# Verbal Gifts: Compliment Statements and Compliment Responses in Social Interaction[4]

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ABSTRACT

This article is intended to examine the nature of compliment responses in conversational interactions between English speakers. I will follow Pomerantz (1978)'s and Herbert (1986, 1989)'s classifications of strategies in compliment responses. The data[5] on which the paper is based consist of one hundred English compliment statements and compliment responses gathered over a two-month period mostly in Scotland, but also in England, Germany, and Spain. Special attention is paid to the constraint systems underlying compliment responses (ie. the need to accept the compliment and avoid self-praise at the same time). The options available to the speaker in order to cope with these constraints are described. Finally, some conclusions on compliment competence are presented.

## Compliment Responses

"When you are complimented, the only response necessary is 'Thank you'. Don't disparage yourself. If someone admires your dress, don't say 'This old thing, I got it at a bargain basement sale'. A simple *thank you* is sufficient (Johnson 1979: 43-44 cited in Herbert 1989).

In his contrastive study of complimenting behaviour in American and South African English, Herbert (1989) maintains that in those English-speaking societies *thank you* is regarded as the appropriate response to a compliment. In Herbert's opinion: "Compliment responses are an interesting object of study since there is relatively strong agreement within the speech community as to what form constitutes a 'correct response'" (Herbert 1989:5).

It would appear at first sight that the question of which is the appropriate response to a compliment is a straightforward one. However, English speakers' awareness of the prescriptive norm may not be as strong as it seems. In fact, many speakers say they find it disconcerting to be complimented.

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## Conflicting Constraints on Compliment Responses

Responding to compliments is a troublesome exercise for many speakers. Such difficulty is mainly due to the social constraints governing compliment responding behaviour. This idea was first suggested by Pomerantz in her influential article *Compliment Responses: Notes on the co-operation of multiple constraints* (1978). In Pomerantz's view, there are two conflicting rules when responding to a compliment:

(a) agree with your conversational coparticipant
(b) avoid self-praise

The desire to avoid self-praise is obvious in the majority of the conversational sequences included in our corpus. However, the actual instances where recipients of compliments manage to avoid self praise and agree with the positive assertion at the same time are not so frequent.

There are different strategies available to the addressee in order to avoid self-praise, as we will later see. For the moment, let us just say that using downgrading devices, shifting the praise elsewhere or returning the compliment are some of the self-praise avoidance mechanisms most commonly used among speaker when agreeing with a prior compliment assertion.

## Compliment Response Types

In this section, the strategies in compliment responses and their pragmatic functions within the discourse will be analised. The description of the different compliment response (CR) types will be illustrated with 29 tokens taken from the corpus. Although Pomerantz's framework will be followed closely, it will be supplemented with some of the categories included in Herbert's taxonomy. The resulting classification seems to reflect the broad range of possible responses and their pragmatic functions.

Compliment Responses are divided into two big categories, according to whether Speaker2 agrees or disagrees with the compliment assertion of Speaker1.

## (a) Agreements

Pomerantz (1978) points at two main features of agreements. Firstly, the referent preservation across compliment statement and compliment response. Secondly, the frequent co-occurrance of acceptances of compliments (appreciation tokens) and agreements (second assessments in agreement).

*Acceptances*

Acceptances are the prescribed responses to compliments. Within the general category of acceptances, Herbert includes three subtypes of responses:

- Appreciation Tokens
- Comment Acceptances
- Praise Upgrades

*Appreciation Tokens*

Acceptances of complimentary assertions are usually expressed through verbal appreciation tokens such as *thank you, thanks, thank you so much*, and *well, thank you*, or non-verbal ones like smiles and nods (Pomerantz 1978, Herbert 1989). The following data segments from our corpus are examples of verbal and non-verbal appreciation tokens:

(66) M1: *Uhm, that's a nice shirt!*
M2: *Thank you.*

(88) F1: *I really like your dress!*
F2: *Oh, thanks.*

(98) M: *I'm really looking forward to reading this!*
F: (smiles)

*Comment Acceptance*

Data segments (45), (52), and (64) are further examples of Comment Acceptance. The complementee accepts the compliment with an appreciation token (*Thanks*) and adds relevant comments about the item being complimented.

(45) F1: *Nice bag!*
F2: *Thanks. It's new. It's a knapsack but also a briefcase.*

(52) M: *You look really nice!*
F: *Oh, thank you. It's because I'm teaching.*

(64) F1: *Did you get your hair coloured?*
F2: *Yes!*
F1: *It looks nice!*
F2: *Yes. Thanks. I just wanted a change.*

## Praise Upgrade

The third subtype of CR falling into the category of Acceptances is the Praise Upgrade. By using this type of response, the complementee not only accepts the complimentary force of the previous assertion, but considers it as being insufficient.

In the following example, taken from a conversation among intimates, the complimentary force of the giver's positive evaluation is increased by the receiver.

(72) F: *You look very nice today, Matt!*
     M: *Of course!*

By supporting the favourable evaluation of the previous utterance, the complementee is flouting the Avoid Self-Praise norm. Data segment (72) is the only instance of Praise Upgrade response found in the corpus. This may be due to the fact that, as Herbert suggests, "Such Praise Upgrades typically have a joking or playful connotation, and they may occur only among close acquaintances" (Herbert 1989:13).

## Comment History

A response variety not included in Pomerantz taxonomy is what Herbert calls Comment History. Although similar to Comment Acceptance, this type of response differs from the former in that here the recipient does not accept the praise personally. In the following conversational exchange, the complementee explicitly agrees with speaker1's original assertion and adds a History Comment in her response.

(33) F1: *The colour of this bowl is fantastic, eh. Good choice!*
     F2: I know. I have one already and all my friends like it, so I'm buying one
     for one of them. I always get compliments on it.

## Solution Types to Conflicting Constraints

According to Pomerantz, there are different turn types which may be used by complementees in order to cope with the dilemma of accepting a compliment and avoiding self-praise at the same time:

- ▸ Agreement with praise-downgrade
- ▸ Agreement about praiseworthiness but with praise shifted to third party
- ▸ Return the compliment

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Pomerantz refers to these turn types under the category of *solution types*, since they contribute to solve the conflicting requirements inherent in face-motivated behaviour (Brown and Levinson 1978:39).

## Praise downgrades

Praise downgrades or Scale-down agreements are one type of response which show an awareness and partial satisfaction of the two conflicting preferences mentioned above (Pomerantz 1978). The complementee agrees with the prior praise assessment but reduces its complimentary force, by replacing the strong-positive evaluative terms offered by the giver, with more moderate-positive terms. In the following example, the complimentary force of speaker1's original assertion (*the best*) is downgraded in the recipient's response through the use of a less positive descriptor (*very good*) followed by a tag question and a Comment History.

(35) F1: *I think that's the best chocolate cake in Edinburgh.*
F2: *Yes. It's very good, isn't it? We make it ourselves. Our chefs are upstairs, in the kitchen.*

As Pomerantz points out, Scaled-down agreements exhibit features of both agreements and disagreements: "On the one hand they are formed as agreements, namely, second praises with more moderate terms. On the other hand, the replacements of the evaluation terms constitute discrepancies which may engender successive reassertions of the parties' respective positions" (Pomerantz 1978:96).

In example (48), the addressee responds to his interlocutor's prior positive assessment by replacing the evaluation terms:

(48) F: *Your son's very nice!*
M: *Yes. He's quite nice.*

Notice how although both giver and receiver use the same positive descriptor (*nice*), the intensifying adverb *very* uttered by the complementer boosts the force of the compliment, whereas the adverb *quite* included in the response attenuates the illocutionary force of the previous assertion. Holmes (1984:354) use the terms *boosters* and *downtoners* to refer to the items used to modify the illocutionary force of a speech act.

## Referent Shift

Referent Shifts, further sub-divided into Reassignment of Praise and Returns,

allow the recipient to transfer the praise to a third party or to the item itself (Reassignment of Praise) and to pay back the compliment (Return).

*Reassignment of Praise*

> (41) (→) F1: *This sauce is absolutely delicious!*
> (←) F2: *Is it? It's really easy to make.*
> (→) F1: *I bet it isn't. If I made it, I bet it wouldn't turn out like this.*
> (←) F2: *Oh yes, it would. It's really easy.*

In the above sequence Speaker 2's response to the compliment includes a question (*Is it?*) and a shift of the credit away from herself (←). In the next turn, speaker 1 returns the credit to the addressee, who again transfers the positive assertion to the object complimented, therefore denying personal merit. Other examples of reassignment of praise include:

> (1) (→) F1: *That's a lovely dress!*
> (←) F2: *Thanks. It's my flatmate's.*

> (5) (→) F1: *This hummus tastes delicious!*
> (←) F2: *Michael made it today. Usually I make it but today he did.*

*Return*

In this CR type the praise is returned to the complimenter, instead of being shifted away from the complementee to a third party or the item complimented. According to Chen: "Returning compliment can be seen as a direct result of the indebting nature of compliment. It helps the responder to get out of the debt by returning the verbal gift to the complimenter" (Chen 1988:58).

In the present corpus there are several exchanges, mostly between intimates, where the addressee reciprocates the act of complimenting by offering praise to the addressor:

> (73) F: *You've got beautiful eyes!*
> M: *So have you!*

> (81) F: *These clothes really suit you!*
> M: *You don't look bad yourself.*

> (86) F1: *Your hair looks really nice!*
> F2: *Thanks. So does yours.*

## (b) Non Agreements

*Acknowledgment*
*Scale-down*

In this type of CR, "the praise of the compliment may be scaled down by Speaker2, thereby minimizing the force of the compliment" (Herbert 1989:15). Let us look at the following example.

> (4)  F1: *I like your trousers.*
>     F2: *They are very old.*
>     F1: *Old things are nice.*
>     F2: *Yes, that's true.*

Although the addressee does not explicitly deny the complimentary force of the Speaker1's assertion, her comment *They are very old* is intended to mitigate the force of the compliment. However, she ends up accepting the validity of the compliment assertion.

*Question*
This type of response has the following pattern;

> A1   A compliments B
> A2   B questions A about compliment assertion + (asks for repetition, clarification, or expansion of compliment assertion).
> A3   A repeats, clarifies, or expands compliment assertion.
>                                                   (Valdés and Pino 1981:60)

In the present corpus there is a small number of examples of this CR variety:

> (60) F1: *Your project is very good!*
>     F2: *Really?*
>     F1: *It's excellent! I really enjoyed reading it!*
>     F2: *Thanks.*

In the above example, speaker2 requests an expansion of her interlocutor's prior asserted position by saying *'Really?'*. In her next turn, the complimenter upgrades the complimentary force offered in the original assertion (*very good -> excellent*). A further compliment follows. According to Valdés and Pino, this type

of response: "permits the complimented individual to seem modest by displaying uncertainty about the subject of the compliment and simultaneously obliges the first speaker to repeat the compliment and, with such a repetition, end the compliment sequence" (Valdés and Pino 1981:61).

In the following exchanges, the receiver responds to the compliment by requesting for an expansion of the positive assertion.

(2)  F₁:*Oh, that's lovely*! (holding the addressee's necklace)
     F₂: *Do you like it?*
     F₁: *Yes, it's beautiful.*
     F₂: *I bought it in Australia.*

(34) F: *You look really well today!*
     M: *Oh, do I?*


In example (34) the complimenter did not insist on pursuing the compliment until a definite acceptance was achieved. Obviously, without more contextual information we cannot say why this was the case.

## Disagreement

Three different types of compliment response may be distinguished within the general category of Disagreements:

►    Direct contrastive counterassertions
►    Diminution of credit
►    Qualification of prior praises

## Direct contrastive counterassertions

When responding to compliments, speakers do not normally deny the complimenter's prior positive assertion by using directly contrastive opposites. To do so would be tantamount to questioning the complimenter's judgement. However, there is an instance in our data where speaker1 responds to a compliment by uttering a direct contrastive counterassertion.

(70) F₁: *You are a very good person, Kate.*
     F₂: *No, I'm not.*

Such a response may be disconcerting to the complimenter. Given the face-threatening nature of direct contrastive counterassertions, two other subtypes of disagreement responses are more commonly used.

*Diminution of credit*

A frequent response is one that downgrades the prior favourable assessment. When offered dinner while watching TV, a girl said to her boyfriend;

(75) F: *This is great! Exactly what I needed!*

to which he replied

M: *It's only sausages, not exactly much effort*

thus giving his own evaluation of the object of the compliment. Notice the replacement of evaluation terms (the complimentee's *only sausages* and *Not exactly much effort* to refer to what had previously been qualified by the complimenter as *Perfect* and *Exactly what I needed!*). By using such terms, the recipient of the compliment is disassociating himself from the giver's prior asserted position. However, speaker1 disagrees with speaker2's diminution of credit by saying (*No!*) and reasserts credit (*It's perfect!*);

F: *No! It's perfect! I'm so hungry!*
M: \silence\

Apparently, speaker 2 did not reply; he just went on eating his dinner and watching TV. A similar example was taken from a conversation between a university student and a member of staff, who was asked to photocopy a poem on an aerogramme.

(99) F: *Great! Well done!*
M: *It's not centred...*
F: *It's perfect!*

Scaling-down of prior praise is used when responding to compliments not only in disagreements but in agreements as well. In both cases, negotiations between the giver and the receiver of the compliment occur. As Pomerantz suggests, these negotiations "follow predictable directions: Recipients downgrade

prior praise, and profferers upgrade the prior downgrades" (Pomerantz 1978:101). This is illustrated by the arrows in the already mentioned examples:

(75) (↗) F: *This is great! Exactly what I needed!*
(↘) M: *It's only sausages, not exactly much effort.*
(↗) F:  No! It's perfect! I'm so hungry!
M: \silence\

(99) (↗) F: *Great! Well done!*
(↘) M: *It's not centred...*
(↗) F: *It's perfect!*


*Qualification of prior praises*
Finally, the main way  in which disagreements are shown is with qualifications of the prior evaluative terms. As Pomerantz (1978) suggests, this type of responses usually contains markers like *though*, *yet*, and *but*. In the following conversational sequence,  the recipient does not fully agree with the positive assertion offered by the complimenter.

(43) F1: *You look really nice: healthy and really fresh!*
F2: *Oh, I don't think so. I'm just hot and in a bad mood. Maybe that's why I have some colour.*
F1: *No, you look really fresh!*
F2: *Oh, thanks.*

Speaker 2 thinks that the praise included in the previous utterance is overdone and disagrees with it.  She qualifies the praise, by uttering a second evaluation she can subscribe. This forces the complimenter to reassert the praise until the recipient finally accepts the compliment. Further examples of qualifications of praise are:

(82) F1: *I like your blouse. It's really nice.*
F2: *Thank you, but I think it's a bit low* (pointing at the neckline). *I keep having to pull it up.*

(74) M: *Nice hair cut!*
F: *Oh, thanks, but it's a bit short maybe.*

Interestingly enough, the recipient of the above compliment later conceded to this researcher "I don't really think that, so I'm not sure why I said it". Presumably, she was, consciously or not, influenced by the social constraint against self-praise.

## No Acknowledgment

Two different attitudes are included within this category. Either the recipient gives no indication of having heard the complimentary assertion, or s/he chooses not to respond to it. In sequence (25), between a shop assistant and a costumer, the latter does not acknowledge the positive evaluation given by the former. She giggles nervously, instead.

> (25) F1: *Oh, good taste! This is my favourite tartan pattern. I think it's lovely!*
> F2: (giggles)

## The Acquisition of Compliment Competence

The present corpus includes several conversational sequences between children and adults. The following data segment occurred between a three-year-old boy and his mother. On that particular occasion, she, who seldom drives, borrowed her father's car and drove her son to a summer school.

> (50) M: *Well done, mummy! We didn't crash!*
> F: (laughs)

Although the complimenter uses an acceptable linguistic strategy for expressing the compliment, he does not seem to know which aspects of performance are appropriate topics for compliments. A second example included in the corpus was taken from a conversation between a babysitter and a child, who did not respond to the compliment.

> (98) M1: *Those are great drawings!*
> F2: /silence/

In one of his studies on complimenting behaviour, Herbert (1986) suggests that compliment competence is acquired by age ten. However, as he admits, this is just a hypothesis resulting from observation, rather than actual evidence obtained under experimental conditions. He holds that: "The question of when children actually acquire adult compliment response competence (i.e., when they learn to avoid self-praise) is an open one" (Herbert 1986:84).

It seems that the acquisition of compliment competence comes together with the acquisition of knowledge about the cultural values and assumptions of a given community. As Brown and Holmes point out: "Knowing whether a compliment is appropriate at all, as well as which linguistic strategy to select to express it, is part of the communicative competence learners need to acquire" (Holmes and Brown 1987:528). Within communicative competence Canale and Swain (1980) include three areas of competence: grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence (See J. Richards and R. Schmidt (1983). As part of communicative competence, compliment competence may be said to include: The ability to chose an appropriate topic for a compliment; selecting an acceptable linguistic strategy for encoding the compliment; taking into account situational factors such as the the social context and the participants' relationship; and finally, the ability to recognise complimentary assertions and respond to them appropriately. Learners need to learn not only the linguistic form of complimentary assertions (their most common lexical and syntactic patterns) but also the situations where compliments may be appropriately used. A series of exercises are suggested by Holmes and Brown (1987) in order to increase learners awareness of the sociolinguistic rules related to complimenting in English.

In conclusion, compliments are not a trivial matter. Rather, they are highly organised speech acts. Given their formulaic nature and their syntactic and semantic regularities, compliments can be systematically described. I hope that this paper will contribute to the understanding of speakers' intentions behind decisions such as replacing strong positive descriptors by more moderate ones, paying a compliment back or shifting the praise to a third party. Such decisions are not caused by chance, but by an awareness of the social constraints underlying compliment responses. Thus, as a positive politeness strategy, complimenting is a powerful bonding device which creates solidarity among speakers.

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