

Moving Away from Traditional Modesty: On Responding to Compliments

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Abstract

A compliment can readily enhance face and affiliation between the interlocutors. The function of a compliment is to establish and maintain social rapport. However, the compliment thus received, cannot be hung in the air, isolated and unattended. It needs to be responded appropriately as it serves as a lubricant for the communication machine. This research revolves around the government officers of different grades who were given eight different scenarios whereby they were complimented. Based on Leech's (1983) Politeness Maxims, responses to these compliments were classified as Agreement Maxim (acceptance) and Rejection/Self praise avoidance (modesty). The patterns were determined from the responses of the subjects found in the data analyzed quantitatively and thereof qualitative interpretations were made. Scenario two presenting a situation between an officer and his subordinates generated maximum percentage (24.6 %) of the maxim of modesty. Scenario one (parent-child) and scenario seven (boss- worker) followed respectively (15.78% and 17.54 %). With 55% Maxim of Agreement the paper questions the notion (Maxim) of Modesty generally considered to be prevalent in the Pakistani society.

Key Words: compliments, responses, modesty, Pakistani

Introduction

Face is the public self image (Allan, 1986) that an individual endeavors to keep and uplift and 'compliments are typically face-enhancing speech acts' (Spencer-Oatey, 2000) and normally have positive effect on interpersonal affairs. However, people feel under pressure whether to agree with the compliment being paid or downgrade it as a symbol of modesty as 'politeness phenomena are one manifestation of the wider concept of etiquette or appropriate behavior' (Grundy, 2000).

Stratification based on race, ethnicity and social class is a significant element of any culture. Many sociolinguistic studies are concerned with grouping

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of individuals based on various factors such as education, occupation, salary etc. (Romaine, 1994). The present study discusses how the notion of power emerges through an analysis of language used in interaction. For example, the Japanese speakers place the hearer more respectable and higher position than themselves by giving compliments. Thus, this study will help students in developing an understanding of the role and significance of language in the construction and negotiation of social power relationships. It will also explore ways in which linguistic exchanges can express relations of power; and the role that power can play in the structure of human communicative interaction because 'speech genres are situated constructs' as discussed by Hadjioannou (2007).

Responses to compliments are different in different cultures such as American, Indonesian and Japanese (Wolfson, 1981); French (Merrill Valdes(ed) (1986); and Native American Indian (Yule, 1996). However, this area remains unexplored with reference to Pakistani culture although exhaustive work in this area in the neighboring countries such as China (Ye, 1995), Indonesia (Wolfson, 1981); and Malaysia (David 2002) has been done. The present research investigates how an educated and relatively privileged group of people i.e. government officers respond to compliments as compared to a common man.

Materials and Methods

Not identifying a compliment and responding to it appropriately is an important part of communicative competence and lack of familiarity with the communicative etiquettes influenced heavily with the social norms can lead to problems in communication. Because of such significance this vital area of communication has been categorized differently. Pomerantz (1978) and Holmes (1995) categorize responses to compliments into three groups

- a. acceptance
- b. rejection/deflection
- c. evasion/self praise avoidance

Whereas Ye (1995) categorizes them as follows:

- a. acceptance
- b. acceptance with amendment
- c. non-acceptance

Herbert's (1986, 1990) taxonomy is as follows:

Response Type	Example
A. Agreement	
I. Acceptances	
a. Appreciation Token	Thanks, thank you [smile].
b. Comment Acceptance	Thank you. It's my favorite too.
2. Praise Upgrade	Really! This matches my hair, doesn't it?
II. Comment History	I bought it for the trip to Italy.
III. Transfers	
a. Reassignment	My mom gave it to me.
b. Return	So is yours.
B. Non-agreement	
I. Scale Down	It's really old fashioned.
II. Question	Do you really think so?
III. Non acceptances	
a. Disagreement	I hate it.
b. Qualification	It's right, but her is nicer.
IV. No Acknowledgement	
C. Other Interpretations	
I. Request	You wanna borrow this one too?

On the other hand Billmyer's (1990) taxonomy along with examples is as follows:

Responses to compliments	Response types
A: That's a nice shirt you are wearing!	
B: Well, I just got it from H&M, though. It was pretty cheap.	(Downgrading)
A: It was an excellent presentation.	
B: Do you really think so?	(Questioning)
A: I love your clock. It looks great in your living room!	
B: Thanks. My sister brought it from Dubai.	(Shifting Credit)
A: You are looking good!	
B: Thanks. So are you!	(Returning)

Thus, responses to compliments can be classified into two broad categories: Acceptance, and Rejection/self-praise avoidance.

For the present study, a group of government officers' responses to compliments were analyzed. The group included 16 administrative staff employed at key positions of a public sector organization, and categorized into grades called Basic Pay Scale. The officers grade range starts at 17 and 22 is the highest grade. The subjects of this study were ranged between grades 18-21 and were of the ages between 35-65 years. Pakistan is a multilingual society. The respondents' first language was either, Punjabi, Pushto or Urdu. They were given eight different

scenarios whereby a compliment was paid to the respondents in each scenario. They were asked to tick one response from an option of six responses. These responses were based on Leech's (1983:132) Politeness Maxims:

1. Tact Maxim (in impositives and commissives)
 - a. Minimize cost to other
 - b. Maximize benefit to other
2. Generosity Maxim (in impositives and commissives)
 - a. Minimum benefit to self
 - b. Minimize cost to self
3. Approbation Maxim (in expressive and assertives)
 - a. Minimize dispraise of other
 - b. Maximize praise of other
4. Modesty Maxim (in expressive and assertives)
 - a. Minimize praise of self
 - b. Maximize dispraise of self
5. Agreement Maxim (in assertives)
 - a. Minimize disagreement between self and other
 - b. Maximize agreement between self and other
6. Sympathy Maxim (in assertives)
 - a. Minimize antipathy between self and other
 - b. Maximize sympathy between self and other

Thus, based on two maxims Downgrading Maxim and Modesty Maxim, for the present study each responses to compliments were broadly classified into two categories

- a. Acceptance (Agreement Maxim)
- b. Rejection/self-praise avoidance (Modesty Maxim)

The second category was further divided into four strategies:

- I. downgrading the compliment
- II. questioning the compliment
- III. shifting the credit away from one self
- IV. returning a compliment

Results and Discussion

The reasons to pay compliments are varied such as to express admiration, approve somebody's work, to establish solidarity, to open and sustain conversation and to exchange greetings (Wolfson, 1981). Compliments help in making the other person feel good and in facilitating the conversation. They are typically face-enhancing speech acts (Spencer-Oatey, 2000). Positive comments can help the complimented attain a friendly and a favorable position as this helps

in developing a polite conversational decorum. Paying a compliment is a symbol of positive politeness (Fasold, 1990) strategy that serves as a 'social lubricant' by diminishing elements such as distance and power and by strengthening solidarity between the interlocutors. Getting a compliment demands from the receiver something to be said in response as letting a compliment hang in the air is an undesirable and awkward position for both the interlocutors. Thus responding to compliments in an appropriate manner becomes essentially important in maintaining social etiquettes.

The research began with the assumption that since Pakistan is an Eastern and a restricted society greatly influenced by adherence to its old traditions, its people would most probably follow Leech's Modesty Maxim more than the Agreement Maxim. The results of the study proved contrary to this general belief as discussed below. As stated above, the respondents were given eight scenarios whereby their responses were recorded. These scenarios have been adapted from the unpublished work of a student of FJWU. Here, the responses of the respondents are discussed scenario wise.

In Scenario 1, most of the respondents rejected the compliment by shifting the credit to their parents. This reflects a clear element of modesty in the subjects' responses towards the attribution of credit to their parents for their success. 'In Chinese, a denial is the routine response to a compliment (Ye, 1995; Yu, 2003). Similarly, 'Japanese will never accept a compliment without saying *ie* [no]' (Mizutani, 1987 in Wierzbick (1991). Acceptance of compliments is common in English whereas rejection of compliments is more common in Chinese.

According to Parisi and Wogan (2006) 'social norms place greater emphasis on appearance for females and skills for males'. Well the present study does not provide a gender comparison but it does show that men like to share the compliment given to their efforts or skills considering them a result of team work. In Scenario 2 also, most of the respondents rejected the individual compliment attributing it to the team effort. Twenty percent grade 20 officers, however, questioned the sincerity of the compliment by saying 'really?' Another 20 % said, 'thank you' whereas 20 % grade 20 officers just smiled and 40% thought it was a team effort. On the other hand all grade 18 officers said it was a team effort which reflects more team spirit and sharing of credit in the junior officers as compared to the senior officers who may be conceited.

As can be seen in this table 68.5% respondents accepted the compliment in scenario 3 by either saying 'thank you' (31 %) or 'Yes, I think it went quite well' (37.5 %). Yet, there was a small

percentage (19 %) of grade 18 & 19 officers who shifted the credit. This shows that grade 18 and 19 (which are mid level positions) employees are more prone to attributing the credit to their seniors as compared to grade 21 who would simply say 'thank you' implying power, authority and confidence to take the credit.

In scenario 4 which is between a student and a teacher most of the respondents accepted the compliment by saying thank you and by smiling though no one chose the first option of taking the credit by saying, 'I put a great effort to complete it'. Officers of all cadres were more inclined towards accepting the compliment thus refuting my primary hypothesis of modesty. The reason could be the relationship of the teacher and student which was poised to them and probably they thought that a teacher is more inclined to accept a compliment than to reject it. That is why only one grade 18 officer rejecting the compliment said 'It's not so good' and only 25% officers including grade 18, 19 and 20 rejected the compliment by questioning it. They might have taken it as a flattery of the American kind whose 'style of complimenting creates great embarrassment for some Native American Indian receivers' who perceive it excessive. (Yule 1996).

Scenario 5 which was about a compliment being paid by a maid to the owner of the house reflects a drastic increase in the acceptance of the compliment than rejecting it in all grades of employees included in this research. Yet, there was a small percentage (20 %) of grade 19 and 40 % of grade 20 officers (which are 6.25 % and 12.5 % of the total number of subjects) who considered the house still needed improvement. Although, I have placed this comment under modesty but from psychological point of view, this could be an indicator of the desire of having more worldly possession. Another reason could be distance between the roles of a maid and owner of the house.

Scenario 6 generated a mixed kind of response. Thirty one percent respondents said 'thank you' but none of them commented on the history of the outfit. Percentages of deflecting, questioning (surprise) and agreeing remained the same i.e. 19 % each. Just smiling option was used the least.

Different cultures have different ways of responding to compliments, depending upon their norms and conventions. In Japan the speakers compliment because it is customary to place the hearer at a higher position than themselves. The listener feels obligatory, again, because of the cultural strings, to refuse the compliment so that both the parties can communicate on equal footing. (Merrill Valdes 1986). For example a person compliments the other by saying 'You are looking awesome' and he gets the response, 'Oh no, not at all'. Some people would

acknowledge the compliment by saying ‘Thank you’ whereas others more self-effacing kind would respond to a compliment such as: ‘You have a nice iphone’ by saying something like, ‘Oh, this old thing!’

Similarly, here most of the grade 19 officers (60 %) took the comment about the outfit with smile and honor, and expressed thanks whereas grade 20 people considered it flattery. It has normally been observed that junior employees refrain from praising their senior colleagues and if they do, it is taken as an indication of some expected favor to be followed. On the other hand, Arabs deal with compliments differently as James (1980) explains: ‘To mention in complimentary terms some possession of hearer will be interpreted by Arabs as a request for that object’.

Scenario 7 created the environment of team spirit and 62.5 % respondents shifted the credit by attributing it to the team effort. However, this was contrary to the informal talks with the same respondents who expressed concern that lack of team spirit existed in their organization. Still 37.5 % half of which were grade 20 officers accepted the compliment.

In scenario 8 getting a comment about having a good English accent was acceptable to 69 % respondents

including 44 % who expressed gratitude and 25 % who just smiled. On the other hand, 25 % disagreed by considering themselves beginners and thought they were in the learning process, half of them included grade 20 officers; whereas marginal 6.25 % questioned the authenticity of the comment. This also reflects that Pakistanis probably are confident about their English accent and take it as compatible with international practices. Another reason could be the fact that having fluency in English language is a status symbol and one would love to have a positive comment about it. This is similar to the American response who consider the remark ‘You look really nice today.’ an indicator of genuine appreciation compared to French attitude who take it as insult considering that it implies the reverse. (Merill-Valdes, 1986).

The situation becomes clear in Table 2 and Figure 1. Scenario two presenting a situation between an officer and his subordinates, generated maximum percentage of the maxim of modesty. Scenario one (parent-child) and scenario seven (boss- worker) followed respectively. On the other hand, scenario five (landlord-maid) led to the maximum responses of the maxim of agreement.

Scenario 1 You have secured excellent position in your final examination. Your father/mother admires your effort by saying: *“Excellent! You have improved a lot.”* What will be your response?

No	Strategies	Compliment Responses	Responses Percentages	Grade 18	Grade 19	Grade 20	Grade 21
a	Shifting credit	It’s all because of you.	37.5%	40%	40%	20%	100%
b	Thanking	Thank you.	25%	-	20%	40%	-
c	Agreeing	Yes, I’ve worked very hard this time.	12.5%	20%	-	20%	-
d	Disagreeing	No, it isn’t so good	12.5%	-	20%	-	-
e	Smiling	Just smiles.	6.25%	20%	20%	20%	-
f	Comment history	I think the questions were quite easy	6.25%	20%	-	-	-
			100	100	100	100	100

Scenario 2 Your company has won an international award due to your immense effort. One of your subordinates admires your achievement by saying, *“Congratulation Sir! It’s all due to your great effort.”* Your response will be:

No	Strategies	Compliment Responses	Responses Percentages	Grade 18	Grade 19	Grade 20	Grade 21
a	Thanking	Thank you.	6.2 %	-	-	20%	-
b	Questioning	Really!	6.2 %	-	-	20%	-
c	Smiling	Keep smiling.	6.2 %	-	-	20%	-
d	Shifting credit	It was a team effort.	81.2%	100%	100%	40%	100%
e	Agreeing	Yes, I have worked very hard.	-	-	-	-	-
f	Disagreeing	I don’t think so	-	-	-	-	-
			99.8	100	100	100	100

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Scenario 3 You have shown extraordinary performance in a recently played football match. Your coach/instructor appreciates you by saying: *“Well done! Your performance was marvelous.”* What will be your response?

No	Strategies	Compliment Responses	Responses Percentages	Grade 18	Grade 19	Grade 20	Grade 21
a	Thanking	Thank you.	31%	20 %	20 %	40%	100%
b	Shifting credit	It’s all due to your supervision.	19%	40 %	20%	-	-
c	Disagreeing	No Sir! It still needs improvement.	12.5%	-	20%	20%	-
d	Questioning	Are You satisfied with it?	-	-	-	-	-
e	Smiling	Simply pass on a smile.	-	-	-	-	-
f	Agreeing	Yes, I think it went quite well.	37.5%	40%	40%	40%	-
			100	100	100	100	100

Scenario 4 You are a fine arts teacher, and you have arranged an exhibition of your paintings. One of your students praises your work by saying: *“Oh! It’s great Sir.”* What will be your response?

S. No	Strategies	Compliment Responses	Responses Percentages	Grade 18	Grade 19	Grade 20	Grade 21
a	Agreeing	I put great effort to complete it.	-	-	-	-	-
b	Questioning	Do you really think so?	25%	20%	40%	20%	-
c	Thanking	Thank you.	56.2%	60%	40%	60%	100%
d	Disagreeing	No, it’s not so good.	6.2%	20%	-	-	-
e	Smiling	Just smiles.	12.5%	-	20%	20%	-
f	Downgrading	No. it’s just OK.	-	-	-	-	-

Scenario 5 You have renovated your new home with a great effort. One of your servants praises your effort in these words. *“It’s looking so nice.”* Your response will be?

S. No	Strategies	Compliment Responses	Responses Percentage	Grade 18	Grade 19	Grade 20	Grade 21
a	Thanking	Thank you.	75%	100 %	60 %	60 %	100 %
b	Disagreeing	Oh no, it still need great improvement	19 %	-	20 %	40 %	-
c	Smiling	Just smiles.	06 %	-	20 %	-	-
d	Agreeing	I have put great effort.	-	-	-	-	-
e	Questioning	Do you really think so?	-	-	-	-	-
f	Shifting credit	My new maid has helped me a lot.	-	-	-	-	-
			100	100	100	100	100

Scenario 6 You have invited your best friend to your birthday party. You have been dressed in a very nice looking costume, and she/he praises you: *“Looking gorgeous in this dress!”* What will be your response?

No	Strategies	Compliment Responses	Responses Percentages	Grade 18	Grade 19	Grade 20	Grade 21
a	Thanking	Thank you.	31 %	20 %	60 %	20 %	
b	Deflecting	Oh! Don’t flatter me.	19 %	20 %		40 %	
c	Comment history	I’ve bought it from ...					
d	Smiling	Keep Smiling	12 %		20 %		100 %
e	Questioning	Really?	19 %	40 %	20 %		
f	Agreeing	Yeah, it’s my favorite too.	19 %	20 %		40 %	
			100	100	100	100	100

Scenario 7 You are working in a company. The company CEO is greatly impressed by your tremendous performance, and applauds your effort in these words: *“Great! You did a splendid job.”* How would you respond?

No	Strategies	Compliment Responses	Responses Percentages	Grade 18	Grade 19	Grade 20	Grade 21
a	Thanking	Thank you.	37.5 %	20 %	40 %	60 %	-
b	Questioning	Sir, Are you satisfied?	-	-	-	-	-
c	Shifting credit	It was a team effort.	62.5 %	80 %	60 %	40 %	100 %
d	Disagreeing	No, it still needs lots of improvement.	-	-	-	-	-
e	Agreeing	I’ve really worked very hard.	-	-	-	-	-
f	Smiling	Just smiles	-	-	-	-	-
			100	100	100	100	100

Scenario 8 You have gone to Gilgit Baltistan. You come across a foreigner, who is impressed by your English accent. He says: *“Your accent is superb.”* What will be your response?

S. No	Strategies	Compliment Responses	Responses Percentages	Grade 18	Grade 19	Grade 20	Grade 21
a	Shifting credit	Actually learned it from a well- renowned institution.	-	-	-	-	-
b	Disagreeing	Oh ,No, I’m Just a beginner	25 %	20 %	40 %	20 %	-
c	Thanking	Thank you.	44 %	40 %	60 %	40 %	-
d	Smiling	Just smile.	25 %	40 %	-	20 %	100 %
e	Questioning	Do you really think so?	06 %	-	-	20 %	-
f	Agreeing	I’ve worked very hard to learn it.	-	-	-	-	-
			100	100	100	100	100

Having evaluated the scenario results individually, it is time to have a quick glance over the grade wise results of the maxim of agreement and the maxim of modesty. The following table helps in narrowing down the earlier discussion.

Table 1 Grade-wise percentages of Acceptance & Rejections Strategies for Responses to Compliments

	Scenario 1		Scenario 2		Scenario 3		Scenario 4		Scenario 5		Scenario 6		Scenario 7		Scenario 8	
	Acc	Rej	Acc	Rej	Acc	Rej	Acc	Rej	Acc	Rej	Acc	Rej	Acc	Rej	Acc	Rej
BPS 18	40	60	-	100	60	40	60	40	100	-	40	60	20	80	80	20
BPS 19	-	100	-	100	60	40	60	40	80	20	80	20	40	60	60	40
BPS 20	75	25	40	60	80	20	80	20	60	40	60	40	60	40	60	40
BPS 21	-	100	-	100	-	100	-	100	-	100	-	100	-	100	100	-

Scenario 1: Parent – Child
 Scenario 2: Officer – Subordinate
 Scenario 3: Coach – Player
 Scenario 4: Teacher – Student
 Scenario 5: Landlord – Maid
 Scenario 6: Friend – Friend
 Scenario 7: Boss – Factory Worker
 Scenario 8: Non-Native – Native

Table 2 Scenario wise comparison of the Maxim of Agreement and Maximum of Modesty

Scenario	Occurrences of Maxim of Agreement	%	Occurrences of Maxim of Modesty	%
One	7	9.85	9	15.78
Two	2	2.81	14	24.56
Three	11	15.49	5	08.77
Four	11	15.49	5	08.77
Five	13	18.30	3	05.26
Six	10	14.00	6	10.52
Seven	6	08.45	10	17.54
Eight	11	15.49	5	08.77
Total	71	55%	57	45%

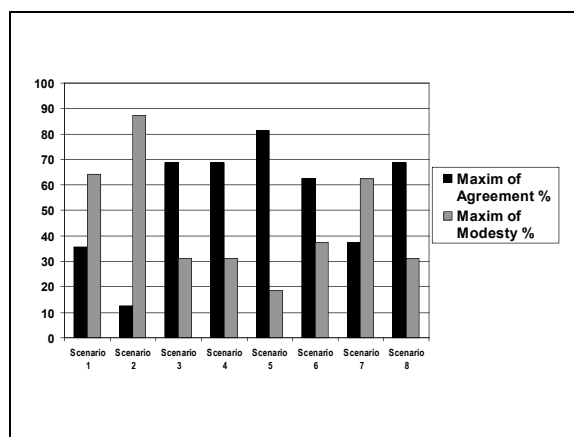


Figure 1 Overall Comparison of Maxim of Politeness

The whole notion of giving and responding to compliments varies from culture to culture. Wolfson (1986) compared American, English, Indonesian and Japanese culture. In the present study about Pakistani culture, if we compare the overall result of the both maxims the hypothesis of ‘modesty’ gets negated. Probably the people of Pakistan or more specifically, government officers are no more modest when it comes to responding compliments. However, comparing the figures, one observes that the percentage of maxim of agreement 55% and maxim of modesty 45% are quite close and still one would have to be cautious to put forth tall claims. Reminisces of the eastern tradition are still there though getting sanded by globalization.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that the speakers of different grades follow different patterns while responding to compliments. This preliminary but interesting study offers some useful insights. There are indications that people of different socio-economic classes (grades)

do not follow the modesty of the collective culture, as reflected in their use of acceptance of self-praise. Though there is inequality in different cadres of government officers but the results of this study highlight that the strategies they use while responding to compliments remain more or less the same when it comes to the overall maxim of modesty or maxim of agreement. The study holds lots of importance as in Pakistan public sector (Government) organizations are the backbone of the society in terms of having authority and power. Understanding of the set of attitudes through compliments and responses to compliments would not only make communication more effective between the government and common men but also help in the development of healthy and positive relationships, with all those they encounter within or across their geographical boundaries. Successful communication requires recognizing the conventions and norms that a particular culture makes use of to maintain and promote harmonious relationships. The relevant culture influences people’s choice of the strategies they employ while responding to compliments. However, it is not essential that the inhabitants of one place would always respond in exactly the same manner in different contexts. Pakistan, because of its sociopolitical turmoil in the first decade of the 21st century is a country in a state of transition. Therefore, such a study as this one would need to be replicated after few years to validate generalizations.

Pedagogical Relevance

Knowing not only how to pay nice and proper compliments but also identification and appropriate response while receiving them is part of one’s communicative competence. Unfamiliarity with them may hazard good communication. ‘Politeness phenomena are one manifestation of the wider concept of etiquette, or appropriate behavior’ (Grundy 2000: 146). In this regard, English language teachers bear heavy responsibility not only in terms of familiarizing their students with culturally appropriate behavior but also teaching relevant language structures and functions. Here, personal response strategies ‘may act as a powerful catalyst to transform them (the students) from the teacher centered conceptions and approaches’ to the learner centered ones. (Kolikant, 2010). However, it requires practice, experimentation as well as the support of a mentor. (Learned et.al, 2009). Dunnett, Dublin and Lexberg in Merrill Valdes (1986) assert, that apart from, ‘implicit and explicit means of teaching inter-cultural communicative competence, the vital element which gives a language course a tone of cultural understanding is the teachers’ own attitudes towards their students’ backgrounds’. Rose and Kwai-fong (1999) discuss the benefits from

instruction in compliments and compliment responses in a foreign language context. They also discuss inductive and deductive approaches for the teaching of compliments and responses. Teaching compliment responses can help in minimizing misunderstanding between interlocutors thus making it a vital component of learning and teaching communication skills.

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