



A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON CHINESE AND ENGLISH COMPLIMENTS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION



Weixuan Shi¹

Pengying Qu²⁺

¹Professor in School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, North District, Baoding, Hebei, China

Email: shirweixuan3458@126.com Tel: +8617332295681

²Graduate Student in School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, North District, Baoding, Hebei, China

Email: 1752776736@qq.com Tel: +8615369302066



(+ Corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

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Compliment, shared by various languages and cultures, is a polite speech act and positive evaluation of others. It reflects social values and cultural conventions and plays a crucial role in daily verbal communication activities. This article takes Chinese and English compliments as the main research objects to explore the differences between Chinese and English compliments in contents, functions and speech patterns of compliment, and tries to analyze the reasons for the differences from the perspective of intercultural communication. It hopes that deeper understanding of Chinese and English compliments can improve people's awareness of intercultural communication and avoid pragmatic mistakes, thus establishing harmonious interpersonal relationships, achieving communicative purposes and improving communication quality.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature of compliment and compliment response strategies. The present study is one of few studies which apply the comparative research method to analyzing the Chinese and English compliments and the reasons for their differences.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of rapid development of society, science and technology, globalization has become an inevitable trend. With the continuous deepening of China's reform and opening up and strengthening of foreign exchanges, communication and cooperation among people from different countries and regions around the world have become more frequent. More and more Chinese are going abroad to take part in tourism, study, work, etc. At the same time, lots of foreigners come to China for economic and cultural exchanges. During the process of intercultural communication, differences in language and cultural practices can affect the effective communication between the two parties, and even lead to misunderstandings and conflicts, thus resulting in the failure of intercultural communication. Therefore, it is important to conduct comparative studies on speech acts in different cultural contexts.

As a speech act, compliment is often applied in social contact. It has been regarded to “grease the social wheels” and to “serve as social lubricants” (Wolfson, 1983) which aims at “maintaining, enhancing or supporting the

addressee's face" (Goffman, 1967). Because of its great significance, many scholars have done lots of researches from various perspectives.

Since the 1970s, scholars began to do studies on compliment. Manes and Wolfson (1981) studied the sentence patterns and vocabulary used in compliments and found that English compliments showed a great tendency of formulation in terms of grammatical forms, verbs and adjectives used. Holmes (1988) and Herbert (1990) confirmed the study by Manes and Wolfson (1981) and emphasized that English compliments are formulated languages. They studied English compliments and their response and gender differences in compliments. According to their research, women give and receive more compliments to each other than they do to men or men do to each other (Holmes, 1988). Male compliments are more likely to be accepted than female compliments (Herbert, 1990). Othman (2011) investigated the pragmatics of Malay compliments among Malay speakers in Malaysia. The results showed that compliments were more likely to be appreciated than denied or rejected by Malay speakers and the subject of the compliment and relative "distance" to the compliment receiver also influence compliment responses. Cheng (2011) conducted an intercultural study to explore compliment responses produced by Chinese ESL (English as a second language) and EFL (English as a foreign language) speakers as well as by native speakers of American English in oral communicative contexts. The results showed that both L2 (Second Language) groups differed from native speakers in multiple ways. Xian and Lei (2014) employed the conversation analysis to depict the basic syntax formations and constructions of the turn-taking of responses to compliment actions in Chinese. By analyzing the stances expressed by various forms of turn-taking, they found out that compliment actions in Chinese spontaneous conversation can be divided into three basic syntax formations and four basic stances. Alsalem (2015) examined the compliment response types Saudi learners of English would use in particular situations within an academic context and identified the cultural and gender differences in the compliment responses between Saudi learners of English and native speakers of English. Zhu (2016) applied speech act theory to analyzing the object, content and response mechanism of Chinese and American compliments, and compared the differences between Chinese and American compliments in cross-cultural perspective, and attempted to explore the influencing factors that result in the differences.

To sum up, although the researches on the compliments have achieved lots of results, most of the researches focused on the response content and strategy of the compliments, but the compliment itself is relatively less studied. This article will analyze the Chinese and English compliments from the perspective of intercultural communication to explore the differences in compliment contents, functions and speech patterns, and the reasons for the differences between Chinese and English compliments.

2. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH AND CHINESE COMPLIMENTS

The English and Chinese compliments are different in many aspects, mainly in contents, functions and speech patterns of compliments.

2.1. Contents of Compliments

The most prominent feature of the compliments is the positive comments on the appearance of others, but the emphasis on English and Chinese compliments is different. English compliments focus on people's beautiful appearance after deliberate dressing up themselves. However, Chinese compliments are more concerned with natural beauty and appreciate the unmodified appearance; In addition to the appearance, another major content of compliment focuses on the ability and achievements of people. Such compliments in English emphasize the results, such as "nice work", "well done" and so on. For Chinese people, the efforts for success and process of hard working are often mentioned, such as "You work very hard!", "You are so diligent", etc. Furthermore, due to the differences in values, lifestyles, and habits between English and Chinese cultures, the topics of compliments are also quite different. Under the English cultural background, age, income, marital status and life experience are considered to

be extremely private, this topic should be avoided. In China, these are frequently used topics, because people consider that it is polite to care about each other in all aspects.

2.2. Functions of Compliments

English and Chinese compliments have multiple functions, such as the greeting, showing thanks and raising topics, etc. For example:

1. Greeting: Hi, Pat, How are you doing? You look nice.
2. Showing thanks: Thanks for the Christmas present. I like it a lot.
3. Raising topics: Jane, you look beautiful, going to a Party?

The above statements are also very common in China. People usually apply the phrase "I haven't seen you for a long time, and you look more beautiful!" for greeting. But in order to employ compliments properly, one must make clear what we will praise. Both English and Chinese people tend to show compliments to family members, relatives and friends. Westerners often praise others, including family members or relatives, and directly praise their own family members as well. Most Chinese do not praise their own family members in front of others, because it will be regarded as lacking of modesty, and there is a tendency to show off. Although Chinese seldom praise their own family members in front of others, they tend to praise others' family members, especially the others' children. In addition, what's interesting is that it is a great honour for a wife to be praised by other men in English culture; it is a taboo for Chinese men. But sometimes in order to thank the host for his hospitality, Chinese will also show compliments to the hostess, but will praise her cooking, hospitality, education, etc other than the hostess' beauty.

2.3. Speech Patterns of Compliments

Both English and Chinese compliments have highly modularised speech act patterns, but their expressions differ from each other, mainly in terms of semantics and sentence patterns.

The semantic patterns of English compliments are very regular, with adjectives and verbs accounting for the most. The most commonly used adjectives are the five words "nice, good, beautiful, pretty and great" [Manes and Wolfson \(1981\)](#) such as "You have a very nice girlfriend." and "You are such a good cook." People use the words—"like" and "love" to express compliments. For example, "I like your watch." and "I love your outfit." However, in Chinese compliments, the adverbs also account for a large proportion besides the adjectives and verbs, such as: "You are really an experienced teacher!", "You are very commendable." and "You accomplished the task very well."

In terms of sentence pattern, there are also differences in English and Chinese compliments. English compliments usually begin with the pronoun "I", while many Chinese compliments start with the pronoun "you" or "your"; English compliments often use the expression of "I (really) like/love..." to praise people for their appreciation. In Chinese, in order to avoid letting others feel that the talker wants to possess the things they are talking about, most Chinese do not use the sentence pattern "I like/love your..." to praise others' possessions because in the eyes of Chinese, such an expression is seen as a euphemism for "I want to...". However, in the English culture, the expression can achieve the purpose of shortening the social distance between the two sides and maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships by expressing their supportive action and endorsing the tastes of the other party.

3. ANALYSIS OF REASONS FOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE AND ENGLISH COMPLIMENTS

Chinese and English compliments are quite different in terms of contents, functions and speech patterns. The author will analyze the reasons for the differences that are related to the values and ways of thinking reflected by cultures in different languages.

“A society’s culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members and culture is the forms of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating, and otherwise interpreting them.” Goodenough (1957) People live in a culture composed of various social relationships. And as a mirror of culture, language reflects the cultural identity shared by certain social groups. As a polite expression of speech act, compliment is a concrete reflection of different cultures.

3.1. Different Values

As a tool of social interaction, language is influenced by different cultures and different values, and the expressions produced are not the same. Therefore, there are differences in the way of expressing compliments. The culture of the Chinese nation has a long history, and the profound influence of Confucianism has greatly permeated China's modern intercultural communication. “Respecting others and being humble” is the most polite principle of Chinese culture. Chinese people often show their own modesty in order to express politeness to others. Therefore, when Chinese people give compliments, they usually depreciate themselves for the purpose of praising others. Whereas westerners often accept the compliments of others and think that it is the basic courtesy. As a result, the English nation will think that the Chinese people are insincere, and Chinese people believe that the English nation is not modest. For example, when foreigners praise the Chinese for beautiful appearance, the Chinese often respond “just so so”. Although in the context of Chinese traditional culture, the Chinese are expressing their humility, this will make westerners feel confused and do not understand why Chinese express in this way.

3.2. Different Ways of Thinking

There is a fixed mindset in people’s deep consciousness, guiding people to express themselves. Therefore, the expression of speech often reflects the subconscious mindset of a nation, and the differences in Chinese and English ways of thinking result in many differences between Chinese and English compliments.

Traditional Chinese thought takes Confucianism as the core and Chinese philosophy pays great attention to harmony takes "the unity of man and nature" as the highest realm. Consequently, Chinese take care of the overall situation, safeguard the overall interests, and advocate interdependent and harmonious interpersonal relationships. Westerners have a strong desire to conquer nature and they are more advocating the freedom and independence of personality, giving importance to personal privacy. For example, when the Chinese praise others’ strong ability, they may say: "You are great! Your salary is several times than my salary!" However, in the eyes of Westerners, personal wages are private and improper to be disclosed to others in the public. Therefore, during intercultural communication, people must try to understand the different ways of thinking in different cultures, thus making correct judgments and avoiding pragmatic errors.

4. CONCLUSION

With the continuous deepening of China's reform and opening up, exchanges and cooperation between China and English-speaking countries in the economic, political, and cultural fields have become more and more frequent. In intercultural communication, cultural barriers are often the biggest obstacle to effective communication. Paying attention to the differences between Chinese and English compliments is conducive to a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese and English cultures, thus helping China and English-speaking countries communicate and cooperate well with each other, which is helpful to establish friendly international relationships.

This article compares the contents, functions and speech patterns in Chinese and English compliments, and explores the reasons for the differences. There are significant differences between China and the West in terms of values and ways of thinking, etc. Different cultural backgrounds lead to different speech patterns. So, we should try to avoid using one’s own standard to measure another culture in intercultural communication. Before we involve in intercultural communication, it is necessary to understand the target language’s culture comprehensively, clarify its

differences and strive to adjust language habits and speech strategies to adapt to the exchanges between different cultures, achieving the harmonious intercultural communication.

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