

PATTERNS OF RESPONSES TO COMPLIMENTS ON PHYSICAL APPEARANCE IN SUNDANESE WOMEN

Refdi Akmal

State Polytechnics of Lampung
E-mail: refdi_akmal@yahoo.com

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Abstract: Complimenting as a speech event has been one of the major areas on which linguists have focused their attention and drawn insights into the phenomenon of linguistic politeness in the last two decades (Zanrong 2004). Some previous research – among others are by Davis (2008); Heidari (2009); Matsuoka (2009) – revealed that gender give rise variations of strategies on compliment responses (CR). This paper examines Sundanese women responses to compliments on appearance addressed by the same and different gender. The research applied Naturalized Role Play method in collecting the data by observing the way of 68 women giving response to the compliment addressed on their physical appearance. The respondents were native Sundanese women living around Bandung. The study found that most women respond differently to compliments addressed to them by women and by men. This study also reveals that most of them considered the compliments – particularly when addressed by men – as a way of either maintaining social hospialities or joking, and thus, the speech acts of compliments appear more to be a way of consolidating solidarity among them.

Keywords: *politeness, compliments, patterns of response*

INTRODUCTION

Compliments are recognized as an important speech act in a socio-cultural context. It is interesting to see the way people respond to the compliments addressed to them which simply features value systems hold within the society. Jing (2005) mentioned that different value systems are reflected in speech acts; thus, different interpretations of a certain speech act sometimes cause misunderstandings of the speaker's intention. In fact, some research as indicated by Parisi and Wogan (2006) cited in Davies (2008) that there is a growing field of research pertaining to compliment behavior and its relation to both status and gender. Davies also noted that gender plays very significant

role in the variation of compliment and compliment responses. In his study, Davies noted that women preferred responses that could be considered less face threatening which are mostly in term of acknowledging a compliment, returning a compliment or changing the topic all together.

In interactions between females and males, Manes and Wolfson (1981) – as cited in Han – found that women appear both to give and receive compliments much more frequently than do men, especially when compliments have to do with apparel and appearance.

Despite the studies carried out in terms of compliments responses within cross cultures setting, this study is in attempt to see the pattern of compliment responses when they are uttered by the

same and different gender basis within a single culture setting. This research tried to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Sundanese women respond to compliments addresses to their appearance?
2. How differently do women respond to compliments addressed to their appearance when addressed by women and by men?

Compliments are recognized as an important speech act in a socio-cultural context. Some researchers defined this act in varied terms. Hobbs, 2003:249 cited in Heidari(2009) stated that a compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly bestows credit upon the addressee for some possession, skill, characteristic, or the like, that is positively evaluated by the speaker and addressee. While Holmes (1988) – cited in Han – mentioned that to be heard as a compliment an utterance must refer to something which is positively valued by the participants and attributed to the addressee. In addition, Holmes also states that compliments are positively affective speech acts, the most obvious function they serve is to oil the social wheels, paying attention to positive face wants and thus increasing or consolidating solidarity between people.

However, Heidari (2009) indicated that compliments may also be regarded as a threat to negative face, even while paying attention to positive face. He mentions that speech acts of compliment and compliment responses (CR) are conversational devices of interpersonal relationships in daily life. The use of CR as a phatic expression (more of a 'ritual' type) may also play a particular role in maintaining the solidarity of interpersonal relationships and the harmony of social interaction. For example, during this study a female

informant mentioned that her answer to a compliment on appearance ("Hey, you look great! You're really beautiful today") would be "Cheers! So do you", even if the addressee was not good looking.

Relating to this research, I would like to follow the definition stated by Holmes (1988, p. 446) as cited by Heidari (2009) that is, "a compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some "good" (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and hearer." Heidari also added that "There is an infinite number of words that could be chosen to compliment, but the set of lexical items and grammatical patterns we use in our daily interaction when complimenting and have high frequency in our daily discourse are very restricted".

The first researcher who discussed compliment responses from a pragmatic perspective was Pomerantz in 1978. She claimed that Americans face two dilemmas when responding to compliments: (A) they have to agree with the speaker, and (B) they have to avoid self-praise (Urano, 2000). Urano further explains this dilemma by stating that when a recipient of a compliment responds by agreeing with the speaker (Condition A), it violates Condition B as this response goes against the sociolinguistic expectations of the speaker. On the other hand, if the speaker doesn't accept the compliment to avoid self-praise, the response will be face-threatening since it violates Condition A. To mediate this conflict, recipients of compliments resolve to a variety of solutions: (1) Acceptance, (2) Rejection, and (3) Self-praise avoidance.

Herbert (1986) revised Pomerantz's taxonomy by analyzing American English speakers' compliment responses. He collected more than a thousand samples of compliment responses from American college students in a three-year

period project. Surprisingly, only 36.35% compliment responses were accounted for by acceptance. Herbert ended up with a three-category, twelve-type taxonomy of compliment responses.

Table 1. Herbert's taxonomy of compliment responses

Response Type	Example
A Agreement	
1. Acceptance	
• Appreciation tokens	Thanks, Thank you
• Comment acceptance	Yeah, I really like it too
• Praise Upgrade	I look better with it, right?
2. Comment History	I got it from that store
3. Transfer	
• Reassignment	It's not mine, it belongs to my brother
• Return compliment	You are too
B Non Agreement	
1. Scale down	It's quite old actually
2. Questions	Do you think so?
3. Non Acceptance	
• Disagreement	I hate it
• Qualification	But Jack's is better
4. No Acknowledgement	(silence)
C Other Interpretation	
• Request	You want to borrow this one too?

Since then, a number of contrastive studies have been conducted to compare compliment responses in different languages and language varieties. Arabic and South African English speakers were found to prefer accepting compliments rather than reject them. Speakers of Asian languages, on the other hand, were likely to reject compliments (Urano, 2000).

Wolfson (1989) in Ishihara (2006) collected observational data on compliments from authentic interaction between native and non-native speakers over a period of two years. She found out that L2 speakers did understand the function of compliments as "a social lubricant" in the American culture. They had difficulty in responding appropriately to compliments. In another contrastive study of compliment

responses between Chinese learners of English and American NSs of English, Chen (1993) in Urano (2000) found out that the majority of Chinese NNSs of English rejected compliments, compared to the American NSs who accepted and appreciated those compliments.

More recently, Cedar's (2006) contrastive study of compliment responses used by Thai NNSs of English and American NSs of English revealed significant differences in responses to English compliments between the two groups. While Americans tended to accept compliments and elaborate positively in their responses, Thai NNSs of English refrained from elaborating and used formulaic expressions in their responses. A number of research has revealed that compliment and responses

to compliment appear to be very affected by the culture view of the society.

METHOD

Participants in this study fell into two categories: role-play informants and role-play conductors. All participants gave consent for their data to be used for research purposes. There were eleven conductors involved and 68 women interviewed as the informants. They were high school and college students, employees and housewives. All participants were in certain social relationship with the conductors, relatives, classmates, colleagues, or neighbors.

The major source of data for this research project comes from the Naturalized Role-play (Tran, 2008). There were 68 role-play informants who were naturally Sundanese native women all have been living in the area since they were born. All of them were university students, employees, and housewives ranging in age from eighteen to forty years. So they showed homogeneity in terms of age, education and profession. Following are details of the role-play informants.

There were eleven role-play conductors who were recruited voluntarily for this research. They consisted of 6 women and 5 men conductors. In this case, five of the women conductors were tertiary students having post graduate study in English education in Bandung, and a housewife – a land lady. While four of the men conductors were also tertiary students and one employee in a private company. They are recruited to fulfill need of varying the informants as they live and mingle in different residences. In this study each of them conducted six to ten interviews role-play.

In this study, the Naturalized Role-play is the main tool of data collection providing the major corpus of data for analysis. This methodology has proven to be an effective means of resolving the lasting controversy that the methodological issue in this field has engendered (Tran, 2008).

At the core of the Naturalized Role-play is the idea of eliciting spontaneous data in controlled settings. In the Naturalized Role-play, informants are not aware of the research focus during their role-play performance. They are conscious of being observed and studied in the whole procedure but not in the moments when they provide spontaneous data on a communicative act in focus. In this study, each informant participating in the Naturalized Role-play produced CRs to compliments on appearance and apparels.

After recruiting the conductors, the researcher explained the way the data should be obtained. All conductors were equipped with a piece of data eliciting form designed for this research to note any responses and information given by the informants.

In gaining the data, the conductors carried out certain conversations naturally with the informants without prior notification that the conversations were for the sake of this research. The conversations were conducted either in Bahasa Indonesia or Sundanese language. After the talks, then the conductors asked some necessary information related to the informants such as their personal information and their thought related to the way they responded to the compliments.

Data were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. In the qualitative analysis, CR data was coded according to the strategies selected to

reply to compliments. The qualitative analysis was based on the content of CRs. In the quantitative analysis, the frequency of occurrence of CR strategy combination patterns was calculated to show the numeric differences between CR strategy combination in women responses as well as the similarities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research revealed that the women do different responses to compliments addressed to them by women and men. The compliment responses uttered by the women informants appeared to be more varied when the compliments were addressed by men conductors. Besides, there were also other types of interpretation noted

during the research – the compliments regarded as jokes and insult to the hearers. The compliments which were interpreted as insults were mainly indicated by women’s perception of the men’s compliments addressed to them. In general, the findings can be presented as described in the table2.

The findings reveal that most of the women expressed appreciation tokens at the very first time the compliments addressed to them either by men or women. However, the appreciation tokens – in form of smiles or thanks – did not always indicate that they agreed the compliments. Most of the tokens were followed by utterances indicating either non agreement or rejections, in addition to those of agreements.

Table 2. Patterns of the women’s response to compliment

Women’s Response Type	Addressed by women		Addressed by men	
	N=33	%	N=35	%
A Agreement				
1. Acceptance				
• Appreciation tokens	30	90,9	27	77,14
• Comment acceptance	5	15,15	4	11,42
• Praise Upgrade	2	6,06	1	2,85
2. Comment History	2	6,06	2	5,71
3. Transfer				
• Reassignment	1	3,03		
• Return compliment	5	15,15	2	5,71
Sub total (excluding the tokens)	15	45,45	9	25,71
B Non Agreement				
4. Scale down	7	21,21	9	25,71
5. Questions	3	9,09	5	14,28
6. Non Acceptance				
• Disagreement			7	20
• Qualification				
7. No Acknowledgement	2	6,06		
8. Express embarrassment	2	6,06	3	8,57
Sub total	14	42,42	24	68,57
C Other Interpretation				
• Joking	3	9,09	7	20
• Insulting			3	8,57
Sub total	3	9,09	10	28,57

Related to the compliments addressed by women, there were 15

responses (45,45%) which indicated the acceptance of the women. This

acceptance were expressed in terms of comment acceptance (15,5%), comment history (6,06%), praise upgrade (6,06%), reassignment (3,03%) and return compliments (15,15%). In addition, there were 42,42% of non agreement patterns indicated through the speech. They fell into the patterns of scale down (21,21%), questions (9,09%), expressions of embarrassment (6,06%), and no acknowledgment (6,06%). The rest were other interpretation forms – in this case the compliments were considered as joke – which were noted from three responses (9,09%).

Unlike the compliments addressed by women, the compliments addressed by men were responded in such different patterns by the women. The patterns of agreement were shown by only nine responses (25,71%). The responses were expressed in terms of comment acceptance (11,42%), praise upgrade (2,85%), comment history (5,71%) and return compliments (5,71%).

On the other hand, the women seemed to respond the compliments addressed by men with more non agreement patterns. The responses which reached 68,7% of the total responses can be classified into several patterns. There were 25,71% responses were of scale down pattern, while 14,28% of them questioned the compliments. Other 20% indicated disagreement and 8,57% expressed embarrassment.

Different pattern of interpretations were also noted from the responses. There were 20% of them considered the compliments as jokes, and 8,57% considered the compliments insults for them. Few of them considered that it is not proper for the man to express such compliments. The utterances were either telling the men that they should not have done that or with other expressions

indicating this interpretation. The expressions may be illustrated as follow:

C : *“Teh, ngomong-ngomongrambutnya sekarang OK bangettu”*

“Teh, by the way, your hair looks so cool now”

I : *“Ah udahlah, ga usah ngejek gitu kenapa sih”*

“Ah come on. Don’t insult me that way”

The data also show that interestingly the women expressed more utterances in responding to the compliments addressed by men than those addressed by women. The women tended to responded to the compliments addressed by women with relatively shorter and fewer number of expressions than those to compliments addressed by men. Most of the time, the appreciation tokens expressed were followed by longer utterances indicating more than one pattern of responses. For example, after smiling or saying thanks then they also expressed questions and scale down patterns, as illustrated below:

Responding to compliments addressed by women:

C : *“Hey, nambahkerenajani”*

“Hey, you look more charming”

I : *“Ah masa’ sih. Makasihya”*

“Oh really? Thank you”.

While responding to compliments addressed by men, the pattern may be as follow:

C : *“Wah, jilbabnya matching bangetdenganbajunya. Kerentuh”*

Gee, your veil matches your dress very well. That’s cool!

I : *(tersenyum) Makasih. Emang masih bagus ya? Ini jilbab dah lama bangetga gue pake sih ..*

(smile) Thanks. Does it still look good? I haven’t put it on for quite long time actually.

Most of the women considered compliments either by men or by women

as social hospitalities instead of as sincere compliments. So responding to the compliments was more to be a way of saving the counterparts' face. In addition, they also treated compliments – more particularly compliments by men – as either jokes or something not proper to do. As the results, more responses indicating non agreement were uttered more frequently to this case.

CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to study the patterns of compliment responses uttered by women in the basis of gender influence. The findings indicated that in general the patterns were similar to what Herbert described in his taxonomy. However, we can find that no pattern of qualification applied by the respondents in this study. Besides, there was no type of reassignment expressed by the respondents when responding to compliments addressed by either the same or different gender.

Other patterns of interpretation also occurred in this study – the compliments were regarded as joking or insulting which were expressed by the women in responding to compliments by men. Although very few of the participants considered the compliments by different gender as insult, but their perceptions about it were of considerably valuable.

Language does reflect the identities of its users and to use it in an appropriate manner is crucial for us to live our social lives. The findings simply indicate that there is a different way of how the women maintain relationship among the same gender and different gender within the culture setting. It also reveals that maintaining solidarity within the interlocutors has been the main issue; thus, face saving acts have been a major concern in the way compliment responses expressed.

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