

What is a compliment? : a view from a non-Western perspective

Chie Adachi

Western academic discourse for the last few decades has generally tried to identify universal principles that can be applied to speech act and politeness theories (e.g. Austin 1961; Brown&Levinson 1987; Leech 1983). However, some scholars question whether or not these Western-influenced “universal” rules necessarily explain the reality of these acts and strategies in different speech communities, especially in non-Western societies, such as Japan (Ide 2006; Nakamura 2001). In the case of Japanese compliments, the pragmatic meanings of this speech act are constrained by culture-specific norms. This paper argues that a new framework for Japanese compliments should be introduced, instead of relying on the ones from previous studies widely done from western perspectives. I will firstly describe how previous studies framed compliments, explain some problems that they raised and then finally, show some early results from pilot studies that I conducted in Japan from 2007 to 2008.

Studies on compliments in the past have been mostly done in western discourse (Holmes 1987, 1988, 1995; Knapp, Hopper&Bell 1984; Manes 1983; Manes&Wolfson 1981; Wolfson 1983). The primary focus of these studies is on functions of the speech act of complimenting as a way of addressing positive politeness strategy needs. They claim that compliments function as social lubricants, maintaining rapport and reinforcing and/or creating solidarity. However, is complimenting always about giving positive evaluations? Some studies mention that compliments can also function as potential face-threatening acts: sarcasm, insult, flattery and harassment (Eckert&McConnell-Ginet 2003; Holmes 1987; Mills 2005). However, there have not been sufficient studies to confirm any of these functions.

These earlier studies have also suggested that complimenting is a “named” speech act type widely seen as gendered (Eckert&McConnell-Ginet 2003). Consequently, my research primarily has the following goals: 1) to propose an interdisciplinary model of Japanese compliments, and 2) to investigate how the Japanese represent gender identities through the speech act of complimenting. I will show some of the early results from the pilot studies in order to tentatively confirm how Japanese compliments are constrained, pragmatically complex, and yet so intriguing in the way that they shed light on the study of linguistic behaviours that are culture-specific.

References

- Austin, J.L. (1961). *How to do things with words*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eckert, P., & McConnell-Ginet, S. (2003). *Language and gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grice, P. H. (1991). Logic and Conversation. In S. Davis (Ed.), *Pragmatics* (pp. 305-315). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Holmes, J. (1987). Teachers and students learning about compliments. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21(3), 523-546.
- Holmes, J. (1988). Paying compliments: A sex-preferential politeness strategy. *Journal of Pragmatics* 12, 445-465.
- Holmes, J. (1995). *Women, men and politeness*. London: Longman.
- Ide, S. (2006). *Wakimae no Goyouron*. Tokyo: Taisyukansyoten.
- Knapp, M., Hopper, R., & Bell, R. (1984). Compliments: A descriptive taxonomy. *Journal of Communication*, 34(4), 12-31.
- Leech, G. N. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Manes, J. (1983). Compliments: a mirror of cultural values. In N. Wolfson & E. Judd (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and language acquisition* (pp. 96-102). Rowley: Newbury House.
- Manes, J., & Wolfson, N. (1981). The compliment formula. In F. Coulmas (Ed.), *Conversational routine* (pp. 115-132). The Hague: Mouton.
- Nakamura, M. (2005). *Kotoba to Jenda*. Tokyo: Keisoushobou.
- Mills, S. (2003). *Gender and politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wolfson, N. (1981). Compliments in cross-cultural perspective. *TESOL Quarterly*, 15(2), 117-124.
- Wolfson, N. (1983). An empirically based analysis of complimenting in American English. In N. Wolfson & E. Judd (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and language acquisition* (pp. 82-95). Rowley: Newbury House.