The Influence of Education

Background on Compliment Responses

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Abstract

Education influences people's social life to a large extent. Nonetheless, the researches on Chinese complimenting behavior chiefly focus on the influences of many social factors have been studied except education background. Based on Herbert's classification of 12 types of compliment responses, data analysis of a questionnaire, this study compares the compliment responses of Chinese participants with different education background and explores the influence of education background on compliment response with an expectation of smoother communications.

Keywords: Compliment response, Education background, Compare, Influence

1. Introduction

Complimenting as a speech event has been one of the major areas on which linguists have focused their attention and drawn insights into the phenomenon of linguistic politeness in the last two decades (Pomerantz 1978, Wolfson and Manes 1981, Wolfson 1983, Holmes 1988, Holmes and Brown 1987, Wierzbickz 1991, Nelson, 1996, Herbert 1989, Herbert 1990). Delivering, identifying and responding to compliments appropriately is an aspect of communicative competence which may differ in a variety of ways from one culture to another (Holmes, 1987).

Wolfson (1983) notes that social factors such as sex, status, intimacy and cultural background should be carefully considered when analyzing compliments. Among the small number of studies on Chinese compliments, the influence of factors such as gender, social status, intimacy and the like have been probed (Wei Yaozhang 2001, Hu Ping, 2001, Feng Jianghong 2003, Zhang Yongmei, 2003); education background, however, has never been studied particularly. In fact, education is one of the most influential factors in people's social life, and it works to shape one's mind and behavior. So this paper intends to explore the differences on compliment responses given by Chinese participants with different education background so as to reflect their different attitudes and ways of thinking, and accordingly participants in communications will take more practical strategies to have smoother communications.

2. The Present Study

This study adopts Robert K. Herbert's classification system of compliment responses with an analysis of the data collected from a Compliment Situation Task questionnaire. A comparative approach is employed to compare compliment responses of participants with different education background, aiming to explore the influence of education on smooth communications.

2.1 Herbert's classification system of compliment responses

Robert K. Herbert (1986, 1989) distinguished 12 types of compliment responses. In his quantitative analysis of compliment response types and their frequency (1989), he grouped the responses as (a) Agreement, (b) Nonagreement, or (c) Request interpretation, with a few subtypes.

(1) Appreciation Token. A verbal or nonverbal acceptance of the compliment, acceptance not being tied to the specific semantics of the stimulus (e.g. Thanks, Thank you, [nod]).

(2) Comment acceptance-single. Addressee accepts the complimentary force and offers a relevant comment on the appreciated topic (e.g., Yeah, it's my favorite, too.)

(3) Praise upgrade. Addressee accepts the compliment and asserts that the compliment force is insufficient (e.g., I'm really a great cook).

(4) Comment history. Addressee offers a comment (or series of comments) on the object complimented; these comments differ from (2) in that the latter are impersonal, that is, they shift the force of the compliment from the address (e.g., I bought it for the trip to Arizona).

(5) Reassignment. Addressee agrees with the compliment assertion, but the complimentary force is transferred to some

third person (e.g., My brother gave it to me) or to the object itself (e.g., It really knitted itself.)

(6) Return. As with (5) except that the praise is shifted (or returned) to the first speaker (e.g., So's yours.)

(7) Scale down. Addressee disagrees with the complimentary force, pointing to some flaw in the object or claiming that the praise is overstated (e.g., It's really quite old).

(8) Question. Addressees question the sincerity or the appropriateness of the compliment (e.g., Do you really thinks so?).

(9) Disagreement. Addressee asserts that the object complimented is not worthy of praise: the first speaker's assertion is in error (e.g., I hate it).

(10) Qualification. Weaker than (9): addressee merely qualifies the original assertion, usually with *though, but, well,* etc. (e.g., It's all right, but I want to retake some pictures).

(11) No acknowledgment. Addressee gives no indication of having heard the compliment: The addressee either (a) responds with an irrelevant comment (i.e., topic shift) or (b) gives no response.

(12) Request interpretation. Addressee, consciously or not, interprets the compliments as a request rather than a simple compliment. Such responses are not compliment responses since the addressee does not perceive the previous speech act as a compliment (e.g., You wanna borrow this one too?)

Herbert's classification system has been widely quoted and developed by linguistics and sociologists in complimenting speech event studies, and it includes almost all types of compliment responses which the study involve.

2.2 Data Collection and Methodology

The data in this study were collected from a Compliment Situation Task (CST) questionnaire (in Chinese, ideas drawn from Ye Lei, 1995,), which consists of 8 situations for responding to compliments. These 8 situations are designed around the generally agreed topics of compliments: appearance/possession and performance/skill. Gender, compliment topic and social distance are controlled in each situation.

With the bachelor degree as criteria, all of the 120 CST forms were collected from Chinese, within whom there were 55 respondents with low-level education background and 65 with high-level education background. The paper, hereafter, refers to them respectively as Respondents A and Respondents B for short in the following analysis. Respondents A are from various walks of life and they have the degree lower than bachelor. Most of them live in a town and range from 19 to over 40 in age. Respondents B are the university students along with a certain number of university teachers, all of whom have the academic degree of bachelor or even master.

The paper mainly delves into the comparison between Respondents A and B. The data from them are classified and processed with computer and the software SPSS.

2.3 Results and Discussion

The relevant data on the actual occurrence frequencies of the various response strategies are given in the following table.

As to the two kinds of Chinese respondents, they are remarkably similar (x^2=5.706,p=0.892>0.05). Both of them are more likely to make use of the Agreement category as the responding type. The most frequently used strategies are Appreciation Token, Disagreement and Scale Down as the figures indicate.

However, there exist some differences between them. Generally speaking, respondents with high-level education background (Respondents B) are more likely to agree with the compliments (54.87%) than to disagree with them (38.33%), while for respondents with low-level education background (Respondents A), the frequencies of the two responding types do not differ much (48.64% vs. 43.63 %), which indicates that they have no special preference for either of the two responding categories.

In Acceptance category, the frequency of Appreciation Token is higher in Respondents B's data (22.64 %) than in Respondents A's (17.57 %), which may be explained by the fact that the overwhelming Respondents B corpus are young university students and they are more influenced by the Western social norms. Comparatively speaking, Respondents A have less chance to get in touch with the Western norms, and consequently they are more reluctant to accept compliments with the direct "Thank you" and the like.

Additionally, Respondents A make more use of the strategy of Praise Upgrade while responding to a compliment (6.18 %) than Respondents B (3.47 %). This strategy often occurs between intimate friends in a joking way. Respondents B corpus is mainly made up of workers in their 20s and 30s, and joking is a good way to strengthen the relation between them, so it is natural for these respondents to answer compliments in a casual way.

In Disagreement category, the difference mainly lies in the Question type: the frequency is 8.49% for Respondents A, and 5.45% for Respondents B. This strategy helps respondents to avoid answering the compliments directly, and it

seems more preferred by Respondents A. The reason may be that traditional Chinese culture holds direct acceptance of compliments as impolite and Chinese people tend to reject compliments. When they find it more appropriate to accept the force of complimenting, they are likely to use the implicit strategy. Therefore, it is not surprising that Respondents A adopt Question strategy to answer compliments. Respondents B, however, have relatively more access to the Western norms due to their higher education, so that they show a less preference for this strategy than Respondents A. and are more inclined to accept a compliment directly.

3. Conclusion

Through the comparative study of compliment responses, this paper attempts to offer some useful information about different attitudinal ideas of Chinese people with different education backgrounds. Being aware of these differences, participants in communications are more conscious to adapt their communication strategies to the others' values, in order to make the communication smoother.

Although Chinese compliments in this study were not observed under natural conditions and participants may respond to compliments a little divergently from what they might do in the actual situations, the findings are consistent with other Chinese researchers (Zuo Huanqi, 1988; Shi Ning, 1997, etc). This similarity suggests the reliability of this study's methodology and data.

Moreover, as this paper only deals with compliment responses of Chinese respondents with different education backgrounds, other factors like age, gender, family, and profession are also influential to people's behaviors. Further studies are needed to paint a more complete picture of Chinese complimenting behaviors, so as to provide more guides for successful intercultural communications.

Table 1. The frequencies of responses types   (x^2=5.706, p=0.892)

Response Type	Respondents A		Respondents B	
	No.	%	No.	%
Agreement				
Acceptance	176	33.98	222	36.69
Appreciation Token	91	17.57	137	22.64
Comment Acceptance	53	10.23	64	10.58
Praise Upgrade	32	6.18	21	3.47
Nonacceptance	76	14.66	110	18.18
Comment History	8	1.54	11	1.82
Reassignment	29	5.60	49	8.10
Return	39	7.52	50	8.26
Subtotal	**252**	**48.64**	**332**	**54.87**
Nonagreement				
Scale Down	60	11.58	63	10.41
Question	44	8.49	33	5.45
Disagreement	87	16.8	93	15.37
Qualification	5	0.97	12	1.98
No Acknowledgment	30	5.79	31	5.12
Subtotal	**226**	**43.63**	**232**	**38.33**
Request Interpretation	**40**	**7.72**	**41**	**6.78**
Total	**518**	**99.99**	**605**	**99.98**

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