Discoursal Variation and Gender: The Case of Compliment Responses Among Male and Female Persian Speakers

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Abstract *This study was aimed at investigating the discoursal variation of compliment responses (CRs) among male and female Iranian Persian speakers. A total of 60 elementary Iranian teenage EFL learners participated in the study. The data were collected through the application of written discourse completion tasks (DCTs), with four situations, i.e. appearance, character, ability and possession. The analysis of the data showed that both male and female groups mostly preferred Accept strategies in almost all the four situations; however, female participants took side with Evade strategies when receiving compliments for possession. The findings have generally a practical relevance to the speech communities under study by providing guidelines for the use of CRs. They have also pedagogical implications, helping males and female Persian speakers respond to compliments in a culturally acceptable manner.*

Keywords: *Compliment, compliment response, gender, Persian speakers, discourse completion tasks.*

1. Introduction

Hobbs (2003:249) defines a compliment as a speech act which explicitly or implicitly bestows credit upon the addressee for some possession, skill, characteristic, or the like, that is positively evaluated by the speaker and addressee . According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness, complimenting is largely a positive politeness strategy since it signals the complimenter's noticing of and attending to the complimentee's interests and needs. The complimenter makes the receiver feel good about her and helps the person realize that her effort has been appreciated. Holmes (1988:462) states that compliments are "positively affective speech acts, the most obvious function they serve is to oil the social wheels, paying attention to positive face wants and thus increasing or consolidating solidarity between people". He points out (1988) that compliments should function as positively affective speech acts and can be considered as phatic communion, a type of speech with ties of union which are created by a mere exchange of words. In our daily lives, we generally exchange compliments as an effort to keep relationships solid. In other words, compliments are supposed to be for rapport instead of report and for cooperation instead of competition in Tannen's terms (1986, 1993 & 1996).

A compliment response (CR, hereafter) is a response to a compliment. These speech acts (a

complement and its response) are conversational devices of interpersonal relationships in our daily life. The use of CR as a phatic expression may also play a particular role in maintaining the solidarity of interpersonal relationships and the harmony of social interaction. For example, in this study a female informant mentioned that her answer to a compliment on appearance ("Hey, you look great! You're really beautiful today") would be "Cheers! So do you", even if the addressee was not good looking.

2. Background of the Study

Conversation analytics have paid attention to CRs in order to investigate their underlying structures. The first person who investigated CRs pragmatically in context was Pomerantz (1978). Her findings demonstrated that speakers of different languages and language varieties followed different patterns when responding to compliments. Since then, many linguists have focused their attention and drawn insights into the phenomenon of CR (e.g., Pomerantz, 1978; Manes & Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson, 1983; Holmes & Brown, 1987; Holmes, 1988; Herbert, 1989, 1990; Wierzbickz, 1991; Nelson, G. L., Al-Batal, M. & Echols, E., 1996). Within this line of research, several studies have been conducted in different contexts focusing on males and females patterns of compliments and CRs. Holms (1998) and Herbert (1990) in their studies on gender in complimenting and CRs found differences in syntactic pattern and lexical choice by men and women. They assumed that females used compliments for keeping solidarity while males regarded compliments as potential face threatening acts or actual assertion of praise. Jia's (1997) studies on CRs strategies have shown a great difference between Chinese and American's use of CRs: Some compliments that could be adopted by one culture would be rejected by another. For example, strategies of 'scale down' and 'questioning' were used more in Chinese context than in English one. Chinese also appeared less interested in complimenting others.

Likewise, in a series of studies on compliments, Holmes (1986, 1988) developed three main categories of CRs: Accept, Reject, and Deflect/ Evade. Her data indicated that in New Zealand, the category of Accept is the most frequent one (1986, 1988). She further examined the role of gender in the process of responding to compliment and found that males ignored or legitimately evaded a compliment more often than females did (Holmes 1986). Jaworski (1995) in a study on Polish compliments, points out that male often use compliments in order to negotiate in group power relation, whilst females tend to exchange compliments to achieve relational solidarity. For Herbert (1990) differences in the use of compliments and compliment responses between males and females and their preferences to use some patterns more or less, represent a cultural choice of modesty. He found that females used fewer instances of disagreeing with compliment and males had a higher tendency to question or fail to acknowledge the compliment.

3. The Study

Since among the large body of research, there are a few studies and little empirical research on Persian compliments and CRs, (e.g. Eslami Rasekh, 2000; Sharifiyan, 2005) and few studies on gender differences regarding the use of CRs, the researchers in this study attempted to identify variations in the use of CRs between male and female Persian speakers. This study is important as it focuses on data from the perspective of gender differences in the use of CRs, which is crucial for successful communication across the two genders. Moreover, the participants of this study are Iranian teenagers, a section of society which has been overlooked for this issue. It is expected that findings will add a new dimension to the research into CRs, and provide refreshing insights to this field of study.

The specific research question was:

How do male and female Persian speakers use CR strategies at macro and micro levels, with respect to four situational settings?

As mentioned above, in terms of classification of CRs, Holmes' taxonomy (1988, 1993) was used: He categorizes the CR strategies into three main acts: Accept, Reject and Deflect/Evade (which are called Macro level, hereafter). Each main act also has further subdivided strategies (Micro level, hereafter). (See Table 1 below for more details).

Table 1. *Holmes' categories of CRs*

Macro level	Micro level	Examples
Accept	**1.** Appreciation token	"Thanks"; "Thank you"; " Cheers"; "Yes"; "Good"
	2. Agreeing utterance	"I know"; "I am glad you think so"; "I did realize I did that well";"Yeah, I really like it"
	3. Downgrading/qualifying utterance	"It's nothing"; "It was no problem"; "I enjoyed doing it"; "I hope it was OK"; "I still only use it to call people"; "It's not bad."
	4. Return compliment	"You're not too bad yourself"; "Your child was an angel"; "I'm sure you will be great"; "Yours was good too."
Reject	**1.** Disagreeing utterance	"Nah, I don't think so"; "I thought I did badly"; "Nah, it's nothing special"; "It's not"; 'Don't say so."
	2. Question accuracy	"Why?"; "It's right"; "really?"
	3. Challenging sincerity	"Stop lying"; "Don't lie"; "Don't joke about it"; "You must be kidding"; "Don't, come on."
Evade	**1.** Shift credit	"That's what friends are for"; "You're polite"; "No worries"; "My pleasure."
	2. Informative comment	"It wasn't hard"; "You can get it from (store name)"; It's really cheap."
	3. Request reassurance	"Really?"

3.1. Methodology

The research question was investigated through data collection involving written DCTs, with four situational settings appearance, character, ability and possession (See appendix 1). There are two reasons for using DCT. As Lorenzo-Dus (2001) argues, DCTs can provide a sound template of stereotypically perceived requirements for socially appropriate CRs in the groups studied. It also enables the researcher to obtain sufficient data in a relatively short period of time. That is, DCTs are effective and efficient when they suit the purpose of the study. As it is generally accepted, however, every data gathering technique has its strengths and weaknesses, depending on the aim of the research. For example, DCT may be adequate when the aim is to make probability-based assertions and/or broad generalizations, while recording naturally occurring talk-in-interactions will suit better if the aim is to study actual language use and/or provide a description of the organization of talk-in-interaction.

3.2. Participants

A total of 60 participants contributed to this research, 30 male and 30 female teenage native speakers of Persian. The average age in both groups was 15. A language background survey was also conducted to ensure that participants were suitable informants. All participants were elementary students of a language center. Consent forms were also signed by participants.

3.3. Procedure

All participants were sufficiently informed of the aims and scope of the study. Then, the DCTs were distributed. The participants were asked to imagine themselves in the situations and write down the answers they would naturally give in each situation. Afterwards, all participants were codified and their answers were classified based on Holmes' taxonomy (1988, 1993).

3.4. Data Analysis

A contrastive analysis of CRs between male and female Persian speakers was carried out to identify different CR patterns between the two groups. Table 2 below gives examples of participants' CRs in which P stands for participants, S for situation, A for Accept, R for reject and E for evade. In addition, the numbers along with these abbreviations refer to the codes assigned to participants, situations and the types of strategies at micro level respectively. Therefore, A4 means Accept: Return compliment (see table 1 for further information)

Table 2. *Examples of CRs*

Male	Examples of CRs
P30,S 1	"nazar e lotfe tost, to ham xoshtip shodi. " "It's kind of you; You're handsome too" (**A4**)
P16,S2	"chakeretam" "I'm at your service" **(A3)**
P12.S4	"200 hezar toman pulesh ro dadam" "It cost me 200'000 tomans. **(E2)**
P4,S 4	"na, hamash mobil e farghi nadare" "No, they are *all* cell phones; There is no difference" **(R1)**
Female	**Examples of CRs**
P5,S1	"xeili mamnoon" "Thanks a lot" **(A1)**
P18,S2	"kari nakardim, vazifamoon bood' "It was nothing, It was my duty" **(A3)**
P23,S1	"velesh kon, bixiyal!" "No worries! Take it easy!" **(E1)**
P9,S4	"ghebeli nadare" "It's worth nothing" **(R1)**

4. Results

In this section, the findings of the use of CRs are presented in two parts: 1) general patterns (macro level) and 2) patterns in the four settings (including micro level).

4.1. The General Pattern of CR Strategies

Fig. 1 below shows general patterns used by male and female groups at macro level. An apparent trend demonstrated in Fig. 1 is that the preference for both groups is in the order of Accept, Evade and Reject: that is, both groups prefer 'Accept' the most and 'Reject' the least. It illustrates that at macro level, males and females in this study actually follow the same order of preference in the use of CRs. Even so, the females use more Reject, and less Accept than males do.
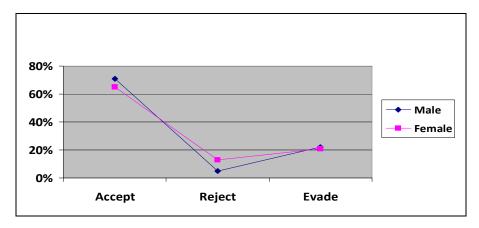

Figure 1. *Macro patterns of CRs*

4.2. The CR patterns Corresponding to the four Specific Situations

The findings presented with regard to the four settings, appearance, character, ability and possession enabled us to see the detailed distribution of CRs and to provide an in-depth analysis of the data.

4.2.1. CRs for Appearance

Fig. 2 shows that the macro level pattern in the setting of appearance is in accordance with the overall macro level pattern shown in Fig. 1. Both groups opted more for Accept strategies than the other two (i.e. Reject and Evade). Additionally, the females used more Reject and Evade but less Accept strategies than the males did.
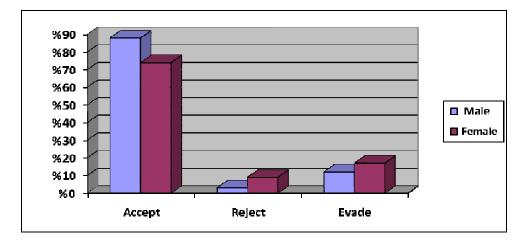
Figure 2. *The macro-pattern of CRs to appearance compliment*

Fig. 3 shows that, at the micro level, there is no uniform trend between males and females similar to the one shown at the macro level in Fig. 2. In addition both groups preferred Return compliment and Appreciation token to the other strategies. In particular, males used more Return compliment than females and females used more Appreciation token than their male counterparts. Another noticeable tendency is that neither group made much use of Agreeing utterance, Downgrading, Disagreeing utterance, Question accuracy and Challenging sincerity.
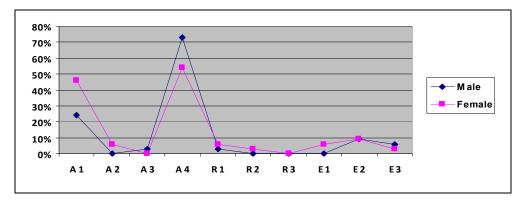

Figure 3. *Micro patterns of CRs to appearance compliment*

4.2.2. CRs for Character

Fig. 4 shows that both groups still preferred Accept as their first preference. This macro level pattern for both groups is remarkably similar to the general macro-level pattern in Fig. 1.
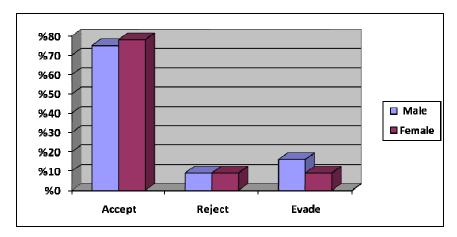

Figure 4. *Macro-pattern of CRs to character compliment*

Fig. 5 implies that at micro level, when receiving a compliment relating to character, both groups would be more likely to use Downgrading utterance, which is a 'self-praise avoidance' strategy. Moreover, males used more Downgrading than females did.
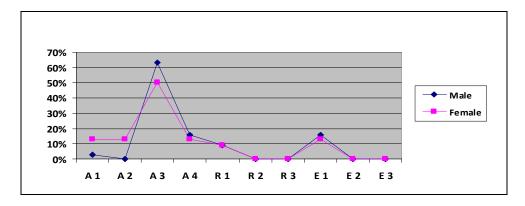

Figure 5. *Micro patterns of CRs to character compliment*

4.2.3. CRs for Ability

Fig. 6 shows the macro-pattern of ability CRs, which differs partially from Fig. 4 of character CRs, but is similar to the general macro-patterns presented in Figs. 1 and 2. The most frequently used CRs are again Accept strategies, followed by Evade and Reject. This may indicate that both male and female speakers would probably be happy to accept compliments on their abilities.
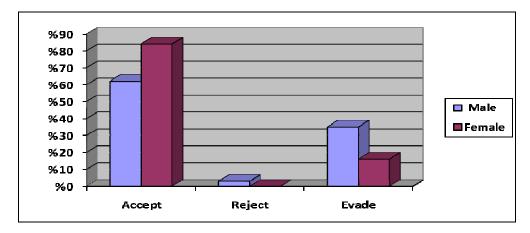

Figure 6. *Macro pattern of CRs to ability*

Fig.7 displays that at micro level females used more Return compliment and Appreciation token than males did. In addition, males used more Informative Comment than that of their female counterparts.
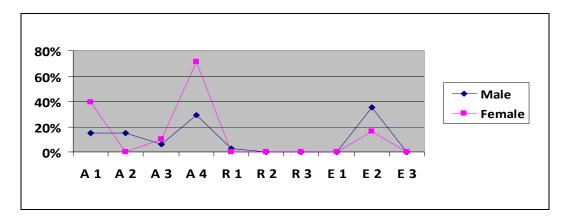

Figure 7. *Micro pattern of CRs to ability compliment*

4.2.4. CRs for Possession

Fig. 8 shows that the majority of males again followed the usual macro-pattern to accept compliments straight away, but females answered differently about compliments on possession. They used Evade most and equally Reject and Accept strategies. It may show that females were less comfortable taking compliments on their possession than they were, for instance, on appearance.
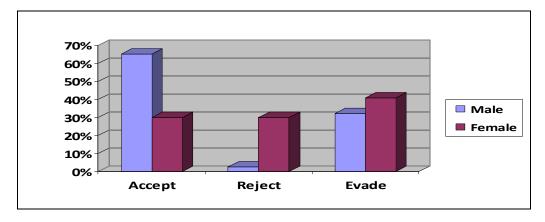

Figure 8. *Macro pattern of CRs to possession compliment*

Fig. 9 demonstrates that Appreciation token, Disagreeing utterance and Informative comment are the three preferred strategies for females. However, for males Downgrading utterance as well as Return compliment is mostly preferred.
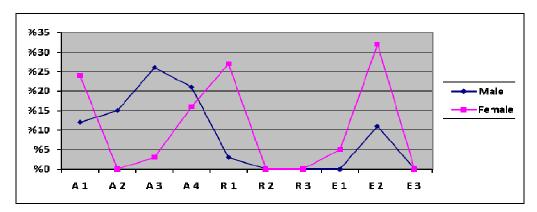

Figure 9. *Micro pattern of CRs to possession compliment*

5. Discussion

Having presented the findings of CR strategies used by male and female groups and based on the research question, this section aims at interpreting the above findings.

The results show that there are similarities between male and female Persian teenage speakers regarding the use of Macro strategies, namely, Accept, Evade and Reject. 71% of the responses by male informants and 65% of them by female informants fall into the Accept category. The next preferred strategy is Evade. There is also similarity between males and females in the frequency of Evade CRs (males 22% and females 21%). For the last strategy (i.e. Reject) males show 5% and females exhibit 13% tendency toward rejecting strategy when receiving compliments. These findings are in contrast with Sharifiyan's study (2005) in which he found that Iranians used formulaic expression to allow them avoid acceptance of compliments, which can be considered as self-praise. Yousefvand (2010) also reported Iranian speakers rarely reject a compliment with a clear negative answer. She points out that Iranians make use of CRs such as "I have done nothing", "You make me feel ashamed" etc. in a way that they generally mean *no*: *I'm not that good. I don't deserve your praise.* Since our participants in this study were teenagers with average age of 15, the contradiction with these two studies may indicate the importance of age as an important variable in investigating compliments and CRs.

Interestingly, although female informants preferred Accept strategy in general, they used more Evade strategies for the last situation (possession). While male informants followed the usual macro pattern for all four situations (i.e. Accept, Evade and next Reject). With respect to micro level, there are also similarities and slight differences between two groups. Males and females showed preference toward Return compliment when receiving compliments on their appearance; however, males used most Return compliment than females did, but in the next most used micro strategy, Appreciation token, female showed more tendency than their male counterparts .For the next situation, character, again both groups demonstrated their preference on Downgrading but males used more Downgrading than females did. In a study by Kryston-Morales (1997) more females tended to downgrade the compliments than males. Yousefvand (2010) concluded that males prefer to apply formulaic expressions response type to weaken the complimentary force by avoiding self –praise whereas females favor accepting the compliment. For the third situation there were significant differences at micro level. Return compliment was the most used strategy (70%) for females in comparison with males (30%). Males also preferred Informative comment more than females. A similarity can be seen between male and female groups regarding responses to ability and possession compliments. As mentioned above, Informative comment was the most frequently used strategy by male in responding to compliment about ability and it is the same for female when responding to compliment about possession, the last situation. Downgrading is the most frequently used strategy for male when responding to a compliment about possession. In contrast to Sharifiyan's findings about Persian speakers (2005), Australians tend to show Downgrading toward compliments about their talents not possession.

Overall the findings show that both groups preferred most Accept strategies in almost all four situations; however, females preferred most Evade strategies when receiving compliments for possession. On the whole, the findings are in line with other studies carried out in foreign contexts (Manes and Wolfson, 1981; Gajaseni, 1994; Nelson, Al-Batal, and Echols, 1998; Baek, 1998; Yu, 2004). However, they are amazingly in contrast with results obtained from Iranian context. It can be explained that the age of the participants probably plays a significant role in the occurrence of these changes and contradictions. More studies with respect to age are needed to show the reasons of this kind of variability.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the CR strategies used by male and female teenage Persian speakers. The linguistic manipulations of CRs shown in this study indicate that no universal model of CRs would work because different genders have different sets of protocols; moreover it is found that age plays a significant role in responding to compliments. The findings in this study suggest that cross-linguistic CR patterns are different at both macro and micro levels. While both groups followed the same preference order of Accept, Evade and Reject strategies, females used less Accept, and more Evade and Reject, than males. At the micro level, there were marked differences in the use of CRs; for instance, males used more Downgrading utterance for possession compliment, but females used more Informative comment in this situation. In general, results suggest that there are several variables which have influence on the use of CRs, beside gender which was our focus in this study; it is also found that age has a significant role in the way of responding to compliments. Since our participants were teenagers, the findings vary with other studies which have been carried out in Iranian context. It is hoped that other researchers focus their attention on this significant variable in Iranian context with Persian speakers from different age groups.

6.1. Implications

Misunderstanding of the use of CRs between two gender groups may trigger communication breakdowns, generating polarized CRs. A successful communication between males and females would not be achievable if, for example, females expected that modesty should be express by using Evade and Reject strategies, but the males interpreted such strategies as hypocritical and insulting.

The findings in this study confirm that males and females have different expectations and follow different linguistic and cultural protocols. It is reasonable to assume that linguistic misunderstandings will occur when communication events involve people with different perceptions of and responses to the use of CRs. This study has practical relevance to the speech communities under study by providing guidelines for the use of CRs. It is also useful for pedagogical purposes, helping males and female Persian speakers respond to compliments in a culturally acceptable manner. Further research on CRs used among male and female Persian speakers may use a different methodology (for instance, natural recordings, to see what

people actually say in talk-in-interaction), or a different age group (such as young adults or children), to see if the findings of this study still hold.

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Appendix 1

Survey on Complement Responses
(English Translation):
Dear participant: This survey is designed to study compliment responses among male and female Persian speakers. Please fill in the questionnaire carefully in order to help us fulfill this survey. Your participation is greatly appreciated.
Name:
Sex: male   ☐   female   ☐
Age:
English Level:
Do you speak Persian as your first language (your mother tongue)? If not, which language do you speak?

Appendix 2

Instrument – Discourse Completion Task
Four situations in which you receive a compliment are described below. Imagine that you are in these situations and write down what you are most likely to answer in each situation

Situation 1 (Appearance)
Your friends have organized a party to celebrate the end of semester. You've dressed up for the party. As you arrive at the party, one of your friends says: "Hey, you look great! You're really handsome/ beautiful today."
 You answer:
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Situation 2 (Character)
One of your friends together with his/her family has recently moved in a new apartment. S/he asks you to help him/her arrange the things. It takes you several hours to put all the things away. As you are about to say goodbye, your friend says:"Thank you! You are really kind and helpful".
You answer:
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Situation 3 (Ability)
After you have completed a presentation, your classmate says: "Wow, that's brilliant, I hope I can do it the way you did. Well done!"
You answer:
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Situation 4 (Possession)
You have bought a new mobile phone. When you receive a call, your friend notices that your phone is a different one. Having looked at it and tried some functions, s/he says: "Wow, how smart! My mobile does not have such functions. It is really great!"
You answer:
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____