# Investigating Cultural Differences in Speech Act Performance:Compliment Responses

異文化間コミュニケーションでの違いと誤解：「ほめ言葉」に対する応答

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In order to examine possible sources of intercultural miscommunication, this study investigated whether there are differences in how subjects from different cultural backgrounds respond to compliments. The subjects were graduate students at the Monterey Institute of International Studies in California. Subjects were approached and asked to fill out a questionnaire under the pretext of helping the researcher to perform a demographic study. While the subject filled out the questionnaire, the researcher casually offered a compliment regarding an item of clothing, for example, "I like your shoes" (I like + object). The researcher then recorded the subjects' responses. First, the responses were categorized according to the different types of compliment responses identified by Chick (1996). Then the data from the questionnaires was used to sort the subjects' responses according to their cultural background. Finally, Chi-square analyses were performed to determine whether statistically significant differences occurred among the frequencies with which members of the various cultural groups responded to compliments. Statistically significant differences were found between the response types favored by East Asians and those favored by Americans. Furthermore, it was found that statistically significant differences exist between how women and men respond to compliments.

　異文化間コミュニケーションで起こる誤解の原因は様々である。その一因を探るため、「ほめ言葉」に対する応答がいかに文化によって異なるかを調査した。被験者はカリフォルニア州モントレー大学院の院生である。「統計学のリサーチのため」と頼まれた被験者が質問表に記入している際に、筆者が「I like + 的語」という形 でほめ言葉をさりげなく発し、応答を録音。この応答はまず Chick(1996) の提案するほめ言葉のカテゴリーに分けられた。被験者の文化バックグラウンドに関するデータは質問表の回答を使用。ほめ言葉に対する応答と、被験者の文化バックグラウンドをカイ二乗検定で分析、その結果、アメリカ人と東アジア出身者によるほめ言葉の応答には著しい違いがあることが確認された。加えて、女性と男性の応答にも違いがあることを認めた 。

## Introduction / Rationale

Miscommunication often occurs when people with different life experiences and different cultural patterns of communication interact with each other (Chick, 1996, p. 329). One source of intercultural miscommunication has to do with the ways in which members of different cultures are accustomed to performing various speech acts. As Chick points out, when and how people

from different cultures thank, apologize, or compliment can vary widely (1996). This raises the issue of sociolinguistic transfer, which is when people use the rules of their own culture to communicate with members of another culture (Chick, 1996, p. 332). When people's expectations regarding the proper performance of a speech act differ, misunderstanding, offense, and enmity are all possible outcomes. For example, Malaysian students in New Zealand indicated that they were disturbed by the frequency of complimenting among New Zealanders. Ironically, New Zealanders reported that they found the frequency of compliments in American culture to be indicative of a lack of sincerity (Wolfson, 1981 as cited in Holmes and Brown, 1987).

Recent research suggests that different cultures sometimes perform speech acts in different ways. For example, among Indonesians, compliments are infrequent and only employed by those who are educated and accustomed to Western norms. This is in direct contrast to the common American practice of exchanging compliments with neighbors, co-workers, and casual acquaintances, who know relatively little about one another (Manes, 1986). This study, modeled on Chick's study of speech act performance on a South African university campus (Chick, 1996), sought to discover whether similar cultural differences in speech act performance exist among the various international populations found at an American graduate school. Since the university where the study took place, the Monterey Institute of International Studies (MIIS), has a diverse population (nearly 70% of the students are internationals) communicating in English as the common language, it was thought that the MIIS campus would be an ideal environment in which to investigate the notion that members of different cultures perform speech acts differently. Furthermore, since all graduate students at MIIS who are not native speakers of English must score at least 550 on the TOEFL exam in order to be admitted, this study provides information about a population that has attained a high level of proficiency in the English language. Specifically, this study examines how speakers from different cultural backgrounds tend to respond to compliments.

This study is valuable because, as has been noted, differences in speech act performance can have serious consequences. Discovering if, where, and how differences occur could enable language teachers to prepare their students to perform speech acts in ways appropriate to the host culture, thus avoiding miscommunication and conflict. Wolfson (1981) points out that paying compliments is often difficult for learners of English. Learners need to be made aware of the strategies used and the appropriate contexts for performing compliments, in addition to the linguistic forms. If nothing else, data that illustrate differences in speech act performance can be used to heighten awareness of cultural differences and encourage sensitivity and tolerance toward such differences. Since it is important to find out whether differences in speech act

performance exist, this study attempted to answer the question: Are there differences in the ways in which people from different cultural backgrounds respond to compliments?

## Method

This study utilized a Criterion Groups Design (Ex-Post Facto class of research designs).

### Subjects:

Graduate students at MIIS were the subjects for this study. The study gathered data from approximately 53 subjects. Since the researcher did not have access to the information necessary to develop a truly stratified random sample, the researcher chose subjects at random while walking around the MIIS campus. Due to population constraints, the researcher mainly focused on American and East Asians. As far as possible, approximately equal numbers of male and female subjects were used. Once the data was collected the subjects were classified into appropriate cultural or national groups (e.g., Asian female, American Female). Since all graduate students at MIIS must have a TOEFL score of at least 550, it was assumed that all subjects had a high level of English proficiency.

### Materials:

The materials for this study were sets of numbered questionnaires and matching numbered index cards. The questionnaire (see Appendix A) was used to collect data about sex, country of origin, native language, program of study, and amount of time spent in countries where English is the primary language. The index cards were used to note the subjects' actual responses to the compliment, what item of clothing was complimented, and any emotional response the researcher experienced as a result of the subjects' compliment responses. These response cards were numbered so that the responses could be matched with the appropriate set of data regarding sex, native language, and so on.

### Procedure:

In order to collect the data necessary for this study, the researcher first approached students at the MIIS campus and asked them to fill out a questionnaire (Appendix A) under the pretext of collecting demographic data for a statistics class. While the subject completed the questionnaire, the researcher casually offered a compliment of the "I like + object" variety and noted the subject's exact response on an index card numbered so as to correspond with the

number of the subject's questionnaire. No data regarding the identity of the subject was recorded on the index card. This process was repeated for each new subject.

The researcher chose to compliment the subjects on an item of apparel because this seemed to be a relatively safe thing to comment on. Manes (1986) states that the majority of compliments are related to possessions, personal appearance (particularly clothes and hairstyles), and performance. Since the researcher is male, it seemed desirable to avoid any remarks that could have suggested an attraction to female subjects, as this might have affected the subject's responses.

Once the raw data had been collected, the researcher sorted the index cards into the three main categories of response types proposed by Chick (1996) and reproduced in Appendix B. After noting his individual classifications of the response cards, the researcher had another individual classify the responses in order to ensure proper classification. The fact that the classification was done using only the response cards, which had no data other than the actual responses on them, also probably helped to prevent any bias from affecting the results.

Once the data had been satisfactorily classified, the researcher matched the index cards with the demographic data collected on the questionnaires. It was then possible to determine with what frequency members of the different cultural groups responded using the different compliment response types. These frequencies were noted in the box diagram shown in Appendix C. Having done this, it was possible to begin analyzing the data.


## Analysis

This study initially posed the following hypotheses:
- Null Hypothesis: There will be no statistically significant differences between the two groups'—East Asians and Americans—compliment response types as classified by Chick's classification system.
- Alternative Hypothesis: There will be a statistically significant difference between two groups'—East Asians and Americans—compliment response types as classified by Chick's classification system.

It should also be noted that, since date about the subjects' gender, major, and time spent in English-speaking countries was collected, the researcher took notice if any patterns based on either of these variables seemed to occur.

# Results

Data were collected from 53 participants: A group of 20 Americans, and a group of East Asians that included 21 Japanese, 3 Chinese, and 6 Koreans. After obtaining the data, the participants' response types were classified into the three main categories proposed by Chick. The three possible categories were (1) Accepting, (2) Deflating / deflecting / rejecting, and (3) Questioning / ignoring / reinterpreting. Figure I. illustrates the frequencies with which members of the various groups responded using the different response types.

## Figure I.

| | Response Type 1 | Response Type 2 | Response Type 3 | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| American Males | 6 | 1 | 2 | 9 |
| American Females | 7 | 2 | 5 | 14 |
| Japanese Males | 4 | 1 | 3 | 8 |
| Japanese Females | 6 | 2 | 5 | 13 |
| Chinese Males | - | - | 1 | 1 |
| Chinese Females | - | - | 2 | 2 |
| Korean Males | 2 | - | - | 2 |
| Korean Females | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Total: | 27 | 7 | 19 | 53 |

After the data had been categorized, six chi-square analyses were performed in order to determine if statistically significant differences in response types occurred when the participants were divided into various groups. Since the data suggested a pattern, the researcher also performed chi-square procedures to determine whether statistically significant differences in response frequencies could be found between women and men. The level of significance for all chi-squares was set at .05. Thus, chi-square analyses were used to examine differences between Asians vs. Americans, males vs. females, Asian females vs. American females, Asian males vs. American males, Asian females vs. Asian males, and American females vs. American males (see Appendix C).

Based on the results of these chi-square analyses, it was found that statistically significant differences occurred ($p=.05$) between the responses of Asians and Americans and between the responses of females and males. Thus, the null hypotheses were rejected and the alternative hypotheses were accepted. However, statistically significant differences were not found to occur between the responses of Asian females vs. American females, Asian males vs. American males, Asian females vs. Asian males, nor American females vs. American males.

In order to calculate the strength of association for the differences that were found to be

significant, phi was determined for both of the statistically significant chi-squares. Subsequently, Cramer's V was calculated and it was found that percent overlap was 34.8% for the American vs. Asian comparison and 43.7% for the male vs. female comparison. This suggests that the amount of variation that can be attributed to the stated independent variables and not miscellaneous other factors in each of these comparisons is relatively high.

## Discussion

The data from this study suggests that differences in responses to compliments do occur between Americans and East Asians and between males and females. In fact, Cramer's V indicated that there is a relatively high degree of overlap for the differences that did occur, lending further strength to the theory that response types vary from culture to culture and from females to males.

It would be interesting to investigate in future studies what causes people of different cultures and genders to respond differently. It would also be interesting to see if statistically significant differences emerge in any of the other relationships investigated after collecting more date and obtaining a higher n.

What is the significance of these results? In terms of classroom instruction, it would seem that this data could be used to increase learners' awareness of the kinds of responses which native speakers of American English most often employ. It seems that the first response type, accepting, is the one most often used, followed by the third type, questioning / ignoring / reinterpreting. The second response type, deflating / deflecting / rejecting, was rarely used by the Americans in our study. However, this response type did not appear to be a favorite of any of the other groups either, suggesting that it may not be necessary to instruct learners from these backgrounds to avoid using it.

It is interesting to note that females seem much more likely to use the third response type than males. However, since the researcher in this study was a male, it would be interesting to investigate whether response types vary depending on the gender of the person who gives the compliment. Intuitively, it seems likely that it would. It is hypothesized that females may tend to use the third response type to inhibit the male compliment giver from making unwanted advances.

While further research would have to be done to confirm it, it seemed to the researcher that the NNSE who used response type 2 exhibited a lower level of English proficiency than the other participants. If this were true, it could be argued that sociolinguistic competence can

indeed be learned and would provide support to those who claim that it is necessary to teach learners about sociolinguistic issues. On the other hand, perhaps less proficient learners, lacking the ability to choose among a variety of response, might actually choose the simplest response (type 1) and thus make fewer "mistakes" . This would be interesting to investigate as would the issue of whether classroom instruction affects learners' response behavior.

Finally, it should be noted that all of the cultural groups utilized all three categories of responses. This means that there is no single type of response that can be singled out as always "bad" or "inappropriate," with the possible exception of no response at all (which generally provoked a negative reaction in the researcher).

Beyond culture and gender, the researcher felt that the emotional state or attitude of the participants had a great deal to do with their response types. For example, it seemed that the participants who used the second type of response were in a bad mood or not very friendly. Whether this is actually the case or if the response type itself provoked this feeling in the researcher would be an interesting, if difficult, question to explore. It seems likely that people vary how they respond to compliments depending on the social situation, setting, time, gender of the compliment giver, emotional stat at the time of complimenting, paralanguage of the compliment giver and possibly numerous other factors. Since this study was exploratory in nature, future studies with a larger pool of participants must be conducted in order to determine in more detail what causes variations in response types.

## References

Chick, K.J. (1996). Intercultural communication. In S.L. McKay and N.H. Hornberger (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching,* (pp. 329–348). New York: Cambridge University Press.

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**Appendix A**

questionnaire # _____

# Questionnaire

1. What is your sex?   Male _____ Female _____

2. Where are you from? If you are American, where in the U.S. are you from?

_____

3. What is your first language?

_____

4. What is your major?

_____

5. How much time have you spent in countries where English is the primary language?

Please explain (studying, traveling for pleasure, etc.).

_____

_____

_____

_____

6. What is your age?

_____

**Thanks for your time!**

**Appendix B**

TABLE 1. COMPLIMENT RESPONSE TYPES

*Accepting*
    1. Appreciation token                    C: That's a great cake.
                                          R: Thank you.
    2. Comment acceptance              C: You have such a nice house.
                                            R: It's given us a lot of pleasure.

*Deflating, deflecting, rejecting*
    3. Reassignment                        C: You're really a skilled sailor.
                                          R: The boat virtually sails itself.
    4. Return                                C: You sound really good today.
                                          R: I'm just following your lead.
    5. Qualification (agreeing)            C: Your report came out very well.
                                           R: But I need to do some more figures.
    6. Praise downgrade (disagreeing)    C: Super chip shot.
                                          R: It's gone rather high of the pin.
    7. Disagreement                        C: Your shirt is smashing.
                                          R: Oh. it's far too loud.

*Questioning, ignoring, reinterpreting*
    8. Question (query or challenge)     C: That's a pretty sweater.
                                          R: Do you really think so?
    9. Praise upgrade (often sarcastic)   C: I really like this soup.
                                          R: I'm a great cook.
    10. Comment history                   C: I love that suit.
                                          R: I got it at Boscov's.
    11. No acknowledgment            C: You're the nicest person.
                                          R: Have you finished that essay yet?
    12. Request reinterpretation       C: I like those pants.
                                          R: You can borrow them anytime.

Taken from:

Chick. K.J. (1996). Intercultural communication. In S.L. McKay and N.H. Hornberger (Eds.).

         *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching.* (pp. 329-348). New York: Cambridge

         University Press.

**Appendix C**

| | $x^2$ | Cramer's V | phi |
|---|---|---|---|
| Americans vs. East Asians | 6.395 | 34.8 | .348 |
| East Asian Females vs. East Asian Males | 2.26 | N/A | N/A |
| East Asian Females vs. American Females | 1.368 | N/A | N/A |
| East Asian Males vs. American Males | 3 | N/A | N/A |
| American Females vs. American Males | 2.82 | N/A | N/A |
| Females vs. Males | 10.122 | 43.7% | .437 |

N/A=Not applicable due to no significant difference