

# COMPLIMENTING FROM SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Gohar Harutyunyan, Hasmik Mirabyan

*Yerevan State University*

The present article focuses on the study of the speech act of complimenting from sociocultural perspective with special emphasis on different realizations of compliments in Armenian culture. The research shows that the choice of specific words and expressions while paying and receiving compliments is greatly influenced by cultural norms and values, the interrelationship between the speaker and the listener and various other social factors.

**Key words:** speech act, compliment, compliment response, culture.

## Introduction

Speaking to others is a social activity. Based on their membership in a particular community, individuals learn the skills necessary for everyday social interaction. Needless to say, humans cannot live without speech which is used to transmit information, feelings, thoughts, etc. Being a complex behaviour, speaking requires both linguistic and pragmatic competence and it is also influenced by sociocultural norms and constraints. According to some implicit cultural rules, humans constantly choose their language use depending on the situation and the interlocutor. Therefore based on various factors, there are different types of behaviours performed through speech acts, such as apologies, compliments, invitations, requests, etc.

## Complimenting as a Communicative Act

It goes without saying that complimenting is an interesting and vital topic for sociolinguistic research. As Holmes states, “compliments are prime examples of speech acts which notice and attend to the hearer’s ‘interests, wants, needs, goods’...” (1988:450). It brings many effects in people’s life. People get confident if they receive positive compliments, whereas in case of negative compliments which threaten their faces, they might get hurt.

An important point to be highlighted here is the distinction between complimenting and praising. Although these two acts require positive judgements, complimenting has to apply to the addressee: “One can praise, but not compliment someone who is absent” (Wierzbicka 1987:201). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet add to this reporting that “one can praise but not compliment absent third parties who are not expected ever to learn of the praise” (2003:145). Sometimes it is hard to identify whether it is a compliment or praise, but a more attentive study will make a clear distinction. First of all, let’s consider an example of praise:

*“Poor Miss Taylor! I wish she were here again. What a pity it is that Mr. Weston ever thought of her!”*

*“I cannot agree with you, papa; you know I cannot. Mr. Weston is such a good-humoured, pleasant, excellent man, that he thoroughly deserves a good wife;—and you would not have had Miss Taylor live with us for ever,*

*and bear all my odd humours, when she might have a house of her own?"*  
(J. Austin "Emma" p.3)

As it has been already mentioned, we praise someone who is absent and in this case the one who is being praised, i.e. Mr. Weston, cannot hear the praise directed to him, therefore, he cannot accept or reject it. It is obvious from the example that Emma praises Mr. Weston ascribing the following features to him "*good-humoured, pleasant, excellent man*" and the one who "*thoroughly deserves a good wife*".

To fully understand the difference between compliment and praise, let's analyze the following example:

*LORD CAVERSHAM: [Looking at her with a kindly twinkle in his eyes.]  
You are a very charming young lady!*  
*MABEL CHILTERN: How sweet of you to say that, Lord Caversham! Do  
come to us more often. You know we are always at home on Wednesdays, and  
you look so well with your star!*

(O. Wilde "The Ideal Husband" p.166)

This passage is from "The Ideal Husband" which contains a vivid example of compliment. Lord Caversham compliments Mabel Chiltern's on her appearance and she responds by complimenting him back. Both sides are present which excludes the possibility of praising.

Various studies on compliments and responses to compliments carried out in different cultures show the culture-dependent nature of the speech act of complimenting. Culture is normally defined as being complex and multidimensional and "referring to learned and shared human patterns or models for living or day-to-day living patterns. These patterns and models pervade all aspects of human social interaction. Culture is mankind's primary adaptive mechanism" (Damen 1987:367). Culture is "learned" from the interaction between people of a certain community and the environment, both natural and social, in which they are dwelling (Them 2004). As culture is a shared knowledge, it is also learnt by experience, imitation, and informal instruction from parents and peers right from the moment of birth. Through communication, culture is mutually constructed and acquired. When we say that culture is learned, we emphasize that it is not genetically determined, nor biologically inherited. Another commonly accepted definition of culture, offering additional insight, comes from the work of Samovar and Porter (2003:14): "Culture is the deposit of knowledge, experiences, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a large group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving."

### **A Case Study on Complimenting in Armenian Culture**

As far as the speech act of complimenting has not been studied in Armenian culture very thoroughly, an attempt has been made to find out the peculiarities of giving and receiving compliments in Armenian culture. The participants of the study comprised a group of 48 people, out of which there were 20 males and 28 females. The age range of the participants varied from 17 to 40 with an average age of 24. The participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire, which was aimed at studying the complimenting behaviour in Armenian culture.

The questionnaire consists of two parts: the first part contains questions with multiple

choices, the second one is what is known as Discourse Completion Test (DCT). It is a written questionnaire that contains a number of hypothetical scenarios or situations. Participants are required to write in the space provided, what they would say in real life if they found themselves in similar situations. As far as the second part is concerned, the responses can be divided into three types: compliment, non-compliment and opt out. What compliment is has already been made clear. Non-compliment refers to responses that cannot be regarded as compliments, be it either mere expression of thanks or bound semantic formula occurring on their own or replies that do not carry any positive meanings. Opt out refers to the cases when the participants say “*I would not say anything*” whereas complimenting is an expected speech behaviour in that situation. Let’s have a look at the following response in the questionnaire:

*Դուք հրավիրված եք Ձեր մորաքրոջ ծննդյան երեկոյթին: Իր նոր գգեսարի շնորհիվ նա շատ երիտասարդ տեսք ունի: Ի՞նչ կասեք նրան:  
– Ոչինչ էլ չեմ ասի:*

As we see, the participant refuses to pay a compliment expected in this situation. In other words the respondent just opts out.

According to Yuan (2002), semantic formulas for compliments can be divided into two types: unbound semantic formulas and bound semantic formulas. Unbound semantic formulas refer to those expressions that can function independently as compliments, while bound semantic formulas refer to those responses that cannot be considered as compliments by themselves but must be attached to or co-occur with one of the unbound semantic formulas to be interpreted as part of a compliment. Let’s analyse the following situation found in the questionnaire:

*Երեկոյթի ժամանակ հանդիպում եք Ձեր ընկերներից մեկին: Դուք միանգամից նկատում եք նրա նոր, գեղեցիկ վերնաշապիկը: Ի՞նչ կասեք նրան:  
– Որտեղի՞ց ես գնել:*

This kind of response is not a valid compliment response because “*Where did you buy it?*” can be likely considered as a question seeking for an answer and not a compliment. It must co-occur with a bound semantic formula to be interpreted as part of a compliment. Unbound semantic formulas can be further divided into two sub-types: explicit compliments and implicit compliments. Explicit compliments refer to compliments outside the context, being realized by a small set of conventional formulae (Herbert 1997). In the current study, explicit compliments are those responses that carry at least one positive semantic value. Implicit compliments are those in which the value judgment is presupposed (Herbert 1997). Therefore, the positive value of an expression can be inferred from what is said in a particular situation. Bound semantic formulas include explanation, information question, future reference, contrast, advice and request.

The examples of explicit and implicit compliments found in the questionnaire are presented below:

Explicit compliment:

*– Օ՛, շատ գեղեցիկ է Ձեր նոր վերնաշապիկը:*

This is an explicit compliment as the adjective «*գեղեցիկ*» carries a positive value. It

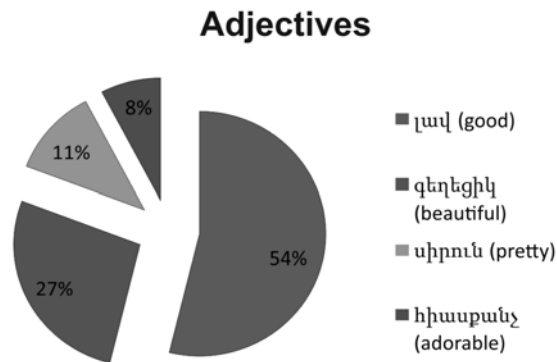
explicitly refers to the addressee and the latter does not need any extra prompt to understand that the compliment is about his/her new shirt.

Implicit compliment:

– *Ծերությունը կողքովդ է անցել, մորաքույր:*

This is an implicit compliment as no word carries a positive value, but we see that the complimenter implies the idea that her aunt looks very young.

As far as the semantic pattern of compliments is concerned, our observations show that there are an infinite number of words that could be chosen to compliment, but in our daily interaction the set of lexical items and grammatical patterns used when complimenting and the frequency of their usage are very restricted. The lack of creativity in the form and content of Armenian compliments is related to their function in discourse. Their aim is to make the addressee feel good and their formulaic nature minimizes the chance that they will be misinterpreted by the addressee. Here are the adjectives mostly used by Armenians while paying a compliment:



An important fact is that while giving a compliment quite often Armenians use intensifiers like շատ, interjections like օ, վա՛յ, etc. and most sentences begin with the pronoun ի՛նչ.

The data yielded by this study provide strong evidence that most Armenians, both male and female, tend to pay more direct compliments to their addressees than indirect ones. As a whole, Armenians seem to be happy to do complimenting in explicit ways as a way of establishing a relationship or just for pleasing others. The use of direct compliments seems to be a general norm in Armenian culture: both women and men produce direct compliments. Of course, there could be instances when women pay a compliment even if they do not like it at all. As an illustration let's consider the following example:

*Ձեր մտերիմ ընկերներից մեկը նոր սանրվածք ունի, բայց Ձեզ սպառն էլ դուր չի գալիս: Ի՞նչ կասեք նրան:*

50% of the women preferred not to express what they really think about the haircut probably thinking of not disappointing or making him/her upset. Most surprisingly 4% of the women questioned would say that the new haircut suits him/her very much. The thing is that women use compliments for establishing or strengthening the relationship

and they are ready even to tell a white lie for maintaining it. On the other hand, none of the men questioned would say that the new haircut suits him/her. Just on the contrary, 70% of them refused to compliment saying «Բնչո՞ւ ես կտրեի մազերդ: Քեզ այնքան էլ չի սազում»:

The data collected show that 64% of the Armenian compliment responses were Agreements out of which 58% were Acceptance Tokens and 6% were Comment Acceptances. Most Armenians accept compliments happily with a comment like «Բնչ էլ է այն դուր գալիս» showing their agreement with the compliment giver. This is due to the fact that Armenian conversation strategies are governed by Leech’s Agreement Maxim, that is to say they receive the compliment gracefully in contrast to the Chinese, Japanese and other cultures, where the Modesty Maxim is commonly accepted.

The other most frequently used compliment response type is the Nonagreement and more specifically the Question strategy. Let’s consider the following example:

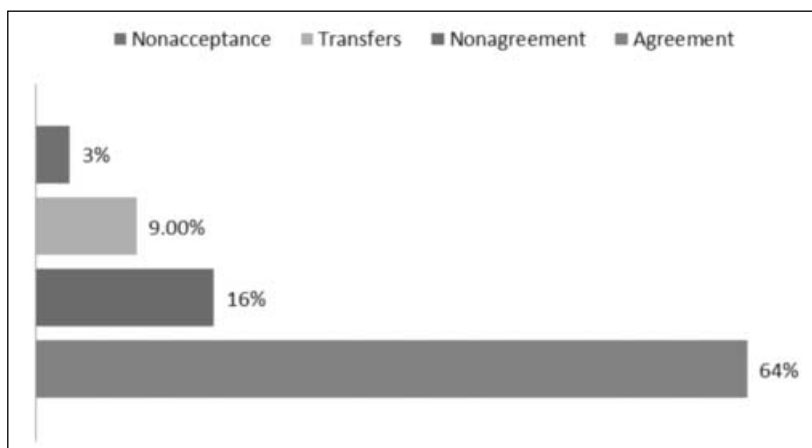
*Դուք և Ձեր դուստրը (որդին) հրավիրված եք ընկերներից մեկի երեկույթին: Ձեր ընկերը ծանոթացնում է Ձեզ իր ընկերներից մեկի հետ: Նա. «Դուք շատ երիտասարդ տեսք ունեք, չէի պատկերացնի, որ դուք մայր (հայր) ու դուստր (որդի) եք»: Ի՞նչ կասեիք Դուք:*

11% of the respondents answered in the following way:

– *Դուք իսկապե՞ս այդպես եք կարծում:*

In this case we can have three possible explanations of this kind of response: firstly, the respondents might have wanted expansion or repetition of the original compliment; secondly, they might have been questioning the sincerity of the complimenter; thirdly, they are just very modest or shy to accept the compliment. Taking into consideration the values typical of Armenian culture, we can state that the question strategy is mostly applied because of the characteristic Modesty feature.

The table below shows the overall picture of the mostly used compliment response types in Armenian daily interaction:



## Conclusion

To sum up, it should be noted that compliments are mostly intended to have a positive effect on interpersonal relations. One must bear in mind that the speech event of complimenting, 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 contexts. These observations point to the dynamic nature of the relationship between language and cultural conceptualizations. Hence, the results show the strong effects of culture on responding to a compliment.

## REFERENCES

1. Eckert, P. and McConnel-Ginet, S. (2003) *Language and Gender*. Cambridge: CUP.
2. Hatch, E. (1994) *Discourse and Language Education*. Los Angeles: CUP.
3. Holmes, J. (1988) *Paying Compliments: A Sex-Preferential Politeness Strategy*. // *Journal of Pragmatics*.
4. Manes, J. and Wolfson, N. (1981) *The Compliment Formula. Conversational Routine*. The Hague: Mouton.
5. Matsuoka, R. (2003) *Gender Variation in Explicitness of Proffering Compliments*. Kyoto, Japan.
6. Samovar, L. and Porter, R. (2003) *An Introduction to Intercultural Communication*. Belmont (California): Thomson Wadsworth.
7. Varner, I. and Bearner, L. (2005) *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
8. Wierzbicka, A. (1987) *English Speech Act Verbs: A Semantic Dictionary*. New York: Academic Press.

## Հաճոյախոսութեան որպէս հաղորդակցական ակտի հանրամշակութային հայեցակէրպը

Հոդվածը նվիրված է հաճոյախոսելու հաղորդակցական ակտի քննութեանը հանրամշակութային դիտանկյունից՝ հիմնական շեշտը դնելով հայկական մշակույթում վերոհիշյալ ակտի հաղորդակցական-գործաբանական առանձնահատկութիւնների ուսումնասիրութեան վրա: Հետազոտութիւնը ցույց է տալիս, որ հաճոյախոսելիս լեզվական միավորի ճիշտ ընտրութիւնը պայմանավորված է մի շարք արտալեզվական գործոնների (մշակութային արժեքներ, խոսողի / խոսակցի փոխհարաբերութիւններ և այլն) փոխկապակցված գործելակերպով:

## Речевой акт комплимента с социокультурной точки зрения

Настоящая статья посвящена исследованию социокультурного аспекта речевого акта комплимента, а именно изучению функционально-коммуникативных особенностей данного акта в армянской культуре. Исследования теоретического и практического материала показывает, что выбор той или иной лингвистической единицы при комплименте обусловлен взаимосвязанным действием ряда экстралингвистических факторов (соответствующие культурные ценности, взаимоотношения говорящего и реципиента, и т.д.).