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Title:

**A Cross-Linguistic Study of the Speech Act of Compliment:
The Case of Iranian EFL Learners**

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To My Parents,

For Their Unyielding Love

And

Endless Support

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List of Abbreviations

DCT	Discourse Completion Task
L1	First language
L2	Second language
IL	Interlanguage
ILP	Interlanguage Pragmatics
NS	Native Speaker
NNS	Non-native Speaker
EFL	English as Foreign Language
ESL	English as Second Language
H	Other (addressee)
S	Self (speaker)
P	Relative Power
D	Social Distance
R	Social Imposition

Table of Phonetic Transliterations

Symbol	Example	Symbol	Example	Symbol	Example
aa	<u>a</u> rm	k	<u>K</u> ill	v	<u>v</u> oice
a	h <u>a</u> t	l	<u>L</u> and	y	<u>y</u> ard
b	<u>b</u> ad	m	<u>m</u> oon	z	<u>Z</u> oo
d	<u>d</u> oor	n	<u>n</u> oon	ch	<u>ch</u> ange
e	t <u>e</u> n	o	<u>O</u> r	gh	<u>gh</u> abul
f	<u>f</u> oot	p	<u>P</u> en	kh	<u>kh</u> ub
g	<u>g</u> ood	r	<u>R</u> ed	sh	<u>sh</u> oe
h	<u>h</u> ouse	s	<u>S</u> o	zh	<u>zh</u> ion
i	sh <u>ee</u> p	t	<u>T</u> ea		
j	<u>j</u> oke	u	<u>T</u> oo		

NOTE:

The Persian sporadic feature *tashdid* is represented by the repetition of the phoneme that receives it.

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Preliminaries

Successful communication has recently changed to the preset objective underlying any language teaching and learning endeavor. No matter how laborious, achievements have been assessed in terms of the ability to produce language appropriately and comprehend utterances in interactional situations. In other words, the earlier beliefs concerning syntactic, phonological and morphological instructions have been further accompanied by teaching the “rules of speaking” (Hymes, 1972) to improve the learners’ ability to sustain communication. This is, in turn, to result in development of pragmatic competence or knowledge of the pragmatic rules of language use.

According to Crystal (1985), pragmatics is “the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication” (p. 240). Any lack of necessary pragmatic knowledge would leave the EFL (English as Foreign Language) learners helpless, hence their resort to the patterns and norms of their native language. This sort of pragmatic transfer appears to be of more significance than formal properties of the languages such as rules of syntax and word order (Kasper, 1992).

Pragmatic transfer can lead to pragmatic failure, i.e. not understanding either the illocutionary force of an utterance or the speakers’ intention (Thomas, 1983). In a conflict to disambiguate misconceptions, native speakers have privilege over the non-native speakers. They can instantly recognize the reason for pragmatic failure

and remedy for it. By contrast, EFL learners may fail to repair the interaction as a result of their inadequate knowledge (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986).

A detailed investigation of pragmatic knowledge, transfer or failure requires an operational definition of the key issues. To this end, speech acts appear to be of great help in that they contribute a lot to construction of every day communication. The knowledge of speech acts entails sociocultural as well as sociolinguistic knowledge (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983). The former refers to the ability to select appropriate speech act strategies to suit social variables of age, gender of the speaker, social class and status in interactions. Yet, the sociolinguistic one conforms to the skill at selection of appropriate linguistic forms, registers or levels of formality to express speech acts. Researchers have, thus, attended to the speech acts of refusal, requests, apologies, complaints, and compliments in a cross-cultural sense.

Complimenting is one of the prevalent studied speech acts within the field of meaningful communication. As a multifunctional speech act, it can show gratitude, open or close a conversation, or soften a criticism or request (Wolfson, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Billmyer, 1990). The contrast between American English compliments and other languages has been frequently laid in their high frequency as well as the use of proverbs and ritualized phrases (Wolfson, 1981, pp. 119-120) which the Americans do not usually use in giving compliments.

Although they may appear simple at the first glance, compliments can function both as a positive politeness device, as well as a face-threatening act, hence their complexity. Among Americans, complimenting is bound to people's social norms of behavior in a way to make them feel good; meanwhile, in some other societies complimenting connotes the speaker's willingness towards the addressee's

belonging. The recipient reaction, offering the object of compliment, in such cases may cause embarrassment to a foreigner. Therefore, a comprehensive study of the speech acts in different communities will be helpful in relation to the investigation of their related social norms and areas of possible transfer among EFL learners. A few studies have been developed with regard to compliments, yet some parts of this puzzle have remained unsolved. Moreover, the sketch of pragmatic failure among Iranian EFL learners is still vague.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

What counts as a compliment may differ from one society to another (Wolfson, 1981, p. 117). Sometimes, compliments are cross-culturally meaningless, since the underlying values and attitudes may differ from one society to another.

Compliment responses have been specifically selected for this study, because in the first case although pragmatic knowledge of Iranian speakers is well investigated in other speech acts, little empirical research, if any, has been conducted in this area on compliment responses. Moreover, there is no data-based study of pragmatic transfer analysis of compliment responses by Iranian EFL learners with respect to certain affective variables.

Following Holmes (1986) who ascribed cross-cultural differences to frequency of compliments, cultural values assumed by compliments, knowing when and who to compliment, and on what topics (p. 502), this study controls for social distance, relative power and compliment topic in a way, and assesses the role of gender, age and educational background in another way.

In the course of communication, native speakers do not lose as much as the non-natives since they can recognize the problems on the spot to remedy for them. For the moment, the non-native speakers fail to repair communication due to linguistic or pragmatic reasons which may cause embarrassments or offense. For non-native English speakers, knowledge of how to respond to a compliment is as important as how to compliment. Yet, the extent of this requirement is a matter of degrees depending on the place of residence. For non-native English speakers in the United States, for example, responding to a compliment is more important than complimenting because of the higher frequency of the compliments in this culture (Wolfson, 1983; Holmes & Brown, 1987; Herbert, 1989). Thus, in an attempt to contribute to inadequate literature on Persian compliments, responses were set at the centre of this research domain.

1.3 Significance of the Study

Due to the worldwide use of English for communication, there is a need to help the students develop their pragmatic knowledge of English language norms in EFL contexts. Therefore, they are in need of exposure to the pragmatic aspects of language and some tools to enhance their pragmatic knowledge. The study of speech acts and their construction in every day communication appears to be of great help.

In an almost significant way, compliments were chosen for this study to be analyzed thoroughly from different dimensions, in a way to pave the way for more exploratory studies.

Although a few studies have been conducted on Persian compliments, a group of determining factors has been set on the outside.

One aspect of these compliments that has been almost rarely attended to in the literature is politeness. It is defined as a constraint on linguistic expressions as a variable of *face* that is emotionally recognized (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Three important factors of solidarity (D), power relation (P), and the weightiness of the imposition (R) contribute to this public self-image. These factors, along with compliment topics and the participants' age, gender and educational background were attended to in an attempt to provide a clear picture of Iranian speakers' social and cultural values governing their compliments and compliment responses. Such a cross-cultural analysis, to the researcher's knowledge, has not yet been touched upon by a Persian native speaker among Iranian non-native speakers.

Another intact domain is pragmatic failure which occurs as a result of pragmatic transfer due to the subjectivity of some "regulative norms" (Leech, 1983) to both inter and intracultural variation.

The significance of meaning construction leads to the complexity of social interactions among the interlocutors. In most cases the use of circumlocutions or reflection of the native language norms might appear helpful in keeping the non-native speakers (NNS) from miscommunications; however, the inappropriate use of native cultural norms would possibly make them appear rude or even unsociable.

To avoid such undesirable endings, this study comments on the inclusion of certain native pragmatic norms of behavior besides the target ones in development of teaching materials in an attempt to enhance the learners' communicative abilities in certain speech communities. To this end, a focus on the speech acts as the canonical

supportive segments of communication might prove of enormous help. Thus, the treatment of certain speech acts (compliments in this case) in terms of their functions, various topics, syntactic and semantic formulas of the interactive utterances as well as different personal and social factors would help broadening the learners' knowledge of language through a consciousness raising process.

Therefore, this study might help in development of communication-based teaching materials through its focus on the determining compliment response factors as well as the governing cultural norms including politeness systems. Such awareness raising devices would, at least, sensitize the learners to apply variety in their roles as the respondents. Hence, hopefully the old view of 'just say thank you' would gradually fade away as a result of the emergence of new communicative needs, ending in the variety of compliment response types in social interactions.

1.4 Scope of the Study

The present study tries to shed light on the types of compliment response strategies with respect to different social variables among Iranian Persian native speakers. Furthermore, EFL learners' compliment responses are subject to precise investigation in search of possible clues to transfer. Afterwards, the areas of transfer are elaborated along with suggestions for syllabus and materials design. This study, in fact, is developed to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the major compliment response types in Persian?
- 2) Do the topic, social distance, relative power, gender, age and educational background play any role in determining a specific type of compliment

response?

- 3) What are the major compliment response types used by Iranian EFL learners?
- 4) Is there any evidence of pragmatic transfer concerning the compliment response patterns among Iranian EFL learners?

It is hypothesized that in the Iranian society, there is a difference in the type of compliment responses which is built on the topic of the compliment, social distance, relative power, interlocutors, gender, age, and educational background of the interlocutors.

It is also hypothesized that there is pragmatic transfer in response to the compliments by Iranian EFL learners, and proficiency level is an important contributor to this phenomenon.

1.5 Outline of the Study

Chapter One, introduction, introduces a brief background to this inquiry and presents the significance, purpose, scope and outline of the study.

Chapter Two, dealing with related literature, elaborates on communicative competence, pragmatics and its two subdivisions, i.e. pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics, interlanguage pragmatics, pragmatic transfer and failure, speech acts, and more specifically on the speech act of compliment. Also, it discusses the most influential studies on compliments and compliment responses as well as the effect of instruction.