

Contrastive Analysis of Compliment between English and Chinese

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Abstract

Compliment has been regarded by many as an expression to show one's fondness and good wishes, and it is defined in the dictionary as "an expression of praise, admiration, or congratulation; a formal act of civility, courtesy or respect" (The American Heritage Dictionary, p. 302). Another definition accepted by many scholars is that "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, characteristics, skill, etc.), which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer" (Holmes, 1988). Its function is to please the addressee (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Herbert, 1990). In addition, they point out that compliment may have many other interpersonal functions, e.g., expressing sarcasm or disapproval, putting someone down, insulting, manipulating, and performing various FTAs (Holmes, 1988). Numerous scholars have conducted research on compliments.

Based on the previous study, this article provides deeper research on this subject from cross-cultural perspective. This paper examines genre of written discourse—peer review and compares various aspects of American compliment and Chinese compliment to determine whether there are any differences and similarities between the two.

Literature Review

Research on Oral Compliment

Extensive research has been done about compliment, such as its function, implication, and causes, particularly in the study of oral compliment. Most of the literature on compliment during the last three decades has focused on oral compliment. In earlier work, Wolfson investigated complimenting behavior among middle class Americans, and results show considerable amount of patterning at both syntactic and semantic levels. The investigation of a corpus of approximate seven hundred examples of compliments uttered in daily interactions reveals that the spontaneity with which they are often associated is linked more to their freedom of occurrence within an interaction than to any originality in structure or lexicon (Wolfson, 1984). For example, 85% of the compliments Wolfson examined are made up of three core syntactic patterns:

- (1) NP is /looks (really) ADJ (e.g., "That shirt is so nice.")
- (2) I (really) like /love NP (e.g., "I love your hair.")
- (3) Pronoun is (really)(a) ADJ NP (e.g., "This was really a great meal.")

Wolfson also found that five adjectives for positive evaluation (nice, good, pretty, beautiful, and great) account for 2/3 of the adjectives used by speakers. Similarly, two verbs “like” and “love” account for 86% of the positively evaluative verbs. Subsequent studies tend to corroborate these general findings, emphasizing the fixedness of compliments (Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1998). Later studies extend analysis to include response to compliments (Pomerantz, 1978; Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1988).

Two recent important studies focusing on the investigations into gender differences in compliment are those by Holmes (1988) and Herbert (1990). Holmes examined gender differences in compliments of everyday speech in New Zealand, and found a number of differences between male and female compliments. The syntactic formulas used by both men and women are generally consistent with those found in the previous similar study by Wolfson (1984). Based on her findings, Holmes suggested that women use strategic devices to strengthen the illocutionary force and expressive function of a compliment, while men use strategic devices to hedge on a compliment’s force and expressive function.

While in China, many scholars have also contributed to the study of compliment in Chinese (Zuo, 1988; Ye, 1995; Jia, 1997). The conclusion of Zuo’s study of Chinese compliments is that a higher frequency is found in the application of adverbials to compliment. Zuo notices that Chinese adverbs are often grouped with most of the positive adjectives and verbs functioning as intensifiers. She also notes that Chinese seldom use “I”, reflective of the speaker’s perspective in their compliment. Ye’s study shows that Chinese compliments are formulaic with a limited range of positive semantic carriers, indicating that, due to the nature of the language structure, the most frequently used positive semantic carriers are adjectives, verbs and adverbs. Additional research by Jia (1997) has provided a contrastive study of compliment in Chinese with respect to syntactic forms and concluded that Chinese compliments are to a great extent formulaic. The differences in syntactic forms are as follows:

Table 1: Syntactic differences between Chinese and English Compliments

	英语恭维语常用句法结构 (The syntactic form in English compliment)	汉语恭维语常用句法结构 (The syntactic form in Chinese compliment)
1	NP is/look (really) ADJ Your blouse is beautiful. You are so efficient.	(Your) NP (ADV) ADJ (Your) this sweater really nice. (你的这件羊毛衫真漂亮) (You) V NP (ADV) ADJ (You) wear this coat really beautiful. (你穿这件夹克可真漂亮) NP (you V) (ADV) ADJ This job you did really well. (你做的工作真好)
2	I really like/love NP	
3	PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP That is a nice wall hanging.	PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP (那是一幅漂亮的油画)
4	You V (a) (really) ADJ NP	You V (a) (really) ADJ NP
5	What (a) ADJ NP	What (a) ADJ NP

6	ADJ NP Nice game	(ADV) ADJ (Really) smart
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(Jia, 1997, pp. 363-4)

The above table reveals that the dominant syntactic form in Chinese is NP (ADV) ADJ, which accounts for most of the total corpus (67%). Positive adjectives in Chinese compliments, which are almost preceded and modified by two adverbs, i.e., very and extremely (真, 太), are less often used than their English counterparts. The syntactic form “I like/love NP” is most frequently used in English, while its opposite is found in Chinese. Jia (1997) also found that noticeable differences exist between Chinese and English compliments in the use of personal focus. In Chinese corpus, the second personal pronoun (you/your) as subjects is used more often than the third personal pronouns (he/she) and the first personal pronouns (I). In the English corpus, the third personal pronouns are most prominent, with the first person pronoun and the second person pronoun being used as subjects without significant difference in numbers. His research is mainly on oral compliments.

Research on Written Compliment

Some scholars attach importance to the study of written compliment, particularly to the difference in compliment between men and women (Johnson & Roen, 1992; Agnes He, 1993). Johnson and Roen use data from peer reviews of academic papers written by postgraduates and analyze the forms, strategies and discourse functions of compliments of these papers. The results show that women adopted more positive evaluations, intensifiers, and personal involvement in compliments than men did. In using compliments to structure discourse, women more often frame the text with both opening and closing compliments. Additionally, women accommodate to the gender of their addressees more often than men do, which results in a gender-specific of female-female distinctive complimenting style. Basing her study on that of Johnson and Roen's, Agnes He (1993) furthers the study on compliment with an experiment that was carried out in an American university, aiming at an analysis of compliments in written texts by college students.

Julia Gousseva (1998) also conducted a similar experiment. The writers were freshman and some of them were native speakers of English. The texts were peer comments about compositions. These peer comments were from two classes and written in English. Task requirements were the same for each class. They are asked to make comments on each other's compositions. The experiment is carefully designed with consideration of such control factors as social distance, social power, degree of imposition and gender. At a general level, in peer comments, all writers are similar to one another in the variables of power and social distance; they are fairly well acquainted but not intimate in most cases, and the overall power and degree of imposition were roughly equal, with gender being a single variable.

Before Gousseva's experiment, several relevant events were made clear. First, all the subjects were asked to write short response and give oral presentation, in which some basic ways of making comment and compliment were involved. After they had developed their ability in making comment and compliment, the subjects were asked to finish a composition. Then, they were divided in pairs and asked to read, evaluate and write specific comments in the form of letter on each other's composition. They were asked to explain what they like about the paper and put forward suggestion for the paper to be improved. In letter format, the writer would take his partner as the addressee so as to reduce the possible or subtle influence

of the teacher. Each pair then met to discuss each other's comment. Finally, students revised their composition, with the suggestions by their partners being taken into account. Their comments reveal their inclination in the choice of words and sentence structure, which are worth discussing.

Method

Research Design

Based on Julia Gousseva's experiment, a similar experiment was designed and carried out by the present author. The purposes were to find the features of compliment in Chinese by Chinese students, to discover similarities and differences of compliment between English and Chinese and to explore the reasons why the differences in linguistic performance exist.

Participants

The experiment concerned with partner comment in Chinese was divided into 4 stages: (1) the subjects were trained in their ability in paper writing and oral presentation, which lasted for one month; (2) they were assigned to finish a composition; (3) they learnt to write comments and make compliments, which lasted for half a month, and then commented on each other's test papers in the form of a letter; and (4) data were collected and analyzed with SPSS. The subjects, 40 (20 male and 20 female) college students at Chinese Department of a University, were native speakers of Chinese and non-English majors. The experiment was carefully designed so as to keep great resemblance with that of Julia Gousseva's.

Instrument

The present experiment and research is significant in the investigation into the written compliment and into the study of gender difference. The study consisted of two parts, (1) gender-linked features, such as positive evaluation, intensifiers and personal involvement, and (2) discourse strategies, such as good/bad new strategies, opening, closing and framing strategies, and their interests were on the differences associated genders.

The results of the two experiments are to be applied in the present contrastive analysis of compliment between English and Chinese so as to find the similarities and differences in compliment between English and Chinese. The focus of the contrastive analysis is on the difference between English and Chinese revealed by the difference in the application of positive evaluation, intensifiers, personal involvement, good/bad new strategy, opening, closing and framing strategies to their compliments.

Data Analysis

Positive Evaluation

When one makes a positive evaluation, he may use some words with connotation of fondness, likeness, admiration such as the verbs "like" and "love". But as Johnson and Roen discovered in their study verbs of positive evaluation are extremely few and almost none of the subjects used "like" and "love" in their comments, which are commonly found in women's oral compliment and considered as part of "compliment formula" in oral speech. Yet, some adjectives for positive evaluation were applied, such as in the following sentences:

This was both useful in interpreting their questions and in fully developing your ideas.

The essay is honest and research is good.

本文的观点很明确。(The statement in this paper is very clear.)

您文中的语言既幽默又深刻。(The language in your article is both humorous and profound.)

Table 2: The application of positive evaluation to the comment in English and Chinese

Subjects	Mean
The American	6.33
The Chinese	2.95

The large difference between the means for English and Chinese is 3.38, and it is obvious that the Americans and Chinese are quite different in expressing their ideas and the American are in preference to the use of positive evaluation.

Intensifier

Typical intensifier refers to a class of words, generally adverbs, which are used to modify gradable adjectives, adverbs, verbs, or –ed-participles, as in:

It is very good.

It was completely destroyed.

I absolutely detest it.

特别有意义 (extremely instructive) and 很深刻 (very profound).

Table 3: The comparison of the mean of intensifier application in the two experiments

Subjects	Mean
The American	2.59
The Chinese	2.26

The difference in the mean of intensifier application is 0.33, therefore it is not of significance, which is contradictory to Zuo's conclusion that a higher frequency is found in the application of adverbials in Chinese compliments.

Personal Involvement

We assess the degree of explicit reference to oneself as measured by the use of first personal pronouns *I, me, my, we, us*, and *our* as well as the degree of explicit reference to the addressee as measured by the second personal pronouns *you* and *yourself*. We assess personal focus on the addressee in third personal involvement by coding the use of the possessive adjective 'your', such as "your paper". For example, in the following 'personal involvement' compliment from a review text, the writer made three personal involvements.

In Chinese, the use of the first personal pronouns is as follows: 我, 我的, 我们, 我们的 (I, me, my, we, us and our). As for the use of the second personal pronouns, they are 你, 你的, 您, 你自己 (you, your, yourself) and that of the third personal pronouns: 贵作 (your paper) apart from 他, 她, 他们. For example, in the following 'personal involvement' compliment from a review text, the writer includes personal involvement four times. For example:

我很欣赏你的新观点，我会重新审视我原有的观点。(I appreciated the new ideas you put forward in your paper, and I will surely reconsider my own views.)

We combine these measures of first, second, and third person involvement to yield an overall picture.

Table 4: Mean of personal involvement in comment between English and Chinese

Subjects	1 st person	2 nd person	3 rd person	Total
The American	2.17	1.17	1.09	4.43
The Chinese	0.93	1.17	2.68	4.78

Table 4 indicates that the American use more “I” while Chinese use less “I” in their compliments. This result echoes Ye’s word that Chinese seldom use “I”, the speaker’s perspective in their compliment.

Good/Bad News Pairing Strategy

It is not true that people always make compliments and say something good. More often than not, it is necessary and honest to make criticism and put forward suggestions: it has been found that some pairing strategies are applied to redress the comments.

Good/bad news pairing strategy involves pairing a compliment (CL) with a specific face threatening act or comment, such as criticism and suggestion, and commentators frequently rely on a “good /bad news pairing strategy” to reduce the force of the FTA (CL+FTA). That is to say after pointing out the flaws, he offers a compliment with a very direct suggestion (CL+SG). For example:

The paper is generally effective. It shows both sides of the issue. However, it seems like you use interviews mostly—you may need to find more references to books. (CL+CR)

Although your persuasive presentation is effective, yet my suggestions for improvement, noted thoughts are often simple editing suggestions. (CL+SG)

您的评论很深刻，但其中还有些不足之处。(CL+CR)

(Your reviews are very penetrating: however, I consider some sections are still insufficient.)

这是一篇写得不错的评论，我的意见是：你应该多了解一些评论的主题，讲一些你自己的观点。(CL+SG)

(The reviews are comparatively well-written for this: my suggestion is that you should know more about your subject and give a little more of your own opinion.)

In most cases the writer may use this strategy twice, i.e., the strategy of CL+CR is followed by that of CL+SG, such as in:

I especially like the fact that you have chosen a topic, which is relevant to you and your country, but it doesn’t seem directly related to your main goal (CL+CR); you have identified a problem, discussed the background of it thoroughly, as for this point, my other two suggestions are as follows (CL+SG).

贵作中的观点详明，但我感觉还是不够透彻(CL+CR); 正如在贵作中体现的那样，您在这方面了解甚多，但最好加一些你自己的观点。(CL+SG) (There are distinctive points in your review, but I feel there is some incompleteness in it; as

evidenced by the information in your review, you know much about this topic, but you'd better add more of your own ideas.)

Table 5: Frequency and percentage of the application of good/bad news pairing strategy

Subjects	Frequency	Percentage (%)
The American	5	56
The Chinese	9	76

It can be seen that this good/bad news strategy is used by most of the writers and more often by the Chinese (76%) than by the American (56%). The probable reason might be that the Chinese students make more effort to express their opinions, especially when they are to point out the weak points. Taking into consideration the positive evaluation, we can safely say that it is easier for people to mention the strong points and not so easy to point out the weak points in each other's work.

Opening/Closing Strategy

In addition to using good/bad news pairing strategy to mitigate specific criticism and suggestions, commentators often use other strategies to construct their comment, either by emphasizing some strong points first and then coming to the weak points or summarizing the strong points after mentioning some flaws in the texts. So this strategy involves using a variety of both positive and negative politeness strategies, of both good news and bad news to redress the face threatening comments. The strategies are applied in the following sentences:

Opening strategy:

My first impression was that the essay was well-written, with a lot of good points.

我怀着浓厚的兴趣读了你的评论。(I read your paper with great interest.)

Closing strategy:

Overall, it is a very good review.

总的来说，这是一篇具有特色观点的评论。(Generally speaking, this is a review with distinctive ideas.)

In many cases, people choose to use both opening and closing strategies in their comments, surrounding a face threatening act/comment with positive comments. This strategy, called a framing strategy, functions to create a socially appropriate and smooth context, to sustain the sense of involvement through the text, and to redress the global FTA.

Table 6: Application of opening, closing and framing strategies

Subjects	Opening (%)	Closing (%)	Framing strategy (%)
The American	91	76	76
The Chinese	91	25	25

From above Table 6 we can see that the American and Chinese students are similar in the application of opening strategy, while the American use closing and framing strategies more often than the Chinese (76% vs. 25%).

Results

For a clear idea of the similarity or difference between the English and Chinese comments, the Table 7 provides a summary comparison.

Table 7: A comparison between English and Chinese comments

Items	English	Chinese	Difference
Positive evaluative terms	6.33	2.95	3.38
Intensifiers	2.59	2.26	0.33
Personal involvement (total)	4.43	4.78	-0.35
1 st person pronoun	2.17	0.93	1.24
2 nd person pronoun	1.17	1.17	0
3 rd person pronoun	1.09	2.68	-1.59
Good/bad news strategy	56%	76%	-20%
Opening strategy	91	91	0
Closing strategy	76%	25%	51%
Framing strategy	76%	25%	51%

Table 7 reveals the general forms adopted in comments by the American and Chinese students and suggests that, to a great extent, the American compliment resembles the Chinese one in forms, strategies and functions in the situation under study. Meanwhile, it also proves that a great deal of discrepancy emerges in the use of positive evaluation, of the 1st and 3rd person pronouns and of some discourse strategies, which are worth studying. As mentioned before, the focus of this contrastive analysis is on the difference between English and Chinese, therefore the discussion is to concentrate on the difference in the application of linguistic forms and strategy to the compliment, so as to learn the social and cultural factors that might account for these differences.

Discussion

It is accepted by many scholars that language is the carrier and mirror of its respective culture, and the difference in languages and in linguistic performances can also reflect the differences in communication norms, in social cultures and value preference. People, brought up in certain society and culture, become accustomed to their own interaction norms, apply the norms in their communication and judge others' speech and text by their own norms. Generally speaking, the Americans emphasize self-dependence and self-reliance, and adopt the attitude of solidarity and respect in communication. While to many Chinese, importance is attached to the harmony of groups; so, an individual is placed within groups, and what matters is to be polite and modest in communication. In most cases, they take compliment as a response strategy and a way to show politeness, which is quite different from the American attitude—a comment, admiration and a way to start a talk.

As the means indicated above, the biggest difference lies in the use of positive evaluation, that is to say the American students use more positive evaluation. This may be explained by that many Americans are very active in expressing their ideas and feelings while

more Chinese would like to choose neutral words and restrain their feeling, for many of them were taught to be observed and not to be heard when they were young.

Another difference is that the American students use more first person pronoun (2.17 vs. 0.93) and less third person pronouns (1.09 vs. 2.68) than their Chinese counterparts. It is known to us that the idea of being self-oriented is favored by many people in America. They intend to maximize the use of first person pronoun in order to show their opinion directly in interaction. On the contrary, the idea of other-oriented has exerted influence over China for thousands of years, and many Chinese learn to minimize self importance by maximizing the use of the third person pronoun. What is worth mentioning is the application of 您 (you) and its derivative word 贵作 (your review), which are used several times by Chinese students. To our knowledge, the use of 您 and 贵+noun may show particular respect to the addressee, such as 贵作 (your work) and 贵国 (your country), yet there is no equivalent in modern English. 您, 您的 or 贵+noun, as honorific address terms, are frequently used by many in their letter or in compliment to show the writer's respect and social distance to the addressee, although it was made clear before the experiment that students were equal in almost every aspect.

The percentage of the application of discourse strategies indicates a more complicated case; yet generally speaking, Chinese students use more strategies than their American counterparts. That is to say they make more effort in choosing words and strategies, and they pay particular attention to the style of discourse which is meant to provide criticism and suggestions. Their care in the handling of negative comments may be explained with their preference to a neutral attitude and might be traced to the influence of the Doctrine of the Mean (中庸之道).

Conclusion

The above discussion proves again that culture and language are interwoven, and the inclination of communicative choices is closely associated with social norms and cultural background.

Compliments are found to occur more frequently in English than in Chinese. These differences between the two languages are closely related to the fact that the solidifying function, which is the interpersonal function of compliments, is maximized in English while the ideational function is relatively prominent in Chinese compliments when compared with English compliments. This functional difference of compliments in the two languages, in turn, is attributed to the different characteristics of the two speech communities: egalitarian vs. hierarchical socio-cultural structure.

Compliment is considered by many as the lubrication or "anointing" process in social interaction. People in different cultures all resort to compliment to establish a friendly relationship. More often, it is also a psychological need for people to praise and admire each other; therefore, it is necessary for us to offer and receive compliments. Compliment, as a speech act, is also a heated topic and issue in the study of language, and the achievement in the study of compliment may further the study in linguistics and particularly in pragmatics.

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