

The Act Of Complimenting In Malaysian English

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Abstract: Complimenting is a very interesting speech act to look at because different cultures draw different assumptions when it comes to giving and receiving compliments. Studies such as Yu's (2005) and Chiang and Pochtrager's (1993) have shown that people from different cultures give and respond to compliments differently. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to find out how the giving and receiving of compliments are done among English speaking Malaysians. The method used for this research was the recording of naturally occurring casual conversations which was then transcribed and broken into individual tokens. Results show that although other Asian cultures have the tendency to reject the compliment, English speaking Malaysians mostly accept the compliment given, but at the same time they also shift or erode the force of the compliment to avoid self-praise. The implication of this research is that there are many ways to respond to compliments and still be polite. By teaching the ways to respond to compliments, teachers can expose the students to ways and means of using language beyond achieving the typical communicative goals.

Abstrak: Memuji adalah satu perlakuan pertuturan yang sangat menarik untuk dikaji kerana budaya yang berlainan mempunyai tanggapan perilaku yang tersendiri. Kajian yang dijalankan oleh Yu (2005) dan Chiang & Pochtrager (1993) telah membuktikan bahawa budaya yang berlainan memberi dan menerima pujian dengan cara tersendiri. Tujuan penyelidikan ini adalah untuk mengkaji bagaimana perlakuan memuji dilakukan dan bagaimana ia diterima di kalangan penutur Bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia. Kaedah penyelidikan yang digunakan adalah dengan merekod perbualan biasa dalam konteks yang sebenar. Transkripsi perbualan dianalisis dan dibahagikan kepada token-token yang berkaitan dengan perlakuan memuji. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa walaupun masyarakat Asia yang lain cenderung menolak pujian yang diberi, penutur Bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia kebanyakannya menerima pujian yang diberi, tetapi dalam masa yang sama mengalih dan mengurangkan kuasa puji-pujian tersebut, demi mengelak daripada memuji diri sendiri. Implikasi penyelidikan ini menunjukkan bahawa guru-guru perlu mengajar ragam perlakuan pertuturan memuji dan menerima pujian disamping mendedahkan pelajar tentang penggunaan bahasa yang bukan sahaja menepati tujuan berkomunikasi yang tipikal tetapi juga memenuhi tujuan pragmatik.

Keywords: complimenting, cultures

Introduction

The difference in cultural norms and values can be seen in many of speech acts and one of the most interesting of the speech acts is complimenting. The act of complimenting is one that is very culturally bounded as every society or culture draws different cultural assumptions based on their values and virtues. These cultural assumptions will determine what they compliment on and how they respond to compliments. Different cultural assumptions will lead to miscommunications and some may even be offensive because what is taboo to one culture may be a norm to the other. Complimenting is an expressive speech act that is culturally and contextually dependent. For example, while one culture may place importance on more visible qualities of a person such as appearance, another culture may place more importance on abilities of a person and what he or she is capable of.

Statement of Problem

Although many studies have been done on the act of complimenting, few or none have focused on the Malaysian culture and compliments done in the Malaysian English. What is so intriguing about the Malaysian English is that it is a blend of native language influences with English being one of the primary languages. Although Malaysians English speakers still depend very much on their cultural values (such as when it comes to saying and doing things such as offering a compliment), they also have to abide by the norms of the English language (such as the appropriate responses to a compliment is “Thank you”). As cultural assumptions also play a big role in the act of complimenting, that makes Malaysian English compliments different from the other cultures. Therefore, it would be interesting to look into how the complimenting act is done and responded to among Malaysian English speakers as the act of complimenting demands a rather sophisticated linguistics competence of both the speaker and the listener.

Objective of Research

There are two objectives in this research. It aims:

- To examine how the complimenting speech act is used and responded to amongst English speaking Malaysians.
- To find out the pragmatic functions of compliments in spoken Malaysian English.

Scope of Research

The scope of this research covers the uses and responses of the complimenting speech act amongst adult English speaking Malaysians aged from early twenties to early fifties. The reasons why I have chosen this age group is because people at that age tend to be more sociable, more discourse competent in English and interact more with each other. The data would be a collection of naturally occurring speech which would be taped using an mp3 player. All data would be collected in a casual spoken context.

Significance of Research

The significance of this research is to highlight the act of complimenting and its pragmatic functions in the Malaysian context. Many studies on complimenting have been done on other cultures and languages like American English, Chinese and also German, however none have been carried out in the Malaysian English. Although this research is quite general, it will be significant for future English teachers such as myself to be aware of the cross- socio-pragmatic aspects of complimenting and how it will help in the teaching and learning process. This research will also provide insights to how the act of complimenting is done in Malaysian English as compared to those provided in the English textbooks. This will show a gap between the textbook replies to compliments as compared to the real replies by English speaking Malaysians. This study will also give a glimpse of some of the socio-pragmatic aspects of spoken Malaysian English, specifically when the speakers compliment one another.

Methodology

Research Instrument

The research instrument that was used throughout this research was an mp3 player-recorder, in which the conversations taped were in a digital format. Casual conversations were taped between family members, friends, acquaintances and even strangers who just met for the first time. The total time for each recording is shown in the table below:

Table 1: Total duration of conversation according to transcripts

Transcript	Total duration of conversation (minutes)
1	03:36
2	12:25
3	11:00
4	06:00
5	21:20
6	05:40
7	17:30
8	07:10
9	20:30
10	01:10
11	07:18
12	07:10
13	02:40
14	03:00
15	04:00
16	03:00
17	02:41
18	12:41
Total	2:28:51

Respondents of the study

The respondents or participants of this study are mainly adult Malaysian English speakers aged from early twenties to early fifties. There are a total of 32 participants in the study, in which 25 participants were females and only 7 were males. This is shown Table 2 below:

Table 2: The total of participants according to gender

Gender	Total number of participants	%
Male	7	21.9
Female	25	78.1
Total	32	100

The respondents of this study come from various backgrounds, those whose occupations range from veterinarians to businesswomen to even students and housewives. The relationships of the participants in this study also vary, from close relatives such as husband and wife, to friends and acquaintances, to even strangers meeting for the first time. The conversations between the respondents took place in a variety of places from the animal clinic, to the university's cafeteria to even the respondents' homes, and were held during various occasions such as after church, during lunch and while waiting for one's turn in the animal clinic.

Result

Where compliments occur

A compliment can occur in three major parts of a conversation, the beginning, the middle or the end of a conversation. However, compliments that occur in different parts of a conversation, serve different purposes and functions. Compliments have four basic functions (as mentioned in Chapter 2), according to Holmes (1995): to express solidarity, to express positive evaluation, admiration, appreciation or praise, to express envy or desire for hearer's possessions, or as a verbal harassment. Table 3 shows the different parts of conversation in which compliments in this study occur and their frequencies. The part of conversation in which a compliment occurred was determined based on the duration of conversation (in minutes) and which minute exactly did the compliment occur.

Table 3: Parts of conversation in which compliments occur, and their frequencies

Parts of the conversation	Number of occurrences(tokens)	%
Beginning of conversation	25	62.5
Middle of conversation	5	12.5
End of conversation	10	25.0
Total	40	100

Table 3 shows that 62.5 percent of the total compliments occur at the beginning of a conversation. According to Hatch (1992), compliments that occur at the beginning of a conversation have five purposes: (1) as a transition from greeting to the first topic of conversation, (2) to establish good rapport (3) to reinforce and encourage good performance (4) as an appreciation that works like a ‘thank you’ and is directly linked to the expressing of thanks, (5) to soften criticisms, especially when done with special intonation curve. However, the kinds of compliments that fulfil the purpose of (4) and (5) are not in my set of data. According to Table 3, compliments that occur during the beginning of conversation comprise more than half of the number of tokens or 62.5 percent. Most compliments function as a bridge or transition to the first topic of conversation and to establish good rapport. Such compliments are said to be those that people notice straight away, such as a person’s appearance (for example, hair style). The gender factor also plays a part in the occurring on compliments, whereby more than 78 percent of the total participants are women. Women often compliment to establish good rapport, mainly with other women, and so, they often start off a conversation with a compliment as a transition to another topic of conversation. Example 1 shows such a conversation:

Example 1

S2:<LOOKS AT S3> wah, must set your hair, must perm, then must blow-dry
 S1: chinese new year coming mah
 S2: yar, yar, must look good on chinese new year, but i bet you do! did you uh
 highlight your hair?
 S3: yar.. oh no, I didn’t.<PRON: din> last time, i dye it, // remember?
 S2: // mm. but the color
stays! nice!

Token 4, Transcript 3, minute 00:30 to 00:55 (total duration: 11 minutes)

In Example 1, S2 and S3 are colleagues, while S1 is their lady boss. S2 and S3 were talking when S1 passed by. S2 and S3 were on the topic of hairstyles when S1 mentioned that Chinese New Year is coming. S2 then mentioned that they had to look good for that special occasion and complimented S3 that she already looks good (“*yar, yar, must look good on chinese new year, but i bet you do!*”). S2 then continued by asking whether S3 highlighted her hair by saying “*did you uh highlight your hair?*”. S3 said she did not highlight her hair and added that she dyed it the last time (“*last time, I dye it, remember?*”). S2 then continued to compliment her colleague by saying that the color of S3’s hair stays and that looks nice (“*mm. but the color stays! nice!*”). Apart from the compliment being a genuine expression of admiration, it also plays a part in establishing and maintaining good rapport. Such compliments will cause the speakers to be friendlier to each other (if they are not acquainted yet) and it is an indication that the complimenter has developed a certain liking towards the complimentee and wants to continue to be in his or her company. Another example can be found in Example 2 below:

Example 2

S2: i’ve// never been to the barber//all my life, since the minute i//went to
 S3: // all his life!
 S1: // oh is it? // your wife is a good
barber lah! <S3 LAUGH>
 S2: no, myself any way cut handsome one. any way cut also handsome, // cheh lamak.

Token 22, Transcript 9, minute 01:08 to 01:50 (total duration- 20:30 minutes)

Example 2 shows the conversation between S1, S2 and S3. S1 is the friend and insurance agent of S2 and S3 who has just dropped by to hand some documents to them, S2 and S3 are husband and wife. S2 and S1 are talking about S1 going to the barber when S2 (husband) tells S1 that he has never been to the barber (“*i’ve never been to the barber all my life..*”). S1 then compliments S3 (wife) for being a good barber (“*your wife is a good barber lah!*”), indicating that she has done a good job with S2’s (the husband) hair.. This compliment is another example of establishing rapport whereby S1 indicates that he likes being in the company of both the speakers. This proves that the act of establishing rapport does happen in the beginning of the conversation as the compliment occurred during the first minute of conversation.

The second highest amount of compliments occur at the end of conversations, which accounts for 25 percent of the total tokens of compliments. The reason why there is a considerable number of compliments occurring at the end of conversations is because they function as leave taking acts, acts done so that the participants in the conversation part company on friendly terms. When a compliment is given, the complimentee is indebted to the complimenter. Compliments although are considered as gifts, are a threat to the complimentee’s negative face (freedom of action or imposition) in which he or she feels obliged to either show gratitude for the gift of compliment or downgrade the object of compliment, and thus damaging his or her face. Therefore, compliments that occur at the end are usually given as face work so that the complimentee is not indebted to the complimenter and the face of the speakers will be balanced. The excerpt below is an example of such a situation:

Example 3

S2: i find you all very pretty lah, you and your sister.
S1:// sama lah!
S3:// sama lah!
S2: huh?
S1: (cause) for us, we’re not mixed lah, we’re just normal Malays.
S2: yar, but so fair!
S1: eh, no lah! got a lot// like
S2: // a lot of Malays are very fair // nowadays
S1: // yar nowadays
S3: // yar
S1: okay
S2: and speak very good English <SS LAUGH>

Token 26, Transcript 12, minute 06:48 to 07:05 (total duration- 07:10)

Example 3 is a conversation between S1, S2 and S3. S2 is the owner of the animal clinic, while S1 and S3 are sisters. S1 and S2 are clients who brought their cat for consultation. S2 (owner) compliments the sisters on how pretty they both are (“*i find you all very pretty lah, you and your sister*”). S1 and S3 (the sisters) both replied “*sama lah*” and “*(cause) for us, we’re not mixed lah, we’re just normal Malays*” which indicates that they are no different from other people. S2 (owner) then complimented them on their fair skin complexion (“*yar, but so fair!*”) and then on their language proficiency (“*and speak very good English*”). However, the compliments paid by S2 are not just an expression of admiration but also to “repay” the debt owed to S1 as is seen in the Example 4 below:

Example 4

S1: // it's like it's like uhm when i talk to him he's like the Steve Irwin, he knows so much you know about// the cat.
S2: // he's like what?
S1: Steve Irwin
S2: oh! Steve// Irwin <LAUGH> knows so much// about the cat.
S1: //yar! // yar, yar correct what! you know when Steve Irwin talks ar he says okay from this thing to this thing, // it's a documentary right, surely (xx) lah// this thing.
S2: // ah
// ayuh! so good ar you all so so nice, think so highly of my husband <SS LAUGH> <S4 OPENS DOOR>

Token 25, Transcript 12, minute 05:45 to 06:40 (total duration- 07:10)

This excerpt (Example 4) is the conversation which occurred right before the conversation in Example 3. In this excerpt, S1 (client) compares S2's husband to the late Crocodile Hunter, Steve Irwin, and adds that he has a lot of knowledge about cats. S2 initially seeks clarification and thereafter accepts the compliment. She may have felt indebted to S1 and therefore compelled to compliment her in return by saying "*i find you all very pretty lah, you and your sister*" in Example 3 just before the two sister left the clinic and end the conversation at almost the final minute of conversation. This is to ensure that she does not owe S1 anything and both her negative face and S1's positive face are attended to.

In addition to that, compliments that occur at the end of the conversation also to maintain rapport, so that both the complimenter and complementee part company amicably. This can be seen in the excerpt below:

Example 5

S2: so, got how many now?
S1: wah, so many!
S2: ayuh..
S1: too many lah! but, have to tahan lah.
S2: kind heart lah, that's why!
S1: mm?
S2: you're so kind, that's why. <S1 LAUGH> huh?
S1: do all these things lah, love them too much, //eh? mm one or two of mine ar, uh bitten by i don't know whether cobra or what lah, //mm saying that one, haiyah ni-nice one.

Token 23, Transcript 10, 00:15 to 01:00 (total duration- 01:10 minutes)

Example 5 is part of a short conversation between S1 and S2. S1, an acquaintance of S2 who have brought her cats to the clinic while S 2 is the owner of the animal clinic. During the conversation, S2

(owner) asks S1 (acquaintance) how many cats she has at the moment (“so, got how many now?”). S1 responded by saying she has too many cats to count but she has to bear with them (“too many lah! but, have to tahan lah”). S2 then compliments S1 on her kind heart to be able to rear so many cats (“you’re so kind, that’s why”). The conversation ends with S1’s comment on the topic (“do all these things lah, love them too much, eh?”) and a brief farewell (not included in the token). It can be seen that in just one minute worth of conversation, S1 and S2 maintained their rapport and parted in friendly terms. Compliments that occur at the end of a conversation can be considered mainly for face work and maintaining rapport.

Compliments that occur during the middle of a conversation have several functions. They could serve as (1) a bridge or transition into another topic, whereby a compliment marks the start of a whole new topic that is probably related to the compliment given, and/or (2) a sincere expression of admiration. As most of the real conversation occurs in the middle after compliments have been given and received, few would be given during that stage of the conversation, unless the compliment’s purposes are of that mentioned above. However, my data only shows instances of compliments serving as sincere expressions of admiration. That may explain why only 12.5 percent of the total compliments occur in the middle of a conversation.

Example 6

S2: is it anything to do with her music?
S1: she was thinking of doing some music lah, i don’t think it will be anything you know, serious like performing or what you know// not really..
S2: // but she’s so talented! she’s so bright!
S1: unless she finds something like music related you know, // uh.. just wait till the time comes mah.
S2: // yar? but..
S2: actually it’s a good field lah// if she’s interested.

Token 11, Transcript 4, 03:20 to 03:26 (total duration- 04:53 minutes)

Example 6 shows an extract of conversation between two acquaintances, S1 and S2. This conversation took place in S2’s sister’s house during Chinese New Year. Before this part of the conversation took place, S2 asked what S1’s daughter would like to do after her A Level examinations. S2 then mentioned that her daughter is not entirely sure about where or what she would want to studying. S2 then asked S1 if it has anything to do with music (“*is it anything to do with her music?*”). S1 then mentioned that her daughter is thinking of majoring in music and S2 then complimented S1 for having such a bright and talented daughter (“*but she’s so talented! she’s so bright!*”). That particular compliment can be seen as an expression of admiration for S2’s daughter.

Therefore, it can be concluded that although compliments that occur both at the beginning and at the end of conversations have seemingly similar functions, however, when face factor is considered, they are quite different. Compliments that occur in the beginning is associated with attending to the complimentee’s positive face, whereby they function as acts of establishing good rapport between the speakers, while compliments that occur at the end of a conversation is the act of leave taking and where the face of both the complimenter and complimentee are balanced before they go separate ways. Compliments that occur in the middle of a conversation, on the other hand, function as a bridge or transition into another topic or/and as a sincere expression of admiration.

Discussion

After discussing what I have found in the general findings section as well as in the discussion section, it is clear that compliments in Malaysian English do play an important role in conversations in this study. Based on my findings, compliments occur mainly at the beginning of a conversation where it is used to establish good rapport and to show a certain liking towards the complimentee. It is also found that the participants in this study mostly compliment on possessions (material possessions, pets, spouses, children) and ability, and most of the participants accept the compliments given, but with a combination of two or more other types of compliment responses to avoid self-praise. Apart from that, I would also like to highlight that there are three pragmatic functions of compliments in Malaysian English based on my data; (1) to establish and maintain good rapport (2) to balance the face between the complimenter and complimentee at the end of the conversation and (3) to express genuine and sincere admiration.

However, it is important to note that this study is by no means a clear representation of how compliments are done and responded to by the general population of English speakers in Malaysia. This is because my study is of a small scale and can only be used as an insight of how the act of complimenting is done in Malaysian English. Therefore, it remains to be seen if by having a bigger corpus (longer hours and more participants), the results of my study would hold true.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, this study consists of the act of complimenting done by 32 participants (25 females and 7 males), with a total of 40 tokens. Although this is a small corpus study and can hardly represent the general population of English speaking Malaysians, it gives hints about the act of complimenting done among English speaking Malaysians. The findings have shown that compliments are done for purposes such as establishing good rapport and the form of its responses are, more often than not, more than what the second language learners are exposed to. Studies like this show us that teachers need to recreate opportunities to practice the varieties of forms in the language classroom when it comes to the act of complimenting. This can be done by having built in roles and context where the students are able to practice the forms and functions in the classroom and not just learn them *per se*. Therefore, it is vital for the teachers to expose the learner the pragmatic functions of compliments to equip them to be better Malaysian English speakers.

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