

Compliment Giving Behaviors among Iranian Males and Females

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Abstract – It is useful to get familiar with complement giving behaviors in order to communicate more effectively. Due to the importance of complement giving behaviors in different societies, this study attempts to explore the likelihood of giving compliments according to addressee type among Iranian males and females, to investigate whether there is any significant difference between Iranian males and females regarding compliment-giving behaviors, and to identify the general ideas of Iranian people about complimenting. For this purpose, 44 Iranian males and females participated in this study. The Matsuura's (2004) questionnaire with a small modification was used in this study. Moreover, the data were analyzed through frequencies and average of ranges and t-test. The results of this study indicated that the complement giving behaviors of Iranian males and females varied according to gender, social status and social distance of their addressees. Moreover, there was not any significant difference between males' and females' compliment-giving behaviors. Additionally, the results of this study indicated that most of the participants believed that they gave complement to someone because they really wanted to make him/her happy.

Keywords: Compliment, Speech act, Culture, Status, Gender

1. INTRODUCTION

Generally, one of the interesting topics in sociolinguistic field is the communicative act of replying to compliments. Compliment can be defined as an utterance used by a speaker for positive evaluation of the addressee (Liu, 1997, as cited in Falasi, 2007). Moreover, according to Olshtain and Cohen, the speech act of complimenting shows politeness; it enables the speaker to make use of available opportunities to show she/he is interested in the hearer (1991, as cited in Kim, 2003). Furthermore, as Goffman (1967, as cited in Bruti, 2006) asserts, the most important purposes for giving complements are maintaining, enhancing, or supporting the addressee's face. Moreover, according to Wolfson (1983, p.86), the function of a compliment is "the creation or maintenance of rapport between interlocutors". Additionally, as Holmes believes (1987, p.101), "the primary function of a compliment is affective and social rather than referential or informative". Besides, according to Herbert (1990), the function of compliment is to make the addressee happy.

Generally, people may have different compliment giving behaviors in different societies because the communication norms, preferences and cultural values of people who live in different societies are different. Therefore, the use of some forms may be appropriate in one culture but it may not be appropriate in another one. In addition to cultural issues,

other factors such as gender, status, age of people and so on may affect compliment-giving behaviors. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to these issues to avoid communication breakdown and misunderstanding.

Due to the importance of complement giving behaviors in different cultures, this study attempts to explore the likelihood of giving compliments according to addressee type among Iranian males and females, to investigate whether there is any significant difference between Iranian males and females regarding compliment-giving behaviors, and to identify the general ideas of Iranian people about complimenting.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. The Effect of Culture on Complement Giving Behaviors

There are differences in the compliment-giving behaviors of people in different cultures (Wierzbicka, 1991, as cited in Tran, 2007). Regarding the communicative act of replying to complements, people have to decide to accept the compliment to maintain solidarity or deny the compliment to avoid self-praise (Pomerantz, 1978; as cited in Tran, 2007). Therefore, their different preferences in the use of acceptance or denial strategies lead to cross-cultural differences in various societies. For example, Daikuhara (1988) found out Japanese usually said "No,no" or " That's not true" when they responded to compliments. Besides, the results of Saito and Beecken's study (1997) on American speakers of Japanese showed that American learners of Japanese used less avoidance responses to compliments in comparison to Japanese themselves. Additionally, Lim (2000) noticed, Korean frequently responded to compliments negatively to show politeness and modesty. Moreover, the results of Cedar's (2006) study revealed that Thai and American responded differently to compliments in English. In Cedar's (2006) study, Thai used smile without any verbal elaboration as a strategy for avoiding the acceptance of compliments because in their culture overt acceptance of a compliment can be regarded as self-praise .However, most of the Americans accepted the compliments and elaborated their responses positively. Furthermore, the results of Tran's (2007) study indicated that Australians often used acceptance strategies but Vietnamese frequently used denial strategies when they were responding to compliments; Vietnamese didn't usually say "thank you" in response to compliment because they wanted to be polite and modest. Chen (2003) also found out Mandarin-Chinese speakers in Taiwan generally preferred to accept rather than reject compliments. However, Mandarin Chinese speakers in Mainland preferred to reject compliments (Chen, 1993). This result showed that compliment response strategies were different within Mandarin-Chinese speech communities. The results of Yu, Fu, and Hou's (2007) study on the complement giving behaviors of American and Chinese students revealed that American students used positive evaluation more frequently than Chinese students; besides, American students could show their feelings easily .However, Chinese students preferred to use neutral words and control their feeling.

Additionally, Cedar (2006) found out compliments could have different functions across cultures. He noticed in American society, a compliment could be used for initiating the

conversation but in Thai society, it was not used as an initiator of conversation. As the results of above studies showed complement giving behaviors are different in different cultures.

2.2. The Effect of Status on Complement Giving Behaviors

In addition to culture, social variables such as status can affect complement giving behaviors (Gumperz, 1979; as cited in Chen, 2003). The results of Wolfson's (1983) study on social interaction in American middle-class society indicated that the status of participants had a role in compliment giving behaviors. She noticed that compliments were mostly given to the persons whose ages and statuses were equal to the speakers' ages and statuses. Besides, Knapp et al. (1984) found out people did not usually give compliments to higher status persons. Moreover, the results of Chen's (2003) study showed that Mandarin Chinese speakers in Taiwan often used accepting strategy in the situations in which their status was equal to the compliment givers status. However, they often used rejecting strategy in the situations in which the compliment givers had higher status.

2.3. The Effect of Gender on Complement Giving Behaviors

Generally, the gender of the participants can have an influence on complement giving behaviors (Knapp et al., 1984; Herbert, 1990). The results of Holmes' (1988) study on everyday speech in New Zealand revealed that males and females used compliments differently. He noticed women increased illocutionary force and expressive function of a compliment, but men reduced the force and expressive function of a compliment. Moreover, Cedar (2006) found out Thai and American females did not use denial responses to compliments; however, they were used by Thai and American males. Besides, American females used acceptance responses more than American males; however, Thai males accepted compliments slightly more than Thai females. Additionally, Thai females used positive elaboration responses a lot but Thai men did not use them. On the contrary, American males used a lot of positive elaboration responses which were more than American females' positive elaboration responses.

Moreover, Al-Khateeb's (2009) study on Arab learners of English revealed that Arab males used more agreement responses than Arab females, while Arab females used more disagreement responses than Arab males. Besides, women used more thanking responses when the conversations were on physical appearances, house decors, clothes designs, food and diet.

3. METHOD

3.1. Participants

44 native Persian-speaking undergraduate students from various academic fields at Shiraz Universities participated in this study. 22 of them were male and the rest were female. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25 with the average of 23.

3.2. Instrument

The Matsuura's (2004) questionnaire with small modification was used in this study. This questionnaire was a Likert-scale type questionnaire which had three parts and 29 items. The first part of questionnaire consisted of 20 short descriptions, 16 of them were about the likelihood of giving compliments on others' appearance and 4 of them were about the likelihood of giving compliments on others' abilities or skills. These four items were distracters therefore they were omitted at the time of data analysis.

In the second part of questionnaire, participants were asked *when* and *why* they usually give compliments. This part consisted of nine statements. A seven points Likert scale was used for answering these nine statements.

The last part was about the participants' personal information including their gender, age, major, and the experience of living abroad.

3.3. Procedure

The questionnaires were distributed to more than 50 male and female undergraduate students at Shiraz Universities. Those participants who had lived in other countries and the ones whose ages were more than 25 were excluded from the study. As a result 22 males and 22 females participated in this study. The questionnaires were given to them after their classes in their rest time and they were asked to fill out the questionnaire anonymously.

Moreover, the averages of ratings for the items of first part were calculated. T-test was run to identify whether there is a significant difference between Iranian males' and females' responses. Besides, the frequencies and averages of ratings for the items of second part were calculated.

4. RESULTS

As is shown in Table 1, Iranian males and females most likely gave compliments to their fiancés or fiancées (Item 3). After their fiancés or fiancées, Iranian males more likely gave compliments to their close-friend of the same sex (Item 1) and their father (Item 14), while Iranian females more likely gave compliments to their mother (6) and their younger sister (Item 20). Moreover, Iranian males least likely gave compliments to their academic advisor of the same sex whom they rarely knew (Item 16); however, Iranian females least likely gave compliments to their classmate of the opposite sex whom they barely knew (Item 2). Furthermore, Iranian males and females less likely gave compliments to their academic advisor of the opposite sex whom they barely knew (Item 12).

Table 1: Likelihood of Giving Compliments According to Addressee Type

	Iranian Males	Iranian Females
Item	Mean	Mean
1	6	6.54
2	3.13	2.04
3	6.77	6.90
5	3.5	3.5
6	5.95	6.81
7	5.31	6.18
8	5.18	5.77
9	3.36	3.45
10	4.45	4.13
11	3.59	3.36
12	3.09	2.59
14	6	6.77
15	5.90	6.72
16	2.77	3.13
18	3.90	4.54
20	5.77	6.81

Table 2: T-Test

Group Statistics

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score	female	16	4.9525	1.76921	.44230
	male	16	4.6669	1.32538	.33134

Additionally, according Table 2, there was not any significant difference between Iranian males' and females' compliment-giving behaviors (sig=.609).

Table 3: Iranians' Beliefs Regarding Complimenting

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Disagree somewhat	Cannot say	Agree somewhat	Agree	Strongly agree	
Item ob	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	mean
21. I give compliment to someone because I really want to make him/her happy. 21								
	2	2	3	2	11	11	13	5.34
22. Complimenting is a good way to start a conversation.								
	2	5	5	3	6	10	13	5
23. It is easy for me to make small compliments.								
	4	6	2	6	7	11	8	4.6136
24. I don't give compliments unless someone really impresses me.								
	2	6	5	2	6	7	16	5.02
25. Complimenting is an effective strategy for getting compliance from someone								
	3	4	8	3	7	11	8	4.63
26. I give compliments because it make me feel good.								
	7	6	5	3	8	5	10	4.22
27. Giving compliments is just a habit for me.								
	31	6	0	5	1	1	0	1.68
28. I give compliments, expecting to receive a compliment in return.								
	25	9	2	1	4	3	0	2.06
29. Complimenting is an important custom in our culture.								
	12	8	1	6	10	4	3	3.40

Furthermore, as is shown in Table 3, most of the participants believed that they gave complement to someone because they really wanted to make him/her happy (mean=5.34); furthermore, most of them agreed that they did not give compliments to somebody unless he/she really impressed them (mean=5.02). Besides, most of them thought that complimenting was a good way to start a conversation (mean=5).

Moreover, most of the participants did not believe that giving complement was just a habit for them (mean =1.68) .Additionally, most of the participants did not believe that they gave compliments in order to receive a compliment in return (mean=2.06).

5. CONCLUSION

Generally, one of the interesting topics in sociolinguistic field is the communicative act of replying to compliments. Therefore, due to the importance of complement giving behaviors in each society, this study attempts to explore the likelihood of giving compliments according to addressee type among Iranian males and females, to investigate whether there is any

significant difference between Iranian males and females regarding compliment-giving behaviors, and to identify the general ideas of Iranian people about complimenting.

Regarding the first objective, the results of this study showed that Iranian males and females most likely gave compliments to their fiancés or fiancées. After their fiancés or fiancées, Iranian males more likely gave compliments to their close-friend of the same sex and their father, while Iranian females more likely gave compliments to their mother and their younger sister. Moreover, Iranian males least likely gave compliments to their academic advisor of the same sex whom they rarely knew; however, Iranian females least likely gave compliments to their classmate of the opposite sex whom they barely knew. Furthermore, Iranian males and females less likely gave compliments to their academic advisor of the opposite sex whom they barely knew.

Moreover, in this regard, the results of Matsuura's (2004) study on compliment giving behaviors of Americans and Japanese revealed that both Americans and Japanese most likely gave compliments to their girlfriends/boyfriends. Additionally, Americans least likely gave compliments to their academic advisor of the opposite sex whom they barely knew, while Japanese least likely gave compliments to their classmate of the opposite sex whom they barely knew.

As the results of the above studies showed, the likelihood of giving compliments varies according to the gender, social status and social distance of the addressees. Generally, the results of the present study are in line with the results of different studies such as Gumperz (1979; as cited in Chen, 2003), Wolfson (1983), Knapp et al. (1984), and Chen (2003) which showed that status can affect compliment giving behaviors. Furthermore, the results of this study are in line with the results of Falasi's (2007) study which indicated that the gender of the addressees can have an influence on compliment giving behaviors.

Moreover, regarding the second objective, the result of this study showed that, although some differences were observed between males' and females' compliment-giving behaviors, these differences were not statistically significant.

Furthermore, regarding the third objective, the results of this study indicated that, most of the participants believed that they gave compliment to someone because they really wanted to make him/her happy; additionally, most of them agreed that they did not give compliments to somebody unless he/she really impressed them. Besides, most of them thought that complimenting was a good way to start a conversation.

Moreover, most of the participants did not believe that giving compliment was just a habit for them. Additionally, most of the participants did not believe that they gave compliments in order to receive a compliment in return.

Generally, these findings are in line with the results of Matsuura's (2004) study: the results of Matsuura's (2004) study indicated that both Japanese and Americans highly agreed that they gave compliment to someone because they really wanted to make him /her happy; besides, they believed that complimenting was a good way to start a conversation. Furthermore, both Japanese and Americans believed that they did not give compliments in order to receive a compliment in return.

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Appendix (A)

This is to investigate the likelihood of your giving compliments to a variety of people and in a variety of situations. Please read Situations 1 to 20 and indicate your feeling by choosing a number below.

**1 -unlikely 2-less likely 3-somewhat less likely 4-not sure 5-somewhat likely
6-likely 7-highly likely**

1. Imagine that you see your close-friend (of the same sex; if you are male, he's a male) on campus. You have noticed that he/she is wearing a new shirt that you think is really nice. After exchanging greetings, what is the likelihood that you might give a compliment about that shirt? Please indicate the likelihood using the scale below.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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2. Imagine that you are in class and are sitting next to your classmate (of the opposite sex) you barely know. You saw him/her wearing a famous brand-name cap when he/she came into the classroom. You really like that brand. Indicate the likelihood of giving him/her a compliment about the cap.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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3. Imagine that you have a fiancés /fiancées. One day you see him/ her, and you notice that he/she has a new haircut, and you think it is nice. Indicate the likelihood of giving him/her a compliment about the haircut.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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4. Imagine that your classmate (of the opposite sex) gave a presentation in your seminar class today. Although you barely knew him/her, you thought it was excellent. Indicate the likelihood of giving him/her a compliment about the presentation.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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5. Imagine that you are in class and are sitting next to your classmate (of the same sex) you barely know. You saw him/her wearing expensive brand sunglasses when he/she came into the classroom, and you liked them. Indicate the likelihood of giving him/her a compliment about the sunglasses.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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6. Imagine that your mother is wearing a gorgeous dress and pearl necklace for her relative's wedding reception. You think she looks nice. Indicate the likelihood of giving her a compliment about the outfit.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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7. Imagine that you belong to a tennis club. Your tennis coach (of the same sex) is in his/her early 30's and is very friendly. You often talk to him/her not only about tennis but also about personal matters. One day you come across him/her on campus, and you notice that he/she is wearing a nice new jacket (or dress). Indicate the likelihood of giving a compliment to him/her after greeting him/her.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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8. Imagine that you belong to a chorus club at your school. One day, you see one of the members (of the same sex and younger than you) wearing nice shoes. You know him/her well and you really liked the shoes. Indicate the likelihood of making a compliment about them.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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9. Imagine that you are a member of the school swim team. One day, you see one of your teammates (of the opposite sex and younger than you) wearing a nice jacket of a famous brand. You barely knew him/her, but you really like that brand. Indicate the likelihood of giving a compliment about the jacket.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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10. Imagine that you are a member of the school swim team. One day, you see one of your teammates (of the opposite sex and younger than you) wearing an expensive brand sweater. You know him/her well and you really like that brand. Indicate the likelihood of making a compliment about the sweater.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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11. Imagine that you are enrolled in a seminar class. Your instructor (of the opposite sex) is in his/her early 30's and is very friendly, and you have never hesitated to ask him/her questions. One day you come across him/her on campus, and you notice he/she is wearing a nice new jacket (or dress). Indicate the likelihood of giving a compliment to him/her after greeting him/her.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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12. Imagine that you are at your academic advisor's (of the opposite sex and in his/her 50's) office to ask questions about your thesis. You notice that he/she is wearing a famous brand-name jacket. You barely know him/her personally, but you really like the jacket. Indicate the likelihood of making a compliment about it.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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13. Imagine that your classmate (of the opposite sex) played the piano in the school concert, and you happened to be in the audience. Although you barely knew him/her, you thought it was excellent. Indicate the likelihood of giving him/her a compliment when you see him/her after the concert.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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14. Imagine that your father is wearing an expensive suit and tie for a relative's wedding reception. You think he looks nice in these. Indicate the likelihood of giving him a compliment about the outfit.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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15. Imagine that you have a younger sister (if you are male) or brother (if you are female). Today, she/he had her/his hair cut. Indicate the likelihood of giving her/him a compliment about the new haircut.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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16. Imagine that you are at your academic advisor's (of the same sex and in his/her 50's) office to get his/her signature. You notice that he/she is wearing an expensive watch of your favorite brand. You barely know him/her personally, but you really like the watch. Indicate the likelihood of making a compliment about it.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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17. Imagine that your close friend (of the same sex) and you are in the same seminar class. Today, your friend gave a presentation, and you thought he/she did an excellent job. Indicate the likelihood of giving him/her a compliment about the presentation.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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18. Imagine that you belong to a chorus club at your school. One day, you see one of the members (of the same sex and younger than you) wearing a nice-looking ring. You barely knew him/her, but you really like the ring. Indicate the likelihood of giving a compliment about it.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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19. Imagine that your close friend (of the same sex) gave an excellent guitar performance in the school concert. You were in the audience and were really impressed. Indicate the likelihood of giving him/her a compliment when you see him/her after the concert.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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20. Imagine that you have a younger brother (if you are male) or sister (if you are female). Today, he/she had his/her hair cut. Indicate the likelihood of giving him/her a compliment about the new haircut.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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Part II

When and why do you think you compliment others? Please read items 21 to 29 and indicate your response by choosing a number below.

1 -unlikely 2-less likely 3-somewhat less likely 4-not sure 5-somewhat likely 6-likely 7-highly likely

When/Why?

21. I compliment someone because I really want to make him/her happy.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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22. Complimenting is a good way to start a conversation.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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23. It is easy for me to make small compliments.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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24. I don't give compliments unless someone really impresses me.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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25. Complimenting is an effective strategy for getting compliance from someone.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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26. I give compliments because it makes me feel good.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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27. Giving compliments is just a habit for me.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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28. I give compliments, expecting to receive a compliment in return.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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29. Complimenting is an important custom in our culture.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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Personal background

1. Sex: Male / Female

2. Age: ()

3. Major: ()

4. Native language: ()

5. Experience of living in a foreign country?

Yes/ No If yes, when and where?

When: From () years old to () years old

Where: ()