

The Speech Communities and Method of Data Collection

Data were collected from teachers' rooms in Britain and America. The British teachers' room was in a large comprehensive school in London. The American teachers' room was for teachers of an ESL university program in Philadelphia. For purposes of this paper, the teachers who share a teachers' room were considered a speech community.

The collection of data was naturalistic. Armed with index cards and pens, I noted down unsolicited compliments and their responses as they occurred in natural speech. Other information recorded was the speaker and hearer's sex, age, and status, and the relationship or social distance of the speaker and addressee (Wolfson 1986, 1988), these being of importance in an analysis of the structure and function of compliments.

The American data were collected by myself, a British national teaching in the same university's ESL program. The corpus consists of 73 compliments and compliment responses. The British data were collected by a British teacher teaching English in the London school. The British corpus consists of 138 compliments and compliment responses. Numbers are therefore small and any observations must be made with this in mind.

Analysis

There are many variables that can be compared in any cross-cultural study of complimenting behavior. I have chosen to look at four main areas previously researched in other cross-cultural compliment studies: lexical predictability, compliment response, syntactic categories and compliment topic. In the first two of these four areas, namely lexical predictability and compliment response, I found similarities between the two groups which agree with the existing literature. In the areas of syntactic categories and compliment topic, I found differences between the two speech communities which disagree with the literature.

Similarities

Compliments and lexical predictability

Both Holmes in her analysis of New Zealand data, (1986, 1987) and Wolfson in her analysis of American data (1978b, 1981a, 1981b, 1983, 1984)] have found that the majority of compliments are drawn from a very restricted range of items.

In the New Zealand data, 65% of the compliments used adjectives to express the positive affect. The total range of adjectives used in the data was approximately 86. However, the distribution was far from even; very few adjectives were used with high frequency. The six most frequently occurring adjectives were nice, good, lovely, beautiful, great, and neat, and these six adjectives accounted for about two-thirds of all the adjectives used. This pattern was even more marked in the American data. Wolfson (1984) notes that 80% of the compliments in the corpus "depended upon an adjective to carry the positive semantic load" (1984:236).

American data

The teachers in the American staff room used 39 adjectives in total (see table 1 above). The largest categories were nice (12 instances), beautiful (5 instances), good (4 instances) and great (2 instances). The other adjectives never occurred more than once.

Table 1 - Lexical Predictability

New Zealand (Holmes, 1984)	America (Wolfson, 1984)
2/3 of data	2/3 of data
nice	nice
good	good
lovely	beautiful
great	great
neat	
American Data (Creese, 1991)	British Data (Creese, 1991)
2/3 of data	2/3 of data
nice	good
beautiful	nice
good	great
great	lovely

British data

The teachers in the British staff room used 65 adjectives (see Table 1 above). The largest categories were: good (19 instances), nice (11 instances), great (5 instances), lovely (4 instances), beautiful, organized, committed wonderful, brill (3 each), and healthy (2 instances). The other adjectives never occurred more than once.

My findings are in keeping with the rest of the literature. There seems to be very little lexically that distinguishes the two groups.

Compliment Responses

Pomerantz (1978) in her study of American compliment responses reports that, for the addressee, the compliments presents a cultural conflict. That is, although the addressee has been taught to say "thank you," accepting the compliment will actually mean breaking ;another social norm, that of avoiding "self-praise." What Pomerantz calls "the self-praise avoidance" constraint will often lead the addressee of a compliment to downgrade it or to shift credit or even to disagree with the speaker. Since Pomerantz's work, an increasing amount of very interesting cross-cultural work has been done on compliment response. Janet Holmes' work in New Zealand found that "by far the most common New Zealand response to a compliment is to accept it (61%), with the next most frequent response being to deflect the credit (19%). It is relatively rarely that New Zealanders overtly reject compliments (10%)" (Holmes, 1986). Herbert, working with American data, reports on his analysis of a corpus of 1062 compliment responses collected at a university in New York. He found that speakers were "almost twice as likely to respond with some response other than acceptance" (Herbert, 1986a: 80).

[V]arieties of English differ from one another not only phonology, syntax, and lexicon, but also in PRAGMATICS, that is, in the ways in which speakers use the linguistic repertoire available to them. Such differences have crucial importance for learners of English and for speakers of other varieties of English: both groups, operating with other norms, are liable to misinterpret and be misinterpreted in the American context....I suggest that Americans accept compliments less often than other English speakers due to the dominant value profile of American culture, which rests upon the notions of democratic idealism and human equality. (Herbert, 1986a: 82)

Table 2 - Compliment Response**New Zealand (Holmes, 1986)****America (Herbert, 1986)**

Accept	61%	Accept	43.6%
Deflect	29%	Deflect	30.31%
Reject	10%	Reject	26.09%
American (Creese, 1991)		British (Creese, 1991)	
Accept	54%	Accept	45.9%
Deflect	29%	Deflect	40.6%
Reject	17%	Reject	13.5%

American data

An analysis of the teachers' responses to compliments in the American teachers' room (see Table 2 above) revealed that the majority of compliments were accepted (54%), followed by deflections (19%) and rejections (16.3%).

British data

An analysis of the teachers' responses to compliments in the British teachers' room (see Table 2 above) revealed that 45.9% of the compliments were accepted, 40.6% were deflected and 13.5% were rejected.

It is my American data here that seems to break the patterns of earlier research in that, according to Herbert, we would expect to find only a third of the compliments accepted. It should be noted, however, that there has been some discrepancy over what actually constitutes an acceptance, deflection, and rejection (see Billmyer, 1990:39-50 for a full discussion). As Holmes and Herbert use differing categories to classify compliment responses, it is difficult to compare their two sets. Thus, in Table 2 above, I have used my interpretation of Holmes categories on Herbert's data in order to make the comparison clearer to the reader. It is obvious that until we are clear as to what constitutes an acceptance, deflection, rejection, we should be careful about making observations regarding cultural usage patterns.

Differences**Syntactic Formulas**

Following previous work on complimenting, I first analyzed the data for linguistic patterning. It was Wolfson (1978) who first revealed that compliments seem to be highly patterned in structure, relying on only a few syntactic formulas. Similar research

in New Zealand also found the same syntactic patterns. The largest of these categories are presented below in Table 3.

A comparison of my American data with Wolfson and Manes categories revealed two very interesting differences. One was that more than 3/4 of my data fell into just two syntactic formulas and the other was that, of these, the most frequent was category 2 "I (really) like/love NP" rather than category 1 "NP is/looks (int) ADJ." It can be seen from Table 3 (b) that the remaining four categories together make up only 23.4%. Such small numbers in each of these latter categories mean that generalizing is difficult and so my discussion of the American data will mostly concentrate on the two largest categories.

The most surprising aspect of the British data is that, unlike the American and New Zealand data, the top three categories are not those outlined above in Table 3 (a). As can be seen from Table 3 (c), although the "NP is/looks (really) ADJ" is indeed the largest of all categories as in other studies, the second largest category is a collection of miscellaneous items. This is troublesome as previous work has stressed the formulaic nature of compliments.

Table 3 - Syntactic Formulas

a) Summary of previous research (from Billmeyer, 1990)	American (Wolfson & Manes, 1989)	New Zealand (Holmes, 1988)
1. NP is/looks (int) ADJ.	43.6%	41.4%
2. I (really) like/love NP	16.1%	15.9%
3. NP is (really) (a) ADJ NP	14.9%	13.0%

(b) American Data (Creese, 1991)	Number	%
1. NP is/looks (really) ADJ Your hat looks nice	25	34.2
2. I (really) like/love NP I like your hair	31	42.4
3. PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP That's a nice wall hanging	2	2.7
4. You V (a) (really) ADJ NP You did a damn good job	3	4.1
5. (INT) ADJ NP Oh very chic	4	5.4
6. Miscellaneous	8	10.9

(c) British Data (Creese, 1991)	Number	%
1. NP is/looks (really) ADJ	55	39.9
2. I (really) like/love NP	16	11.6
3. PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP	8	5.8
4. You V (a) ADJ NP	7	5.1
5. You V (NP) (really) AD	2	1.4
6. You have (a) ADJ NP	1	0.7
7. Miscellaneous	49	35.5
TOTAL	138	100.0

Topic of Compliments

As Wolfson has shown, the topics of compliments fall into two major categories: appearance and ability. My findings also fall neatly into these categories (see Table 4 below).

These findings seem to tally with previous work and it is not surprising that appearance and ability are the topics most complimented. What is surprising is that, unlike the American data which agrees with the rest of the literature (Manes, 1983; Holmes, 1986) in that its largest topic category is for appearance compliments, the British data does not, its largest category

Table 4 - Number of Compliments by Topic
American (Creese 1991) **British (Creese 1991)**

Topic	Number	%	Topic	Number	%
Appearance	48	65.8	Appearance	53	39.2
Ability	24	32.9	Ability	75	54.3
Possession	1	1.3	Possession	10	7.3
Total	73	100.0	Total	138	100.0

being ability compliments. The table suggest that Americans compliment more on appearance. This is an interesting finding but it would be dangerous to overgeneralize its significance without further research.

Discussion

The interviews in the first part of this paper revealed that there may be many differences in the use of the English language between the two middle class English

speaking speech communities. We took one of these areas of difference, the compliment, and looked at similarities and differences in language use. Some interesting details were revealed. What can the findings here tell us about the cultural values of the two groups? It would be nice to generalize, to say that Americans use formulaic appearance compliments to build solidarity whereas the British prefer to give fewer formulaic ability compliments which are more sensitive to status and age. Unfortunately, I am unable to say this. Our data sample is too small, and the study not ethnographically detailed enough. It is an area worth pursuing, however, not only so that we can reach a better understanding regarding the relationship between language and culture and in particular the differences between British and American language use, but also so that any differences in language use between the two cultures can be made accessible to and used by ESL/EFL students, teachers, and textbook writers alike.

Applications for the classroom

Language and culture are bound together in a system of meaningful signs. Its symbolic nature means that speakers of a language have conventionalized its form producing a consistent and meaningful relationships between form and functions. When we teach British or American English we are already teaching our students something about how English speaking cultures express time, space, and number. Language, however, is also indexical and, as such, can indicate many things about a speaker, such as social class, gender, age, and geographical area. These indexical functions cannot be separated from symbolic functions. American English is indexed to American values and British English to British values. Speech Act analysis offers us, as students and teachers of English, one way to investigate if and where these values differ. Classroom material based on recent research on various speech act use will help us as teachers be clearer about what the speech rules are of the two groups. We must be clear, however, that although this new teaching material (Say It Naturally, A. P. Wall, 1987; Speaking Naturally B. Tillit and M. Newton Bruder, 1985, etc.) is better researched and better describes language use rules than the more intuitive material of earlier days, this material is still indexical of one speech community's rules of language use. Middle class Americans, New Zealanders, South Africans and Britons have most often served as the speech communities for such research and it is the language use rules of these middle class groups which serve as the "cultural standard" in ESL and EFL classrooms all over the world. Consequently, more work

needs to be done on these middle-class varieties especially, on the British and American varieties. It may turn out that the two groups share more sociolinguistically than they differ. If research reveals big differences, however, the discussion about which English to teach and which English students will want to learn will take on a greater importance than the usual rather superficial discussion revolving around phonetic, lexical and syntactic differences between the two dialects.

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Appendix

Prompt Sheet

- 1 When were you in England/America?
- 2 How long were you there?
- 3 How do you think Americans and English people differ in terms of speech
 - a in requesting
 - b in thanking
 - c in apologizing
 - d in warnings
 - e in complimenting
 - f in ordering
 - g in suggesting
 - h in complaining
 - i in insulting
 - j in disagreeing
 - k in raising dangerous topics
 - l in greeting
 - m in congratulating
 - n in turn taking
 - o in sense of humor
- 4 Do you think the two countries share the same taboos. Is there anything you felt less able to talk about there than you do here?
- 5 What are the main differences between British and American culture?