

A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF OBJECTS OF COMPLIMENTING IN WESTERN AND ARMENIAN COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT: *The speech act of complimenting in Western and in some Eastern speech communities has been an object of extensive comparative investigation. However, the study of complimenting in Trans-Caucasian speech communities, the Armenian community in particular, remains less-investigated. The aim of the paper is to indicate the objects of complimenting in Armenian community. The analysis shows that taken in general terms the objects of complimenting in Western and Armenian societies do not differ greatly, but the accents are fairly different which can be explained by the mentality and perception of social values that each society displays. Whereas in Western societies the accent is on appearance and abilities, in Armenian community the greater part of compliments refers to the ability and performance, family members, especially children and hospitality. As far as appearance is concerned, the attention is focused mainly on new looks and new possessions (hairstyle, dress, earrings, etc.).*

KEY WORDS: compliment, praise, speech act, topic of compliment, communication, politeness strategy

INTRODUCTION

Paying a compliment can be a daunting affair for a non-native speaker whose social values and standards of behaviour differ from those in the target culture. Therefore studies of how different ethnic cultures make compliments or choose objects of complimenting become of considerable importance. The speech act of complimenting in Western and some Eastern speech communities has been an object of extensive comparative investigation. However, the study of complimenting in Trans-Caucasian speech communities, the Armenian community in particular, remains less-investigated. We can mention only a few researches which give a general review of the subject [1, 2]. The aim of the present paper is to investigate similarities and differences in choosing topics of complimenting in Armenian culture and the target language culture. The analysis is based on transcriptions from films and participant observation.

The place of complimenting in the system of speech acts

Communication through language is one of the basic devices that help in establishing and developing relationships with others. Among many acts that people perform daily compliments occupy a special place. As Sadokhin puts it, “it has been ascertained that the character, form and the style of communication depend to a great extent on the first minutes, sometimes seconds of communication. There exist very simple devices that allow practically in every situation to make the initial stage of communication easier, which determines the entire further course of this process. Among such devices is a compliment” [3,139]. Therefore compliments are considered to

have great social power and value. As Wolfson claims compliments can function as “social lubricants” which “grease the social wheels” [4,89]. Pomerantz is one of the first researchers that refers the speech act of compliment to the sphere of pragmatics [5]. Therefore it is reasonable to examine compliment in the light of the theory of speech acts suggested by Austin (1962) and Searle (1980) and the theory of linguistic politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson [6].

According to Brown and Levinson, complimenting is a positive politeness strategy as it is directed to the addressee’s interests, his needs, wants, etc. They introduced the notions of *face* as “something that is emotionally invested and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced and must be constantly attended to in interaction” [6, 61]. They also distinguish two types of face: *positive* and *negative face* directly related to two types of politeness strategies: positive politeness strategy and negative politeness strategy. Compliments are regarded to refer to the positive polite strategy. As Holmes argues a compliment may function as a positive speech act to enhance solidarity between speakers and addressees, and it can serve as a negative speech act when it is used in cross-cultural interactions [7, 487].

As a type of speech act compliments belong to expressives as they are associated with certain feelings and emotions of participants in the act of complimenting. From the point of view of the impact on the addressee, it is worth mentioning that compliments satisfy the most important psychological need of a person – the need of positive emotions and have also educational importance. “Thus compliments not only make us feel happy, but also noticeably influence our learning, memory, motivation and other cognitive functions” [8]. Besides, the ability to notice positive qualities in other people helps us to reveal good features in ourselves, work, personality traits, possessions, and about third parties closely related to the addressee” [9, 64].

As compliments reflect some sort of evaluation or estimation concerning the addressee’s appearance, behavior and possessions, they may sometimes cause the addressee’s annoyance or displeasure. This kind of situation is described by Brown and Levinson as Face-Threatening Act (FTA) [6]. Even in a mono- cultural communication a compliment can be perceived as a face threatening act as it may collide with some conversational principles. As Pomerantz (1978) says responding to a compliment poses a dilemma for speakers since they have to balance two conflicting conversational principles: agreeing with the co-participant and self-praise [10].

As a speech act compliments are also associated with the notion of *felicity conditions*, which require that speakers should perform speech acts in a sincere manner [11, 50-51]. Compliments are effective when speakers mean what they say. As a matter of fact we know that this is not always the case. So here we observe the violation of the Maxim of Quality which says: try to make your contribution one that is true [11,37].

Compliment vs praise

The words ‘praise’ and ‘compliment’ are often used interchangeably in both scientific literature and in everyday language. It is not surprising as most definitions of these two concepts overlap, the definition of one is often formulated through the mention of the other or in some cases both the concepts might go under the same definition. Let’s see how these two concepts are defined by different researchers: Praise and compliments are both the expression of approval and admiration. Colloquially ‘praise’ is usually given for a behavior trait. ‘Compliments are usually given for physical traits, or specific abilities [12]. Or: “to praise” someone is to express a higher level of a compliment. It gives someone a deeper feeling that they are worthwhile or loved than a compliment does [13].

In some cases there seems to be a play of words in their definitions as in “As nouns the difference between praise and compliment is that praise is commendation; favourable representation in words while compliment is an expression of praise, congratulation, encouragement, or respect” [14]. It is not surprising that researchers often use these words as synonyms, seeing very little or no whatsoever difference between them.

Below are extracts from works of different researchers using these words quite interchangeably? 1. “Studies after studies show that offering **compliment** works better at improving the performance of other people than criticism or negative remarks. **Praise** activates the reward circuit in the receiver’s brain heightening their focus and motivation [15]. See another extract: 2. To the brain, receiving a **compliment** is as much a social reward as being rewarded money. There seems to be scientific validity behind the message ‘**praise** to encourage improvement’ [16].

Now let us see what kind of definitions are given to these notions by dictionaries and the prominent opponents in the field. In *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* we read “Compliment is an expression of praise, admiration, or respect”. Holmes gives the following definition of compliment, “A compliment is 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” [7,446]. This definition, though acknowledged by many, has a weakness mentioned by Chie Adachi. The researcher says that the definition is unclear since the statement that the compliment can be given to someone “usually the person addressed” hints that here could be someone other than the addressee [18].

More plausible is Wierzbicka’s definition of a compliment which says, “One can praise, but not compliment, someone who is absent” [19, 201]. Aarhus and Aldrich argue that compliments are not always bald, as the grammatical approach suggests, but can be coiffed in many ways: the inference of a compliment may not depend on issuing an explicit compliment formula. “Thus, compliments can be inferred from aspects of the social context that the speaker’s message brings into play” [20, 399-400]. They argue, therefore, that having at least a working definition should precede the study of compliments in any given community. From the above discussion, it appears that though it has been claimed that there is no need for a definition, most linguists are liable to accept the opposite view. This means that if we want to have a working definition we should try at least to draw a distinction between praise and compliment. We have chosen the following criteria which distinguish compliments from praise. Unlike praise, compliments

- occur in the presence of the addressee
- often sound formal like greetings *How are you? Have a nice day! How did you spend your weekend?* whose function is limited to the creation of the atmosphere of solidarity, immediacy and friendliness
- occur most frequently between acquaintances and friends, rather than intimates or strangers
- are in most cases formulaic
- can be explicit and implicit.

Objects of Compliments

For any culture a compliment expresses approval or admiration of something that both speakers and addressees consider positively. As compliments generally reflect values that are accepted by the society, it is important to know which topics become most common objects of this speech act

for different cultures. As Manes puts it, a compliment is a “mirror of cultural values” [21,96]. Wieland suggests what is considered to be acceptable as the object of a compliment is culturally determined [22]. Several general topic categories have been identified across languages: appearance, ability, performance, possessions and personality [7, 23, 10, 24]. These topics of compliments seem to be commonly shared across different cultures, however, they differ from culture to culture by their scope, types and forms of responses: each culture has its preferences for certain topic categories and specific forms of expressing them.

In general, western speakers tend to use and accept compliments more often than Asian speakers. As for objects of complimenting, Americans prefer to compliment on appearance more than French [22]; Japanese compliment on personal traits more significantly than Americans [25]; Polish people tend to give compliments on possessions while Americans tend to compliment people’s characteristic [22,12]. British students focus on more extrinsic features about addressees – appearance and possessions, whereas Japanese students tend to compliment on intrinsic features such as personality and ability [18]. Taiwan men and women compliment more on someone’s appearance than on his/her ability or personality [26].

Now we will try to find out how the matters stand with Armenian community. Armenians are generally regarded as a somewhat reserved and austere society with a lot of traditions and customs that were always preserved in spite of its harsh and rigorous history. Formal statements like compliments were much less common than praises. Compliments were mainly detected among the more intelligent and advanced layers of the society, particularly among females. Heads of enterprises or administration could praise but not compliment their workers. This is especially true for pre-Soviet and Soviet periods when people were not encouraged to make compliments, the latter being considered a sort of flattery, fawning or hypocrisy. Nowadays the situation has drastically changed: in view of globalization, international cooperation and international academic exchange programs the Armenian society has become an open society and has an immediate access to European and American (there is a big Armenian diaspora in the US) cultures, which has its influence on the representatives of this nation, especially the young generation. Therefore the present paper focuses on data from comparatively younger speakers. So we will examine each above mentioned topic of complimenting in detail.

Appearance

Like many cultures compliments on appearance are common in Armenian community, however, with some difference: speakers focus more on something new about the addressee: hair-cut, dress, bag, hat, shoes, etc. For example (examples are given in translation):

What a nice hair cut!

This dress suits you perfectly!

What an adorable hat!

Compliments on physical appearance are mainly made by men to their sweethearts or girls and women in general whereas compliments of the second type are often made by females.

e.g. You are the best girl I have ever known!

You are a charming creature!

You are dear to me.

Ability, performance

Compliments on mental ability and moral traits are valued more in Armenian society, therefore they seem to be more common among Armenians. Armenian society appears to be more rationalistic guided by the proverb “It is not the gay coat that makes the gentleman”.

It is worth mentioning that compliments in this case are more genuine and sincere than those on physical features of the addressee.

- e.g. You are so clever!
 You are so intelligent!
 You are so strong!
 You are brave!

The last two compliments mainly refer to males.

Possessions

In the Soviet period it was not common to give compliments on possessions. In the socialist society everyone seemed to be pretty much in the same boat, living in the same conditions: the same typically-designed apartments, shopping in the same places, having meager possessions, etc. Those who might have better conditions or more possessions seemed to conceal the fact in order not to draw the state authorities' attention. With the collapse of the Soviet Union the situation has changed and nowadays one could hear compliments on private houses, furniture, house decorum, etc.

- e. g. What a nice house!
 Your kitchen is exquisite.
 What fine furniture you have! It looks quite antique!

Family

Though this subject does not appear to be a top priority on the list of the above mentioned topics, we do include it as it proved to be vital for Armenian culture.

Here we should speak in the first place about children. For Armenians children are the most cherished members in the family. Children are an absolutely sacred value. Parents are ready to sacrifice their life for their children [27]. Therefore they most often become objects of complimenting.

Paradoxically, responses to compliments on children in most cases are accepted by Armenian community negatively, not to say aggressively. We can say that in many cases compliments on children in Armenian society function as FTAs. Here they are frequently responded by the actions performed superstitiously to avert the possibility of bad luck that might happen: 1) *touch wood* uttered while touching something wooden, to avoid bad luck from what has just been said, 2) the pinching some part of the body, especially the buttocks generally performed secretly so that nobody sees it. It should be mentioned that the expression *touch wood* is borrowed from European culture is mainly used by younger generation. Compliments on children usually involve such expressions as

- e.g. You are my life!
 You are my world!
 You are my pride!

Husbands and wives rarely become the objects of compliments.

Food

Armenian people are distinguished for their generous and lavish hospitality in which treatment of food takes most part of the ceremony. Armenian housewives try their best to entertain their guests with most delicious and originally-cooked dishes. In the bottom of their hearts they hope to be complimented on that. And they are never mistaken: they are usually lavishly and generously complimented by the guests.

e.g. The food was superb. We enjoyed it very much.
 Thank you for delicious meal!
 I have never eaten such tasty tolma!
 How nice your cake looks!

CONCLUSION

The analysis suggests that compliments in Armenian culture are likely to be made more by female speakers than male speakers. As for the old generation, praises are more common among them. With respect to the compliment topics, they do not differ greatly in Western and Armenian communities, but the accents are fairly different which can be explained through the mentality and perception of social values by each culture. Whereas in Western societies the accent is on appearance and abilities, in Armenian community the greater part of compliments refers to the ability and performance, family members, especially children and treatment of guests, food in particular. As far as appearance is concerned, the attention is focused mainly on new looks and new possessions (hairstyle, dress, earring, etc.). Compliments on physical appearance are mainly made by men to their sweethearts or girls and women in general whereas compliments of the first type are often made by females. Treatment of guests in Armenian society is a special occasion which is usually marked by lavish hospitality and festivity, therefore it often becomes a frequent object of compliments.

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