

A cross-cultural study of giving and responding to some compliments in English and in Vietnamese

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ARTICLE INFO

DOI:10.46223/HCMCOUJS.soci.en.13.2.2622.2023

Received: January 16th, 2023

Revised: April 07th, 2023

Accepted: April 26th, 2023

Keywords:

compliment; compliments & response to compliments; response to compliments

ABSTRACT

Complimenting and responding to compliments reflect the norms and values of a nation and a country and are also expressed differently across cultures. In this article, the author conducts a cross-cultural study on giving and responding to compliments in English and in Vietnamese. The purpose of this study was to investigate how people give and respond to compliments in English and in Vietnamese and analyze and compare them to find similarities and differences. This analysis and comparison can help learners understand and use the target language appropriately so that cultural bottlenecks and communication breakdown can be avoided. This study used a quantitative technique method and was conducted using a questionnaire, focusing on how to give compliments and feedback about their appearance, assets, or work in English and Vietnamese. The findings of this study on compliments are useful in teaching English to Vietnamese as well as teaching Vietnamese to foreigners. The act of complimenting and responding to compliments - an aspect of communicative competence-needs to be carefully observed in order to maintain good relations among people in society.

1. Introduction

Every language has certain rules for speaking, and every culture has rules about how people should interact with each other. These rules are not usually written down but are learned by people living together in one culture. Complimenting and responding to compliments are examples of the areas where ways of interacting can differ across cultures. People of different cultures have different ways of giving compliments and responding to them. Obviously, compliments reflect and express cultural norms and values (Benander, 1993; Holmes & Brown, 1987; Kirkpatrick, 2014). Many of our lives involve giving compliments as expressions of approval or admiration, respect, or praise, and their main purpose is to show that you like some aspects of another person's appearance, belongings, or work. Everyone likes to receive compliments; they make us feel good about ourselves. Like any other language function, complimenting requires appropriateness. It requires the speaker and hearer to recognize and identify the situation or the context of discourse so that they can choose the appropriate language to be used. In addition, the expression of approval may function as a form of positive reinforcement. Compliments represent one means whereby an individual or, more importantly, society as a whole can encourage, through such reinforcement, certain desired behaviors.

Holmes (2013, p. 485) describes compliments as “a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for

some ‘good’ which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer”. Meanwhile, Herbert (1990) argues that compliment responses are words used in response to other utterances that refer to something; participants perceive these responses as having a positive connotation for the recipient. Since anyone can give a compliment, this is considered an interesting topic to conduct research on. There are researches on compliments conducted in different languages, such as Jordanian Arabic (Al-Batayneh, 2019), Indonesian (Indah & Rifana, 2018), Mexican Spanish and Irish English (Flores-Salgado & Witten, 2019), Iranian (Eslami, Jabbari, & Kuo, 2019), Israeli Hebrew (Danziger, 2018). Again, it is because compliment is a part of communication, which people always do in their daily life when they are getting along with other people.

In this research paper, I conduct a cross-cultural study on giving and responding to compliments in English and in Vietnamese. The aim of this study is to investigate how people give and respond to compliments in English and in Vietnamese, then analyze and compare them in order to know if there are any similarities and differences. The purpose of the investigation is to draw out some methodological implications for the teaching of English to Vietnamese learners on the function of compliments in everyday conversation. However, the study will focus on giving compliments and responding to them among friends in three common situations: Appearance, possessions, and work accomplishment.

2. Literature review

2.1. Speech act

Yule (2010) states that a speech act is an action performed by the speaker with an utterance. Austin (1962, as cited in Bublitz & Norrick, 2011) suggests that when we say something, there are three simultaneous acts, namely the locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act. Of these, locutionary is the basic act of speaking or creating a meaningful linguistic expression (the act of speaking). For instance, in the sentence “Would you close the door, please?” The locutionary is the speaker asking the listener to close the door. An illocutionary act is said to be the intended meaning of the speaker or what the speaker expects the listener to do. Perlocutionary is understood as the listener’s response to the speaker’s words. When hearing the sentence from the speaker, “Would you close the door?” the perlocutionary act is that the listener will close the door.

Searle (1976) classifies illocutionary as assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declaratory because he argues that a speech act coincides with an illocutionary act. Assertive refers to a statement or expression that represents a situation. A directive is obtained when the speaker asks the listener to do something. These are begging, praying, inviting, inviting, asking, requesting, ordering, and commanding. Commissive refers to how the speaker commits to something or certain actions in the future. Expressive is materialized to a degree of truth about a state of propositional content. Declaration verifies institutional or factual changes.

2.2. Courtesy theory of Brown and Levinson (1987)

Politeness is mainly a special behavior between people. When saying and doing something, one must consider the attitude of others. Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that in human communication, either spoken or written, people tend to maintain the face of another individual continuously, and this tendency also increases politeness. Some speech acts, according to Brown and Levinson (1987) are considered face-threatening, such as asking for help, because we can compromise the listener’s right to freedom of action of the listener, so it is called the face-threatening act. Brown and Levinson (1987) subdivide face into two wants, namely the negative face and the positive face. A negative face is the desire to maintain one’s own autonomy. Every

individual wants to be respected, their privacy and space not violated, and their resources and actions not to be used and unrestricted without a legitimate reason. Negative politeness is based on avoidance, and it is geared towards satisfying the negative face of the listener. So, when asking for help, this type of speaker will try not to interfere with the hearer's freedom by attempting to minimize the imposition arising from the request (e.g., "I just want to ask you if I can borrow a tiny bit of paper"). The positive face is the desire to have one's attributes and actions approved by significant others. These authors suggest that positive politeness is based on an approach and is geared towards maintaining the positive face of the listener. Therefore, the speaker says what she thinks the listener wants to hear. Complimenting others is a good example of a positive politeness strategy. In addition to saving face, Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 61) argue that relational interdependence creates incentives to favor the face of others. Conversationalists who threaten another party face the risk of retaliatory attacks on their own. Despite the interdependent nature of social relationships, however, individuals often commit face-threatening actions.

2.3. Compliments

In studying the speech act of complimenting, Wolfson, Judd, and Manes (1983, p. 98) stated that "Any speech act reflects a variety of cultural norms and values and in so doing serves to express and maintain those values. Compliments are of particular interest in relation to the reflection and expression of ... of reinforcing that importance". Norms and values differ across cultures. What is highly valued in one society may not be as much appreciated in another. For example, in many cultures, it is considered inappropriate to compliment babies, but in the United States, it is common: "What a cute baby!" Compliments are typical of different languages and cultures, "Your child is very intelligent" can be heard in many languages, including English, but it is not a compliment that is common in all languages. Giving a gift to the teacher to show appreciation is usual in some Asian countries, whereas in many other countries, students usually thank the teacher for his or her teaching at the end of the course, and this is considered a sign of appreciation and compliment. Following are the examples of compliments across cultures: "She is like the moon and has beautiful eyes" (Arabic); "Your earrings are pure gold, aren't they?" (Japanese); Son: "It was delicious, mother. I hope your hands never have pain." (Iranian); "Your shoes are nice." Response: "It is your eyes which can see them that is nice." (Iranian). Husband to wife: "You must be tired after doing all the shopping." (Indonesian).

The value that members of our society attach to newness is also reflected in responses to compliments. As has been pointed out by Pomerantz (1978, p. 100), "the recipient of a compliment faces a conflict in that accepting the compliment and agreeing with a speaker may be seen as self-praised, while at the same time, it is impolite to disagree and reject the compliment outright." Most people enjoy receiving compliments; however, there are culturally different ways of responding to compliments. In Western countries, most people say "Thank you" in response to a compliment, but to Asians, denying or disagreeing with compliments is very common.

Brown and Levinson (1987, pp. 65-66) categorize compliments as intrinsic face-threatening acts. In relation to this function, they claim that a compliment primarily threatens the hearer's negative face. Holmes' (1995, p. 117) definition of a compliment is therefore adopted here: "A speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some 'good' possession, characteristic, skill, etc. which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer". An utterance that is accepted as a compliment must be truthful; giving a compliment to the wrong person or being truthful may produce undesired effects upon the hearer, and in some cases, the hearer may feel hurt or insulted. "You look smart

today”, said someone who is wearing shabby clothes, which can hardly be considered a compliment; it may be interpreted as irony or teasing. Also, if the compliment is too personal, some people become flustered, nervous, or embarrassed; they do not know how to reply. However, complimenting does not mean flattery. Compliments are given with no ulterior motives - no hidden reasons and nothing to gain. Flattered is usually insincere complimenting for specific purposes - to please a person, to get something from a person, etc.

The vast majority of compliments make no reference to specific behavior, and there is no reason to assume that the speaker has any intention to affecting the addressee’s future actions. As Wolfson et al. (1983, p. 97) said, “A major function of compliments is the establishment or reinforcement of solidarity between the speaker and the addressee”. In daily interactions, compliments may well replace greetings when friends or acquaintances meet. Americans, particularly American women, begin many conversations with compliments. They might say, for example, “You look nice today. Is that a new dress?”, then they turn compliments into conversations.

Regarding gender differences and pragmatism across cultures, Shabani and Zeilani (2015) proposed strategies for responding to compliments based on data analysis with 30 native Persian speakers and 26 Canadian English speakers. They also looked at the effect of gender on response to compliments. The results showed that most of the speakers accepted the compliment. The results also concluded that there is no statistically significant difference between the two gender groups.

Unlike other authors Nguyen (2007); Tran (2010); Nguyen (2011); Nguyen (2020) studies comparing compliments and/or responding to compliments on a large scale, my article only studies some compliments and responses to compliments in English and in Vietnamese. I find it interesting to study and compare compliments and respond to compliments in English and Vietnamese. It brings many benefits in communicating and learning about the culture. Therefore, the author conducted the study using the following method.

3. Method

Research questions:

The questions that guide this study are:

- How do friends give and respond to compliments on physical appearance, personal possessions, or work accomplishments in English and Vietnamese?
- What are the similarities and differences between giving and responding to compliments among friends in English and Vietnamese?

Sub-Questions:

- How often do people give compliments?
- Which personal features or possessions do people most compliment?

The study was carried out at HCMC University of Physical Education and Sports and Vietnam USA Society English Language Center, Ho Chi Minh City, for two months. During the study, the researcher worked as a teacher of English in these two places.

The study consists basically of quantitative techniques and was carried out by means of questionnaires that focused on how to give compliments and respond to them on appearance, possessions, or work in English and in Vietnamese. I do not intend to include a discussion of the ways people of all ages give and respond to compliments; the focus is only on friends of the same age.

Population and Sampling

The data source for this research is the feedback from questionnaires completed by three different groups of subjects: Native speakers of English (**NSE**) who are working in Vietnam USA Society English Language Center, Ho Chi Minh City; Vietnamese speakers of Vietnamese who know English well (they are teachers and learners of English (**VSV₁**), teaching and learning at HCMC University of Physical Education and Sports); Vietnamese speakers of Vietnamese who do not know English well (they are not learners of English (**VSV₂**), working at HCMC University of Physical Education and Sports.)

The questionnaires consist of 12 questions, distributed to 60 respondents. The number of males and females in each group is equal. The respondents range in age from 18 to 55. NSE answered the questionnaire in English. VSV₁ answers the questionnaire in English with Vietnamese translation for each question. VSV₂ answered the questionnaire in Vietnamese. The distribution of the questionnaires is shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1

The number of males and females in each group

Respondents	Native speakers of English		Vietnamese teachers & learners of English		Vietnamese speakers of Vietnamese	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
In English	10	10				
In Vietnamese			10	10	10	10

Questionnaires collected from the survey were processed by Excel software with a simple descriptive statistics method. The data collected from the documentary research method was used to present an overview of the topic and was flexibly used in the analysis process in the article.

4. Findings and discussion

Data Analysis and Discussions of the Findings

Frequency of Complimenting

The numbers in the following table (Table 2) are the results in responding to the question “How often do you compliment other people?” (M: Male; F: Female).

Table 2

Frequency of complimenting

Frequency Respondents	always		usually		sometimes		rarely		never	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
NSE			80%	90%	20%	10%				
NSE ₁					70%	90%	30%	10%		
VSE ₂					60%	80%	40%	20%		

Table 2 shows that women give more compliments than men do, and native speakers of English give compliments more often than Vietnamese speakers of Vietnamese. This is probably because native speakers of English like to start their conversations with compliments.

It is interesting to know that female and young people give more compliments than male and old people.

4.1. Giving compliments on the appearance

Usually, a person compliments his or her friend if he notices something new about his or her appearance. Table 3 below shows the expressions that foreign and Vietnamese friends use for complimenting personal appearance.

Table 3

Complimenting on personal appearance

	NSE		VSV ₁		VSV ₂	
Appearance	You look really nice today!	60%	Bạn trông đẹp lắm!	45%	Bạn trông xinh quá!	70%
	You look great!	20%	Bạn dễ thương quá!	20%	Bạn trông trẻ hơn!	15%
	I like your new hairstyle!	10%	Bạn có duyên ghê!	15%	Kiểu tóc bạn thật mốt!	15%
	You are looking smart today!	10%	Dáng đẹp thật! Bạn bảnh trai lắm!	15% 5%		

The data shows that the forms: You look + adjective, I like your outfit, you are looking + adjective + today are the most used by both male and female native speakers in complimenting on appearance. The most common adjectives are nice, great, and smart. It should be noted that a female native speaker uses “nice” to a female but “great” to a male one.

The following utterances are the most frequent compliments among Vietnamese friends: Bạn trông + adjective + lắm/quá (You look really + adjective). The most common adjectives đẹp trai (handsome), trẻ hơn (younger), mốt (fashionable) used for male addressees; xinh (beautiful), đẹp (pretty), duyên dáng (charming) used for female ones. Many Vietnamese female speakers indicate that they seldom compliment directly on their male friend’s appearance.

Frequency of Compliments on Personal Features

There are some features of a person’s appearance that are fine to compliment, and there are others that should be avoided. The features on which respondents most frequently compliment are set out in the following Table 4.

Table 4

The features on which respondents most frequently compliment

		1 Most frequent		2		3		4		5 Least frequent	
		F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Eyes	NSE			30%	15%	20%	15%				
	VSV	40%	40%		30%		15%				
Hair	NSE	60%	30%		30%			20%	30%		
	VSV	70%	40%	15%			15%			15%	

		1 Most frequent		2		3		4		5 Least frequent	
		F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Smile	NSE	20%	10%	40%		20%	45%				
	VSV		50%								
Height	NSE									50%	45%
	VSV		15%			15%					
Healthy	VSE	20%	60%	20%	30%						
Appearance	VSE	65%	15%								

In the table above, hair is the most frequently complimented on by the native speakers, and height is the least. More females compliment on hair than males do, and more males compliment on healthy appearance than females do. The table also shows that a healthy appearance is the most frequently complimented by female Vietnamese Speakers. Some male respondents indicate that they give compliments on females’ eyes, hair, smiles, or general appearance. However, it would not be in good taste to compliment females on more personal parts of their bodies unless the two people were very intimate with each other.

4.2. Giving compliments on possessions

Table 5 below shows the expressions that foreign and Vietnamese friends use for complimenting personal possessions.

Table 5

Expressions that foreign and Vietnamese friends use for complimenting personal possessions

	NSE		VSV ₁		VSV ₂	
Possessions	I like/love your new house!	60%	Áo bạn đẹp quá!	50%	Mặc áo này trông xinh thật!	60%
	That hat looks good on you!	20%	Đồng hồ mới đẹp quá!	20%	Màu quần này trông rất hay!	20%
	Your new dress is beautiful!	10%	Mua ở đâu vậy?	20%	Giày mới à, đẹp lắm!	20%
	What a nice/beautiful shirt!	10%	Áo dài của bạn màu đẹp thật!	10%		

The data shows that the forms: I like/love your + noun, that + noun + looks good on you, your new + noun + is nice/beautiful, what a lovely/nice + noun, are most used by both male and female native speakers in complimenting on personal possessions. It is interesting to note that when complimenting on possessions, native speakers of English often give some extra information: “It suits you well” to add to the conversation. But it is considered impolite to spy on people’s personal business, for example, “How much did you pay for it?”

In complimenting possessions in Vietnamese, friends often say something nice about the object and then ask where it was bought. The following forms are found to be the most common among friends: Áo (mới) bạn đẹp/xinh quá (Your (new) shirt is nice), hôm nay trông bạn trẻ/bảnh ra (You look smart/younger today), màu áo bạn xinh/đẹp/hay thật (Your shirt color is nice/beautiful). Mua ở đâu vậy? (Where did you buy it?)

Frequency of Compliments on Possessions

The following Table 6 shows the different possessions in order of frequency.

Table 6

Different possessions in order of frequency

		1 Most frequent		2		3		4		5 Least frequent	
		F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
House	NSE	25%		15%	50%	20%	10%			30%	
	VSV	70%	75%	15%	50%			20%	20%		
Car Motorbike	NSE		50%	25%	10%			20%	10%		
	VSV		30%	25%	40%			30%	15%		
Shirt	NSE	60%		10%	10%	10%	45%		20%		60%
	VSV	70%		15%		15%	20%		30%		55%
Watch	NSE				10%		20%			35%	45%
	VSV			15%							
Other	VSE	35%									
	VSE		15%		20%						

Female foreign respondents chose a shirt as the object on which they would most frequently compliment and a watch as the least. However, males tend to give the highest frequency on the car and the lowest on the shirt. Among other things, 40% of female foreign respondents compliment the most frequently on clothes and family, and males are complimented more often on pictures or ornaments.

Both Vietnamese males and females give a high percentage of the house as the most frequent compliment. Compliments on clothing are common among Vietnamese female friends; in contrast, males rarely compliment on clothing themselves, and they do more often on motorbikes.

4.3. Giving compliments on work accomplishment

It is nice to compliment a friend when he or she has done a job well or has performed a task in a good way. Table 7 below shows the expressions that foreign and Vietnamese friends use to give compliments on work accomplishments.

Table 7

Expressions that foreign and Vietnamese friends use to complement work accomplishments

	NSE	VSV ₁	VSV ₂
Work Accomplishment	You did the job very well!	40%	Giỏi/cù lắm!
	Well done!	20%	Chúc mừng bạn!
	Good job!	10%	Tốt lắm! Bạn đáng 10 điểm!
	Congratulations!	10%	Hay lắm! Bạn hoàn thành công việc rất tốt!
	I am impressed by your work!	10%	
	You deserve it!	10%	
		60%	Bạn chăm chỉ lắm!
		20%	Đó là một việc làm rất tốt!
		10%	Hay quá! Mình phục bạn đấy!
		10%	
			30%
			30%

The compliment forms for work accomplishment that have been found to be more frequent among foreign friends are: You did/finished the job/work very well, Well done, good job, congratulations, I am impressed by your work/job, you deserve it. For Vietnamese friends, the following expressions are the most common: *Giỏi/cừ lắm* (Well done), *chúc mừng bạn* (Congratulations), *bạn đáng mười điểm* (You deserve ten marks for your work, đó là một việc làm rất tốt) (That was a good job), *minh ngưỡng mộ bạn* (I admire you).

4.4. Responding to compliments

The following tables (Tables 8 & 9) show the percentage and common expressions that foreign and Vietnamese friends use in response to compliments.

Table 8

The percentage that foreign and Vietnamese friends use in response to compliments

Replying by	NSE	VSV ₁	VSV ₂
Smiling	10%	20%	10%
Saying “Thank you”	60%	10%	10%
Denying compliments	10%	20%	30%
Returning compliments	10%	30%	40%
Other ways	10%	20%	10%

In terms of the NSE group, compliment recipients were more likely to accept than reject a positive comment. This seems to correlate with the Politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). To be specific, people choose to accept the compliment in order to save face for the compliment giver and, in other words, to preserve harmony and maintain a positive face during communicative exchanges. The data in Table 8 shows that accepting compliments of VSV1 and VSV2 groups is not the most preferred strategy of Vietnamese people. Saying “Thank you” only accounts for 10% to 20% (while the NSE group accounts for 60%). Denying compliments and Returning compliments of the two groups of people accounted for 20% to 40%, while that of the NSE group only accounted for 10%. This study shows that the VSV1 and VSV2 groups indicate that humility is an integral part of receiving compliments. They believe that “Thank you” is an inadequate evaluation, sounding formal, thus creating a gap between the person who compliments and the person who receives the compliment.

Table 9

The common expressions that foreign and Vietnamese friends use in response to compliments

Replying by	NSE	VSV ₁ + VSV ₂
Saying “Thank you.”	Thank you for saying so. Thank you. You are too kind! Thank you. I’m glad you like/enjoy it/think so. Thank you. I spend hours on it. Thank you. It was one of my best efforts.	Cám ơn. (Đẹp) thật không?

Replying by	NSE	VSV ₁ + VSV ₂
Denying compliments	It isn't nice at all. It's an old shirt.	Tôi đâu thấy mình giỏi đâu! Có gì đẹp đâu! Đồ cũ mà! Ồ! Không. Tôi không giỏi như bạn! Đẹp đâu! Thường thôi mà!
Returning compliments	Yours was really good, too.	Áo của bạn cũng đẹp vậy! Trông bạn cũng xinh vậy! Mình cũng thích kiểu tóc bạn lắm! Bạn còn đẹp, giỏi hơn mình!
Joking	You are kidding, right?	Bạn nói đùa/giỡn hả? Thật không? Muốn mượn không?

The data shows the majority of the foreign respondents accept compliments with a direct "Thank-you." The additional part after a thank you is the explanation about the thing being complimented: You are too kind. I'm glad you enjoy/like it (think so), an explanation of effort or time invested in work.

Vietnamese respondents usually show their modesty by denying the compliments: Thường thôi (So so), có đẹp đâu, đồ cũ mà (It isn't nice at all. It's an old. Etc.), mình không giỏi/tốt như bạn (I'm not as good as you are); or returning compliments, that is, giving the other person a similar compliment. (áo) bạn cũng đẹp/xinh vậy (Yours is really good, too), mình cũng thích, ... của bạn (I like yours, too), bạn còn đẹp/giỏi hơn mình (You are more beautiful than I am). They think that accepting compliments or agreeing with the speakers may be seen as self-praise.

The analysis of the last question shows that females often get shy or embarrassed when receiving compliments on their appearance and possessions from male friends.

5. Conclusion

The data obtained from this project can help us understand more about giving compliments and responding to them in English and Vietnamese. We can draw some conclusions about the similarities and differences in the speech act of complimenting:

- In general, both native speakers of English and Vietnamese use similar syntactic structures to make compliments.

- Young and female people give more compliments than old and male people.

- Native speakers of English give compliments more often than Vietnamese Speakers of Vietnamese; however, the speakers of the two languages respond to compliments in different ways. The most common response used by foreign recipients tends to return compliments or deny the worth of the things complimented.

- Complimenting is a positive politeness strategy. Therefore, compliments ought to be observed as carefully as possible in order to maintain good relationships among people in society.

Along with the research by Nguyen (2007), Tran (2010), Nguyen (2011), and Nguyen (2020), my research on 'giving and responding to some compliments in English and in Vietnamese' contributes to enriching the findings about the unique culture of giving compliments and reciprocating sincere compliments. The person receiving the compliment will feel better during the day. It can be said that giving sincere compliments is also an art. In order for compliments to make people feel good about themselves, make sure your compliments are for a specific person and not a general compliment. The person receiving the compliment will feel appreciated when you say exactly why he or she deserves your praise. Before giving a compliment, make sure you're doing it because it truly deserves recognition, not because you want to fill the silence or stay polite. The findings of this study on compliments may have useful implications for teaching English to Vietnamese as well as teaching Vietnamese to foreigners. When speakers of different cultural backgrounds interact, they may misinterpret the message conveyed to them. So, it is clear that speech act, one aspect of communicative competence, needs to be taught and learned. The study of speech acts in a foreign language could help the learners understand and use the target language appropriately to avoid culture shock and communication breakdown. The learners should be made aware of cultural differences that they come across in textbooks and other teaching materials through conscious comparisons and contrasts of their own country or working and living in an English-speaking country.

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