

A Comparative Analysis of English and Chinese Compliments

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Abstract

Compliment as a speech act is a tool for establishing friendship that creates ties of solidarity in different cultures. This paper introduces the background theories concerning studies of the speech act of complimenting. It makes comparison about making compliments in English and in Chinese from the perspectives of topics, semantic and syntactic structures followed by discussing differences and similarities in performing compliments in two cultures. Moreover, implications of the study to foreign language teaching and learning are provided and the significance of integrating culture teaching to enhance learner's pragmatic competence and smooth their cross-cultural communication is emphasized.

Keywords: Compliment, Speech act, Politeness theory, Cross-cultural communication, Foreign language teaching

1. Introduction

The compliment is a polite speech act that frequently occurs in people's daily verbal interaction. Paying appropriate compliments and identifying them accurately is an aspect of communicative competence which may differ in a variety of ways from one culture to another (Holmes, 1987). Any speech act reflects a variety of cultural norms and values, and so do complimenting behaviors. The study of compliments in different cultures helps people better understand different cultural norms and provides insights for language learners and teachers.

2. Background theories

2.1 Cross-cultural pragmatics

Yule (1996, p. 4) describes "pragmatics" as "the study of the relationships between linguistic forms and the users of those forms". With the international communication among people who come from different ethical, social and cultural backgrounds, cross-cultural pragmatics as one field of pragmatics is gaining increasing attention. Cross-cultural pragmatics generally refers to studies which investigate the cross-cultural use of speech acts (Paltridge, 2006). The main premise of it is that cultural values, beliefs, assumptions and communication strategies of the user are reflected by language use (Lo Castro, 2003). Wierzbicka (2003) also demonstrates that different pragmatic norms reflect different cultural values which are mirrored in what people say and their intentions of their saying in different cultural contexts.

2.2 Speech act of compliment

Compliment is a speech act which expresses courteous praise explicitly or implicitly to someone for some good (character, deed or skills, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer

(Holmes, 1986). Hebert (1989) notes that compliments were either explicit or implicit, corresponding in part to the distinction between direct and indirect speech act. Explicit compliments are recognized as compliments outside of context. For example “You are looking good.” and “I like your hairstyle.” While implicit compliments are those do not necessarily relates to something done by the hearer directly, since we may compliment someone on his intelligence or ability for which he is responsible.

The compliment speech act has the structure of an “adjacency pair operation” (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973, p. 296) or “action chain event” (Pomerantz, 1978, pp. 109-110). As the general social convention and the rule of the adjacency pair demand, the first part of an utterance pair must evoke a response. Thus, if A compliments B, B should make verbal response. That is, the compliment act is a two-unit turn in which utterance 1 and utterance 2 are linked by both temporal and relevancy conditions. This can be seen in the following example (Herbert, 1990, p. 53):

A: That's a beautiful sweater.

B: Thanks, my sister made it for me.

B is conditionally relevant and sequentially dependent on A. One may schematize the general structure of the compliment speech event as A compliments B and B responds/ acknowledges that A has spoken.

2.3 Politeness theory and compliments

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory has been regarded as the one that most clearly maintains its cultural validity, thus evidently claiming its application as a basis for cross-cultural comparison. They adopted Goffman's sociological notion of “face” to account for politeness in behavior. They characterized face as the public self-image and argued that the speaker comes into any conversation with two seemingly conflicting face wants: a negative face want and a positive face want. According to them, paying a compliment is largely a positive politeness strategy, for it signals the complimenter's attending to the complimentee's interests and needs to be liked and thus addresses the positive face of the latter. But responding to a compliment can be a face-threatening act. If one refuses a compliment, he/she may threaten the complimenter's positive face. Conversely, if one accepts the compliment, he/she may threaten his/her own negative face.

Different from Brown and Levison, Geoffrey Leech's (1983) proposal is more elaborate. Leech laid emphasis on the normative or regulative aspect of politeness. He proposes to supplement Grice's Cooperative Principle with the politeness principle. His politeness principle consists of at least six maxims, such as the Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modest, Agreement and Sympathy. In Leech's politeness principles and maxims, there is a more general law that politeness is focused more strongly on other than self. According to Leech's politeness principle, compliment is the application of Approbation Maxim, that is, to minimize dispraise of other and maximize praise of other. Each maxim of Leech's politeness principle is not equally important in different cultures. For example, the Americans and Chinese are found to use largely different politeness strategies: the former are mostly motivated by Leech's Agreement maxim, whereas the latter are driven by Modesty maxim more commonly.

Like Western cultures, linguistic indirectness in Chinese is also driven by politeness concerns and thus serves as a face-redressive strategy (Zhang, 1995). However, the Chinese concept of face and politeness is different from that of western cultures (see Gu, 1990; Ho, 1975; Mao, 1994). Base on Chinese data, Gu Yueguo (1990) modified some of Leech's assumptions and put forward politeness principles that are claimed to be unique features of Chinese politeness. His principles include our maxims: Self-denigration, Address, Tact and Generosity. Among these four maxims, the

Self-denigration which means denigrating self and respecting other, remaining as the core of the conception of politeness in modern Chinese, summarizes perfectly the politeness phenomenon with Chinese characteristics. Self-praise in Chinese is usually belittled as it can be considered as arrogance, while praising other is usually highly appreciated. Thus in responding to compliments, Chinese prefer employing non-acceptance strategies instead of accepting them in most occasions. In a culture where self-modesty is highly valued and where specific principles of politeness exist, what will the speaker offer to compliment and what will the hearer response certainly will differ largely from the cultures where individualism is highly encouraged.

3. Analyses of English and Chinese compliments

Complimenting is an important social strategy in that it functions as an opener for a conversation and allows meaningful social interaction to follow. One must bear in mind that compliment formulas, topics and responses are dependent on shared beliefs and values of the speech community coded into communicative patterns, and thus cannot be interpreted apart from social and cultural context. Here compliments in American English and Chinese will be contrasted to find the similarities and differences of the realization of this speech act in two different cultures.

3.1 Topics in English and Chinese compliments

Studies of the speech act of complimenting in different languages reveal that most of compliments fall into “only a few general topics” (Ye, 1995, p. 212). Despite the fact that there are some general topics people from different cultures compliment or comment upon, different cultures may have different preferential topics for compliments. Wolfson (1983) points out that in American English, there are generally two topics which have to do with appearance and comment on ability. Generally, Manes' (1983, p.101) findings replicate Wolfson's study. He also indicates that Americans are more likely to comment on personal appearance such as new “clothe” and “hair-dos” and such abilities as “well-done job, a skillfully-played game, and a good meal”.

In America, any change in appearance is deserved to compliment for showing one's interest or respect to others. Compliments on appearance are usually related to the result of individual effort, but less concerning about something born beauty. Compliment others like “You are beautiful” seldom happens, but “You look nice.” or “You look pretty.” are more common. Because Americans perceive the “artificial beauty” can represent their individualism much better. However, topics on appearance are not the most preferential in China. While female's looks is also a common topic though it does not lead a major part in compliment. Moreover, complimenting female's looks from men are usually considered as a taboo, except for jokes among acquaintances. Chinese compliments concerning appearance may usually go with “born beauty”. Accordingly, “天生丽质” is always considered as the highest evaluation to ladies in all ages. The different preferential verbs adopted in English compliments and Chinese compliments can fully account for it. Westerners like “look” better but seldom use “be” as frequently in Chinese cases.

Performance and ability are frequently visited topics for both Chinese and American English speakers and ability as a topic of compliments is more highly valued in the American English speakers according to Wolfson (1983). Compliments concerning achievement and ability differ in the following aspects: first, English compliments on achievement lay emphasis on the result of individual effort, similar to “appearance” discussed above, for example “You have done a very good job”; but on the contrary, compliments on achievement in Chinese are nature-oriented, that is person's natural wisdom,

aptitude, gift are greatly valued. “这孩子真聪明”(The boy is so clever) is quite common compliment among Chinese people.

3.2 Linguistic forms of English and Chinese compliments

Manes and Wolfson (1981) found that compliments are remarkably formulaic speech acts. This formulaic nature can be shown by the limited range of lexical items, which are the positive semantic carriers of compliments, and some frequently used syntactic patterns and structures which convey the compliments. They study 686 American and find that “the majority of compliments contain one of a highly restricted set of adjectives and verbs” (Manes & Wolfson, 1981, p.116). From their data, five adjectives including nice, good, beautiful, pretty and great, and two verbs, like and love, are found most frequently used in English compliments. While the positive semantic carrier in Chinese compliments can be realized by either an Adjective/Stative Verb, an Adverb, a Noun or a Verb. According to data collected by Jia Yuxin (1997, p.365), Adjectives like“好、行、能干”etc. and adverbs like“真、很、太”etc. have frequently turned up. And it is worth mentioning that adjectives combined with such adverbs as “你真能干”express a kind of intensified compliments.

Manes and Wolfson (1981) also analyze the syntactic structure of the compliments in their data. Holmes (1986) conclude that in their data three most commonly occurring syntactic patterns can account for 85% of the compliments in American English. Based on Manes and Wolfson’s study, Jia (1997) made a comparison on the syntactic patterns of English and Chinese compliments.

The most frequently used syntactic patterns in English compliments	The most frequently used syntactic patterns in Chinese compliments
NP {be/look} (Intensifier) Adj. e.g., You look really lovely.	(Your) NP (Adv.) Adj. (你的这件羊毛衫真漂亮). (You) V. NP (Adv.) Adj. (你穿这件夹克真漂亮). (You V.) (Adv.) Adj. (你做的工作真好).
I (Intensifier) {like/love} NP e.g., I simply love that shirt.	
Pro be a (Intensifier) Adj. NP e.g., That's a really nice coat.	Pro. is (really) (a) Adj. NP. (那真是一幅漂亮的油画。)

From the comparison we may find that American English compliments and Chinese compliments share some similarities but they still bear some differences. First, the pattern “NP (Adv.) Adj” plays the leading role in both English and Chinese when performing complimentary behavior. Second, the fact in English and Chinese data of all compliments fall into only three syntactic patterns lead to conclusion that compliments are formulas in syntactic structure. Third, it can also be distinguished in English compliments and Chinese compliments while referring to the use of personal pronoun as subject, for example, the pattern "I like/love NP" and "Pro is (really)(a) Adj NP", which are frequently used forms in English compliments are seldom recognized as compliments in Chinese. American English compliments have the 1st person pronoun as their subjects, while the 1st person pronoun is seldom used as subjects in Chinese compliments. Many Chinese complimenting sentences begin with the 2nd person pronoun such as“你”, or“你的”. The main reasons are that, outgoing personality and individualism make English speaking people are ready to express their views from freely, while Chinese people are inhabited relatively and they put emphasis on the relationship between self and other by avoiding using "I love/like NP" which may be considered as a symbol of arrogance and unfriendliness in many cases.

4. Implications for foreign language teaching and learning

From the above discussions we see that speech acts are the manifestations of cultural values. Complimenting as a speech act is branded with cultural trail and has its particular topical, semantic and syntactic features. For the English as their Foreign Language (EFL) Chinese learners, sometimes it is hard to find the appropriate topic for complimenting or they are quite unaware of the formulaic nature of the compliments given and received. Thus, misunderstandings are likely to occur when they interact with English native speakers who come from totally different cultural and social background. These misunderstandings are not due to their lack of linguistic knowledge but the lack of pragmatic knowledge which may result in cross-cultural pragmatic failures termed by Thomas (1983) as the failure to convey or understand a pragmatic intention in another language and culture. Therefore, it is relatively of great advantage of speakers from different cultural backgrounds to acquire the ability to give and interpret the speech acts in different social and cultural contexts. And of course this is the responsibility of EFL teachers to give explicit instructions to their students in performing speech acts in English properly and therefore enhance students' cultural awareness and pragmatic competence to avoid cross-cultural pragmatic failures.

As many scholars (Byram & Morgan, 1994; Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999; Hinkel, 1999; Hatoss, 2004; Moran, 2001) indicate, language and culture are fused together and teaching culture is an indispensable part of teaching language, especially foreign or second language. Culture is everywhere in communication, so the language learners need to have the cultural knowledge which are used in their interactions with other people and the world. The proper use of a compliment makes good sense when the expressions of admiration, approval and encouragement are considered as social strategies across different social groupings and promote efficient interpersonal communication. Only if the learners have enough knowledge of culture of the target language speaking country, he can well master the target language, with not only linguistic competence but also communicative competence.

5. Conclusion

This essay compares Chinese and English compliment speech act from the aspects of compliment syntactic formula, semantic formula and topics and analyzes the differences and similarities between them based on the cultural factors. Both Chinese compliments and English compliments can be interpreted as formulaic in basic semantic and syntactic patterns and topics on compliment. Both of them, however, contain their own peculiar emphasis within these aspects. English compliments are formulaic in nature and lack of originality in terms of syntactic structure and lexical items while those in Chinese are much more specific and original, being realized by a wide variety of terms and structures. Chinese compliments show more ritualized phrases related to Chinese culture, whereas English compliments remains in the range of limited adjectives and verbs. Chinese compliments favor the topics on achievements and abilities, while English compliments concentrate more on the topics on appearance and possession. In general, the hierarchal tradition and Confucianism are the main influencing factors of Chinese compliments and American complimenting speech acts are rooted in individualism and equality.

The essay also provides practical educational implications in foreign language learning and teaching. EFL teachers may need to incorporate more cross-cultural pragmatic analyses in their teaching to address the learner's possible communicative problems and EFL learners may need to better understand pragmatic factors of the target culture in order not only to speak grammatically but also to appropriately interpret what they hear and to interact effectively with members of the target culture.

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