

# *How Compliments and Compliment Responses Differ for American and Chinese People on Instagram*

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**Abstract:** This paper reports a qualitative study on complimenting behaviors and response strategies of American English speakers (AES) and Chinese speakers (CS). It explores how the two speech groups differ in their patterns of compliment and response behaviors on Instagram. There are 26 participants who have answered a questionnaire that asks them to rate certain statements and let them give examples of compliments and responses. This paper will discuss the interpretations of the questionnaire and link them to linguistic politeness in virtual contexts and second language learning. Some limitations regarding each step of the research are that the sample size is too small to generalize the result to a greater population and that some questions in the questionnaire were not carefully designed. Future research should take note of the limitations and avoid them as much as possible.

**Keywords:** social media comment, compliment, compliment response, cross-cultural pragmatics

## **1. Introduction**

Compliment and compliment responses are two very interesting areas of pragmatics. Compliment is a speech act, that is, an utterance that serves a function in communication [1]. In both real-life and digital interactions, a proper speech act would require knowledge of the language that is spoken in the context as well as knowledge of the culture within a given speech group. Therefore, language rules and conventions can vary across different cultural communities, and compliment behaviors and response strategies do not have universal rules, although there are similarities [1]. When complimenting and responding to compliments in a second language, it may be difficult because learners may not know the meaning of certain expressions. However, many can quickly accommodate the newly learned behaviors of compliment and response, and this practice helps learners to be more competent in their second language.

Compliment has multiple functions as a speech act. It attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, and it carries a positive meaning [2,3]. In doing so, the person can express admiration or approval of someone's appearance, work, and taste [4,5]. This study will examine compliments made towards Instagram posts that consist of appearances.

Manes and Wolfson categorized compliments into nine syntactic categories [3]. In cyber interaction, compliment and responses are usually shortened and have their own internet slang to use. Therefore, it is difficult to account for the online forms of complimenting behavior to traditional analysis frameworks [6]. However, adjectival compliments are used widely because they can carry a

positive meaning in words such as “beautiful” [3]. Other compliments on characteristics, such as personality traits, are considered less than adjectival compliments [2].

Response to compliments is considered a behavior of linguistic politeness, a working social norm to be applied whenever necessary, and it is also cultural-dependent [7]. Essentially, how American English speakers (AES) respond to compliments can differ greatly from Chinese speakers (CS) because of their various social values and beliefs. Accepting compliments can be seen as the correct strategy, and rejecting compliments can also be a sign of humbleness and avoidance of self-praise [2,8]. According to Brown and Levinson’s definition, positive politeness is often used to exaggerate approval, presuppose what the hearer wants, and notice and attend to his interest [9]. It also creates in-group marking, which may be why some people tend to accommodate the speaking habits of other speech communities to avoid being seen as an outgroup member [9].

Many studies also explore the responses to compliment by different speech communities. For example, in a study by Nelson et al., they found that their participants, American English speakers, either accept, mitigate, reject, or do not respond to compliments [10]. Another study by Herbert found categorized responses by American English speakers in agreement or nonagreement [11]. In both studies, the appreciation token, which means responding by saying “thanks” or “thank you,” takes up 29% of the responses. The acceptance rate in these two studies differs by 50% and 35%. In the study by Chen, Chinese speakers are very likely to reject compliments (around 96%) to show modesty, and only 1% of the participants use the strategy of appreciation token [8]. However, a later study shows that 72.3% of the participants used appreciation tokens when complimented [12].

Now, researchers are turning to virtual environments where compliments and responses are used, and Instagram is one place that allows people to like and comment on posts. Instagram is an international social media platform for many users of different speech communities. Instagram users like to post pictures of themselves as well as receive compliments in the comments. The unique thing about digital context that differs from in-person context is the use of emoticons and the function of liking posts and comments. Positive emoticons such as the smiley face and the behavior of liking a comment are interpreted as compliment acceptance tokens [6].

Concerning gender differences, patterns in complimenting behavior may differ when data collectors include equal numbers of males and females, but she believed the imbalance would not be dramatic [12]. In the study by Holmes, women give (67.7%) and receive (74.3%) more compliments than men, and there were only 9% of the compliments between men [2]. In this study, the participants who answered the questionnaire were also mostly female.

This study will examine how American English speakers and Chinese speakers differ in giving compliments and replying to compliments on Instagram. It brings insight into how the two speech communities differ in their interaction of commenting compliments and responses on Instagram. The pragmatic strategies used by the participants in this study show that there can be miscommunication between the two groups, and in learning linguistic politeness from another group, many feel like they can blend in with another community.

## 2. Method

This study is a descriptive qualitative study that uses a designed questionnaire that consists of 26 possible questions, of which some questions may be skipped if the participant chooses a specific answer for certain questions. The sample consists of 26 participants who are 18-24 years old; 16 of them are native Chinese speakers, and 10 of them are American English speakers. The gender distribution of this sample is 73% female, 23% male, and 4% non-binary. The participants answer questions such as “Have you ever felt pressured to comment on your friends’ posts in order to show that you guys are close?” and “Do you think such comments help build friendship between the person who posts and the person who comments?”. Their responses are indicated by choosing *definitely*, *very*

*probably, probably, probably not, and definitely not.* Some questions can have simple yes or no answers.

### 3. Results

Table 1: Recorded responses of participants.

AES to others on Instagram	CS to AES on Instagram	CS to CS on Instagram	CS to CS on other Chinese apps
	so pretty!	Pretty girl cuddle	Looking good!
Gorgeous!!	so beautiful	Pretty girl	Pretty girl
You look SO cute!  Or You're SHINING		wow pretty girl	Where is this place!
BREATH TAKING    SLAY QUEEN	Yesssss You look so cuuuute	(cry) so pretty	
Love this love you	Slut	Pretty girl cuddle	So pretty si—ha
prettiest<3	Eight	so pretty ahhhhh	Pretty!
cute	dang cuh   Love u bro	Dang cuh   you became more handsome/pretty!	Big cutie
	Ask about contents in their posts	So pretty ~	You're so hot
	Literally stunning	Hi pretty girl	
	So adorable queen	Pretty to death	

Note: Most responses by CS were originally written in Chinese.

Table 2: Difference in complimenting behaviors.

Type of compliment	% of using emoticons	% of using adjectives
AES on Instagram	100%	71%
CS to AES on Instagram	80%	50%
CS to CS on Instagram	50%	100%
CS on other Chinese social media platforms	37.5%	75%

### 4. Discussion

#### 4.1. Adjectives and emoticons used in the compliments

By giving compliments, the complimenter appeals to people's positive faces to satisfy the complimentee's need to be liked and make the complimentee feel good [12]. Every participant in the study is, to different extents, happy to see others' comments compliment his or her posts of appearance. As shown in Table 1, although 32% of the participants chose “probably not” or “definitely not” for the question on expecting someone to comment compliment, the rest 68% expected some comments or compliments. The most widely used adjective in the questionnaire is “pretty” for both AES and CS and 74% of the responses recorded used adjectives. This is like the data of Manes & Wolfson, where 80% used adjectives to carry a positive meaning [3].

Emoticons are often used to intensify the compliment, and they can also be used to show

“creativity” and “playfulness.” stand-alone emojis, which appeared in the data of this paper as well, are a kind of pictorial compliment [6]. All the participants report using emoticons at a certain rate for compliments, and no one chooses *never* or *rarely* for this question. In the data of compliment free responses, 63% of the compliments contained an emoticon. Onursoy points out that using emoticons can solve potential misunderstandings, especially between two groups of people who are different in culture and language [13]. Some emoticons can be universally understood, such as the smiley face, and it may be a better way to communicate between native and cross-cultural users [14]. However, certain emoticons can be confusing because their meaning may be switched when used in compliments; for example, the fire emoticon does not mean something is burning but may mean the person is hot. This can cause a certain extent of misunderstanding between two groups of people when they first meet. In this case, CS learned to use such emoticons quickly but only used them on Instagram with AES. Table 2 shows CS increased their usage of emoticons by 50% on Instagram, suggesting that they accommodate the speech act in a new online environment (other than Chinese social media platforms), supported by the questionnaire results. All CS chose *extremely true*, *somewhat true*, and *slightly true* for the statement, “I would like to blend in with another community by accommodating to the way they talk.” No CS picked, *not true at all*.

## 4.2. Compliment Response Strategies

According to Holmes, acceptance is the correct strategy or ideal for English speakers when responding to a compliment [2]. In the data, 62.5% of the participants think that acceptance (both appreciation token and compliment return) of a compliment is a “social courtesy.” 100% of the participants choose to accept compliments. 50% of the participants would say something nice back, indicating a compliment return and 42% would say thank you, which is the appreciation token. One limitation of this questionnaire is that “something nice” was not specified, so we cannot say that saying something nice means complimenting back. Also, 8% of the participants only ‘liked’ the comment but did not comment anything back. In this case, the categorization by Placencia, Lower, and Powell is adopted to make ‘like’ without comment as accepting the compliment [6]. One thing to note is that both AES and CS show the same percentage of choices on saying something nice back or saying thank you, but the 8% who only choose to ‘like’ but not comment are all AES. This differs from the previous studies done in face-to-face interactions, where participants show nonacceptance or even rejection of the compliments they receive [5,8,10,11]. One possible interpretation of such difference is that replying to virtual comments is easier, and the environment is more relaxed so that people do not always have to show modesty or question the compliment.

## 4.3. Other interesting findings

One interesting thing about compliments in the data is that CS tends to use more intensified praise words to compliment AES, just as AES would also use more intensified praise words. For example, they would use the word “queen,” which cannot be its literal meaning but rather an exaggerated version of praise. However, CS would not do so to other CS or use it on Chinese social media apps, so this may be seen as a cultural accommodation to the AES way of speech act.

Another finding is that both speech groups are direct at complimenting one another: they do not try to hide their emotions and feelings. In the sample, only CS will look at what the post is about and ask questions about the background information of the post. Instead of praising one another all the time, they seem to care about what one another is doing. However, this may be a limitation of the imperfectly designed questionnaire because the free-response question does not directly tell participants to praise one another. Instead, it asks participants to say anything when they see a friend post a picture of himself or herself.

In the questionnaire, participants also prefer private compliments over public compliments. Most participants believe that complimenting someone privately in stories is more genuine and sincere than doing it publicly in the comments and that complimenting someone privately in stories helps to build friendship between the two people. Future research can look at how public and private comments differ, and a more detailed questionnaire or interview can be done to investigate if such beliefs of the participants in this study are true.

#### 4.4. Thoughts on Second Language Learning

It would be important for second language (L2) learners to observe the speech act (in this case, compliments), and they can also learn from such observations to accommodate the target speech community. At first, some differences may be observed and even confusing for L2 learners. By seeing why and how AES compliment and responded to others, CS also learned the manners of another culture and language. From the perspective of integrative learning, L2 learners' purpose in learning a language is to blend in with a certain community. In this case, many CS observed the difference in their compliment from AES. They quickly picked up how to compliment others in a certain way and can blend in with the American community.

#### 5. Conclusion

This paper explores how AES and CS differ in compliment and response behaviors on the Instagram app. Adjectives and emoticons were widely used in the subjects' responses. CS showed increased use of emoticons and intensified adjectives when commenting on posts on Instagram, which suggests that they have learned the speech acts of AES and tended to use them more on the learned platform. Both groups used the response strategy of acceptance in this study, which included compliment return and appreciation tokens. This study shows that second language learners can adapt to new communities by learning how they use speech acts, and learners will not simply lose their original habits of speech acts. By accommodating the newly observed speech act, second language learners can quickly understand certain cultural differences and avoid group misunderstandings. Future studies can look at other speech communities and how their ways of compliment and responses are observed and learned by second language learners.

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