

A Sociolinguistic Investigation of Compliments and Compliment Responses among Young Saudis

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Abstract

There is a lack of awareness of the use of compliments and compliment responses in the Saudi Arabian context. This research investigates, from a sociolinguistic perspective, the speech acts of compliments and compliment responses as realized by eighty Saudi students who study English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It aims to identify the semantic and structural formulas used by the participants to express compliments and to respond to compliments. The study also examines the roles of the topic of conversation and the participants' first language in the realisation of compliments. Furthermore, the study investigates gender differences with regard to the use of compliments and compliment responses. A discourse completion test (DCT) consisting of twelve situations was used to collect data from the participants. The analysis of the responses found that the dominant form of compliments used was unbound semantic formulas that were not influenced by the social relationship between the participants. Topics that are socially delicate result in the use of more implicit compliments than explicit compliments. The religious norms require politeness in the interactions between people, and this is reflected in the prevalence of implicit compliments. There is a wide range of compliments used with no fixed pattern of usage. Compliments tend to be given using adjectives rather than verbs. Gender did not appear to affect the nature of usage of compliments and responses. The research suggests that the cultural influences of the English language and western culture may be influencing how young Saudis use compliments.

Keywords: compliments, compliment responses, discourse completion test, gender differences, politeness, pragmatic awareness, sociolinguistics, unbound semantics, young Saudis

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Introduction

Background

Compliments and compliment responses are considered key speech acts that are used in daily life situations in order to praise and congratulate others or to reply to their praise or compliments (Holmes, 1986). They are particularly important because they reflect cultural values and because they are considered as judgments and expressions of appreciation of others' work (Nelson, Bakary & Al-Batal, 1996). Speakers use different terms and linguistic constructions to express compliments and compliment responses. Speakers also differ in the frequency of their use of compliments and compliment responses (Golato, 2003). That frequency is dependent on the social context in which the compliments are produced, and on the gender and social standing of the persons involved (Cutting, 2002; Levinson, 1983). Using a Discourse Completion Test (DCT), the current research collected data from eighty Saudi EFL learners at Al-Baha University in Al-Baha city in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The DCT was used for data collection since it is the most common method used to collect natural and spontaneous data in social contexts despite limitations with the DCT approach (Cedar, 2006; Chen, 1993; Urano, 1998; Tang & Zhang, 2009). The DCT used in this research consisted of twelve situations in which the participants were asked to write compliments to a given social situation, and to respond to the compliments given to them.

Statement of the Problem

Compliments in the Saudi context are understudied. Although compliments have been studied in other Arabic-speaking contexts such as Yemen (Qanbar, 2012), Kuwait (Farghal & Haggan, 2006) and Egypt (Nelson et al., 1996), the findings of such studies cannot be generalized to other Arabic-speaking settings. Compliments in Arabic are mainly derived from religious expressions, which are common in all Arab countries. However, lifestyles differ from one Arab country to another. Studies such as Al-Khateeb's (2009) have asserted that Saudi speakers use more conservative and religion-based social utterances than speakers in other Arab countries. Saudi society is a more conservative society, and the use of compliments is worthy of study in this context. So, the current research provides an understanding of compliments in the Saudi context. In doing so, the research explores a new culture and speech community by studying how compliments are produced by Saudi EFL learners. Therefore, this research fills a research gap by adding a study of Saudi-based compliments to the cross-cultural literature on compliments.

Literature Review

Definition and Functions of Compliments

The term "compliment" has been defined by researchers in many different ways due to differences in the contexts, cultures and perspectives of those researchers. Hyland (2000) defines a compliment as "an act which attributes credit to another for some characteristic, attribute, skill, etc., which is positively valued by the person" (p. 44). Holmes (1986) defines a compliment as "a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some 'good' (possession, characteristic, skill etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer" (p.485). A compliment can be described as showing approval of the other's behaviours and efforts (Farghal & Haggan, 2006). Fraser (1990) considered that compliments are positive judgments that attach direct or indirect qualities to the recipients. According to Herbert (1986), compliments are indications of appreciation and good relations with others. This friendly nature of compliments has motivated Herbert (1986) to argue that compliments are considered

phatic expressions which aim to strengthen connections through the exchange of words. This means that a compliment involves praise of the other's characteristics, and normally springs from the social relations between the interactional parties.

Compliments serve a range of social functions (Leech, 1983). There can be a difference between what is said and what is meant. The nature of an expression is influenced by a wide range of variables including gender, social status and the cultural identity of the participants (Ruhi, 2006). A compliment may be motivated by a desire to maintain a harmonious relationship, maintain face or observe established social protocols, or it may be part of an interactional strategy. This variety in motivations explains the different linguistic forms that speakers use to express compliments. For example, "Congratulations!", "I am very happy with your success", and "That is great!" are three different expressions used to compliment people on their success.

According to Yuan (2002), there are two categories of compliments in terms of the semantic formulas used to express them. These categories are unbound semantic formulas and bound semantic formulas, as tabulated in Table One.

Table 1. *Compliment strategies framework*

Compliment Strategies		Example
Unbound Semantic Formulas	Explicit Compliment	What a nice cell phone you have.
	Implicit Compliment	I wish I could have a cell phone like yours.
Bound Semantic formulas	Explanation	I saw how difficult it was to fix my laptop.
	Information Question	Where did you learn to fix it?
	Future Reference	You have a bright future in fixing laptops.
	Contrast	I think you are more helpful than your brother.
	Advice	You'd better open a laptop store.
	Request	Can you check my cell phone too?
Non-Compliment Opt Out		Sorry to take your time
		I would say nothing.

Note 1. Adapted from Yuan (2002, pp. 193-194)

"Unbound semantic formulas" indicate expressions that can work autonomously as compliments. "Bound semantic formulas" indicate expressions that cannot be regarded as compliments by themselves, and they should be used in combination with an unbound semantic formula. The "unbound semantic formulas" can be classified into two sub-categories: "explicit compliments" and "implicit compliments". An explicit compliment is often a general statement "with at least one positive semantic carrier" (e.g. a great effort). Implicit compliments are compliments "with or without a positive semantic carrier, where the addressee is not directly mentioned but the positive meaning can be inferred from what is said in a particular context" (e.g. "Where did you buy this dress? I want to buy one myself") (Yuan, 2002, p. 192). On the other hand, "bound semantic formulas" involve "explanations, references to the future, contrasts, advice or requests". "Non-

complimentary” replies involve “non-compliments” or “opt outs”. “Non-compliments” can be “bound semantic formulas” or other responses that do not have any positive meaning. “Opt outs” are cases where speakers do not say anything in a situation in which a compliment is anticipated (Yuan, 2002, p. 192).

Functions of Compliments

Keeping Social Ties and Solidarity

Compliments perform various functions. One of their main functions is to maintain social ties and connections (Holmes, 1988). Compliments are acts that mainly attempt to increase social solidarity between the speaker and the recipient. Compliments are described as being like the “social lubricants” that establish familiarity between people (Wolfson, 1983, p. 89). Holmes and Brown (1987), when investigating the functions of compliments, reported that compliments are made in order to enhance the positive aspects of an individual in order to establish social solidarity and strengthen social ties. Holmes (1986) argued that compliments are uttered to stress solidarity and heal the gaps that may be caused by offences. In general, compliments aim to make others feel comfortable and pleased. A compliment conveys an affective meaning (Schmidt & Richards, 1980). This shows that a compliment is a speech act that can harm or hurt the listener’s feelings, depending on how it is performed. Compliments can be part of a positive politeness strategy that is designed to increase the solidarity between individuals (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Billmyer (1990) and Zhan (2010) have asserted that compliments often encompass certain socio-cultural functions. Compliments are used in order to perform certain social purposes, that is, to show respect and deference, or to show intimacy and solidarity (Watts, 2003). By attempting to make people feel good about themselves, the complimenter is seeking to consolidate social ties.

Informative Purposes

Johnson and Roen (1992) claim that while compliments are mostly uttered for emotional purposes, some compliments aim to fulfil robust informative purposes. They analysed a number of research writings and found that the compliments in these writings carried both an emotional and a referential meaning. Referential meanings convey information. The conveying of information through a compliment serves the practical purpose of communicating a person’s opinion of another in a positive manner.

Politeness

Complimenting is one of the speech acts that serve the function of yielding pragmatic success (Golato, 2004). In daily life situations, speakers often select the discourse strategies that make them appear polite. Compliment strategies are used to facilitate conversation and maintain the face of the speakers. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), speakers have to consider the face wants of other people and try to satisfy their face desires. In producing compliments, speakers need to take into account the utterances they produce and the language they use.

Compliment Responses

A compliment response is generally described as an expression used by the recipient of a compliment when responding to a complimenter. Herbert (1986) defines a compliment response as the appreciation of the other’s endeavours to praise one’s action or behaviour. This shows that a compliment response is generally seen as a reply that the recipient gives to those who praise their

performance or attributes, and to those who think highly of them. The compliment response depends on the type of the compliment and the social relations between the speech parties.

Compliment responses have been researched extensively in linguistic research. One of the first researchers to discuss compliment responses was Pomerantz (1978), who investigated compliment responses in American English and reported that the speaker is faced with two competing ideas: (a) agreement with the speaker, and (b) evasion of self-praise. Pomerantz proposed that, in any conversation, the recipient is under pressure to accept a compliment from the complimenter. The person receiving a compliment has a choice as to whether they accept the compliment, downplay the importance of the compliment, or seek to respond in a manner that lessens the importance of the compliment. The recipient is faced with a difficult decision as to the response that is required to convey the level of humility that they wish to exhibit. The analysis of American responses showed a widespread disagreement and rejection of compliments. Pomerantz (1978) deduced that compliment respondents use different strategies to resolve the conflict through acceptance or rejection or self-praise avoidance. Those “solutions” or “resolutions” are described as “Praise Downgrades”, “Referent Shifts,” and self-praise avoidance.

There have been a number of significant studies into the nature of compliment responses. The studies that have tackled compliments and compliment responses examined the variations associated with the production of compliments and compliment responses. Holmes (1986) introduced three key types of compliment responses: rejection, acceptance and evasion. Holmes pointed out that the most common form of compliment response produced by speakers in New Zealand is acceptance. It was shown that the recipients tended to accept the compliments given by speakers and to return the compliment to the complimenter. In a study on American and British speakers of English, Herbert (1986) analysed more than one thousand compliment responses gathered at the State University in New York. Herbert concluded that about sixty per cent of compliment responses conveyed acceptance. Herbert found that British speakers tended to accept compliments more often than American speakers. Herbert explained that this variation in compliment acceptance might be due to cultural patterns and to the factors of religion, politics and environment that affect the speakers’ realisation of compliments. Holmes (1986) and Herbert (1986) pointed out that there are different tendencies in the realisation of compliments and compliment responses between male and female speakers.

Herbert (1986) introduced a classification of compliment responses, as summarised in Table Two below, to show the different ways in which people react to compliments.

Table 1. *Classification of compliment responses*

Compliment Response Category	Instance
A- Agreement	
1- Acceptances	
▪ Appreciation Token	Thanks; thank you; [smile].
▪ Comment Acceptance	Thanks, it’s my favorite too.
▪ Praise Upgrade	Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn’t it?
2- Comment History	I bought it for the trip to Arizona.

3- Transfers	
▪ Reassignment	My brother gave it to me.
▪ Return	So's yours.
B- Non-Agreement	
1- Scale Down	It's really quite old.
2- Question	Do you really think so?
3- Non-acceptances	
▪ Disagreement	I hate it.
▪ Qualification	It's all right, but Len's is nicer.
4- No Acknowledgement	[Silence]
C- Other Interpretations	
1- Request	You wanna borrow this one too?

Note 2: Adapted from Herbert (1986, p. 79)

Table two reveals that different compliment responses may be chosen by compliment recipients. Firstly, the compliment response can be an *agreement*. In this category of responses, the addressee can respond either by *acceptance* such as using *appreciation tokens* (e.g. Thank you), *comment acceptance* (e.g. Thanks, I like it also), or *praise upgrade* (Really makes me more handsome, doesn't it?). Agreement can also be expressed by using the strategy of *comment history* (e.g. I purchased it from the UK) or by using *transfers*. Transfers can be divided into sub-categories: *reassignment*, giving credit to someone else (e.g. My sister prepared it for me) and *return* – that is, paying back the first speaker with a similar compliment (e.g. So is yours).

Secondly, a compliment response can be a *non-agreement*. In this category of responses, the addressee can respond either by a *scale down* (e.g. It's somewhat old), a *question* (e.g. Do you really think so?), or a *non-acceptance*. A non-acceptance can be expressed by using a *disagreement* (e.g. I don't like it) or *qualification* (e.g. It is okay, but the blue one is better). Furthermore, a compliment response can be expressed by *non-acknowledgement* (e.g. silence). Thirdly, the addressees can respond to a compliment by using other *interpretations* such as *questions*. Rather than take the first speaker's utterance as a compliment, the addressee may interpret it as an implied request and respond by saying, for example, "You need this one also?"

After Herbert (1986), different studies have compared compliment responses in different languages. These studies revealed clear differences between the various languages in the patterns of compliment responses. Lorenzo-Dus (2001) investigated differences in the patterns of compliment responses between British and Spanish undergraduate students. The study showed that Spanish male speakers were more inclined to upgrade compliments ironically than female speakers, and that this category of compliment response was not found in his corpus of British participants. Furthermore, the studies of Nelson, Al-Batal and Echols (1996) and Herbert and Straight (1989) concluded that Arabic and African speakers commonly respond to compliments by acceptance more often than British and American speakers.

The Linguistic Patterns of Compliments

It has been claimed that compliments are, to a great extent, formulaic utterances (Wolfson & Manes, 1980). Complimentors mostly use a limited number of structures and words in order to

express compliments (Kasper, 2000). In this respect, compliments resemble greeting, thanking, and apology speech acts. The limited variations in the patterns of compliments are mainly attributable to the functions of compliments (Wolfson & Manes, 1980). A compliment is mainly intended to establish solidarity with the addressees and to make them feel better. Adjectives such as *good*, *wonderful*, *beautiful*, *nice* and *great* are commonly used to express compliments.

Compliments and Politeness

In order to communicate successfully, speakers need to pay attention to the pragmatic meaning of the compliment in its cultural and linguistic contexts (Golato, 2002). Compliments are a mix of linguistic and cultural elements. Politeness is one of the ways through which communication becomes effective (Holmes, 1995). Politeness strategies aim to mitigate face-threatening acts by conveying information in a manner that makes the speaker and the listener satisfied and is in line with the social relationship between the two (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory revolves around the idea that both the speaker and the recipient have positive and negative face. Negative face is the need not to be underestimated or imposed on by others, and positive face is the need to be recognised by others. Politeness functions to maintain the interlocutor's positive and negative face. Positive politeness implies that the discourse fulfils the needs of the two parties involved in the conversation for establishing social bonding. Compliments can be used as an automated social convention that reinforces the positive social relationships between people. They can be instrumental in establishing a positive and respectful relationship between people. The interlocutor selects whether he/she wants to appeal to the recipient's positive or negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). If the interlocutor wants to connect with the other, he/she will use positive politeness.

Compliments and Gender

Several studies have found differences between males and females in the use of compliments. In her study in New Zealand, Holmes (1995) discussed gender differences in the use of compliments. The findings of her study show that females give and receive compliments more than male speakers. Moreover, she found that male speakers rarely make compliments. Qanbar (2012) found that females complimented more often than males in both the English and Yemeni contexts.

Compliments and Intercultural Competence

Communicative competence is associated with the ability to use the right language in the right situation. Language is the primary tool for achieving social goals. Language is the key instrument for interaction between people from different cultures, and it is influenced by the socio-cultural setting (Brown, 1963). According to Byram (2008), intercultural competence means the ability to communicate with persons from another culture. Intercultural competence is mainly associated with communication between people from different cultures. For a person to possess intercultural competence they need a wide understanding of how language is used to reflect the different norms and values of different cultures (Witte, 2011).

There are some general social rules for complimenting. The general rule in respect to compliments is the need to praise the other's good behaviour and actions (Mohammed, 2012). People are encouraged to give compliments in order to enhance the social relationships between them. Garcia (2009) and Golato (2003) emphasised that compliments are central to social

interconnectedness and they encourage social interaction between people. Compliments can be considered as important facilitators of social interaction.

Compliments and Pragmatic Awareness

Pragmatic awareness involves the conscious awareness by the individuals participating in communication of the rules and conventions of the social context in which they are communicating, and the appropriate use of language. Research in the area of pragmatic awareness has considered language proficiency (Matsumura, 2001), motivation (Takahashi, 2005), learning environment (Schauer, 2006), and the length of residency in the host country (Bella, 2012; Rafieyan, Sharafi-Nejad, Damavand, Eng, & Mohamed, 2014). Matsumura (2001) investigated the effect of the proficiency of the participants in the target language and the effect that this had on the development of the pragmatic awareness of the learners of a language. Matsumura (2001) found that the higher the level of exposure to the target language, and the higher the level of competence, the greater was the student's level of pragmatic awareness.

Compliments and culture

The practice of giving and responding to compliments is culturally based. Nelson, Bakary and Al-Batal (1996) argue that compliments are especially significant since they imply the cultural values of the speakers and indicate an approval of the other's endeavours. Studying the complimenting behaviour of American and Egyptian speakers, they found that both American and Egyptian compliments are made by using adjectives, and that the American participants used shorter forms of compliments than the Egyptian participants. The frequency of the use of compliments differs in different cultures. Western speakers have a higher level of usage and response to compliments than Asian cultures (Fujimara-Wilson, 2014). The objects of compliments also differ culturally, with Europeans giving compliments about possessions while Americans compliment people for their personal characteristics (Herbert, 1991). Japanese speakers tend to compliment the work and abilities of acquaintances rather than comment on people close to them (Daikuhara, 1986). American compliments tend to be repetitive, with similar semantic structures, and they are adjectival in nature (Wolfson, 1981). Qu and Wang (2005) compared undergraduate English and Chinese students' complimenting behaviours in both the first language and the second language. Using the taxonomy of Herbert (1986), the findings of the study showed that the Chinese students tend basically to accept compliments, and to respond to them using shorter forms than the English students. Qu and Wang (2005) also found that English students rejected compliments more than the Chinese students.

Methodology

Research aims

This study seeks to identify the speech acts which communicate compliments and compliment responses used by Saudi EFL students, and to understand them from a sociolinguistic perspective. In particular, the study aims to:

- Determine the semantic and structural formulas used by the participants (Saudi EFL students) to express compliments in English.
- Investigate gender differences in the use of compliments and compliment responses.

Research Questions

The research questions are:

1. What are the semantic and structural forms used by young Saudis studying English to express compliments and compliment responses in English?
2. How does the topic of a compliment affect the way in which young Saudis studying English express compliments in English?
3. What are the differences between male and female EFL learners regarding compliments and compliment responses in English?

Participants

The subjects of this research were 80 Saudi EFL students studying at the Department of English Language and Literature at Al Baha University in Al Baha city in Saudi Arabia. Forty were men and 40 were women. They were aged between 18 and 25, and their native language was Arabic. The English language proficiency of the students ranged between upper intermediate and advanced, as indicated by their test marks in their admission test for enrolling in the university.

Instrument

In order to achieve the goals of this study, the researcher used a DCT as the primary data collection tool. A DCT is an open-ended statement which replicates a practical situation in which the respondent is required to provide a verbal reaction. This practical situation needs a written answer, similar to what a participant would say in a real-life situation. The researcher designed a DCT based on previous studies that have used DCTs (e.g. Wolfson, 1983; Herbert, 1990; Qanbar, 2012; Farghal & Haggan, 2006). The test consisted of 12 situations that were designed based on different occasions that speakers might face in their daily lives. The cases involved different contexts in order to elicit the possible compliments and compliment responses that the speakers might use.

The test consisted of two parts. The first part was about the demographic data of the research participants, including gender and level of education. In the second part the participants were asked to write the compliments and compliment responses that they would have produced in twelve hypothetical situations. These situations are presented in Appendix One. The participants were invited to read the descriptions of every situation carefully, and to respond by filling in the blanks in English.

Data Collection

The data collection took approximately one month, starting in November 2016. The data was collected at the Department of English Language and Literature at Al Baha University in Al Baha city in Saudi Arabia. At the outset, the research participants were made aware of the research objectives, and their consent to participate in the study was obtained. The participants were then informed that their responses would only be used for research purposes, and would not affect their academic scores. After that, the participants were asked to write their responses to the DCT situations. There was no limit placed on the amount of time the participants could take to complete their responses. The researcher explained details such as the length of the answers and responded to requests for further clarification regarding the DCT situations. To administer the questionnaire to the female students, the researcher collaborated with a female co-researcher. In Saudi Arabia, males are not allowed to communicate with female students in academic institutions. The

researcher trained the female co-researcher in the research objectives and the use of the research tool. The female co-researcher was a student in the fourth grade in the Department of English Language and Literature at the same university. It was easy for her to understand the research topic.

After all the students had completed the DCT, the researcher typed all collected data into an NVivo software program. The compliments were coded and analysed according to Yuan's (2002) classification of compliment strategies, and the responses to the compliments were coded based on Herbert's (1986) classification of compliment responses.

Statistical Analysis

This study collected qualitative data and coded it for quantitative analysis. The SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) was used to examine the data. The SPSS output helped the researcher to access and prepare the data to summarise the results in tables which included the frequencies and percentages of answers in particular categories, and the results of inferential statistics tests. Using the most frequently used statistical tests in the SPSS package, the present study applied descriptive statistics including the frequency of compliments offered by participants, and of their responses to compliments from others. In addition, it was necessary to apply an inferential statistics test to the non-parametric data. In this case the appropriate test was the Chi-square test. The Chi-square test was used to compare the observed frequency of the participants' responses to compliments across their gender categories (male or female) with the expected frequencies. If the results of a Chi-square test are significant at a probability value of 0.05, this indicates that there is a significant relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable across the sample group.

Research Data

Semantic formulas of Compliments

Compliments

This section presents the compliments produced by the participants in their responses to the first part of the DCT. Using NVivo software, all the compliments were coded based on Yuan's (2002) framework of compliment strategies.

Compliments in total

Table three tabulates the frequencies and percentages of the types of compliments in all six situations.

Table 3. *Frequencies and percentages for all compliments among the participants in situations 1-6*

	Description	Sources	References	Percentage
Bound semantic formulas				
Advice	Giving a recommendation	1	14	2.65
Contrast	Opposing	0	16	3.03
Explanation	Providing further information	1	22	4.17

Future reference	Referring to the upcoming	1	24	4.54
Information question	Requesting more information	1	31	5.87
Request	Asking to have the item	0	2	0.38
Non-complimentary replies				
Non-compliment	Non-related to the situation	0	2	0.38
Opt out	No response	0	0	0
Unbound semantic formulas				
Explicit compliments	Statements with at least one positive carrier	1	280	53.03
Implicit compliments	General statements	1	137	25.95

It can be seen that “explicit compliments” were the most frequent type of compliment strategy (53.03% of all strategies), followed by “implicit compliments” (25.95%), subtitles of bound semantic formulas “information question” (5.87%), future reference (4.54%), “explanation” (4.17%), “contrast” (3.03%) and “advice” (2.65%). This result shows that the Saudi EFL speakers are perceived to be most likely to be explicit when expressing their positive feelings in compliments.

Table four is a tabulation of the ten most commonly used words in the compliment strategies, with examples extracted from the corpus data.

Table 4. *The ten most commonly words used in compliment situations*

Word	Length	Count	Weighted Percentage (%)	Similar Words
good	4	122	7.58	dear, good, healthy, just, well
nice	4	89	6.01	nice, nicely
look	4	82	5.12	appearance, expect, feel, feelings, look, looking, looks, see, seems
congratulations	15	65	4.39	congratulations
beautiful	9	59	3.98	beautiful
wow	3	59	3.98	wow
like	4	62	3.85	like, liked, wish, wishes
Phone	5	45	3.04	phone, phones
Shoes	5	41	2.70	place, shoes
Great	5	41	2.65	big, expect, great, greatly

Table four shows that in the compliments, the three words most commonly used to convey positive feelings were “good”, “nice” and “look”. Most compliments were surveyed to be expressed in an explicit manner.

Compliment Responses

Table five indicates the total frequencies and percentages of compliment responses in all six situations involving a response to a compliment.

Table 5. *Frequencies and percentages of total compliment responses among the participants in situations 7–12*

	Description	Sources	References	Percentage
Agreement				
Acceptances				
Appreciation token	General acknowledgement	1	169	34.85
Comment acceptance	With positive affiliation	1	102	21.03
Praise upgrade	Admire the compliment	1	61	12.58
Comment history	Given the reason	1	19	3.92
Transfers				
Reassignment	Refer to someone else	1	4	0.82
Return	Given back the compliment	1	75	15.46
Non-agreement				
No acknowledgement		0	0	0
Non-acceptance				
Disagreement		0	0	0
Qualification		0	0	0
Question		0	0	0
Scale down	Minimise the value of action	1	54	11.13
Other interpretations				
reveal		1	1	0.21

The findings reveal that the compliment response strategy of “agreement” was the most frequent (used in 88.66% of all responses) in the six situations when considered in an aggregated manner. Among the subcategories in the “agreement” category, “appreciation token” (34.85% of all responses) was the most frequent compliment response, followed by “comment acceptance” (21.03%) and “return” (15.46%). In addition, it was found that non-agreement responses comprised 11.13% of all responses. Of these, “scale down” strategies were the most common. This means that the Saudi EFL speakers were more likely to accept the compliments than refuse them.

Table six is a tabulation of common words which were applied in the compliment response strategies.

Table 6. *The ten most commonly used words in compliment responses*

Word	Length	Count	Percentage (%)	Similar Words
thank	5	379	30.70	appreciate, grateful, thank, thankful, thanks
much	4	58	4.21	lot, much

happy	5	48	4.08	glad, happy
help	4	43	3.61	assistance, help, helped, helpful, helping, helps, serve, service
hope	4	33	2.81	hope, hoping, promise
really	6	33	2.81	actually, really
work	4	45	2.68	going, make, makes, studied, study, studying, work, worked
job	3	31	2.47	job, problem
teacher	7	29	2.47	instructor, teacher
good	4	35	2.40	dear, full, good, just, respectful, respecting, well

Table six indicates that the word “thank” (used in 30.70% of all responses) was the most commonly used word in compliment responses.

Structural Formulas of Compliments

The data shows that the participants used different structural formulas to express compliments. Table seven presents the structural formulas employed by the research participants.

Table 7. *The frequencies and percentages of structural formulas of compliments*

Name	Example	Source	References	Percentage
1. NP is/looks (really) ADJ	<i>Your hair looks nice</i>	1	1	0.27
2. I (really) like/love NP	<i>I love your hair</i>	1	68	18.74
3. PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP	<i>That's a nice piece of work</i>	1	94	25.89
4. You V NP (really) ADJ NP	<i>You did a great job</i>	1	30	8.27
5. You V NP (really) ADV	<i>You really handled that situation well</i>	1	70	19.28
6. You have (a) (really) ADJ NP	<i>You have such beautiful hair</i>	1	25	6.89

7. What (a) ADJ NP!	<i>What a lovely baby you have</i>	1	13	3.58
8. ADJ NP!	<i>Nice game</i>	1	62	17.08
9. Isn't NP ADJ!	<i>Isn't your ring beautiful! Isn't it pretty!</i>	0	0	0
			363	100

Table seven shows that the pattern “3. PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP” (used in 25.89% of all responses) was the most frequently used structure. Examples of this pattern include “The cell phone is really nice”, “The dinner is very delicious”, and “The shoes are very expensive”. The pattern “5. You V NP (really) ADV” (19.28%) was the second-most frequently used structure employed by the participants to express compliments. Example of this pattern includes “You did the presentation very well”, The pattern “2. I (really) like/love NP” (18.74%) was the third-most frequently used structure employed by the participants to express compliments. Examples of this pattern include “I love that type of cell phone”, “I like your shoes”, and “I really like the style”. The pattern “8. ADJ NP” (17.08%) was the fourth-most frequently used structure employed by the participants to express compliments. Examples of this pattern include “Amazing presentation”, “Nice shoes“ and “Nice house”.

The above data reveals that the participants mostly used structures that contained adjectives to compliment their addressees. Also, the data demonstrate that the participants used adjectives such as “*nice*”, “*good*”, “*happy*”, “*glad*” and “*delicious*” as major adjectives in compliments. Verbs were not used by the participants when giving compliments.

Influence of Topic on Compliments and Compliment Responses

Compliments

When expressing congratulations regarding academic success, the complimenter expresses a general judgment on the quality of the success through the common use of the word “good” in both situations. Explicit comments are dominant in both situations. Complimenters express their positive feelings openly to the person. The compliments are not quantified or qualified. The complimenter does not say, for instance, “that was a good presentation because you engaged the audience”. This suggests that the compliment in respect to academic success tends to be positive and of a general nature.

The compliments relating to belongings or objects focus on the object in question, which is qualified by a general judgement such as “nice” or in the case of the house “clean”. Unlike compliments concerning academic success, compliments concerning an individual’s objects show a greater diversity of bound semantic formulas. The dominance of unbound semantic formulas, observed in compliments on academic success, is also dominant in respect to the topic of belongings/objects. This suggests that when an individual is able to view the object physically, as compared to a non-physical referent such as academic success, it is easier for the complimenter to link the compliment to the object. Unbound semantic formulas and explicit comments specifically remain the most common compliment irrespective of the topic.

Compliment Responses

Compliment responses involving the topic of personal achievement demonstrate a high level of agreement, with expressions of appreciation being dominance the most common. As would be expected, “thanks” or “thank you” is the most prevalent response. There is a difference in that the response to a compliment on cooking a delicious dinner has a dominance of acceptance over appreciation. This is because in this context, the experience has been shared whereas in situations seven and eight consumption is separated in time and space from production.

In situations where the topic is related to personal ability, agreement still dominates, with the appreciation token being the most dominant. In this context, there is evidence that it is difficult to predict the prevalence of the types of agreement responses that will be used. It can be said then that irrespective of the topic, the compliment responses are driven by the cultural norms of the requirement to express gratitude when receiving a compliment and that the types of agreement expressed by the individual is more a reflection of the personal communicative style than the topic. It does appear that compliment responses are more influenced by social norms than compliments. This is evident in a tendency to seek to scale down compliments across all topics in order to show humility.

Gender Differences

Compliments

Table eight tabulates the frequencies, percentages and chi-square tests of compliments across male and female participants:

Table 8. *Frequencies, percentages and chi-square test of compliments across male and female participants*

Name	Male	Female	χ^2
Bound semantic formulas			
Advice	5	9	7.54 , P= 0.37
Contrast	6	10	
Explanation	13	9	
Future reference	9	15	
Information question	18	13	
Request	2	0	
Unbound semantic formulas			
Explicit compliments	139	141	
Implicit compliments	72	65	

The quantitative analysis of the Saudi EFL speakers’ compliments shows some variations across genders. However, the Chi-square results indicate that there are no significant differences between males and females in the choice of compliment strategies. This means that the male and female participants used the same compliment strategies.

Compliment Responses

Table 9 shows frequencies, percentages and Chi-square tests of compliment responses across male and female participants.

Table 9. *Frequencies, percentages and chi-square tests of compliment responses across male and female participants*

Name	Male	Female	χ^2
Agreement			
Acceptances			
Appreciation token	100	69	12.15, P < 0.05
Comment Acceptance	48	54	
Praise Upgrade	22	39	
Comment History	10	9	
Transfers			
Reassignment	1	3	
Return	35	40	
Non-Agreement			
Scale Down	27	27	

The Chi-square analysis of the Saudi EFL speakers' responses to compliments shows some variations across genders. Table nine indicates that there are differences between males and females in compliment response strategies ($\chi^2 = 12.15$, $P < 0.05$). It also indicates that the female and male participants used different compliment response strategies. The details are addressed in the following paragraph. Overall, "acceptance" was the most frequently used compliment response strategy. The data shows that male participants employed more "acceptance" strategies than females when responding to compliments. Men used 170 acceptance strategies, which include "appreciation token", "comment acceptance" and "praise upgrade" in their compliment responses while women used 162 (Table 35). The data indicates that the male participants used more "appreciation token" strategies than the females in responding to the compliments. Males used 100 while females used 69 appreciation token strategies when responding to compliments. Female participants used slightly more "comment acceptance" strategies than the males when responding to compliments. Males used 48 while females used 54 "comment acceptance" strategies in compliment responses. Female participants used more "praise upgrade" strategies than the males in responding to the compliments. Males used 22 while females employed 39 "praise upgrade" strategies in compliment responses. "Non-acceptance" strategies were the second-most frequently used type of agreement strategy. The data suggests that male and female participants employed the same number of "non-acceptance" strategies when responding to compliments.

Compliment Structure

Table ten tabulates the frequencies, percentages and Chi-square tests for compliment structures across male and female participants.

Table 10. *Frequencies, percentages and chi-square tests for compliment structures across male and female participants*

Name	Male	Female	χ^2
1. NP is/looks (really) ADJ	1	0	12.17, P = 0.09
2. I (really) like/love NP	28	40	
3. PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP	50	44	
4. You V (a) (really) ADJ NP	15	15	

5. You V NP (really) ADV	25	45
6. You have (a) (really) ADJ NP	13	12
7. What (a) ADJ NP!	6	7
8. ADJ NP!	38	24
9. Isn't NP ADJ!	0	0

The Chi-square analysis of the Saudi EFL speakers' compliment structure shows some variations across genders. However, the Chi-square results indicate that there are no significant differences between males and females in their use of compliment structures. This means that male and female participants used the same structures.

Findings

The research found that the dominant forms of compliments were unbound semantic formulas that comprised either explicit or implicit comments. This does not appear to be different from the findings about compliment usage amongst other cultural groups (Pour & Zarei, 2016; Yuan, 2002). The form used was unaffected by the social relationships between the participants. Where the social context of the compliment involved a situation that was delicate, the participants tended to use more implicit compliments than explicit. This suggests that the religious requirements regarding politeness in the Saudi Arabian context increased the likelihood that implicit compliments would be used. Bound semantic formulas will be more prevalent in this social situation. Discussions of objects rather than people tend to promote a greater use of bound semantic formulas.

A significant finding was that the cohort showed a high level of variation in the range of compliments that were used, and that there was no fixed pattern to their use. The cohort used adjectives as compliments rather than verbs. This finding is congruent with the research of Qanbar (2012). It does appear that the use of compliments amongst Saudi Arabian students is strongly influenced by the social need to not cause offence to the other person. There was no evidence to support the findings of Farghal (2006) that the contextual situation affects the length of the compliment among Arabic speakers. The length of the compliments used was consistent across all situations. The use of both compliments and compliment responses is not affected by the nature of the social relationship that exists between the people communicating. Compliments require a return compliment and are used to establish social equality and mutual respect.

The other significant finding in the research was a lack of difference in the types of compliments and compliment responses according to gender. The only identified difference was that females tended to provide more compliments than males. Men tended to accept compliments more than women and provided compliments that were performance based. Females tended to provide compliments that were appearance based. The findings suggest that gender differences in the use of compliments and compliment responses transcend cultures. This may be reflective of the different social standing that women have in society compared to men.

The central finding of this research is that the Saudi culture may be undergoing a semantic cultural change in the way that young people use compliments and respond to compliments. Although the causes of this change were not a focus of this research, the fact that this change is

occurring signals that a wider cultural change may be taking place. The politeness which tends to characterise Muslim cultures still exerts a strong influence on the use of compliments. This change appears to be occurring, as the cohort showed a high degree of variability in their semantic framing of compliments and compliment responses. This might indicate a displacement of the collective culture of Saudi Arabia with a more individualistic one.

Conclusion

Although prior to this study there had not been enough research into the use of compliments and responses to compliments in the Saudi context, there have been studies conducted within Muslim countries. In the Arab World, Farghal (2006) examined Kuwaiti students' realisation of compliments at the college level. Using a (DCT) the study found that the Arabic language affects the students' complimenting behaviour when they used English. The study found that the students used a relatively fixed pattern to express compliments and that the compliment topic was an important determinant of the length of compliments and compliment responses. Falaisi (2007) used a DCT to study pragmatic transfer in the United Emirates amongst female students. Falaisi (2007) found that Arabic native speakers do not use target-like responses when they compliment. In an Egyptian context, Nelson, Bakary, and Al-Batal, (1996). found that Egyptian speakers primarily use adjectives and full sentences for compliments. This was supported in the study of compliments by Ebadi and Salman (2015) in the context of Iraq. In a Persian context, Karimnia and Afghari (2011) found that compliments were important as part of a socio-religious requirement to provide compliments to others.

The present research does not support previous findings that the Arab culture tends to favour longer forms of compliments (Nelson, Bakery & Al-Batal, 1996). One possible reason for this may be that the cohort of younger Saudi people had been influenced by western linguistic practices. Whereas Farghal and Haggan (2006), Kasper (2000), Qanbar (2012) and Manes and Wolfson (1981) found that Arabic speakers tend to use a fixed pattern of compliment usage that had a low degree of variation, this study found the reverse to be true. This may be due to the nature of the cohort that was used in this research.

The research was unable to provide a definitive insight into the influence of the degree of intimacy and social status of the people involved. However, the research identified that the socio-religious rules that dominate the highly conservative culture of Saudi Arabia do influence the way that compliments are used. Although exposure to western language and culture may be changing the way that young Saudis semantically express compliments, the socio-religious rules that influence behaviour and relationships remain. The research found that irrespective of the relationship between the participants, there is a strong requirement for the participants to be polite to each other. Compliments tend to be given out of social necessity rather than as a genuine expression of how the person feels.

Implications

Further comparative research is needed to increase the level of understanding of the use of compliments in the Saudi Arabian context. The research has identified a need to assess whether there is a fundamental difference between the ways in which younger Saudis use compliments and

the ways in which older generations do so. The research suggests that there has been a change. This is worthy of investigation into the precise nature of this change and the underlying causes. This is necessary as it may be evidence of a significant cultural change occurring in the younger generation due to the gradual westernisation of the Saudi Arabian educational system, the increased exposure of Saudi Arabian students to western education through international scholarships, and greater exposure to Western education. The significant difference between the findings in this study and those of previous studies in regard to how compliments are used warrants further investigation to determine whether this difference can be found in other cohorts of Saudi Arabian students. If this difference is found to be evident in a wider group of students, then it will imply that the exposure of Saudi Arabian students to English and to western culture is changing the ways in which they use compliments.

There is a need for students learning English to shift their focus from a grammatical orientation towards developing pragmatic competence. The lack of variation in how students use compliments in different situations indicates how politeness restricts the variability of compliments and responses to compliments. EFL learners need to be trained in the use of compliments in other cultural settings. This comes with the danger that has been identified in this research. Greater exposure to cultural and linguistic differences in the use of compliments and compliment responses may be instrumental in initiating linguistic cultural change. This exposure may result in less conservative and religious-based social utterances. This research has identified the beginnings of a cultural change in how young Saudis are using compliments and responding to compliments.

About the Author

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