

# **An Empirical Study on Compliments and Compliment Responses in Taiwan Mandarin Conversation<sup>1</sup>**

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The present study explored compliments and compliment responses in Taiwan Mandarin, based on a conversation corpus. The corpus used in this analysis consists of 454 compliment/response sequences collected with the assistance of college students at Providence University, Taiwan. With regard to syntactic preference, the speakers preferred the syntactic pattern NP/PRON BE (intensifier) ADJ. With respect to the compliment topic, both college men and women complimented more on someone's appearance than on his/her ability, possessions, or personality. In responding to a compliment, they tended to express disagreement or surprise. Specifically, males were most likely to reject a compliment by disagreeing to the compliment; in contrast, females tended to respond with surprise to a compliment.

Key words: compliments/compliment responses, self-praise avoidance, gender

## **1. Introduction**

Speaking to others is a social activity. By virtue of their membership in a particular community, individuals learn their skills necessary for everyday social interaction. There are many almost automatic patterns in the structure of conversation, and these automatic sequences are called adjacency pairs. They always consist of a first part and a second part, produced by different speakers. Basically, a first part that contains a request or an offer is typically made in the expectation that the second part will be an acceptance. An acceptance is structurally more likely than a refusal. This structural likelihood is called

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preference. The term is used to indicate a socially determined structural pattern and does not refer to an individual's psychological or emotional desires. Preference structure divides second parts into preferred and dispreferred social acts. The preferred is the structurally expected next act and the dispreferred is the structurally unexpected next act. Specifically, to date some conversation analysts (e.g., Levinson 1983; Davidson 1984; Pomerantz 1984) have observed that there is a systematic interactional preference toward affiliative actions and have demonstrated that the acceptance or rejection of such actions as an invitation, offer, and assessment etc. are not generally of equal status. Acceptance/agreement occurs with much greater frequency than does rejection/disagreement. Moreover, there is evidence that acceptances are usually given clearly and without delay, while rejections are often with hesitation and/or accounts (Levinson 1983; Pomerantz 1984). Thus we can say that acceptance/agreement is preferred for invitations, requests, assessments, and offers, and that rejection/disagreement is dispreferred. However, in a study on compliment responses in English conversation, Pomerantz (1978) observed that most of them lie somewhere in between acceptance and agreement on the one hand and rejection and disagreement on the other. In particular, her data revealed that for recipients of compliments, the preference for agreeing with and/or accepting compliments and that for avoiding self-praise may conflict. She concluded that the production of compliment responses is influenced by the interaction among multiple constraint systems.

Studies on compliments demonstrate that a compliment is a structured speech act that reflects social values in the culture (Manes 1983). Studies to date have concentrated mostly on complimenting in several varieties of English; however, little empirical research has been done on compliments and compliment responses in other

languages, like Chinese<sup>2</sup>. The present study aims at exploring compliment/response sequences produced by college students in Taiwan. The purpose of the study is twofold. First, since Manes & Wolfson's (1981) study demonstrated that compliments are highly formulaic, the main concern in our study is to determine the basic syntactic forms and categories that carry the compliment's positive evaluation in Taiwan Mandarin. In addition, we are also interested in the role of gender in complimenting, so the treatment here focuses on sex-based differences in compliments and compliment responses. The collected data were analyzed according to the topics of the compliments in relation to the sex of the participants. Second, by adopting Herbert's (1990) classification of compliment responses, we analyzed our conversation data in order to determine the strategies for compliment responses which college students in Taiwan prefer to use. In particular, we aimed to find out whether gender plays a role in the addresser's compliments and the recipient's compliment responses. Before we proceed, some previous studies on compliments and compliment responses are reviewed in the following section.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Previous Studies on Complimenting in Western Languages**

The compliment speech event has been a subject of careful sociolinguistic investigation in recent years. In an early study, Manes and Wolfson (1981), examining a corpus of compliments uttered in daily conversation in American English, discovered that there exists a large amount of patterning at both the syntactic and the semantic levels. For example, 85% of the compliments they studied consisted of

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Manes & Wolfson (1981); Manes (1983); Knapp et al. (1984); Herbert (1990) on compliments in American English. Also, Holmes and Brown (1987); Holmes (1986, 1988) on compliments in New Zealand English; Herbert (1989); and Herbert and Straight (1989) on compliments in South African English. Studies on compliments in other languages include, amongst others: Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1989); Jaworski (1995) on Polish compliments; Golato (2002) on German compliments; and Shih (1986); Chen (1993); Ye (1995) on Chinese compliments.

three core syntactic patterns. These were:

- (i) NP is/looks (really) ADJ (e.g., “That shirt is so nice”).
- (ii) I (really) like/love NP (e.g., “I love your hair”).
- (iii) DET/PRON is (really) (a/an) ADJ NP (e.g., “This is really a great meal”).

They also found that five positive evaluative adjectives—*nice*, *good*, *pretty*, *beautiful*, and *great*—accounted for two-thirds of the adjectives that complimenters used. By the same token, the two verbs *like* and *love* accounted for 86 percent of the positive evaluative verbs. They concluded that compliments are highly formulaic, both in their syntactic form and in the lexical items that carry the positive evaluation. Subsequent studies in this vein of research (e.g., Holmes 1986, 1988; Herbert 1990) have tended to corroborate Manes and Wolfson’s general findings, focusing on the gender difference in compliment forms. Both Holmes and Herbert found that women used the *I like/love NP* formula much more than men, and that women’s compliments were more personal in focus, while men complimented on ability and performance. In addition, research has focused on the functions of compliments, compliment topics, the status of complimenters and recipients, and compliment responses in relation to cross-cultural or sex-preferential differences.

### 2.1.1 Functions

The functions of complimenting are varied. People may compliment one another to maintain or re-establish a social relationship, to reinforce a desired action (e.g., teacher-student interaction), or to soften a speaker’s discourse before uttering a face threatening act (FTA) (Holmes 1986; Brown and Levinson 1987). Holmes (1988: 464) maintained that compliments appeared to be functionally complex speech acts which served as “solidarity signals, commenting on friendships, attenuating demands, smoothing ruffled feathers and bridging gaps created by possible offenses”. Compliments are usually intended to make others feel good. The primary function of a compliment is most obviously affective and social, rather than referential or informative. They are generally described as positively affective speech acts serving to increase or consolidate the solidarity between the speaker and addressee. In brief, compliments have been said to “grease the social wheels” and thus to serve as “social lubricants” that create or maintain rapport (Wolfson 1983:

89).

While the primary function of compliments is most obviously affective, it is possible that some compliments are intended to convey and perceived as having a stronger referential message than are others. Johnson and Roen (1992) argue that the compliments they analyzed in written peer reviews simultaneously conveyed both affective (or interpersonal) meaning and referential (or ideational) meaning. In some contexts, compliments may function as praise and encouragement. Herbert (1990) suggests, based on an analysis of American compliments, that some compliments serve as expressions of praise and admiration rather than offers of solidarity. Thus, the relationship between participants is crucial in accurately interpreting the functions of a compliment.

However, compliments may have a darker side. Compliments can be used to express sarcasm or disapproval, to put someone down, to insult, to manipulate, and to threaten the addressee's negative face. Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that a compliment can be regarded as a face-threatening act to the extent that it implies the complimenter envies the addressee in some way, or would like something belonging to the addressee. It is also true that compliments may be considered somewhat face-threatening in different cultures or social groups. Holmes (1988) suggests that in some situations, men in New Zealand may interpret compliments negatively as face threatening acts. Some researchers (e.g., Herbert 1990; Holmes 1988) claim that male and female compliments in American English serve different functions. Two important studies that emphasize gender differences in complimenting are those by Holmes (1988) and Herbert (1990). Explicit and precise analyses involved in these studies produced some findings on gender differences in complimenting. For example, Holmes found that women gave and received more compliments than men did, and Herbert suggests that female compliments rely heavily on solidarity, while males focus on assertion of praise. Herbert (1990) suggests, as Holmes (1988) does, that for women, compliments are primarily offers of solidarity, while for males, they function more often as actual assertions of praise.

### 2.1.2 Status of Complimenters and Recipients

Most compliments occur between status equals. As Wolfson (1983:91) puts it, "the overwhelming majority of all compliments are given to people of the same age and status as the speaker". Many researchers have reported the same pattern

(Knapp, Hopper and Bell 1984; Holmes 1988; Herbert 1990). However, in New Zealand data, Holmes (1986) found that higher status females were twice as likely to receive compliments as higher status men, and that men were even more likely to compliment women of higher status than women were. This is further support for the view that it is more acceptable to compliment high status women than high status men. This interpretation of the patterns observed is consistent with the suggestion that higher status women are perceived as more receptive to compliments than their male counterparts are, because in society as a whole, women are generally regarded as socially subordinate and less powerful and influential than men (Holmes 1988). Alternatively, women are seen as more approachable because they value solidarity more highly than status, and tend to reduce rather than emphasize status differences. Based on the results, Holmes (1988) concluded that in New Zealand, women tend to use compliments as solidarity signals, but men are more likely to experience them as FTAs.

### 2.1.3 Compliments Topics

A topic may properly serve as the focus of a compliment. In spite of the broad range of topics found in some research, the majority of compliments are restricted to only a few general topics. Based on the U.S. data, Manes and Wolfson (1981) and Wolfson (1983) observed that compliments seem to fall naturally into two general categories—those which focus on appearance and/or possessions, and those which have to do with ability and/or accomplishments. With respect to the first category, in addition to compliments on apparel, hairstyle, and jewelry, it is very common for Americans to compliment one another on such seemingly personal matters as weight loss. Favorable comments on the attractiveness of one's children, pets, and even husbands, boyfriends, wives, or girlfriends seem to fall within this same category, as do compliments on cars and houses. Compliments assigned to the second category include those referring to the addressee's skill or performance, e.g. a well-done job, a skillfully played game, a good meal. According to Manes and Wolfson's (1981) and Wolfson's (1983) studies on compliments in American English, the greatest number of appearance/possession compliments are given and received by acquaintances, colleagues, and casual friends, especially by females. Upper-status males rarely received compliments, and these were nearly never associated with appearance. By contrast, women are the recipients of the great majority of

compliments on appearance/possession. In this case, however, the status of the woman seems to have little if any effect, since she can be complimented on her appearance by virtually anyone. Similarly, Holmes (1986) found that 92.5% of 517 compliment responses were about appearance, ability and possessions, with the first two accounting for 81.3% of the data. Her study suggests that there is agreement between the New Zealand and American norms at this very broad level concerning appropriate/acceptable topics of compliments. In another study examining the distribution of compliment topics by gender, Holmes (1988) pointed out that there is a clearly observable tendency for women to receive compliments on their appearance and to compliment each other on their appearance. To be specific, 56.7% of all the compliments women received in the New Zealand data related to aspects of their appearance, and 61% of all the compliments between women related to appearance, compared to only 36% of the compliments between males. In addition, Holmes and Brown (1987) identified the cultural differences in what constitutes a socially appropriate topic for a compliment. For instance, while weight loss is considered a suitable topic for a compliment in Western societies, in Tokelan society it is a reason for concern.

#### 2.1.4 Compliment Responses

One major focus of research on complimenting events has been on compliment responses. Pomerantz (1978) pointed out that responses represent the recipient's resolution of conflicting conversational constraints. In any conversational exchange, she suggested, the preferred second part will present an agreement with the previous utterance. There is, thus, pressure on the recipient to agree with the complimenter and accept the compliment. On the other hand, there is strong pressure on speakers to avoid or minimize self-praise. Her American data reveal that a large number of compliment responses deviate from the model responses of accepting compliments, and actually show a prevalence of disagreements and rejections. According to her analysis, the prevalence of disagreements and rejections is an outcome of yet another system of constraints which co-operates along with the other systems on compliment responses. That system involves speaker's minimization of self-praise (Pomerantz 1978:81).

Likewise, in a series of studies on compliments, Holmes (1986, 1988) developed three main categories of compliment responses, based on the credit

attribution component of compliments: Accept, Reject, and Deflect or Evade. She analyzed complimenting behavior in terms of Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory and considered compliments to be, on the one hand, positively affective speech acts, and on the other, potentially face-threatening acts, which account for the variety of compliment responses. Her data indicated that in New Zealand, by far the most frequent response to a compliment was Accept (1986, 1988). She further examined gender characteristics in the interaction between the gender of complimenter and complimentee and found that males will ignore or legitimately evade a compliment more often than women will (Holmes 1986). The results of her study reveal the existence of sex-preferential strategies for compliment responses. Specifically, New Zealand men tend to interpret compliments as FTAs more readily than their female counterparts, with the latter usually treating them as strategies for maintaining solidarity. In a study on Polish compliments and their alleged solidarity function, Jaworski (1995) suggests a refinement to Holmes' remark in the sense that whilst females tend to exchange compliments to achieve relational solidarity, males often use the procedural solidarity function of compliments in order to negotiate in-group power relation. Herbert (1990) has noted differences in the use of compliments and compliment responses between females and males, such as fewer instances of compliments being returned or of disagreeing compliment responses by the former, together with a higher tendency to question or fail to acknowledge the compliment by the latter.

There have been several cross-linguistic studies on compliment responses. Based on the previous work of Pomerantz (1978), Herbert (1989, 1990) further distinguished 12 types of compliment responses: (1) appreciation token ("Thanks," "Thank you"), (2) comment acceptance ("Yeah, it's my favorite too"), (3) praise upgrade ("Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?"), (4) comment history ("I bought it for the trip to Arizona"), (5) reassignment ("My brother gave it to me," "It really knitted itself"), (6) return ("So's yours"), (7) scale down ("It's really quite old"), (8) question ("Do you really think so?"), (9) disagreement ("I hate it"), (10) qualification ("It's alright, but Len's is nicer"), (11) no acknowledgment, and (12) request interpretation ("You wanna borrow this one too?"). They were subsumed within three broad categories: agreement, nonagreement, and request interpretation. Herbert conducted a contrastive study on American and South African compliment responses spoken by college students (1989, 1990). His data suggested that



Americans exhibit a high frequency of compliment-expression but a low frequency of compliment-acceptance; South Africans exhibit a low frequency of compliment-expression but a high frequency of compliment-acceptance. He explained the contrast in terms of ideological differences between Americans and South Africans. That is, the high frequency of compliments and the low rate of acceptance in the U.S. data reflect American notions of equality and democratic idealism, whereas the low frequency of compliments and the high rate of acceptance are tied to elitism in South Africa.

Using Herbert's (1989, 1990) taxonomy of compliment responses, Lorenzo-Dus (2001) examined a corpus consisting of a thousand compliment responses by British and Spanish male and female undergraduates. The results showed the existence of cross-cultural and cross-gender similarities as well as differences between the four groups of subjects. For example, Spanish males tended to upgrade compliments ironically (a type of compliment response absent in the British data) more frequently than their female counterparts.

## 2.2 Previous Studies on Complimenting in Chinese

Recently, several researchers have studied Chinese compliment responses. According to Shih's (1986) study on a comparison between the ways compliments function in English and in Chinese, complimenting behavior is quite similar across languages except that the complimented items may differ somewhat according to what is highly valued in the culture. Compliment responses, however, differ quite remarkably between Chinese and Americans. In her study, compliment responses in Chinese were classified into three major types: (1) rejection, (2) acceptance, and (3) compromise. In the three types of compliment responses in Chinese, the rejection type is the most prevalent, next is the compromise type, and the acceptance type is the last. Each type could be subdivided into more polite and less polite types. Furthermore, the choices made among those types are influenced by various social factors, such as sex, age, degree of intimacy, and social context. For example, teenagers prefer blunt and humorous types of compliment responses from their peers. Shih held that modesty is a great virtue for Chinese, and the essence of modesty is reflected most clearly in compliment responses.

In addition, Chen (1993) examined the compliment response strategies used by American English speakers and Chinese speakers, and stated that the American

English speakers' strategies are characterized by acceptance governed by Leech's Agreement Maxim, whereas the Chinese speakers' strategies are characterized by compliment rejection and self-denigration motivated by Leech's Modesty Maxim. The differences between compliment responses in English and Chinese reflected differences in social values in the two cultures. According to Chen (1993), the norm in American society seemed to be to receive the compliment gracefully, i.e., to accept it, while the social norm in Chinese was to appear humble.

In a similar vein, looking at data collected through the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) format, Ye (1995) explored compliments and compliment responses between interlocutors of equal status and those in close relationships. Her study, based on ninety-six native speakers of Chinese in the People's Republic of China, found that each gender group of respondents treats the opposite group differently from their own group. She analyzed compliments and compliment responses in Mainland China from four perspectives: the compliment formula, the compliment focus, the compliment response strategy, and sex-preferential strategies. In her study, the compliment response strategy was divided into five categories: Acceptance, Acceptance with Amendment, Non-acceptance, Combination, and No Response. She found that males used Acceptance with Amendment as their first compliment response preference to both males and females, while females used the same strategy toward females but Acceptance toward males. Specifically, she pointed out that women offered compliments more often than men did. Moreover, women tended to give more explicit compliments, but men chose to opt out, or to offer implicit or no compliments no matter what topic it is. However, both men and women offered twice as many explicit compliments on performance as on appearance. Based on the results, she concluded that Chinese rejection of compliments is not a real denial; to be more specific, the speaker denies the proposition but accepts the complimenting force. Similar to Chen's argument, she maintained that this preference is a cultural choice of modesty over agreement. Both Chen's and Ye's subjects were from Mainland China: Chen's were college students, while Ye's included college students, teachers, engineers, and civil officers, but they were different from Shih's subjects, who were mainly Taiwan college students.

Although the above-mentioned studies on Chinese compliment responses have provided a solid foundation for further work, their data were mainly obtained

through questionnaire surveys<sup>3</sup>, which produce results that may vary from real empirical data (for discussion on data-gathering methods, see Yuan 2001). Instead, the present study, using the ethnographic method described by Manes & Wolfson (1981) and Herbert (1990) and conversation analysis (viz. ethnomethodology) as discussed by Sacks et al. (1974), looked at compliments and compliment responses in Chinese, based on a conversation corpus.

### **3. Method**

Previous scholars have examined the pragmatic use of compliments with a view of politeness. There are two main perspectives of politeness we would like to discuss here: the Conversational-maxim view as claimed by Leech (1983) and the Face-want view as proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987).

Leech (1983) proposes the Politeness Principle (PP), which is composed of a set of politeness maxims, such as tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy. In these maxims of politeness, he uses two words ‘maximize’ and ‘minimize’ to deal with the bipolar scales: the cost-benefit, praise-dispraise, agreement-disagreement and sympathy-antipathy scales. He argues that in each maxim, sub-maxim (a) using the word ‘minimize’ appears to be more important than (b) using ‘maximize’. That is to say, avoidance of discord seems to be more significant than seeking concord. He further suggests that given the same propositional content, it is possible “to increase the degree of politeness by using a more and more indirect kind of illocution. Indirect illocutions tend to be more polite (a) because they increase the degree of optionality, and (b) because the more indirect an illocution is, the more diminished and tentative its force tends to be” (Leech 1983: 108).

Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory (1987) stresses the strategic nature of human communication. They believe that politeness is the reason why people do not always “say what they mean”. Politeness theory aims to provide a universal descriptive and explanatory framework of social relations. Brown and Levinson state that face is the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself/herself. When we attempt to save another’s face, we can pay attention to

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<sup>3</sup> Shih’s study employed multiple data sources. Her data included questionnaires, interviews, observations of the speech around her and of TV shows, and reports on other linguists’ research.

their negative face wants or their positive face wants. A person's negative face is the need to be independent, to have freedom of action, and not to be imposed on by others. A person's positive face is the need to be accepted, even liked, by others, to be treated as a member of the same group, and to know that his/her wants are shared by others. In simple terms, negative face is the need to be independent and positive face is the need to be connected. Consequently, a face saving act which is oriented to the person's negative face will tend to show deference, emphasize the importance of the other's time or concerns, and even include an apology for the imposition or interruption. This is also called negative politeness. A face saving act which is concerned with the person's positive face will tend to show solidarity, emphasize that both speakers want the same thing, and that they have a common goal. This is also called positive politeness.

Complimenting is a kind of speech act belonging to the category of expressives<sup>4</sup>, based on Searle's (1979) classification. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), complimenting is a positive politeness strategy aiming to praise the addressees for a past or present action. In other words, compliments are prime examples of speech acts that notice and attend to the hearer's interests, wants, needs, and goods. A frequent denotation is Holmes's (1988:446) definition: "A compliment is a polite 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 hearer". She defines a compliment as a speech act that is accomplished either explicitly or implicitly to express admiration or approval for some good of the addressee. In such a situation, explicit compliments are those whose meaning is understood literally, as in a direct speech act, for example, 'you look nice in blue'. Similarly, implicit compliments account for indirect speech acts whose meaning can be inferred among participants, for instance, 'I wish I could play the piano like you do' (Cordella, Large and Pardo 1995).

In the present study, the definition of a compliment draws on the work of Holmes (1988). The core of Holmes's definition is the act of attributing credit. Compliments normally attribute the value "good" to the addressee, and even when a compliment apparently refers to a third person, it may well be indirectly

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<sup>4</sup> Expressives are those kinds of speech acts that state what the speaker feels. They express

complimenting the addressee. As (1) has illustrated, Utterance 1 can be interpreted as a compliment since it indirectly attributes credit to the addressee<sup>5</sup>:

(1) F: ... Wo you shihou hui kao dankao shenme de ah<sup>6</sup>,\_  
 I have time will bake cake what DE PRT  
 ...(1) jiali ah\  
 home PRT

M: (0) oh,\_  
 oh

.. nide laogong hen xingfu oh\  
 your husband very lucky PRT (Utterance 1)

F: ... (1) Hai bucuo=\  
 ADV not bad (Utterance 2)

F: 'I sometimes bake a cake at home.'

M: 'Your husband is very lucky.'

F: '(His luck is) not bad.'

Hymes (1974), one of the most influential scholars in the ethnography of speaking, has claimed that language and speech have independent patterning and cannot be taken for granted in the study of any given community. The current study, taking this stand, assumes that compliments and compliment responses vary cross-culturally in their form, frequency, distribution, and function. Since it is recognized that compliments and compliment responses may differ quite remarkably across languages and cultures, compliments and compliment responses in Taiwan may differ from those in Western societies. The method used in this study was a

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psychological states and can be statements of pleasure, pain, likes, dislikes, joy, or sorrow.

<sup>5</sup> Though the definition of the term "compliment" includes utterances attributing credit to someone other than the addressee, for the purpose of analysis in this study, such utterances have been excluded. It is perhaps worth stating explicitly here that in classifying utterances as compliments, it is the attributed underlying intention that is the guiding criterion, rather than any surface form indicators (Leech 1983). In addition, teasing and irony are also not included in this analysis because they are not sincere compliments. The meaning of the sentence and the speaker's true meaning are opposite. Generally speaking, the functions of complimenting may vary. Compliments serve many other functions as well. They can be used to express sarcasm or disapproval, to put someone down or to insult someone.

<sup>6</sup> The abbreviations used in the interliner translation are as follows: 1SG = first singular person, 2SG = second singular person, 3SG = third singular person, 1PL = first plural person, 2PL = second plural person, 3PL = third plural person, ADV = adverb, CL = classifier, COP = copula, CRS = current relevant state marker, DC = directional complement, EXP = experiential aspect marker, INT = intensifier, IRJ = interjection, NEG = negation, NOM = nominalizer, PFV = perfective aspect marker, PREP = preposition, PRT = clause final particle, Q = final question marker, TOP = topic marker, and

combination of the ethnography of speaking and conversation analysis (henceforth, CA). Both focus on rules of language use and behavior from the perspective of a single culture or single social interaction (for discussion, see Schiffrin 1994). Scholars in these two fields have conducted detailed analyses of particular sequences of utterances that have actually occurred in English conversation, such as act sequences of assessment—agreement/disagreement, and invitation or request—acceptance/rejection etc. Following an ethnographic approach, the social, cultural and linguistic context of verbal interactions, the setting, the tone and the relationship between the participants, among others, were considered in the present study. On the other hand, according to CA, each utterance in a sequence is shaped by a prior context and provides a context for the next utterance; however, the relevance of the context is grounded in the text. We adopted CA's transcription of talk but paid some attention to social context, e.g., the social identities of the participants, the occupation and age of the participants, and the setting, in order to search for recurrent patterns, distributions and forms of organization in a large corpus of Taiwan Mandarin conversation. The data for the present study were collected in 1998-2001 by graduate and undergraduate students at Providence University in Taiwan, who were instructed to tape-record compliments and compliment responses among their peers in informal contexts such as classrooms, dormitories, and so on<sup>7</sup>. The sex of the speaker and the addressee, the relationship of the participants, and the location were also recorded. All the participants were considered to be equal in status and close acquaintances because most of them were classmates or/and roommates. The treatment here highlighted Taiwan college students' compliment behavior.

#### **4. Compliments and Compliment Responses in the Corpus**

The corpus of compliments upon which our analysis rests consists of 454 examples. There is an interesting methodological consideration which is relevant here, namely the sex of the data collectors. Because in this study a large majority of the data collectors were female students<sup>8</sup>, the most obvious pattern revealed by

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GEN = genitive marker.

<sup>7</sup> Most of the subjects in this study were not aware of recording.

<sup>8</sup> From the list of students names acknowledged in Manes and Wolfson (1981), it appears that their data collectors were also predominantly females. In addition, Holmes (1988) comments that it would have been possible of course to ask students to ensure they collected equal numbers of

the data is that women gave and received significantly more compliments than men did. Moreover, a high proportion of the compliments recorded were addressed to females, as seen in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Compliments according to sex of participants

Complimenter-Recipient	Number	%
Female-Female (F-F)	215	47.3
Female-Male (F-M)	122	26.9
Male-Female (M-F)	62	13.7
Male-Male (M-M)	55	12.1
Total	454	100

Table 1 shows that 47.3% (i.e. 215 out of 454) of the compliments occurred between female participants, and 26.9% (i.e. 122 out of 454) of them were given by females to males. By contrast, men gave 13.7% (62 out of 454) of the compliments to women and 12.1 % (55 out of 454) to other men. From the data, we can infer that women might use such speech behavior more frequently than men, but this conclusion needs to be investigated further.

In the following subsections, the forms and topics of compliments offered by men and women are highlighted, and the response behavior is discussed as well. Following this discussion, the authors will then turn to an in-depth investigation of the compliment event.

#### 4.1 Syntactic Patterns & Lexical Items of Compliments

Because the compliments in our data appear to occur more frequently between females and to be given most commonly by females, we would like to see whether there are differences in the linguistic patterns and lexical items between males and females. Manes and Wolfson (1981) pointed out that compliments are noticeably formulaic speech acts in that a very small number of lexical items and syntactic patterns account for the great majority of them in their corpus. Likewise, Holmes (1986, 1988) reported broadly similar patterning for New Zealand English. She found that the pattern NP BE (INT) ADJ/LOOK ADJ appeared to be the most widely used English compliment formula regardless of dialect or sex, accounting for at least 40% of her data in the samples analyzed.

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compliments from each sex and addressed to each sex, but it would then have been impossible to make any statements about what sex uses compliments most frequently in natural contexts.

Adapting Manes and Wolfson's (1981) classification, we categorized our data into 8 syntactic patterns, and an example for each type is given below.

1. NP (BE) (INT) ADJ

Ni na shuang tuoxie hen piaoliang ye.  
You that pair slippers very pretty PRT  
'Your slippers are very pretty.'

2. (PRON/NP) LOOK ADJ

Ni qise kanqilai bucuo eh.  
You complexion look not bad PRT  
'You look good.'

3. (INT) ADJ

Hao keai!  
Very lovely  
'Very lovely!'

4. NP/PRON V (DE) (INT) ADV

Ni jintian chuan de bucuo.  
You today dress DE not bad  
'You are dressed very nicely today.'

5. NP/PRON V (INT) ADV

Ni shangke hen renzhen.  
You go to class very attentive  
'You are very attentive in class.'

6. NP/PRON (INT) V NP

Ni name you meili.  
You such have charm  
'You have charm.'

7. (Wo 'I') (INT) V (NP)

Hao xianmu ni oh.  
Very admire you PRT  
'(I) admire you very much.'



8. PRON BE *yige* ‘a’ (INT) ADJ NP

Ni shi ge hao laogong.

You are CL good husband

‘You are a good husband.’

Table 2 summarizes the syntactic patterns occurring in the data.

**Table 2.** Syntactic patterns of compliments

Syntactic formula*	Female	Male	No.	%
1. NP (BE) (INT) ADJ <sup>9</sup>	186	54	240	52.9
2 (PRON/NP) LOOK ADJ	26	4	30	6.6
3. (INT) ADJ	59	27	86	18.9
4. NP/PRON V ( <i>DE</i> ) (INT) ADV	27	18	45	9.9
5. NP/PRON V (INT) ADV	15	3	18	4.0
6. NP/PRON (INT) V NP	18	8	26	5.7
7. ( <i>Wo</i> ‘I’) (INT) V (NP)	3	1	4	0.9
8. PRON BE <i>yige</i> ‘a’ (INT) ADJ NP	1	1	2	0.4
9. Other	2	1	3	0.7
Total	337	117	454	100

( $\chi^2=7.22$ ,  $df=7$ ,  $p=0.406659$ )

Because no great significant difference was found in the compliments according to gender ( $\chi^2=7.22$ ,  $df=7$ ,  $p>0.01$ ), as seen in Table 2, we take into account all of the compliments in the data, excluding the effect of gender. The first pattern NP (BE) (INT) ADJ accounts for 52.9% of the compliments given by both the female and male subjects, which is the most commonly used syntactic pattern. The Chinese data exhibit a great preference for syntactic pattern 1, just as the American English data do. However, the Chinese data show that Chinese display a slight preference for the syntactic pattern, (INT) ADJ (18.9%), over the pattern “I like/love NP” (0.9%), as opposed to American English speakers who use the latter more than the former. Another characteristic difference from compliments in English that we found in our data was a marked infrequency of first person compliments in Chinese. Besides, in Chinese, the subject is frequently omitted from the surface structure, when it is clear from the context, for example, *hao piaoliang* ‘(You) are very beautiful.’ As Table 2

<sup>9</sup> Following Manes and Wolfson (1981), ADJ represents any semantically positive adjective and INT represents any boosting intensifier, e.g., *name* ‘such’, *hen* ‘very’. In addition, since all of the above compliment patterns could be embedded with the frame *Wo juede* ‘I think’, the frame was not included in the analysis.

reveals, the syntactic pattern “I like/love NP” occurred much less than the pattern NP/PRON V (INT) ADV (i.e., 0.9% vs. 4.0%). To be specific, for Chinese people, the second most commonly used syntactic pattern in speakers of American English “I (really) like/love NP,” is a rather unusual form for a compliment. Similar to Ye’s (1995) finding, Chinese rarely employ the speaker’s perspective “I” in complimenting.

In addition, most of the compliment patterns in the data make use of adjectives to express the positive evaluation of the complimenters. We found that the most frequent types of compliments belonged to the adjectival category. The five most frequently used adjectives were *haokan* ‘good-looking,’ *bucuo* ‘not bad,’ *piaoliang* ‘pretty,’ *hao* ‘good,’ and *lihai* ‘terrific,’<sup>10</sup> accounting for 56% of the positive evaluative adjectives. Akin to English *nice* and *good*, most of the adjectives lack specificity and are usable with almost any compliment subject. Among the five adjectives in our data, *bucuo* ‘not bad’ and *hao* ‘good’ were used by males or females in compliments on any topic to a man or woman. This fact has to do with that they have ‘weak semantic load’ (Manes and Wolfson 1981) so that they can hardly be said to have any meaning more specific than positive evaluation. However, *piaoliang* ‘beautiful’ was usually used in a compliment given to a female on her appearance; *haokan* ‘good-looking’ was used commonly in a compliment on appearance or possessions, and *lihai* ‘terrific’ in a compliment on ability/performance, regardless of the sex. The major Chinese adverbs used to intensify ADJ were found to be *hen* ‘very,’ *hao* ‘quite,’ and *man* ‘rather’ accounting for 82% of the adverbs that the complimenters employed. On the other hand, semantically positive nouns like *tiancai* ‘genius’ were rare in the data, and their range was enormous. Likewise, verbs, which are commonly used in English compliments (Wolfson and Manes 1981), turned out to be rarely found in the data. The verbs found in the data were *shihe* ‘fit,’ *xihuan* ‘like’ and *xianmu* ‘admire’; only *xianmu* ‘admire’ occurred four times in the data, the others, once. This is consistent with the rare occurrence of the pattern “*wo xihuan/ai* NP ‘I like/love NP,’” which has the speaker-oriented subject *wo* ‘I’ in compliments<sup>11</sup>. Apparently,

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<sup>10</sup> The adjective *lihai* ‘terrific’ was used particularly in a compliment on ability/performance.

<sup>11</sup> As far as the syntactic patterns and lexical items of compliments are concerned, it seems that there are no significant differences between our empirical data and Ye’s (1995) elicited data on Chinese compliments.

Chinese data, compared with American English, suggest that there are differences in syntax as well as in lexicon, and that the differences may lie in different cultural values (for discussion, see Section 5.1).

#### 4.2 Compliment Topic

Examining the distribution of compliment topics by gender, we found that there was a significant difference in the compliment topics used by women and men, as shown in Table 3 ( $\chi^2=32.81856$ ,  $df=12$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

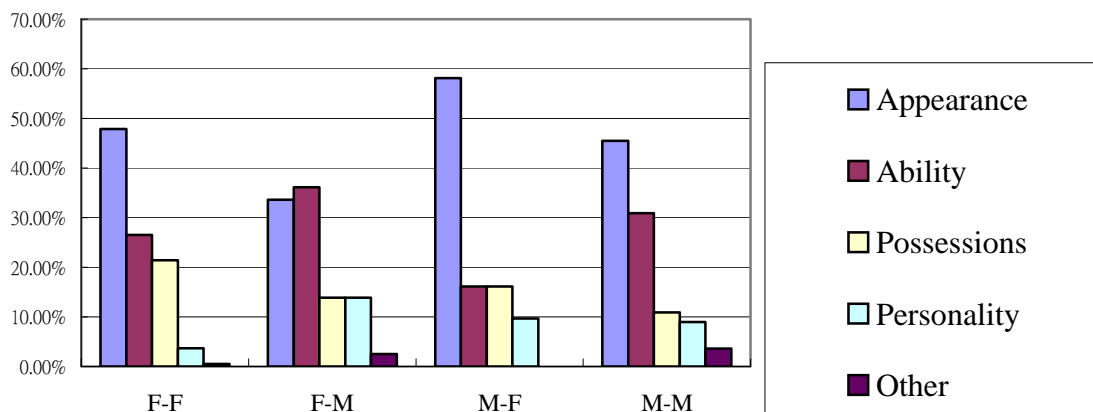
**Table 3.** Interaction between compliment topic and sex of participants

Topic	F-F	F-M	M-F	M-M	Total	%
Appearance	103 (47.9%)	41 (33.6%)	36 (58.1%)	25 (45.5%)	205	45.2
Ability/Performance	57 (26.5%)	44 (36.1%)	10 (16.1%)	17 (30.9%)	128	28.2
Possessions	46 (21.4%)	17 (13.9%)	10 (16.1%)	6 (10.9%)	79	17.4
Personality/Friendship	8 (3.7%)	17 (13.9%)	6 (9.7%)	5 (9%)	36	7.9
Other <sup>12</sup>	1 (0.5%)	3 (2.5%)	0 (0%)	2 (3.6%)	6	1.3
Total	215	122	62	55	454	100

( $\chi^2=32.81856$ ,  $df=12$ ,  $p=0.00103$ )

Table 3 indicates that 45.2% of all the compliments related to aspects of the complimentees' appearance, and 28.2% related to their ability and performance. There is a clearly observable tendency for both women and men to give compliments on their appearance (i.e., 47.9% in female to female interaction, 58.1% in male to female interaction, and 45.5% in male to male interaction). Both genders use compliments on appearance as the most frequent topic for males and females. Compliments on appearance were the dominant topic for both women and men, which confirms Holmes' (1988:458) observation that appearance is the most frequent topic for compliments between equals, close friends and intimates, regardless of gender. However, women praised men's ability/performance (36.1%) more often than their appearance (33.6%). The second highest proportion concerned compliments related to ability/performance in female to female (26.5%), female to male (36.1%), and male to male (30.9%) interactions, as illustrated in Figure 1.

<sup>12</sup> This category includes wealth, good luck, and the like.



**Figure 1.** Compliment topic and gender of participants

#### 4.3 Compliment Responses

In order to make a comparison between American and Chinese compliment responses based on the empirical data, we adopted Herbert's (1989, 1990) classification of compliment responses and divided our data into 12 types<sup>13</sup>:

1. APPRECIATION TOKEN. A verbal or nonverbal acceptance of a compliment, acceptance not being semantically fitted to the specifics of that compliment, e.g.,

(2) F1: .. Zhe daizi man haokande.\  
 this bag quite good-looking  
 'This bag is gorgeous.'  
 → F2: .. Xiexie.\  
 thank  
 'Thanks.'

2. COMMENT ACCEPTANCE. The addressee accepts the complimentary force by means of a response semantically fitted to the compliment, e.g.,

(3) F1: .. Hao youqu oh.\  
 very funny PRT  
 '(The alarm is) very funny.'

<sup>13</sup> The English examples for the 12 response types are provided in Section 2.1.

→ F2: .. <L Dui ah L>.\  
 right PRT  
 ‘Right.’

3. PRAISE UPGRADE. The addressee accepts the compliment and asserts that the compliment force is insufficient, e.g.,

(4) M: .. Ganjue shang ni bian piaoliang le.\  
 Feel DC you become pretty PFV  
 ‘(I) feel that you have become pretty.’  
 → F: .. Benlai jiu hen piaoliang le.\  
 Original ADV very beautiful PFV  
 ‘I am always beautiful.’

4. COMMENT HISTORY. The addressee, although agreeing with the complimentary force, does not accept the praise personally; rather, he/she impersonalizes the complimentary force by giving (maybe irrelevant) impersonal details.

(5) M1: .. Man haokande.\  
 very good-looking  
 ‘(The clothes) look good on you.’  
 → M2: .. Qian ji tian qu mai de.\  
 ago several days go buy DE  
 ‘(I) bought them several days ago.’

5. REASSIGNMENT. The addressee agrees with the compliment, but the complimentary force is transferred to some third person or to the object complimented itself.

(6) M: .. Ye. ni chuan xinde maoyi oh,\_  
 PRT 2SG wear new sweater PRT  
 .. man,\_  
 very  
 .. hai man haokande.\  
 ADV very good-looking  
 ‘Hey, you are wearing a new sweater. It looks nice.’

→ F: .. Chuan dier ci le.\  
Wear second time PRT  
'This is the second time I've worn it.'

6. RETURN. The praise is shifted to the addresser/complimenter.

(7) F: .. Ni shi man you zhihui de yi ge ren ah.\  
You COP quite have wisdom DE one CL person PRT  
'You are a wise person.'

→ M: .. Ni naojin ye bucha.\  
You brain too not bad  
'You have a good mind, too (=so are you).'

7. SCALE DOWN. The force of the compliment is minimized or scaled down by the addressee.

(8) F1: .. Zhe shi ni jia ya?/  
This COP your house PRT  
.. Hao ganjing oh.\  
very clean PRT  
'This is your house? So clean!'

→ F2: .. Hai hao ba.\  
ADV okay PRT  
'It's okay.'

8. QUESTION. The addressee might want an expansion or repetition of the original compliment or question the sincerity of the compliment.

(9) F1: .. Wo hen xianmu ni zheyang de gexing.\  
I very admire you such DE personality  
'I admire your personality very much.'

→ F2: .. Zhende ma?/  
really Q  
'Really?'

9. DISAGREEMENT. The addressee directly disagrees with addresser's assertion.

(10) F1: .. Ni haoxiang bian shou le.\  
 You seem become slim PFV  
 ‘You seem to have become slimmer.’  
 → F2: .. <@<T Pian ren T>@><sup>14</sup>.\  
 cheat people  
 ‘You must be joking.’

10. QUALIFICATION. The addressee may choose not to accept the full complimentary force offered by qualifying that praise, usually by employing *keshi* ‘but’, *buguo* ‘yet’, etc.

(11) M1: .. Man haokande ye,\_  
 quite pretty PRT  
 .. man shihe ni de oh.\  
 quite suit you DE PRT  
 ‘(It) is very pretty and suits you.’  
 M2: .. Wo ye juede bucuo,\_  
 I also feel it’s not bad  
 → .. keshi gen wo xiang de yuanben bu tai yiyang.\  
 But with me think De original NEG too same  
 ‘I also think it is not bad. But it is not the same as what I thought originally.’

11. NO ACKNOWLEDGEMENT. The addressee gives no indication of having heard the compliment; that is, he/she employs the conversational turn to do something other than respond to the compliment offered, e.g., shifts the topic.

(12) M1: .. Ganjue man siwende la.\  
 Feel very gentleman-like PRT  
 ‘You look like a gentleman (wearing the pair of eye glasses.)’

<sup>14</sup> Although F2 disagrees with F1’s compliment, she does not really mean it, according to the context of the talk. Notice that F2 responds to the compliment with laughter, marked by “@” in our transcription notation.

→ M2: .. Ah ni bushi you jishi ma?  
PRT you NEG have near-sightedness Q  
.. Zenme bu qu pei yi fu ne?  
Why NEG go get one pair Q  
'Hey, you are near-sighted, aren't you? Why don't you get a  
pair for yourself?'

12. REQUEST INTERPRETATION. The addressee interprets the compliment as a request rather than a simple compliment.

(13) F1: .. Na biao shi womende Xiaoling jue dui shi lihai.  
That indicate our Xiaoling absolutely COP terrific  
'That indicates that our Xiaoling is absolutely terrific.'

F2: .. Ni buyong zai pong wo le,  
You NEG need again flatter me PFV  
'Don't flatter me again.'

→ .. Ni daodi you shenme qitu.  
You on earth have what attempt  
'What on earth are you attempting to do?'

The data on the actual frequencies of occurrence of the various response types are given in Table 4.



**Table 4.** Response interaction data<sup>15</sup>

	F-F	F-M	M-F	M-M	Total (%)
Agreement					
Acceptance					
Appreciation token	12 (5.6%)	9 (7.4%)	5 (8.1%)	2 (3.6%)	28 (6.2)
Comment acceptance	42 (19.5%)	23 (18.9%)	18 (29.1%)	6 (10.9%)	89 (19.6)
Praise upgrade	4 (1.9%)	4 (3.3%)	2 (3.2%)	2 (3.6%)	12 (2.9)
(subtotal)					129(28.4)
Nonacceptance					
Comment history	5 (2.3%)	2 (1.6%)	1 (1.6%)	2 (3.6%)	10 (2.2)
Reassignment	9 (4.2%)	6 (4.9%)	3 (4.8%)	6 (10.9%)	24 (5.3)
Return	2 (0.9%)	1 (0.8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (0.6)
(subtotal)					37 (8.1)
Nonagreement					
Scale down	23 (10.7%)	16 (13.1%)	4 (6.5%)	9 (16.5%)	52 (11.5)
Disagreement	46 (21.4%)	30 (24.6%)	11 (17.7%)	16 (29.1%)	103 (22.7)
Qualification	12 (5.6%)	5 (4.1%)	1 (1.6%)	2 (3.6%)	20 (4.4)
Question	53 (24.7%)	22 (18.1%)	15 (24.2%)	8 (14.6%)	98 (21.6)
No acknowledgement	5 (2.3%)	2 (1.6%)	2 (3.2%)	1(1.8%)	10 (2.2)
(subtotal)					283 (62.4)
Request interpretation	2 (0.9%)	2 (1.6%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.8%)	5 (1.1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>215</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>454 (100)</b>

( $\chi^2=24.72208$ ,  $df=33$ ,  $p=0.84973$ )

Although there was no significant difference in Table 4 ( $\chi^2=24.72208$ ,  $df=33$ ,  $p>0.01$ ), it shows that there was a high incidence of NONAGREEMENT to the compliments in the data, which contrasts with those of western cultures, such as American English, South African English, and New Zealand English. In a study on American college students, for example, the proportion of Agreement responses, 66% (comprising 29.4% APPRECIATION TOKEN, 6.6% COMMENT ACCEPTANCE, 0.4% PRAISE UPGRADE, 19.3% COMMENT HISTORY, 3% REASSIGNMENT and 7.3% RETURN), was much higher, as displayed in Table 5.

<sup>15</sup> Though not always mutually exclusive, the three categories, agreement, nonagreement, and request interpretation, accounted satisfactorily for the great majority of examples in the data. The former

**Table 5.** Frequency of compliment response types in English (taken from Herbert 1990:211)

	American		South African	
	No.	%	No.	%
<b>Agreement</b>				
<b>Acceptance</b>				
Appreciation token	312	29.4	162	32.9
Comment acceptance	70	6.6	213	43.2
Praise upgrade	4	.4	1	.2
<b>Nonacceptance</b>				
Comment history	205	19.3	24	4.9
Reassignment	32	3.0	23	4.7
Return	77	7.3	12	2.4
<b>Nonagreement</b>				
Scale down	48	4.5	31	6.3
Disagreement	53	5.0	9	1.8
Qualification	106	10.0	0	0
Question	70	6.6	12	2.4
No acknowledgement	54	5.1	1	.2
Request interpretation	31	2.9	4	.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,062</b>	<b>100.1</b>	<b>492</b>	<b>99.8</b>

On the contrary, in our data, Nonagreement responses occurred in approximately two-thirds (62.4%) of the compliment exchanges. Among them, DISAGREEMENT and QUESTION response types made up 22.7% and 21.6% of all of the responses, respectively. The remaining one-third was comprised of AGREEMENT responses, in which the compliment receiver accepted the semantic content of the compliment (28.4%), and NONACCEPTANCE responses (8.1%). As mentioned earlier, if the function of the compliment is to make the hearer feel good, the function of a response other than acceptance may be the same. The results imply that, recognizing that the compliment was intended to make him/her feel good, the addressee asserted that he/she and the complimenter were equal by employing the strategy of disagreement or question to avoid self-praise. Therefore, the findings presented here hardly bear any similarity to Herbert's (1990) findings for American English speakers' compliment responses. Herbert's Agreement Type (i.e., Acceptance and Nonacceptance) made up two-thirds (66%) of the total responses. However, the compliment responses uttered by Taiwan college students in this study are comparable to Chen's (1993) distribution of Chinese compliment responses based on questionnaires. Chen categorized the compliment responses into 5 types:

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two have a number of categories.

Disagreeing and Denigrating, Expressing Embarrassment, Explaining, Thanking and Denigrating, and Thanking only. His category of Disagreeing and Denigrating comprised 50.7% of the total responses. Although the labels are different, our findings are somewhat similar to his. This indicates that the high frequency of nonagreement may be the result of conscious self-praise avoidance.

On the other hand, though the differences between the complimenting behaviors of females and males described in Table 4 are not statistically significant ( $\chi^2=24.72208$ ,  $df=33$ ,  $p>0.01$ ), we find that within the category of nonagreement responses there is differences between the women and the men in terms of the compliment response types, as shown in Table 6.

**Table 6.** Compliment response by gender

	Female	%	Male	%
<b>Agreement</b>				
<b>Acceptance</b>				
Appreciation token	17	6.1	11	6.2
Comment acceptance	60	21.7	29	16.4
Praise upgrade	6	2.2	6	3.4
<b>Nonacceptance</b>				
Comment history	6	2.2	4	2.3
Reassignment	12	4.4	12	6.8
Return	2	0.7	1	0.6
<b>Nonagreement</b>				
Scale down	27	9.7	25	14.1
Disagreement	57	20.6	<b>46</b>	<b>26.0</b>
Qualification	13	4.7	7	3.9
Question	<b>68</b>	<b>24.5</b>	30	16.9
No acknowledgement	7	2.5	3	1.7
Request interpretation	2	0.7	3	1.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>100</b>

To be more specific, the males were most likely to reject a compliment by disagreeing with it (i.e., 46 out of 177 or 26.0%). In contrast, the females showed a preference for a QUESTION response rather than a DISAGREEMENT response; they tended to respond with surprise to compliments given to them (i.e., 68 out of 277 or 24.5%). The difference between the genders was found to be that males preferred DISAGREEMENT, while females adopted QUESTION.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Modesty as Solidarity in Complimenting Behavior of Taiwan College Students

Compliments in Chinese are usually intended to have a positive effect on interpersonal relations, yet for the outcome actually to be positive, both the compliments and compliment responses need to be handled appropriately. It has been argued that compliments reflect cultural values and norms of behavior (Manes 1983). Modesty is an important component of Chinese politeness. Our data on compliments and compliment responses uttered by Taiwan college students support the argument that modesty plays a role in Chinese complimenting and compliment responding (Shih 1986; Chen 1993).

#### 5.1.1 Compliments of College Students in Taiwan

The great majority of compliments uttered by a variety of speakers and in a number of quite different speech situations were remarkably similar both in their syntactic and lexical forms. The Chinese data exhibit a great preference for the syntactic pattern NP (BE) (INT) ADJ, just as the American English data do. However, the second most commonly used syntactic pattern in English, “I (really) like/love NP,” is a rather unusual form for a compliment in Chinese. That is, the occurrence of its corresponding formula with the speaker’s perspective, *wo xihuan* ‘I like/love’ is rarely observed in the data. According to Ye (1995: 264), several factors are responsible for its low frequency of occurrence. First, *xihuan* is semantically stronger than English ‘like’. While ‘like’ can be applied to anything towards which the speaker has a positive feeling or attitude, *xihuan* is relatively restricted to something the speaker evaluates as more than only positive. As a matter of fact, *xihuan* is often used to show the speaker’s preference and willingness. Because of this connotation, the formula *wo xihuan* might be used for indirect requesting more often than complimenting. Upon hearing the utterance *wo xihuan*, the hearer might interpret the utterance as a request for what follows *xihuan*. This kind of expression is conventionalized though it is not always meant by the speaker as a request. In line with Ye, here, we further argue that the low frequency of this syntactic pattern is mirrored by the rare occurrence of verbs as positive semantic carriers in the data. Instead, most of the compliment patterns make use of adjectives to express the positive evaluation of the complimenter. As a result,

Chinese people seldom use the pattern “I love/like NP” especially when complimenting someone on his or her belongings, which might be regarded as an indirect request or an expression of envy. It appears that Chinese do not want their complimentee to interpret a compliment as an invasion of personal privacy or as a request for the object complimented. Therefore, in one sense, the compliment mainly functions to make the hearer feel good. This might suggest that compliments uttered by college students in Taiwan are not literal statements of admiration/praise, but rather offers of solidarity.

Another interpretation could be that Chinese complimenting behavior is constrained by modesty. We suggest that a cultural value, *hanxu* (‘being implicit/veiled’), which characterizes Chinese verbal behavior in general, could well explain why the college students in Taiwan did not like the popular American English compliment ‘I really like/love NP’. In his analysis of the politeness strategies that are behind the responses of American English and Chinese speakers to compliments, Chen (1993) finds that whereas the social norm in American society is to accept compliments, the social norm in Chinese is to modestly reject them. In line with Chen’s conclusion, our study reveals that modesty is a factor among college students in Taiwan when they give compliments to their acquaintances.

As for the compliment topics, since compliments are usually employed by Taiwan college students to increase the solidarity between them and their addressees, they compliment their addressees on their appearance or ability rather than on their belongings or personalities. In particular, the vast majority of compliments focus on personal appearance (e.g., hair, skin, clothing and figure). That is, college students in Taiwan like to compliment one another on any change in their appearance, such as a thinner appearance, loss of weight or a new hairstyle. This lends support to Wolfson’s (1989:114) argument that when the quality of newness is highly valued in society, then a compliment is appropriate whenever an acquaintance is seen with something new. A compliment indicates that the speaker has noticed a change, thereby proving that he/she considers the addressee worthy of attention. As a result, the compliment receiver might be pleased by the compliment on his/her appearance, even if he/she does not accept it verbally. Yet compliments on possessions in Mandarin Chinese conversation are much less common; there is a possibility that the complimenter will be perceived as expressing desire for the object referred to. From the compliment data, we find that speakers consider

modesty when paying compliments in order to maintain or increase solidarity.

### 5.1.2 Compliment Responses in Taiwan College Students

Compared with American college students (Herbert 1990), who prefer to accept compliments, Taiwan college students tend not to accept compliments. The most common way in which Taiwan college students respond to compliments is to disagree with the semantic content of the compliment as well as to show surprise in order to avoid self-praise, which is different from Americans, who are likely to accept compliments. Among American college students, agreement responses might be used as return offers of solidarity, but Taiwan college students use nonagreement responses. In particular, the data show that disagreement (i.e. rejection) is the most commonly used response type. When someone receives a compliment from others, he/she may feel embarrassed; he/she is likely to reject the compliment with an expression of self-praise avoidance. From a closer observation of the data, the forms of compliment responses uttered by college students in Taiwan show that the modesty displayed by the compliment responses may not really mean that the compliment receivers dislike the compliments. Judging from the speakers' tone in the data, we find that most of the disagreement responses do not actually accuse the complimenter of doing something wrong, but rather simply negate the proposition. In addition, QUESTION responses are the second most frequently used type. This is the type most frequently combined with other response types<sup>16</sup>, as illustrated in (14-15):

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<sup>16</sup> In the data, the response types QUESTION, APPRECIATION TOKEN, and COMMENT ACCEPTANCE tended to occur with other types. There were 5 cases of APPRECIATION TOKEN followed by REASSIGNMENT (n=1), COMMENT ACCEPTANCE (n=1), SCALE DOWN (n=1) and RETURN (n=2), respectively; 4 cases of COMMENT ACCEPTANCE were followed by APPRECIATION TOKEN (n=1), COMMENT HISTORY (n=2), and REASSIGNMENT (n=1), respectively. However, in 25 out of the 98 cases (i.e., 25.5%), QUESTION was combined with other response types (in 6 cases, it was combined with APPRECIATION TOKEN; in 2 cases, with COMMENT ACCEPTANCE; in 3 cases, with COMMENT HISTORY; in 5 cases, with REASSIGNMENT; in 6 cases, with SCALE DOWN; in 2 cases, with DISAGREEMENT; and in 1 case, with COMMENT HISTORY), as shown in (14-15).

- (14) F1: .. Ni zhe datouzhao man haokande ya.\  
you this close-up quite beautiful PRT  
F2: .. Hui ma?/ (question)  
Will Q  
.. Wo juede xiao de hen jia.\ (disagreement)  
I feel smiling DE very pretended  
F1: ‘Your close-up picture is very nice.’  
F2: ‘Really? I feel that my smile in the photo is not natural.’

- (15) F1: .. Wo juede ni zhe lan yanjing man haokande eh.\  
I feel you this blue glasses very good-looking PRT  
F2: .. Zhende ma?/ (question)  
Really Q  
.. Wo ye zheme juede.\ (comment acceptance)  
I also so think  
F1: ‘I think your blue glasses are quite beautiful.’  
F2: ‘Really? I think so, too.’

In the two examples above, the compliment receiver reacts to a compliment with a question in a neutral manner, which results in a confirmation uttered by the compliment giver. We find that compliment responses of this type exhibit some agreement and some disagreement, similar to the category identified as the “inbetween-ness” by Pomerantz (1978). The most frequently used question—*zhende ma* ‘really’—might be interpreted as a request for confirmation, which reveals that the speaker has received the information and is soliciting further information. The phrase *zhende ma* ‘really’ in Chinese may not be the same as the question type for English, typically realized in “Do you really think so?” Although their semantic meanings look similar, their pragmatic meanings may not be. Our subjects probably saw in the use of this compliment response type an opportunity to attend to their interlocutor’s positive face wants, i.e., fulfilling the desire of a person to be appreciated, liked and approved by others, rather than an invasion of his/her negative face needs. Such a circular exchange of compliments might contribute to enhancing a rapport between the complimenter and the complimentee. Whereas the English question expresses doubt or surprise about the complimentee’s praiseworthiness, the Chinese response can merely be a modest way to accept the compliment while still avoiding outright self-praise, thus a nice compromise

between accepting the compliment and avoiding self-praise.

Furthermore, from the point of view of social interaction, the QUESTION type, akin to DISAGREEMENT, can be seen as a negotiating strategy, i.e., as a gambit where the complimentee has an opportunity to negotiate an offer of solidarity. Put differently, QUESTION displays a neutral stand on the part of the compliment receiver. The coparticipant can often be seen to give another compliment, reassuring the compliment receiver. By the same token, through DISAGREEMENT, the complimentee is likely to initiate a long period of negotiation with multiple repetitions and extensive elaboration between himself/herself and the complimenter. In the data, there are 25 instances of QUESTION in combination with the other response types, which further shows that complimenting chiefly serves the function of negotiating solidarity. In one sense, these responses are ambiguous. It was difficult to discern the complimentees' intentions from the questions in the data. They might have wanted expansion or repetition of the original compliment or might have been questioning the sincerity of the complimenter. Although QUESTION deviates from DISAGREEMENT in its illocutionary force, e.g., QUESTION is felt to be less aggressive than DISAGREEMENT, some QUESTION responses that are meant to question the sincerity of the complimenter also entail self-praise avoidance. Both DISAGREEMENT and QUESTION types in the data are the manifestation of Chinese modesty.

## 5.2 The Functions of Compliments in Taiwan College Students

According to most analysts of compliments and compliment responses, such as Wolfson (1981, 1983, 1989), Herbert (1989, 1990), and others, the primary function of compliments in everyday conversation in English is social. Although they can serve a variety of functions<sup>17</sup>, their primary purpose is to establish, negotiate, maintain, or consolidate social solidarity (Manes and Wolfson 1981; Herbert 1990; Holmes 1986, 1988). That is, they are generally regarded as positively affective speech acts which are used to “reduce social distance” and “reinforce solidarity” between interlocutors (Brown and Levinson 1987:108). For example, a

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<sup>17</sup> For example, Holmes (1986, 1988) argues that compliments and compliment responses can be perceived as Face Threatening Acts (for a definition, see Brown and Levinson 1987), as shown in (13). However, in our data, there were only 5 cases of REQUEST INTERPRETATION, which can



compliment such as (16) from our data:

- (16) F: .. Nansheng liu changfa oh,\_  
           boys have long hair PRT  
 .. wo juede haokande meiyou jige,\_  
           I feel good-looking NEG many  
 .. Danshi wo juede ni man tebie de oh.\  
           But I feel you very special PRT  
 ‘Most men with long hair look bad, but you look very special.’  
 M: .. Zhende ma?/  
           really Q  
 → ..Wo hao kaoxing.\  
           I very happy  
 .. Hao shao ren zheyang jian ye.\  
           Very few people such speak PRT  
 ‘Really? I’m very happy. Very few people say so.’

conveys agreement, approval, and a sense that the speaker and the hearer share similar views. It works as a kind of social accelerator or lubricant, conveying a desire to establish social solidarity (Brown and Levinson 1987:101). Another main function in which Chinese compliments serve to grease the social wheels has to do with their use in greeting routines. When friends meet by chance, compliments may be uttered as a type of formulaic greeting. Wolfson (1983) points out that the safest compliments to offer as conversation openers have to do with possession (e.g. ‘I like your necklace’) or with some aspect of performance intended to be publicly observed (e.g. ‘I really enjoyed your presentation yesterday’). However, Taiwan college students like to pay attention to the change in their acquaintance’s appearance and take it as a compliment topic for greeting or opening a conversation.

The data indicate that compliments from college students in Taiwan very often function primarily as tokens for negotiating social distance, and that addressees recognize this function. Hence, nonagreement responses, such as disagreements, questions, and the like, are employed as return offers of solidarity. Though the main function of Chinese compliments is to increase solidarity among speakers, similar to the main function of American compliments, the compliment forms are

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be regarded as FTAs.

greatly shaped by Chinese culture. Put differently, Chinese are much more likely to reject compliments than to accept them, a very different pattern from that of Americans reported by Herbert (1990), and from that found by Holmes (1986, 1988) in New Zealand. As claimed by both Shih (1986) and Chen (1993), Chinese compliment responses are constrained by Leech's (1983) Maxim of Modesty: (a) minimize praise of self and (b) maximize dispraise of self. The response type DISAGREEMENT is a clear case of the Modesty Maxim application. By the same token, the QUESTION type, in which the addressee expresses surprise about his/her praiseworthiness, implies that he/she does not want to overtly praise himself/herself. Based on the results, we suggest that modesty, as reflected in Chinese responses to compliments, is meant to strengthen solidarity.

### 5.3 Gender-Difference in Taiwan College Students' Compliment Responses

On the whole, the most frequent response to a compliment among Taiwan college students is *not* an acceptance. Although in Chinese exchanges, the Modesty Maxim is clearly much more heavily weighted and frequently overrides the Agreement Maxim as defined by Leech (1983), we observe a noticeable difference between men and woman in how they respond to a compliment if we examine the common response types within the twelve categories. In the data, male respondents show a tendency to use DISAGREEMENT, whereas female respondents show a preference for QUESTION. To be specific, by choosing to avoid self-praise, females tend to employ the QUESTION response type to weaken the complimentary force, but males favor DISAGREEMENT to deny that force. As discussed in Section 5.1.2, both strategies serve to re-establish social balance between the conversationalists. However, QUESTION is felt to be less aggressive in its semantic force, so the significant female preference for this category is related to the fact that women are more concerned about face than are men when they reject a compliment. Additionally, women probably view QUESTION-type responses to compliments as necessary for conversational maintenance. In our data, the female addressees may have used QUESTION to reinforce the solidarity between themselves and the complimenters because they were close acquaintances. The high frequency of QUESTION suggests that women might make far greater use of compliment/response exchanges to create and reaffirm solidarity. To put it in another way, compliments are more often employed by women than by men to

reinforce friendship and intimacy.

Based on the above discussion, we would like to propose that as suggested in previous studies on complimenting, the most important function of compliments is to reinforce the solidarity between the speaker and the addressee (Holmes 1986, 1988), especially between females, although compliments have a number of other functions as well. Since they mainly serve to maintain rapport (Manes 1983; Herbert 1990), complimenting and compliment responding belong to the category of interactional communication involving politeness. Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that complimenting is largely a positive politeness strategy, for it lets the addressee know that he or she is liked and approved of. As positively affective speech acts, the most obvious function compliments serve is to polish the social relationship, pay attention to positive face wants, and thus increase or integrate solidarity between people. The Chinese data on complimenting suggest that the compliment/response sequence appears to be motivated by a desire to establish greater solidarity between interlocutors; i.e., it is a negotiated elaborate exchange in which two or more interlocutors get involved.

## **6. Conclusion**

As a whole, the data show that modesty plays a role in both giving and receiving compliments. Specifically, the study suggests that Chinese seldom use the 'I love/like NP' pattern to avoid the compliment being interpreted as an invasion of personal privacy or as a request for the object complimented. Since an obvious function compliments serve in our data is to increase and maintain solidarity between interlocutors, there is a clearly observable tendency for both women and men to give or receive compliments on their appearance, especially in greeting contexts. The data also indicate that compliments on appearance are generally perceived as most appropriate between those who know each other well. Hence, 'appearance' among the four types of compliment topics is most frequently used in the college students in Taiwan. The results of this study show that both males and females most commonly compliment others on their physical appearance, and on abilities next. In particular, compliments on a person's appearance may be felt to presume friendship and intimacy (for discussion, see Holmes 1988). Therefore, both male and female compliments tend to be adjectival. Likewise, our data reveal that the compliment receiver often chooses to appear reluctant or overwhelmed and

proffers gentle nonagreement. In our study, both males and females employed most of the nonagreement types. To be more precise, of these nonagreement types, DISAGREEMENT and QUESTION were the two major response types most often found; however, males used DISAGREEMENT as their first compliment response preference, while females used QUESTION. Nevertheless, the DISAGREEMENT response type and QUESTION type are cases of modesty application, that is, strategies for self-praise avoidance. We suggest that modesty, which is meant to strengthen solidarity, is the driving force behind Chinese responses to compliments.

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## 台灣大專生之會話中讚美語及其回應的語言特徵

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根據 Pomerantz (1978)對說英語人士對讚美反應的觀察，當受到他人讚美時，聽者一方面必須遵行說話原則，即表示同意或接受對方所言，儘量不要表示不同意或拒絕，以免令對方尷尬。但是，他若全然同意或接受，就會給予人自我膨脹、往臉上貼金的感覺；因此，另一方面他則須避免自我讚美(self-praise avoidance)。此外，Wolfson (1983)亦提到：讚美行為深受一個語言的文化價值所影響。基於此，本研究旨在探討中文會話中讚美語及其反應的特色，特別是觀察大學生男女在讚美及回應所使用的策略。研究方法結合了以 Hymes (1974)為主的 ethnography of communication 及 Sacks 等人(1974) 的 Conversation Analysis 來蒐集語料與進行分析，共收集到 454 個發生在大學生間的讚美語及其反應。本研究發現臺灣的大學生，不論男女，其會話中所發生的讚美語的主題多是讚美對方的外表，如髮型、身材等；而讚美句型以 NP BE (INT) ADJ/BE LOOKing ADJ(例如，“你今天氣色很好”)最常出現。至於讚美的反應類型則以否認居多，疑問居次；前者男性使用居多，後者則為女性使用居多。大體上，從此會話語料所發現中國人最常用的讚美的反應之結果與 Shih (1986)和 Chen (1993)的結果類似，即中國人對讚美的反應不同於美國人，較傾向於避免自我讚美。最後我們試從 Brown & Levinson (1987)及 Leech (1983)的理論來討論與解釋此研究結果。基本上，我們同意 Shih (1986)和 Chen (1993)的看法，即美國人對讚美的反應顯示他們受 agreement maxim (同意原則)所支配，中國人則是 modesty maxim (謙虛原則) (詳見 Leech 1983)。但我們的語料亦顯示：臺灣大學生對其同輩所給予讚美的反應亦如 Brown & Levinson (1987)所言：讚美語言行為的主要功能在表達 solidarity，故臺灣大學生對讚美的反應使用否認或疑問策略乃是讓會話雙方可以有更多交談的機會，以促進情誼。

關鍵詞：社會語言學、讚美、讚美反應、避免自我讚美