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# Linguistic - Cultural Peculiarities Of The Compliment

Abstract: *This paper is focused on a corpus of compliments / answers to compliments expressed by foreign speakers. The analysis of these phrases has provided us with information regarding the attitude of the persons who compliment / receivers, the linguistic structure of the appreciative statements / answers, as well as regarding the context where these are expressed. The issues mentioned can change from one language to another, from one civilization to another, due to the 'cultural identity' of the different communities. The elaboration of compliments and answers is made according to the established protocol of each civilization. In all cases we refer to the context where the compliment is expressed, a context that must be previously known, so that the parameters of the speech act could be the targeted ones.*

Key words: *compliment, cultural identity, speech act, illocutionary force, cultural differences.*

A compliment conveys an evaluation of physical, intellectual attributes, human and material endowments and is, due to the force of circumstances, a strong speech act marked by the cultural identity of the communication participants. The pragmatic perspective is more than ever necessary in the analysis of these verbal changes, since the performances' target is determined at the extra linguistic level, at least as transparent as the strictly linguistic level.

The pragmatic competence has been defined as the ability to communicate beyond the grammatical level, being a competence of people to use language in an appropriate social manner (Thomas 1983: 91-112). From this point of view, the participants' attitude towards the conversation can change according to the cultural-social background, where they come from, their educational level, age, sex, religion, etc. In an interactive speech act between two individuals from different communities, uncomfortable situations can emerge during a conversation, because of the misunderstandings regarding the linguistic-cultural differences.

These differences of behavior and verbal expression in attitudes actually represent what we call 'cultural identity' of the respective communities. We will deal with a subject regarding the communication peculiarity, as a fundamental element in defining the cultural identity and understanding the cultural diversity (cf. Wierzbicka 1983: 145-178; Vasilescu, 2007: 28-46; 47-206). Moreover, we refer to differences that are culturally induced in the

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communication styles of the speakers communities, at the discourse level, of explicit and implicit significations (determined by local mentalities), as well as at the level of verbal interactions (Șerbănescu 2007: 199-255).

Compliments are made with the purpose of satisfying the positive image of a narcissistic personality and to preserve the image formed by the speaker for himself and which they try to submit during the conversation. Therefore, compliments must be carefully elaborated, taking into consideration mainly the speaker civilization characteristics. J. Holmes (1995: 119) considers that the appreciative speech act also has a "dark side", so it can bring the feeling of offensive, sarcastic, ironic act that may jeopardize the positive image. Oftentimes, a compliment may be interpreted as an intromission into a private, intimate area, or as an attempt at establishing a closer connection, that may determine the receiver to feel threatened.

Pragmatics researchers are more and more interested in the study of the speech acts of different cultures. Cultural differences are observed and analyzed, especially linguistic universals which emphasize various methods of performing the conversation.

Compliment formulas, as well as the answers to the appreciative statements, vary according to the individual characteristics and the cultural background. The non-verbal elements, included in the appreciative message, are also interpreted differently from one civilization to another. Culture may influence the appreciative statement, as well as the answer given by the beneficiaries, as a reaction to the communicative intentions of the person who pays compliments.

Compliments in a different language are perceived sometimes as inappropriate. This is why, at times, unpleasant situations emerge in a conversation, because some appreciations can be negatively interpreted by the addressee. In her study, Beck (2011: 66) mentions a situation that she encountered when she frequently met an Indian, who was always accompanied by his entire family. Seeing that he was always with his family, anywhere he was going, Gloria Beck told him admiringly:

(1) "-*What a big family you have*!"

The reaction was unpredictable for the person who complimented, and the reply was:

(2) "-*Indeed, but this situation has its advantages*."

The beneficiary of the compliment interpreted the message elaborated by Beck as an observation of a disadvantage. Compliments in other languages may lead, as we noticed, to certain misunderstandings between the two participants of the conversation, or, as Thomas (1983: 91-112) says, they may lead to real *pragmatic failures* ). These situations emerge when a foreign speaker transfers the linguistic rules from their mother language into the foreign one.

In the following pages our attention will focus mainly upon the appreciative expressive speech acts elaborated by foreigners. In the entire world there are events, situations, objects or characteristics which form the objective of the compliments.

We will analyze compliments from the view point of the addressing method, their structure as well as the person's reaction towards the received compliment. Our purpose is to emphasize the cultural and linguistic differences, as well as the existent similarities between certain cultures and civilizations.



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## 1. Compliments in German

German speakers pay compliments regarding clothes and goods, food, physical features, etc., and rarely about intellectual knowledge or abilities. Germans consider that the physical appearance is worth being appreciated more than a great spirit (Beck 2011: 67). The Germans' answer to compliments is a simple *ja* – '*yes*', since they are considered to be distant personalities:

(3) „***A:***

- *Sybille du hast aber schöne rosen dieses jahr*. (*Golato* 2005: 29).
- *Sybille, you have beautiful roses this year*!"

To a certain compliment, a German speaker prefers to express a short intervention using an affirmative adverb *ja*, by which they manifest their appreciation towards the speaker, or, they don't say anything without giving a *feedback* to the speaker. Silence is often noticed in the conversations of German speakers.

In a situation where a British or French person pays a compliment to a German, the last one will be silent and the British speaker will interpret this attitude as indifferent and rude. But for the Germans, silence is considered a compliment; they do not feel uncomfortable at all if the compliment does not receive an answer. Sometimes they have no gestures and their faces show no sign in order to express their position towards the spoken statement, which can be confusing for a foreigner speaker, who does not know the Germans linguistic and extralinguistic behavior. But, this attitude is not interpreted by Germans as a refusal of the compliment, since silence is, in their culture, something ordinary. In Hindu and Arabic societies conversation is also characterized by silence and discretion, but for these speakers silence is interpreted as a demonstration of refusal of the speech. (cf. Șerbănescu 2007: 28-46, 47-206).

Gloria Beck (2011:78), in her study, states that German women are naive, ingenuous and accept compliments very easily; moreover, the appreciative words make them immediately check up their eyes, hair or face in the mirror, in order to notice whether the compliment is true or not. By comparison with them, Russian women are distant in receiving a compliment. That is why Russian men prefer to opt for compliments regarding the inner values, since this kind of compliment is more difficult to check up.

## 2. Compliments in English

Regarding compliments in English, statements seem to be accepted. It is known that British people focus on courtesy. It has become an international cliché that they usually thank and apologize for anything, no matter how insignificant that might be. Since English speakers frequently use compliments in their daily conversations, the appreciative messages are carefully controlled, if they are correctly elaborated and if they express a real feeling of appreciation, admiration of gratitude.



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According to Grossi (2009: 54) the grammatical structure, often used by British people, for the compliment elaboration, is the following:

(4) 1. *I (really) like/love* + N

2. N + *look(s) +beautifully, nice etc.*

„*Speaker **A**: That color looks really nice on you.*

*Speaker **B**: Thank you. I think so too.*" (Othman 2011: 92).

In this example, the person who compliments gives illocutionary force to the statement by the use of the superlative "*really nice*". The compliment is correctly interpreted by the interlocutor and they express the agreement towards the message, by the answer "*I think so too.*"

We identified in a study of Grossi (2009: 58) a compliment made by an American speaker regarding the outfit of the interlocutor:

(5) „***A**: Aren't you the hostess with the most beautiful dress?*

***B**: I felt it like a bandage today!*"

This compliment is structured on the basis of an interrogative phrase which requires an affirmative answer from the addressee, as a way of confirmation and acceptance of the proper compliment. Practically, by the transmitted message, the compliment sender indirectly forces the beneficiary of the compliment to agree upon the statement. This method of sending a compliment through an interrogation which starts with the structure *isn't this* or *aren't you* is a way of 'grabbing' an affirmative answer from the complimented person.

The receiver's reaction is not the expected one by the sender; it does not comply with the convention imposed by the sender through the elaborated message. Actually, **B** does not reject the compliment, but they are satisfied with the observation of the clothes comfort. The comparison *like a bandage* emphasizes the fact that the beneficiary of the compliment feels tight-laced in the admired dress.

In the United States of America a compliment is used to maintain social harmony and to support social interactions (cf. Celce-Murcia 1991: 135-151). American speakers, using complimentary formulas try to show gratitude and, together with the interlocutor, make efforts to maintain the conversation and the positive image. The beneficiary of the compliment, the person from the American culture who receives a smile after they accept a compliment, considers it to be the object of a flirt, a fact that determines an uncomfortable feeling for them. American English speakers tend to pay compliments regarding their look, by comparison with the British English speakers, who focus on abilities and intellectual competence (cf. Bergqvist 2009: 8).

Regarding the answers, American speakers as well as British speakers generally have a polite attitude towards compliments and their message. Of course, there are many situations when the beneficiary reacts negatively because of the breach of the maximum honesty and other intentions of the sender are revealed or only assumed.



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## 3. Compliments in Japanese

The most frequent compliments of the Japanese people refer to activities developed by the speech participants. They have the tendency to use adjectives in the structure of the compliments, which entail the receivers' abilities and their physical appearance. When compliments are addressed towards the interlocutor's clothes, the most common verb for Japanese people is *niau* '*to correspond with*'. As opposed to speakers from other cultural areas, Japanese receivers tend to reject the compliment, an attitude understood as polite and modest:

(6) ***A**:*

- *Your daughter is really good at school. By comparison with her, my daughter is not so good.*

***B**:*

- *Oh no. Your daughter is much better than mine*" (cf. Beck 2011:73).

The addressee from this example tries, by his answer, to reduce the compliment and to emphasize the intellectual competence of the speaker's daughter. **B** underestimates their child while they value the child of **A**. It is a method used by the beneficiaries of compliments, which we call '*the boomerang method*' (we chose this denomination in order to define the answers such as "compliment in return") and which they use to return a compliment due to the need of not owing a compliment to the conversation partner. Such verbal expression is not often encountered, the attitude of rejection and refusal of a compliment being a characteristic especially for the Japanese cultural region. There are also situations when Japanese speakers accept a compliment with a smile, or, in other situations, they prefer to be silent. It is possible that the beneficiary thank or respond with a short comment, but the preferred reactions are the reduction or refusal of the complimented object/appearance, as a demonstration of modesty and to establish a balance after the evaluation of the positive image of the receiver.

Japanese people seek to avoid answers to compliments they receive because silence or the change of reference are considered, in the Asian culture, demonstrations of balance and equity, which are very much socially appreciated (cf. Beck 2011: 72-73).

## 4. Compliments in Arabic

Compliments between Arabic persons of a different sex are very rare since these are considered impolite by the husbands/wives of the complimented person. Often the compliment paid to a woman from the Arabic countries is seen as an offence and a way to manifest interest towards the participant of the conversation. An appreciative statement can never be addressed to a woman in the absence of their husband or a third party because the receiver will feel threatened. Compliments uttered by the Arabic speakers are a set of formulas taken from different situations of the ordinary life (cf. Cutting 2002: 164).



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Reactions in the Arabic culture refer to a compliment in return, as the way in which the beneficiary will not owe anything to the speaker. From this perspective, Arabic speakers are similar to the Japanese speakers. If we refer to a compliment regarding an object, the receiver tends to offer it as a gift. Probably under the Arabic influence, this attitude is noticed also at Spanish people:

(7) „***A**: I love your clock! It looks great in your living room!*

***B**: You must take it.*

(T.P. -*http://www.linguistics-journal.com/April_2007 haf.php*).

The receiver in this example does not want to owe anything to the conversation partner, so they offer the admired object as an exchange for the compliment. The impersonal verb *must* expresses the addressee's perseverance to convince the person who compliments to accept their intention.

The Egyptians often use metaphors and comparisons with reference to marriage and Allah:

(8) ***A:** shaklak 'ariis in-naharda*

***A:** You look like a groom today!*

(T. P. - http://www.carla.umn.edu/speechacts/compliments/arabic.html).

Arabic speakers feel uncomfortable when they compliment a person of a different sex or an elder person (Idem).

## 5. Compliments in Turkish

Turkish people consider compliments a sign of solidarity as well as messages of gratitude. This is why, in Turkish, the answers to larger compliments are seen as a demonstration of the need to continue the conversation.

(9) „***A**:*

- *What's the secret of your figure? You eat and eat and never gain weight!*

***B**:*

- *Maybe I look this way because I am very active. Damn, I'm perfect*!" (adapted from Şükriye Ruhi 51).

Turkish speakers are very generous with compliments to their friends or family members. In the above example, the compliment sender asks, by an interrogative phrase, details regarding the way in which the conversation partner manages to keep fit. The repetition of the verb *to eat* expresses the focus on an action made by the speaker continuously and uncontrollably, without any consequences upon their physical appearance. Therefore, the compliment sender wants to know the secret of the receiver's healthy and fit body.



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By their answer, the receivers try to find an explanation to the question. They consider that, being an active and vivacious person eliminates calories and keeps their body fit. The additional comment is a self-compliment, and by using the invective *damn*, the speaker tries to focus the listener's attention upon the statement that will follow.

## 6. Compliments in French

It is already a general opinion that France is a country where people often pay compliments. Here compliments are about appearance, clothes, actions, intelligence, sensitivity, and obviously about general attractiveness of a person. Compliments can be paid without restraint since French people feel very good when they are admired, appreciated or complimented. Therefore, they often pay compliments on the street, with their family and at their work place. Regarding the answer from the beneficiaries, a study by Mulo Farenkia (2009) states that the French people tend to adopt the Anglo-Saxon model of thanking the speaker with the purpose of paying them a compliment:

(10)

„***A**:*

- *Tu as une mine splendide (aujourd'hui).*
- *You look great (today).*

***B**:*

- *Tu es gentil(le)!* (T. P. - *http://projetbabel.org/roumain/guide_1.php*).
- *You are sweet!*"

In colloquial conversation the French people react positively when they are complimented, but in the case of formal, official speech, they manifest their skepticism due to the fact that they tend to ask themselves if the message is honestly created or it implies ironic tones.

## 7. Compliments in Chinese

By comparison with the French people, who are very generous in compliments, the Chinese people are very short in compliments regarding the elegance and beauty of a woman, and if they happen to utter an appreciative statement, they do it without any illocutionary force of the message, in a dull, boring and unattractive manner.

The Chinese, as all the representatives of the Asian civilizations, are distant in what concerns the compliment. The appreciative speech acts are rare in their conversations. We shall illustrate an example from a study by Pu Zhihong 2009: 117) in order to show their way of paying compliments:



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(11) „***A***:

*Ni de xin zuo you hen da ti shen, dou kuai chao yue zhuan ye hua jia le*"

„***A***:

*Your new piece of art has reached a very high level; you shall exceed all professional painters*."

The above mentioned compliment is paid to a superior. The statement emphasizes the artistic development of the addressee. The sender suggests that their interlocutor has reached the highest level in his career with his ultimate creation, and this will bring him on the top of the great artists.

The sender of the following compliment gives enough illocutionary force to the message, a situation which is not very common to Chinese conversations:

(12) „**A**:

- *Měinǚ, nǐ de qúnzi zhēn piàoliang*." (http://www.tomschinablog.com/a-guide-to-complimenting-chinese-girls/).

- *Hey, sweetie, your dress is very beautiful!*"

The interjection *hey* and the form of address *sweetie* convey expressiveness to the message. The modal deictic *very* emphasizes the illocutionary element. The intention of the compliment sender is to draw the receiver's attention upon the clothing object which they admire.

In the case of the Chinese civilization "*modesty is a fundamental virtue*" (cf. Zhihong 2009: 180). Therefore, Asian receivers who accept compliments are used to being grateful by silence towards the compliment sender, as a demonstration of modesty. On the other hand, in many situations, the beneficiaries' answer to compliments is mainly negative. Chinese people adopt this virulent attitude as a method of protection of their positive image of personality and because they are afraid that the conversation partner may interfere in the personal/private space of the complimented person. Chinese speakers consider that false appreciative statements are marks of hypocrisy; therefore, these must be amended in order to demonstrate to the sender that their intentions have been correctly decoded.

## 8. Compliments in Spanish

Southern societies are known as very generous in paying compliments. Spanish people often use compliments in daily conversations with the purpose of creating strong relationships and as a demonstration of communicative kindness, characteristic of positive courtesy. Moreover, introducing a compliment in stressed contexts aims to reduce threatening acts, characteristic of negative courtesy. The Spanish "*Piropo*" –compliment - (cf. Romeo 2000: 38) focuses either on the interlocutor's beauty, or on certain parts of their body:

(13) „**A**:

- *Eres más guapa que la Virgen!*"



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- *You are more beautiful than Virgin Mary!*

The invocation of the divinity focuses on the intention of giving an illocutionary force to the statement, in order to have a positive impact upon the receiver. The compliment emphasizes the beauty of the interlocutor, which the sender places on a higher level, by using the superlative.

In the following example we notice that Spanish people are persons who try to elaborate original compliments, in order to express their communicative intentions in the most efficient way, and as a demonstration of honesty:

(14) „***A**:*

- *Nena, como mire usted con esos ojos a un campo de trigo en verano ¡adiós cosecha*!"
- *Honey, if you put your eyes on a wheat field in summer, goodbye harvest!*

The participants in the conversation have the purpose of using a strategic behavior, which refers to a careful use of the interactional structures. The sender of the above compliment uses all his linguistic resources to select the suitable words, to be sure that the intention is correctly interpreted.

Although the appreciative statement is elaborated as a risk observation (their look could compromise the harvest), it transmits the admiration and appreciation of the sender regarding the receiver's eyes.

The answers elaborated by the Spanish speakers are very diverse. Sometimes, Spanish people feel obliged to reward the sender when they receive a compliment, and because they do not want to owe anything, they make available the admired object. This situation can be noticed in the following example from Romeo (2000: 38):

(15) „***A**:*

– *¡Ay que pantalones más chulos!*

– *Oh, what a lovely pair of trousers!*

***B**:*

- *¿Sí? Bueno, cuando quieras, son tuyos.*
- *Really? Well, it's yours whenever you want it.*

The answer of the addressee is a demonstration of positive courtesy, an honest proof of gratitude. By his attitude, the complimented person demonstrates that he accepts the compliment and tries to reward the sender.

## Conclusion

Linguistic formulas of positive courtesy, as well as the manner or context where these are used, can vary from one language to another or from one civilization to another. These differences were identified in the linguistic structure of the compliments and the answers,



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as well as in the pragmatic value of the respective statements. We noticed that some cultures frequently use complimentary statements in conversations, but we also realized that Asian people verbally express their lack of confidence towards compliments, by rejecting the received compliment. It is more than certain that these differences emerge due to the interpretation of the complimentary statement, according to a particular set of rules, a protocol established by the society.

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