Comparative Cross-Cultural Analysis of Compliments in English and Persian Series

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Abstract

With the growth of interests in the study of compliments, this subject has become a major issue in the areas of interactional sociolinguistics and cross-cultural language studies. In the same line, this study compares the compliment responses (CRs) of native Persian speakers with those of native speakers of American English in TV series to find similarities and differences in the use of CRs in both languages. The data are from the two TV series broadcasted in 1994 and 2013. For analyzing the data, this study employs Herbert's (1986) three main categories including agreement, non-agreement, and other interpretation and different CRs varieties (appreciation token, reassignment, scale down, etc to identify the sociopragmatic realizations of CRs and the role of gender in this respect. Upon a scrutiny, the findings of this study reveal that in each language, the use of CRs varieties are culturally dependent and gender cannot be an issue in determining the CRs varieties in each language. Taking the results of this study into account, they can provide a strong skeleton by which many language practitioners and writers can have better understanding of the cultural boundaries in designing activities of the books, which highly focus on the pragmatic function of language, and avoiding communicational breakdown for EFL learners. Moreover, this study gives EFL learners and teachers a bunch of information to explain why one variety of CRs is used more than others in a language comparing to the other type of language variety.
Keywords: Cross-cultural Language studies, Compliment response, Herbert's taxonomy of CRs

INTRODUCTION

Among different speech acts, compliments are recognized as important speech acts in a sociocultural context (Sadeghi & Zarei, 2013, p. 39) whose pragmatic functions are determined by the cultural norms of the society. In conformity with Kim (2003),

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compliment is a particularly suitable speech act to investigate a culture because it acts as a window through which we can find out what is valued in a particular culture. Based on the way the compliments are used and understood by the receiver, compliments can be interpreted in different ways in different cultures. For Brown and Levinson (1987), the most obvious function of compliments is to polish the social relationships, pay attention to positive face wants and thus increase or integrate solidarity between people (as cited in Yousefvand, 2012, p. 1). In the same line, Yousefvand (2012) notes, "the speech act of complimenting is largely a positive and polite strategy: since it lets an addressee know that he or she is being liked." (p. 1)

Many researchers (Creese, 1991; Miles, 1994; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1998; Wolfson & Manes, 1980) worked on compliments and compliments response. Accordingly, many taxonomies and classifications of compliments were proposed. Among those, Manes and Wolfson (1981), Herbert's (1986) Taxonomy of Compliment responses, and Holme's (1986) taxonomy of compliment response are noticeable. Drawing on Herbert's (1986) taxonomy, the present study investigates the varieties of CRs in the two languages to clarify the frequency by which each variety is used.

Pragmatics, as a field concerned with the way language is used in society, is of great importance not only for language learners but also for native speakers in the realm of successful communication. It necessitates both addressers and addressees fully understand the function of speech act he or she is using and the meaning he or she is communicating. In fact, the society and culture are strongly connected with the way different speech acts are used. Therefore, the cross-cultural analysis of compliments necessitates the mastery of pragmatic aspect of language.

Accordingly, the present study aims to compare pragmatic functions of compliment responses and patterns in English and Persian from cross-cultural perspective. This study also aims at considering the following research question:

- Do Persian and English native speakers use different pragmatic functions of compliments?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on compliments cover many necessary aspects such as pragmatic, sociolinguistic, contrastive, discourse analytic and psycholinguistic ones. Among all, cross-cultural study specifically concentrates on social and pragmatic function of language. Accordingly, interaction is defined as a notion that is closely framed by the cultural schema and it is this schema which determines pragmatic function used by the speakers. In other words, the cultural schema of a speech community might affect the linguistic nature of pragmatic strategies.

Pomerantz (1978) was the first who discussed compliment responses from a conversation analytic perspective. She categorized the compliment responses in terms of Acceptance, Rejection and Self-Praise Avoidance. After her, other researchers (Manes &Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson, 1983; Holmes 1986, 1988; Herbert 1986, 1990) presented

several categorizations and taxonomies for compliment responses. Large-scale studies by these researchers pave the way to revise and present a practical taxonomy for compliment responses. For this purpose, the revision of the Pomerantz's taxonomy by Herbert (1990) in the form of three main categories opened a new chapter for studying compliment responses more accurately.

Conducting an extensive study, Herbert (1986) collected a corpus of 1,062 compliment responses over a three-year period at the State University of New York. He observed that American speakers preferred to respond with some responses other than agreement. However, it is assumed that a compliment is socially conditioned to be responded by agreement. Later, Herbert (1989) concluded that it was the speech community's agreement that formed a "correct response". He also noted that the common compliment response among all speakers of English was "thank you" when they were questioned generally. Herbert tried to investigate the fact that "[firstly,] the patterned use of language is culturally variable and [secondly, that] these patterns may be linked to such larger aspects of sociocultural organization as religion, politics and ecology" (1990, p. 82). Finally, he concluded that common South African speakers preferred to accept the compliments while East Asian speakers preferred to reject them.

In the sociolinguistic analysis of compliments, Sucuoğlua and Bahçelerlib (2015) studied the patterns of response to compliments in second language. Using written discourse completion tasks (DCT), together with a set of six different scenarios in which the students were asked to respond to specific compliments, they tried to assess the compliment responses of native and non-native Turkish English Language Teaching (ELT) students in North Cyprus. Their study showed that there were significant differences in English compliment strategies between the native and non-native Turkish ELT students.

Similarly, Yu (2005) focused on the cross-cultural pragmatics in the study of compliments. He used data-collection methods through ethnographic observation pioneered by Wolfson and Manes (1980). His study presented sociocultural features of compliments in Chinese and American societies including topics, the addresser-addressee relationship, and culture-specificity versus universality. His study showed that cultural norms played a crucial role in compliment behavior. Additionally, he found that the cultural boundaries caused American English speakers' intention to be misunderstood by native Chinese speakers. Accordingly, he concluded that while Chinese silence or indirect utterances considered as inappropriate or even rude in situations, their use of direct, straightforward compliments could be regarded as socioculturally proper by the native English speakers.

Moreover, Duan (2011) analyzed the complimenting speech act of Chinese EFL learners to examine second language cross-cultural pragmatic awareness. He found that in different contexts of situations, learners used different strategies when performing the speech act.

Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) politeness model, Karimnia and Afghari (2011) studied the role of compliment in both English and Persian contexts from a cross-cultural perspective. For this purpose, they chose a comparative study based on which the compliment response behavior of native Persian speakers was compared with that of native speakers of American English to see the applicability of Brown and Levinson's universal model. The results of their study demonstrated that Persian and English speakers used different strategies and cultures and these strategies had an important effect on speakers' speech act performance. Their study also mentioned the inapplicability of Brown and Levinson's model for cross-cultural comparisons.

Using DCTand Herbert's (1986) taxonomy of compliment responses, Motaghi-Tabari and Beuzeville (2012)investigated whether the Persians who were exposed to Australian culture were still affected by their cultural norms -in particular by the politeness system *taarof*- in responding to compliments in an intercultural interaction or not. Conclusively, their study suggested that in addition to similarities in the choice of compliment response types by Australians and Persians living in Australia, there were still some differences in response to the compliments by the Persians.

Concerning different Responses to Compliments in Chinese and English, Yuhuan (2004) conducted a study in which compliment responses were studied cross culturally. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness principle was used and the elicited responses to sincere compliments in different circumstances under parallel situations in Chinese and English were gathered. Comparing results with cultural values and assumptions specific to each culture illustrated some differences in the way compliment responses were used by Chinese and English. The result of his study emphasized cultural differences in this respect.

Putting forward the role of cross-cultural aspects in the use of compliments and CR between English and Persian TV Interviews, Behnam and Aminzadeh (2011) investigated the compliment responses used by Oprah Winfrey and Reza Rashid Pour in celebrities from MBC4 channel and eight Iranian celebrities, respectively. They investigated the similarities and differences in the use of compliments and compliment responses in English and Persian TV interviews based on the topic, function of the compliments and also interlocutors' responses to compliment in the Persian and American TV interviews by using eight video-taped and transcribed interviews. The result of their study revealed that English and Persian interlocutors' complimenting behavior was cross-culturally varied and different when they complimented and responded compliments in TV interviews.

Similarly, in a comparative study on the use of compliment response strategies, Shabani and Zeinali (2015) explored the significance of pragmatic knowledge and politeness strategies in language learning and teaching. They knew lack of pragmatic awareness as the root of most communication failures. Using a group of Persian and English native speakers, they examined the effect of gender on the use of strategies to respond to compliments. For sampling, 15 female Iranian native speakers and 15 male ones in Iran as well as 26 female English native speakers and 13 malesin Canada, with age range of

17-30, participated in their study while a researcher-made questionnaire in the form of a DCT was used. Through *ANOVAs*, it was clarified that there was a significant difference between Persian native speakers and Canadian English speakers with respect to the compliment response strategies for the use of CR at macro level of analysis, accept, evade, and reject. They also noted that the most widely used CR strategy among both Iranian and English participants is *accept*. Regarding the effect of gender, they did not observe any statistically significant difference between the two groups for the use of CR.

In the study by Jing and Li-ying (2005), the role of pragmatic transfer in compliment responses by Chinese learners of English was investigated. They discovered similarities and differences in CR between the American English speakers (AES) and Chinese Learners of English (CLE). They also showed an empirical evidence for or against existing theories of pragmatic transfer in CRs. Moreover, they highlighted social value differences between the two groups.

METHOD

The materials used in this study were the transcripts of two TV series, Friends and Shahgoosh, in English and Persian. The "Friends" series is an American sitcom series, broadcasted from 1994 to 2004and created by David Crane and Marta Kauffman. It has 10 seasons while each episode varies from 18 to 25 minutes. And the other material is an Iranian sitcom series, broadcasted in 2013, directed by Seyed Davood Mirbagheri (an Iranian film maker), and produced by Seyed Mohammad Emami and Mehran Boroumand. Shahgoosh has 28 episodes with approximately 60 minutes long. All transcripts were downloaded from the internet, and four episodes of first season of Friends and Shahgoosh were selected. It was decided to select 33 and 24 compliments in the English and Persian series respectively. The analysis could be done in different categories in which compliment and compliment responses had   pragmatically meaningful functions in cultural context. So, compliments are classified under main categories and some subcategories of CR functions based on Herbert's (1986) taxonomy; then, frequency of each one was obtained.

Herbert's (1989) taxonomy of CRs in which he specified and elaborated categories and subcategories of compliment and CRs under a functionally cross-cultural microscope, suits well to the ends of this study. In fact, Herbert (1998) talked about Agreement, Non-agreement, and Other Interpretations as macro level analysis of compliments, in addition to Appreciation Token, Comment Acceptance, Praise Upgrade, Reassignment, Return, Disagreement, and Qualification as micro levels.

Three macro level CRs of Agreement, Non-agreement, Other interpretations and variety of micro level CRs proposed by Herbert (1998) are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Taxonomy of Different Types of CR (Herbert, 1998)

Different kinds of CR

I. Agreement: a "semantically fitted" response (Herbert, 1989, p.12) to a complimentary force, praise, or assertion is used by the complimentee to show his/her agreement.

A. Appreciation Token: the complimentee agrees verbally or nonverbally with the compliment. e.g., Thank you! [nod]

B. Comment Acceptance: the complimentee accepts the compliment and comments in line with the compliment. e.g., Yeah, this is my favorite, too

C. Praise Upgrade: the addressee accepts the compliment while he applies the force of the compliment. Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?

D. Comment History: addressee informs on the object of compliment on which he is complimented for. e.g., I bought it for the trip to Arizona.

E. Reassignment: addressee's agreement is expressed by reassigning his comment to a third person e.g., My mother gave it to me.

F. Return: the addressee shifts or returns the praise to the addresser e.g., So is yours.

II. Non-agreement

A. Scale down: complimentary force is disagreed by the addressee, and some flaw in the object is mentioned, or it is claimed that the praise is overstated. e.g., It is really quite old.

B. Question: the sincerity or the appropriateness of the compliment is questioned by the addressee. e.g., Do you really think so?

C. Disagreement: addressee disagrees with the addresser about the value of object of the compliment. e.g., I hate it.

D. Qualification: the original assertion is the only notion qualified by the addressee by using adverbs such as, usually, though, but, well etc. e.g., Well, it is all right but Kim's is nicer

E. No Acknowledgement: The addressers' compliment is not followed by any response from addressee as if he has not heard the compliment or answer irrelevantly by shifting topic or even no response.

III. Other Interpretations:

A. Request: The addressee considers addressers' compliment as request rather than a simple compliment. e.g., you want to borrow it?

In order to prepare easier analysis, first the frequency of each variety of CR is enumerated. Then, through *t*-test, the degrees of evaluated differences are computed for both languages.

RESULTS

For comparing purpose, the number of CRs varieties used in each language representative series was counted and displayed in the Table 2.In the four episodes of Friends on first season, the patterns of No Acknowledgement, Acceptance, Comment History, and Transfer have the highest occurrence; No Acknowledgement, a variety of Non-agreement, with 9 times occurrence was the most frequent strategy in English. Contrastively, appreciation token strategy has the highest frequency in Persian with approximately a close occurrence (8 times).Appreciation Token, Question, Comment Acceptance, and No Acknowledgement with 8, 6, 4, and 4 times occurrence respectively, are the most frequent used CRs in Persian representative series Shahgoosh.

Table 2. Frequency of Response Types in English and Persian

Response types			English		Persian	
			f	*P*	*f*	*P*
A. Agreement	I. Acceptance	1.Appreciation Token	7	21.21	8	33.34
		2.Comment Acceptance	7	21.21	4	16.67
		3.Praise Upgrade	1	3.03	1	4.16
	II. Comment History		1	3.03	0	0
	III. Transfer	1.Reassignmen	1	3.03	0	0
		2.Return	0	0	0	0
B. Non-agreement	I. Scale down		1	3.03	0	0
	II. Question		1	3.03	6	25
	III. Non-acceptance	1.Disagreeemnt	0	0	0	0
		2.Qualification	5	15.15	1	4.16
	IV. No Acknowledgment		9	27.27	4	16.67
C. Other Interpretations	I. Request		0	0	0	0
	Total		33	100.0	24	100.0

Note. P= Percentage

Furthermore, in order to see whether the difference between the two languages in the use of different CRs is meaningful or not, a *t* test was run. For this purpose, after calculating the mean for different varieties of CRs in English and Persian, the following results are derived from *t* test.

Table 3. Mean for Different Kinds of CRs in English and Persian

Two languages	*N*	*M*
English	8	4.12
Persian	8	3.37

Note. N= number of samples, M= mean

Table 4. T-test for CRs in the Two Languages

	Paired Differences							Sig. (2-tailed)
				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		*t*	*df*	
	M	*SD*	*SE* Mean	Lower Bound	Upper Bound			
E&P	-2.07018	2.73117	.36175	-2.79485	-1.34550	-5.723	56	.000

Note. E&P= English and Persian, SD= Standard deviation, SE Mean= Standard error of the mean

In Table 4, the mean difference indicates, how differentially the respondents in the two languages used CRs patterns. Also, from the output (T = -5.723 with 56 degrees of freedom, Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.000 with p-value = 0.05) there exists enough evidence to conclude that there is a difference in the mean for CRs indexes in English. To wit, when the significance value is low (typically less than .05) and the confidence interval for the mean difference does not contain zero within its range, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between the means of the two languages in the use of CRS.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study the patterns concerning the most frequent CRs are obtained as Appreciation Token, Comment Acceptance, and Qualification in English and as Appreciation Token, Question, Comment Acceptance, and No Acknowledgement in Persian. Accordingly, the original hypothesis is supported; in both languages different CR strategies are used in order to meet sociopragmatic functions defined culturally in each language. This finding is in line with the results of studies done by Holmes (1986, 1988) and Herbert (1990). They found Acceptance the most frequently used strategy by people in New Zealand and American college students respectively. However, this finding is in contrast with the result of study done by Wang and Tsai (2000) who found Disagreement as the most common strategy among Taiwan college students. Also it is similar to the results of studies done by Razi (2013) who knew Acceptance, Evasion, and Rejection as the first, second, and third kind of compliments in the order of usage. This result also supports the cultural similarity between the two languages for preferring one kind of CR over others. Along withShabani and Zeinali (2015) as well as Sadeghi and Zarei's findings (2013),the results of this study showed the cultural similarities between English and Persian for using Acceptance as the most common CR used strategy.

The result of this study is also similar to the results of many of previous studies (Gholamali Dehkordi, & Chalak, 2015; Mohajernia & Solimani, 2013; Tajedin & Yazdanmehr, 2012; Motaghi-Tabari & Beuzevil, 2012; Yousefvand, 2012, and Shabani & Zeinali, 2015) in terms of cultural similarity. The same also can be seen in the study by Jin-pie (2013)on Philippines English. Considering these results, this study also confirmed Holmes (1986, 1988) and Herbert's (1990) conclusion that Acceptance was the most frequently used strategy of CR.

According to Herbert's (1998) taxonomy, the categories of CRs were differentiated by culture to which each language belongs. In this respect, it could be claimed that it was culture which largely determined how compliments were responded in each language. Although there were some parallelisms and similarities between the two languages in the use of these strategies, each complimentee shaped his or her CR based on his or her own culturally laden knowledge and principles. In other words, it was observed that, CR strategies act sociopragmatically in both languages to fulfill a response to the compliment, which was culturally appropriate.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study has been framed through the principles of CR with some possible implications for language teaching. As it is observed in the study, in addition to the differences between the two languages in the use of CRs, there are some cultural similarities (Shabani and Zeinali, 2015 and Sadeghi and Zarei, 2013) which make it easier for the teachers to raise learners' awareness of the pragmatic features of Persian and English languages. Furthermore, teachers can prepare the ground to avoid misunderstanding and serious breakdowns in communication. Additionally, what learners need is comprehension and production of language (Al Falasi, 2007). In addition, the material developers and practitioners are incumbent to focus more attentively on this aspect of language through issuing different group works and cultural point of the second language. Also, the varieties and unique features of every language which is culturally rooted in language should be clarified and put through the materials taught in the class to accentuate the cross cultural similarities and differences between the first and second language in order to achieve what Kasper and Schmidt (1996) knew as the teachability notion of pragmatic knowledge"(p.160). For this purpose, teachers can use authentic materials such as films as a way to demonstrate how speech act of compliment is responded in real situations.

As it is observed in the present study, genders cannot be influential in the way males and females respond to the compliment. So, this can be considered as a common point between the two languages to hypothesize the similarity which can make it easier to use CRs in interactions.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study especially ventures to find how compliments are responded across the two languages and the order by which CRs are used. There are some points that highlight the need for further studies. First, as it is observed in the present study that gender cannot be an issue in determining the pattern of CRs, but the role of other social factors like social distance and power are needed to be investigated as well. Secondly, there are many authentic materials that are needed to be studied in order to determine whether genre or in other words different situations can determine the patterns by which compliments are responded or not . Moreover, the present study is presumed to be a cross-cultural one in which the sociopragmatic aspect of language is investigated but a speech act must be appropriately socially, pragmatically, and linguistically fitted as well.

Therefore, the sociolinguistic aspect of the CRs should be considered as an issue for further studies.

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