanks, I still have a lot to do on it's though.	classroom	SD/15
F-M (20s)	C: I think you did well with your paper. CR: I don't know, I think the criticism was valid.	classroom	SD/1
Disagreement			TOTAL: 5
F-M	C: You need to be a motivational speaker! CR: (The student just looks down and smiles, as if he doesn't believe her.)	classroom	SD/16
M-F (20s)	C: You look better with your natural hair color anyways. Don't tan, it's unhealthy. CR: (Rolls eyes)	school campus	VA/6
M-F	C: Wow you're a really good drawer. CR: This? Hal? This is nothing.	classroom	KD/22
F-F (20s)	C: You're really pretty though. CR: No, I'm not.	library	SD/16
F-F (20s)	C: I wish I had curly hair like yours. CR: No you don't.	Campus Center	SD/13
Qualification			TOTAL: 2
M-F (20s)	C: I've told you before that you look better without makeup on. CR: Thank you, but this is sort of normal.	somewhere on campus	ES/6
F-M (20s)	C: I think you did a good job though. CR: I hope they think so.	Campus Center	SD/19
Question			TOTAL: 1
F-M (20s)	C: Nice hair. CR: Really, or are you just making fun of me?	Cavanaugh Hall	SD/4
No Acknowledgement			TOTAL: 10
M-F (20s)	C: Why are eyes so tan? CR: Haha, I don't know.	School hallway	KD/21
M-M (20s)	C: I actually think your opening paragraph isn't this up well. CR: Okay.	college campus	SD/11
F-F (20s)	C: You're like my spirit animal! CR: (Laughter)	classroom	SD/15
F-F (20s)	C: Oh that's a good line, I need to use that! CR: (No response)	Campus Center Starbucks	SD/20
F-F (20s)	C: Even I can't go past 10! CR: (No response)	Campus Center Starbucks	SD/21
F-F (20s)	C: I like your eyeshadow, do you do them yourself? CR: (answers yes)	School campus	VA/18
M-F	C: Hey sexy! You're looking extra fine today! CR: Go away!	Nursing Building	HW/18
M-M (20s)	C: You seem less fat than usual. CR: And you seem less like an asshole.	Commons area	ES/4
F-F (20s)	C: You got a haircut? It looks good. CR: Yeah.	classroom	SD/9
M-M (20s)	C: Hah! That's very impressive! CR: (no response)	classroom	SD/7
TOTALS			80