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## **A STUDY OF COMPLIMENTS ACROSS CULTURES: A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF COMPLIMENTS AND COMPLIMENTS RESPONSES IN ENGLISH, POLISH AND RUSSIAN**



### **Introduction**

Lustig and Koester<sup>1</sup> define communication as “a symbolic process in which people create shared meanings”. A symbol in this definition refers to a word, action or object that represents a meaning. Meaning is often a personal experience which cannot be shared with others as such, but needs to be conveyed and interpreted (negotiated) through a message. Messages, in turn, are sets of symbols, and receivers interpret and understand them according to expectations based on their experience. It follows from the above that people identify reality and form expectations with respect to it by linking ongoing events with pre-existing stable patterns of behavior that are present in a given culture.

Since the 1970s, Western linguists and scholars have conducted a lot of research on compliments and compliment responses<sup>2</sup>. Scholars and researchers have collected a mass of compliment cases from people’s daily lives, and then examined those linguistic data from two perspectives, namely qualitative and quantitative. This research on compliments can be divided into several aspects, i.e. compliment functions, compliment formulas, compliment topics and gender differences in compliments

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<sup>1</sup> M.W. Lustig, J. Koester, *Intercultural Competence: Interpersonal Communication Across Cultures*, New York 1996, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> A. Pomerantz, *A. Compliment Responses: Notes on the Co-operation of Multiple Constraints. Studies in the Organization of Conversational Interaction*, New York 1978, pp. 79-112; J. Manes, N. Wolfson, *Conversational Routine: Explorations in Standardized Communication Situations and Pre-patterned Speech*, The Hague 1981; J. Holmes, D.F. Brown, *Teachers and Students Learning about Compliments*, “TESOL Quarterly” 21, 1987, pp. 523-546; R.K. Herbert, *The Ethnography of English Compliments and Compliment Responses: A Contrastive Sketch*, [in:] *Contrastive Pragmatics*, W. Olesky (ed.), Amsterdam 1989.

and compliment responses. The aim of this article is to show how compliments and responses to compliments are created in the process of communication by Poles, Russians and English speaking individuals.

### **The Definition of Compliment and Compliment Response**

As a kind of polite speech acts in everyday verbal communication, compliment contains two parts: compliment giving and compliment response. Holmes<sup>3</sup> believes that “a compliment can be seen as a behavior of speech acts which directly or indirectly shows person credit to someone except the interlocutor, in general the reaction of the person for some attribute (characteristic, possession, skill, etc.) praised by the addressor and addressee”. Nelson *et al.*<sup>4</sup> state that “a compliment response is as a kind of verbal acknowledgement, the compliment receiver was heard and reacted to the compliment giver”. The compliment receiver has to respond to other people’s compliment either by accepting or declining it.

### **Compliment Functions**

A great number of scholars and researches have stated that compliments can establish solidarity between compliment contributor and compliment receiver<sup>5</sup>. That seems to be the main function of compliments. Manes<sup>6</sup> observes that individuals use compliments to establish and reinforce solidarity between compliment giver and compliment receiver. Similarly to Manes, Wolfson<sup>7</sup> has showed that the compliment giver compliments others, the speaker expresses admiration, approval to the hearer, and thereby solidarity between interlocutors is created. Moreover, Wolfson suggested that compliments could serve other functions. For instance, compliments could be used to strengthen the desired behavior in specific contexts, such as in the field of teaching.

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<sup>3</sup> J. Holmes, *Paying Compliments: A Sex-preferential Positive Politeness Strategy*, “Journal of Pragmatics” 12, 1988, pp. 445-465.

<sup>4</sup> G.L. Nelson, M. Al-batal, E. Echols, *Arabic and English Compliment Responses: Potential for Pragmatic Failure*, “Applied Linguistics” 17, 1996, pp. 411-432.

<sup>5</sup> J. Manes, *Compliments: A Mirror of Cultural Value*, [in:] *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition*, 9, N. Wolfson, E. Judd (eds), Rowley 1983, pp. 96-102; N. Wolfson, *An Empirically based Analysis of Complimenting in American English*, [in:] *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition*, N. Wolfson, E. Judd, E. (eds.), Rowley 1983, pp. 82-95.

<sup>6</sup> J. Manes, *Compliments: A Mirror of Cultural Value*, [in:] *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition*, 9, N. Wolfson, E. Judd (eds), Rowley 1983, pp. 96-102.

<sup>7</sup> N. Wolfson, N. *The Social Dynamics of Native and Non-native Variation in Complimentary Behaviors*, [in:] *The Dynamic Inter-language*, M. Eisentein (ed.), New York 1989, pp. 219-236.

Wolfson and Manes demonstrate that the function of compliments in specific culture could be found within its specific linguistic and socio-cultural context. Herbert and Straight claim that individuals could perceive the distinctive characteristics of compliment functions by contrastive analysis. Intercultural studies are comparatively few amongst the studies on compliments in the present literature. It is a fact that only by carrying out a study of compliments designed to compare different cultural backgrounds, especially those with distinctive value systems, such as Eastern and Western societies, we can find out more about the characteristics of this type of speech act in global or cultural society.

### Compliment Topics

Compliment topic appears to be another significant aspect in compliment research. A lot of studies on compliment topics revealed that most compliment topics concentrate on a few general life topics<sup>8</sup>, such as, personality, possessions, child, pet, appearance, accomplishments, and so on. But the most popular compliment topics in English are accomplishments and appearance. Furthermore, Wolfson<sup>9</sup> observed that in the United States of America anybody could compliment a female's appearance without considering her age, status and job. According to Manes<sup>10</sup>, personal appearance and accomplishments are the most regularly employed topics in compliments. Holmes' (1988) data on compliments also showed agreement with Manes<sup>11</sup> findings; these two topics are uniformly distributed in everyday interaction. Previous studies exploited different terms for compliment topics, such as possessions, skill, work, appearance, ability, performance, friendship, personality, and so on. These topics can be clustered into two wide categories: ability/accomplishment and clothing/appearance.

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<sup>8</sup> N. Wolfson, *The Social Dynamics of Native and Non-native Variation in Complimentary Behaviors*, [in:] *The Dynamic Inter-language*, M. Eisentein (ed.), New York 1989, pp. 219-236; J. Holmes, D.F. Brown, *Teachers and Students Learning about Compliments*, "TESOL Quarterly" 21, 1987, pp. 523-546.

<sup>9</sup> N. Wolfson, *The Social Dynamics of Native and Non-native Variation in Complimentary Behaviors*, [in:] *The Dynamic Inter-language*, M. Eisentein (ed.), New York 1989, pp. 219-236.

<sup>10</sup> J. Manes, J. *Compliments: A Mirror of Cultural Value*, [in:] *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition*, 9, N. Wolfson, E. Judd (eds), Rowley 1983, pp. 96-102.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

## The Study

### Subjects, Instruments and Data Collection Process

The findings presented below derive from a contrastive study of compliments and responses to them involving individuals representing Anglo, Polish, and Russian cultures. Compliments are usually considered as speech acts addressing other's positive face, yet they can be face-threatening.

To find out if there were differences and similarities in paying compliments, two different questionnaires were prepared. The first questionnaire asked the subjects to role-play, that is, to pay compliments in various situations, and responses to them were obtained from 50 speakers of American English and 51 speakers of Polish. The other questionnaire asked who the respondents paid compliments to, what they complimented people on, and why. The respondents were to represent British, Polish, and Russian cultures.

Compliments in English have been studied by quite a few researchers<sup>12</sup> who have categorized them as referring to:

- Appearance,
- Attire,
- Achievement,
- Character,
- Possessions.

Responses to compliments have been categorized into:

- Acceptance without thanking,
- Just thanking,
- Thanking and adding something else,
- Ignoring the compliment and responding to accompanying act (e.g. an inquiry),
- Disagreeing,
- Shifting credit to someone else,
- Downgrading.

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<sup>12</sup> A. Pomerantz, *Compliment Responses: Notes on the Co-operation of Multiple Constraints*, [in:] *Studies in the Organization of Conversational Interaction*, New York 1978, pp. 79-112; N. Wolfson, *Compliments in Cross-cultural Perspective*, "TESOL Quarterly" 15, 1981, pp. 117-123; R.V. Serebriakova, *Natsionalnaya spetsyfyka komplimenta i pohvaly v russkoy i anglijskoy kommunikativnyh kulturah*, [in:] *Jazyk, kommunikatsyia i sotsyalnaya sreda*, Issue 1, 2001.

A number of authors<sup>13</sup> are of the opinion that compliments for Americans are part of small talk, and responses to them are formulaic, while Herbert<sup>14</sup> points out that the English find it difficult to accept compliments. Serebriakova<sup>15</sup> also found that Russians and, to a lesser extent, the English tended to downgrade what they were complimented on or to reject a compliment. As scores in section “A – Friend to Friend” show, males do not often downgrade nor do females; the latter tend more to shift credit to a third person.

Polish vs. English –  
responses to the first questionnaire

To show how representatives of Polish culture are sometimes misinterpreted by their Anglo interlocutors, and the other way round, we will quote Mike Reynolds’ description<sup>16</sup> of one such experience: He was travelling together with a new Polish acquaintance who spoke, as he said, excellent English. There was a long pause in their conversation, and then he said looking through the window ‘How many trees are there in Poland?’. Her reaction was ‘I wonder who would want to know that’. At first he felt he had been put down, but on second thought he realized that she had missed the cue that he had been engaged in phatic communication<sup>17</sup>. Misunderstandings like this lead to the emergence of stereotypes like those aptly summed up in Edward Ronowicz’s title *Aussies are friendly and Poles aren’t rude*<sup>18</sup>.

One typical feature of Polish communicative behavior is believed to be directness (cf. Ronowicz 1995). Complimenting seems to be no exception:

- (1) *Ależ ty dzisiaj elegancka.*  
“You look so smart today”.

For the Polish, indirectness appears to be a rare phenomenon while paying compliments. On the other hand, they often resort to supportive moves. A supportive move appears to be an element that serves to intensify the force of a given compliment:

<sup>13</sup> A. Pomerantz, *Compliment Responses: Notes on the Co-operation of Multiple Constraints*, [in:] *Studies in the Organization of Conversational Interaction*, New York 1978, pp. 79-112; N. Wolfson, *Compliments in Cross-cultural Perspective*, “TESOL Quarterly” 15, 1981, pp. 117-123.

<sup>14</sup> R.K. Herbert, *The Ethnography of English Compliments and Compliment Responses: A Contrastive Sketch*, [in:] *Contrastive Pragmatics*, W. Olesky (ed.), Amsterdam 1989.

<sup>15</sup> R.V. Serebriakova, *Natsionalnaya spetsyfyka komplimenta i pohvaly v russkoy i anglijskoy kommunikativnyh kulturah*, [in:] *Jazyk, komunikatsyia i sotsyalnaya sreda*, Issue 1, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> M. Reynolds, *Where the trouble lies: cross-cultural pragmatics and miscommunication*, “Papers and Studies in Contrastive Linguistics” 30, 1995, pp. 5-15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> E. Ronowicz, *Aussies are friendly and Poles aren’t rude*, “Papers and Studies in Contrastive Linguistics” 30, 1995, pp. 16-25.

(2) *Masz wspaniałą figurę, powinnaś być modelką.*

*"Your figure is great; you should become a model".*

The following compliment may be perceived as a prelude to an inquiry:

(3) *Ty to masz zawsze ładną fryzurę... Jak ty to robisz?*

*"Your haircut always looks great. How do you do that?"*

*-A, używam specjalnego szamponu.*

*"Oh, I use some special shampoo".*

(4) *- Ale masz fajny zegarek. Gdzie go kupiłeś?*

*"What a nice watch. Where did you buy it?"*

*- No, niezły. Dostałem od ojca.*

*"Yes, not bad. Got it from my father".*

The data suggest that, whereas the complimenting utterances of Americans are mostly straightforward, and use few supportive moves, Polish speakers employ such moves much more often so that many of their complimenting sequences have a tendency to be longer, as can be seen in the following examples:

(5) *Świetny szalik, pasuje do twoich butów i makijażu, podoba mi się takie zestawienie. Sama wybierałaś, czy inspirowałaś się jakimiś gazetami?*

*"Great scarf. It goes well with your make-up and shoes. I like this combination. Did you select it yourself or were you inspired by fashion magazines?"*

(6) *Podoba mi się sposób twojego myślenia, zawsze szukasz pozytywnych rzeczy w najbardziej beznadziejnych sytuacjach.*

*"I like your way of reasoning. You always see something positive even in hopeless situations".*

Polish native speakers' use of supportive moves has to do with a socio-cultural convention that embraces a communicative style valuing mutual face work very highly. That is 'small talk' or supportive moves can help both the speaker and the addressee observe each other's mood as well as attitude, thereby fine-tuning the face, distance and relationship between them and generating a harmonious atmosphere to conduct interpersonal transactions. With this kind of interactive adjustment, a balance of face between interlocutors can be achieved<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> R. Scollon, S. Wong Scollon, *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach*, Cambridge 1995, p. 116.

### Compliment frequency and function

The finding that native speakers of Polish appear to pay compliments considerably less often than Americans seems to imply that Americans consider complimenting as part of small talk. Compliments have also been found to occur in a much wider variety of speech situations in American culture than in other cultures<sup>20</sup>. For example, it is common for Americans to compliment a stranger to show their friendliness, but if a Polish speaker did so in a Polish context, this could cause some embarrassment for the addressee, as observed in the following compliment exchanges:

- (7) – *Ale ty jesteś silny!*  
 “How strong you are!”  
 – (zawstydzony) *Dziękuję.*  
 “Thank you (feels awkward)”.

As the exchange shows, compliments sometimes function as conversation openers for the speaker who tries to build up some rapport with the addressee. Generally, American English speakers would not find such situations particularly strange or troubling. It is not so for the speakers of Polish. In fact, it is often the case that the act of complimenting a stranger is considered an imposition.

A further analysis of cross-cultural behavior reveals that the primary factor behind the cultural norm is face, which is related to whether or not a speaker's behavior can be regarded as appropriate or polite. In Polish culture, the speaker is usually expected to make use of compliments as assertions of admiration. A failure to live up to this cultural expectation may imply that the speaker does not take the addressee's face into account, thereby damaging his or her own face.

It is not that Americans employ compliments just to negotiate solidarity, whereas the Polish express praise only when they want to show genuine admiration. There are, in fact, many commonalities in compliment function in the two cultures. As the data show, Poles also make use of compliments to negotiate solidarity, while Americans pay compliments when they want to show real admiration.

### Compliment topics

As the data show, most compliments concentrate on only a few topics. For example, it is found that compliments in American English fall mostly into two main categories:

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<sup>20</sup> N. Wolfson, *The Social Dynamics of Native and Non-native Variation in Complimentary Behaviors*, [in:] *The Dynamic Inter-language*, M. Eisenstein (ed.), New York 1989, pp. 219-236.

(a) appearance and/or possessions; and (b) ability and/or performance<sup>21</sup>. Studies of other varieties of English<sup>22</sup> and other languages<sup>23</sup> also indicate that these topics were the most frequent ones.

Also, whereas there were fewer Polish speakers who complimented on ‘ability and/or performance’ and other topics, there were more Poles who complimented on ‘appearance and/or possessions’. Typical compliments on appearance and/or possessions in Polish are shown in the following examples:

(8) *Fajnie ścięłaś włosy.*  
“Great haircut”.

(9) *Ładnie dziś wyglądasz.*  
“You look great today”.

(10) *Świetna spódnica!*  
“Great skirt!”

Typical compliments on ability and/or performance in Polish are shown in the following examples:

(11) *Świetnie wykonane zadanie, trzymaj tak dalej.*  
“Well done, keep going!”

(12) *Pani potrafi świetnie poradzić sobie z każdą trudną sytuacją.*  
“You can cope with any difficult situation”.

As we can see, these kinds of compliments may be taken as praise.

The majority of compliments on ‘other topics’ concern personality/whole person, as illustrated in the following examples:

(13) *Niesamowita z ciebie dziewczyna.*  
“You’re a great girl”.

(14) *Ależ to co pani robi, jest niesamowite!*  
“What you are doing is out of this world!”

<sup>21</sup> J. Manes, *Compliments: A Mirror of Cultural Value*, [in:] *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition*, 9, N. Wolfson, E. Judd (eds), Rowley 1983, pp. 96-102.

<sup>22</sup> R.K. Herbert, *Sex-based Differences in Compliments Behavior*, “Language in Society” 19, 1990, pp. 201-224; J. Holmes, *Compliments and Compliment Responses in New Zealand English*, “Anthropological Linguistics” 28, 1986, pp. 85-508.

<sup>23</sup> B. Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, *Praising and complimenting*, [in:] *Contrastive pragmatics*, W. Oleksy (ed.), Amsterdam and Philadelphia 1983, pp. 73-100.

Our data may suggest that the Polish tendency to compliment more on 'ability and/or performance' is due to the desire to emphasize the virtues and qualities of individuals as having a greater social value than good looks or possessions. In contrast, it appears that the major function of compliments for American English speakers is to create solidarity between the speaker and the addressee.

Their inclination to pay compliments on appearance and/or possessions<sup>24</sup> has to do with the fact that originality is very highly valued in American society. Thus, offering a compliment is appropriate whenever an acquaintance is seen with something new. This is the type of praise most often heard, and it is generally employed as an expression of solidarity.

#### Addresser-addressee relationship and compliments

It has been stated that the relationship between the addresser and the addressee is a vital factor affecting compliment behavior because the 'who' and 'whom' elements often constitute the most important components of any sociolinguistic or speech act study<sup>25</sup>. This relationship reveals two important parameters in pragmatic research, namely social status and distance. A speaker's social status is an essential variable in language use. This applies to compliments without exception, for it seems apparent that people of different social status show a discrepancy in their strategies, topics, and frequency of complimenting. Taking into account Polish and English speakers, one can notice that the great majority of compliments occur in interactions between people of equal status. This finding seems to be consistent with Holmes' study<sup>26</sup> on New Zealand English and Wolfson's study<sup>27</sup> on American English.

In Polish tradition it is apparent that lower status individuals are discouraged from taking the initiative in talking to higher-status persons unless some legitimate reasons exist. Violation of this implicit social convention by the lower status individual may offend the higher status person or be considered as shameless flattery by his/her peers. Conversely, in American culture, relative power is not significant and asymmetric power relations in a conversational interaction are often not recognized. Hence, taking the initiative in paying a compliment to a person of higher status will usually not incur offence.

<sup>24</sup> J. Holmes, *Paying Compliments: A Sex-preferential Positive Politeness Strategy*, "Journal of Pragmatics" 12, 1988, pp. 445-465.

<sup>25</sup> N. Wolfson, *The Social Dynamics of Native and Non-native Variation in Complimentary Behaviors*, [in:] *The Dynamic Inter-language*, M. Eisentein (ed.), New York 1989, pp. 219-236.

<sup>26</sup> J. Holmes, *Paying Compliments: A Sex-preferential Positive Politeness Strategy*, "Journal of Pragmatics" 12, 1988, pp. 445-465.

<sup>27</sup> N. Wolfson, *Compliments in Cross-cultural Perspective*, "TESOL Quarterly" 15, 1981, pp. 117-123.

### Who compliments who and for what purpose – a contrastive study

This analysis is based on a questionnaire which was placed on two websites that allow of the electronic processing of responses. The questionnaire for speakers of Polish was placed on the site [www.ankietka.pl](http://www.ankietka.pl) and the ones for speakers of English and Russian on [www.kwiksurveys.com](http://www.kwiksurveys.com). The questionnaire for the Poles was in Polish, and those for Russians and the English – in English. To get access to the questionnaire the volunteers had to contact the author in order to obtain the code. This was meant to secure feedback in case of a doubt.

The request for cooperation was published on [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com) and [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com) and addressed to different interest groups that had native speakers of English, Polish and Russian. It was clearly stated that the questionnaires were addressed only to native speakers of a particular language. It was stipulated that 100 respondents were required for each of the three languages and the respective file closed automatically upon attaining 100 responses. The questionnaires were activated in October 2010, and closed automatically as mentioned above. It is not surprising that the majority of respondents in each group said they paid compliments predominantly to women.

It is remarkable that the Polish respondents admitted to paying more compliments to females of higher social status and of the same age and older (32%), with Russians coming in second (20%). The English respondents proved to be less snobbish indicating that they pay compliments to females who are the same age as them but whose social status is lower (23%) – compare this with the Polish – 0%, and Russians – 4%. When we look at what the respondents reported they complimented people on, we can also see some differences. The Polish paid more compliments on a person's looks – 73%, compared with 52% for the British and 51% for Russians. Russians paid more compliments on a person's possessions – 43% compared with 20% for the Polish as well as the British. The British paid compliments on achievements more often than the Polish and Russians – 25% against 7% and 5%, respectively. While the British answered they paid compliments simply to please a person – 69%, the Polish and Russian respondents proved less disinterested – they admitted to paying more compliments.

### Final remarks

The present research provides a new perspective on the analysis of compliment behavior in English, Polish and Russian. This study contributes to intercultural communication studies of speech acts as well as politeness. It can complement the previous research and launch another research agenda. The cross-cultural study of compliments

and compliment responses strategies can help teachers and business people find out how to exploit compliments in everyday life when encountering new cultures. It also helps to strengthen the language learners' pragmatic consciousness in language use. The information regarding the patterns and lexical carriers of compliments and compliment responses in this study, together with the examples taken from the questionnaires, can provide a useful tool for some teachers to raise students' awareness of cultural similarities and differences in compliments and compliment responses.

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### **Komplementowanie w różnych kulturach: kontrastywna analiza komplementów i reakcji na nie w językach angielskim, polskim i rosyjskim**

**Streszczenie.** Mówienie komplementów i reagowanie na nie to nieodzowny element pozytywnej komunikacji. Mając na uwadze wszechobecność aktu, jakim jest komplementowanie oraz reagowanie na komplementy, celem niniejszego artykułu uczyniłam ukazanie międzykulturowych różnic oraz podobieństw podczas formułowania i odbierania komplementów ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem badań w obszarze pragmatyki i socjolingwistyki. Badania przedstawione w artykule zostały opracowane w oparciu o wyniki badań o charakterze kontrastowym w obrębie języków polskiego, angielskiego i rosyjskiego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** komplementy, komunikacja międzykulturowa, odpowiedzi na komplement

### **A Study of Compliments across Cultures: A Contrastive Analysis of Compliments and Compliments Responses in English, Polish and Russian**

**Summary.** As positive speech acts, compliments and compliment responses seem to play an important role in daily verbal communication. Incorporating a questionnaire survey as well as pragmatic theories and sociolinguistic views of differences in language, this study investigated intercultural differences in compliments and compliment responses. The findings presented in the paper are based on a contrastive study of compliments and responses to them involving individuals representing Anglo, Polish, and Russian cultures. Compliments are usually considered as speech acts addressing other's positive face, yet they can be face-threatening.

**Key words:** compliments, intercultural communication, compliment responses