

denies the charge; second, he hits back with another proposition that is again a personal, not a ritual insult: 'You come over to my house to eat (since there was no food in your own), and so what right have you to complain?' Of course, the second part implicitly contradicts the first – if no chair caved in, how does Junior know what occasion is being talked about? ...

Sounds are directed as targets very close to the opponent (or at himself) but by social convention it is accepted that they do not denote attributes which persons actually possess: in Goffman's formulation, symbolic distance maintained serves to insulate this exchange from further consequences. The rules given above for sounding, and the development of sounds in bizarre and whimsical direction, all have the effect of preserving this ritual status. As we have seen, the ritual convention can break down with younger speakers or in strange situations – and the dangers of such a collapse of ritual safeguards are very great. Rituals are sanctuaries; in ritual we are freed from personal responsibility for the acts we are engaged in. Thus when someone makes a request for action in other subcultures, and he is challenged on the fourth precondition, 'What right have you to tell me that?' his reply may follow the same strategy:

It's not my idea – I just have to get the work done.

I'm just doing my job.

I didn't pick on you – somebody has to do it.

Any of these moves to depersonalize the situation may succeed in removing the dangers of a face-to-face confrontation and defiance of authority. Ritual insults are used in the same way to manage challenges within the peer group, and an understanding of ritual behavior must therefore be an important element in constructing a general theory of discourse.

## NOTE

I am particularly indebted to Benji Wald for suggestions incorporated in the present version of the analysis of sounding.

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# 37 The Sociology of Compliment Work in Polish and English

Robert K. Herbert

## INTRODUCTION

The study of speech formulae, precoded sentential chunks, conversational and interactional routines, and the like has received substantial attention within the linguistic pragmatics literature over the past ten years. The common thread unifying these phenomena is the notion that some – perhaps a great deal – of everyday speech activity cannot be characterized by the spontaneous creativity attributed to speakers by early generative grammarians. It is now apparent that some important pieces of speech activity consist of stored units which are activated or retrieved in appropriate circumstances (cf., for example, Ferguson 1976, and the papers in Coulmas 1980). These precoded pieces and routines vary in terms of their fixedness in speech from a set of rigid formulae to a set of conversational prescriptions which may be filled in a variety of acceptable fashions. Conversational units of this nature seem especially prominent in situations of social negotiation, that is, when speakers are involved in the common tasks of attending to own and others' face. That such interactional face-work should rely rather heavily on formulae and routines is perhaps not surprising, since such formulae and routines are easily recognized as such, and therefore the social moves committed by the speaker stand less chance of being missed or misinterpreted by the hearer. ...

## DEFINITION

There seems to be widespread popular agreement on what it is that constitutes a compliment, and the examples which native speakers cite of

Source: 'The Sociology of Compliment Work: An Ethnocontrastive Study of Polish and English Compliments', *Multilingua*, 10, 4 (1991) (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter) pp. 381–402.

compliments are compatible with their folk definitions. Most definitions of complements specify two conditions: (1) an expression of admiration on the part of the speaker, (2) concerning a possession, accomplishment, or personal quality of the addressee. The definition proposed by Holmes (1988) mirrors the above folk definitions:

A compliment is 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.

Several points are worthy of mention here. First, the distinction between explicit and implicit compliments is an important one, corresponding in part to the distinction between direct and indirect speech acts. The former are recognized as compliments outside of context, being realized by a small set of conventional formulae (cf. below), for example,

- (1) Terrific presentation this morning!
- (2) I like your hair short like that.

Implicit compliments are those in which the value judgement is presupposed and/or implicated by Gricean maxims, for example,

- (3) I wish I could manage my work like you do.
- (4) Your husband is a very lucky man.

Note that the literature on compliments, and this chapter is no exception, deals almost exclusively with explicit compliments.

A second point relevant to Holmes' definition concerns the relationship between the addressee and the topic of the speech act. Holmes' definition allows for examples such as:

- (5) [Context: 2 elderly women discussing a new TV newsreader]  
A: Oh, but you must admit that she's got a lovely voice.  
B: She certainly has.

to count as compliments (correctly, in Holmes' view), but she then explicitly excludes such examples from further consideration. It is perhaps better to distinguish between compliments and other statements of admiration/praise (of which compliments form a subclass) by restricting compliments to situations in which the topic of admiration bears directly on the addressee or on a quality or person(s) more or less closely related to the addressee

(cf. Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1987: 5; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 1989: 14). Thus, (6) counts as and is recognized as a compliment whereas (7) is not:

- (6) Your children seem very well-behaved.
- (7) Your neighbors seem like such nice people.

The issue of stating precisely what is meant by 'more or less closely related to the addressee' is a thorny one, which is not pursued in the present context. This issue is taken up and discarded by Marandin (1987: 76), who replaces it with a functional notion, describing compliments as statements where the speaker pleases or intends to please the addressee.

Finally, there are broad similarities between the act of complimenting and the act of congratulating, noted by Norrick (1980), Marandin (1987), and others. This similarity will be taken up separately in greater detail later in this chapter. It will suffice to mention here that while compliments focus on possessions and personal qualities, congratulations often refer to accomplishments and to good fortune (Norrick 1980: 297).

## COMPLIMENT FORMULAE

In a series of articles, Nessa Wolfson and Joan Manes (for example, Wolfson and Manes 1980; Manes and Wolfson 1980; Wolfson 1983) noted that one of the most striking features of compliments in American English is their almost total lack of originality (Manes and Wolfson 1980: 15). Examining a corpus of approximately 700 compliments, they found that about 80% of the compliments depended on an adjective to carry the positive semantic load of the utterance and that two-thirds of all adjectival compliments made use of only five adjectives:

*nice, good, beautiful, pretty, great*

Most of the nonadjectival compliments depended on semantically positive verbs, for example, *like, love, enjoy, admire, be impressed by*, and the first two of these verbs accounted for 86% of the compliments in this category. Relatively few compliments made use of an adverb (usually *well*) or a noun (for example, *genius*) to express positive valuation. Wolfson and Manes noted that the semantic load of the compliments in their corpus is borne by the several lexical items mentioned above, and they argued that this is strong evidence of the non-creativity of compliments in speech.

More striking evidence of formulaicity in English compliments is found at the syntactic level. More than half (53%) of the data studied by Wolfson and Manes exhibited a single syntactic pattern:<sup>1</sup>

- (8) NP is (really) ADJ  
looks  
That shirt looks great on you.

The two other major syntactic patterns were:

- (9) I (really) like NP (16.1%)  
love  
I really like what you've done to your hair.
- (10) PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP (14.9%)  
That's a good question.

Only six other patterns occur with any regularity in the remaining 15% of the Wolfson and Manes corpus:

- (11) You V (a) (really) ADJ NP (3.3%)  
You did a great job.
- (12) You V NP (really) ADV (2.7%)  
You sang that song really well.
- (13) You have (a) (really) ADJ NP (2.4%)  
You have a beautiful living room.
- (14) What (a) ADJ NP! (1.6%)  
What a pretty skirt!
- (15) ADJ NP! (1.6%)  
Good shot!
- (16) Isn't NP ADJ! (1.0%)  
Isn't that ring pretty!

American English compliments are not mere statements of admiration offered to the addressee: they are highly structured formulae which can be adapted with minimal effort to a wide variety of situations in which a favorable comment is required or desired (Manes and Wolfson 1980: 123). ...

Polish, like English, makes use of a small set of syntactic and semantic formulae for the purpose of encoding compliments. The noncreativity of the compliment act is a striking fact: these are speech formulae. It is tempting to speculate that such noncreativity is directly tied to a need for easily recognizable formulae in status- and solidarity-negotiating gambits in speech. That is, in making a social move of this kind, the use of a formula

decreases the likelihood that the move might be misinterpreted or unnoticed by an addressee. The formulae used in Polish and in English differ – as one expects – in interesting ways, and these differences are set within a larger cultural framework below.

## ANALYZING COMPLIMENT DIFFERENCES

There are both striking similarities and important differences between the Polish and English compliment data. Syntactic differences in the two languages account for the less rigid adhesion to formulaic structure in Polish, that is, the relatively free word order in Polish contrasts with the fixedness of English word order. More interestingly, one notes the virtual absence of compliments expressed with a first person singular focus (for example, *podoba mi sie* ≈ 'I like', (*ja*)*lubie* ≈ 'I love/like') in Polish as compared with the high frequency of such first person focus in English (for example, *I like/love NP*). By contrast, the most common Polish formula is *Masz* ('you have') (*INT*) *ADJ NP*, which accounts for 35% of the sample, compared with a 2.4% frequency for the corresponding English structure *You have (a) (really) ADJ NP*. Herbert (1987) categorized English compliments according to the 'personal focus' of the compliment act, for example,

- (17) 1st. I like your hair that way.  
I think you've done a good job so far.  
2nd. Your hair looks good short.  
You've done an excellent job with the sources you had.  
3rd. That's a nice sweater.  
Nice job.

and found that the relative distribution of personal focus was:

- (18) 1st 2nd 3rd (impersonal)  
32.8% 29% 38%

By contrast, the relevant frequencies for the Polish data are:

- (19) 1st 2nd 3rd  
5.75% 75.5% 18.5%

The infrequency of first person compliments in Polish is quite marked, and it cannot be attributed to the lack of a syntactic formula of the relevant type. Although *podobać się* 'to like' does not often figure in the encoding of compliments, it is frequently used in compliment responses, for example,



- (20) A: *Ladną masz sukienkę*  
 'You have a nice dress.'  
 B: *Podoba ci się?*  
 'Do you like it?'

This response type strikes the English speaker as coy and 'fishing' for further praise. The vast bulk of Polish compliments have second person focus, which, on the one hand, may seem natural since the definition of a compliment is an assertion of admiration for some possession, achievement, skill, etc., bearing directly on the addressee or on objects/persons closely related to the addressee. What is interesting is that almost half of the second person structures focus directly on possession via the formula *Masz ADJ NP/ADJ masz NP* 'You have (a) ADJ NP'. As Manes (1983) noted, compliments are indirect indicators of values held by the society using them, and the very high incidence of possession compliments, especially on new possessions, is outstanding here. In the same way that American speakers report an obligation to compliment close acquaintances on changed physical appearance (for example, changed hair style/length, absence/presence of facial hair, loss of weight [although not weight gain]), Polish speakers report an obligation of the same sort when close acquaintances display newly acquired possessions, especially items of apparel or decoration, for example,

- (21) *Widzę nowe kolczyki. Bardzo ładne.*  
 'I see new earrings. Very nice.'  
 (22) *To nowa koszula? Ładna*  
 'Is that a new shirt? Nice.'  
 (23) *O, masz nowe spodnie.*<sup>2</sup>  
 'Oh, you've got new pants.'

Manes (1983: 99) noted that appearance is very commonly the focus of American compliments, especially aspects that are the result of deliberate effort and new items. Compliments on skill or performance are the second most frequent type, with a rapid decline in topic frequency. Holmes (1988) provides a quantitative analysis of topic in New Zealand compliments:

- (24)
- |                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| appearance             | 50.7%  |
| ability/performance    | 30.6%  |
| possessions            | 11.2%  |
| personality/friendship | 4.8% (for example, <i>You're such a gentle person.</i> ) |
| other                  | 2.7%   |

Using these same categories for topical analysis of the Polish corpus, the relevant frequencies are:

appearance	32.25%	(n = 141)
ability/performance	11.75%	(n = 47)
possessions	49.25%	(n = 197)
personality/friendship	1.25%	(n = 5)
other	2.5%	(n = 10) (for example, <i>Masz bardzo pracowitą żonę</i> 'You've got a hard-working wife.')

The most striking point of contrast between the English and Polish data sets concerns the category Possessions, which is the most common topical subtype in Polish compliments, accounting for about 50% of the sample whereas the category occurs in only 11% of Holmes' sample. There is a sharply reduced frequency of compliments on ability/performance in the Polish data. It is important to recall here that the data were collected ethnographically among university student populations in the respective countries. One point of interest arising from the present finding is that it directly contradicts the widely held folk-belief mentioned earlier that compliments are relatively infrequent on account of a lesser importance attached to material possessions in Poland than in Western countries. Without any firm evidence to support the conclusion, it is nonetheless tempting to speculate on the relationship between the high frequency of possession compliments in Polish and life within the consumer-troubled society of Poland [under communism, pre-1989 – Ed.]. The fact is, as readily acknowledged by official and unofficial sources, consumer goods are in very short supply, or they are imported and available only for Western currency or at very high, occasionally staggering, prices. There is a variety of sources through which people acquire the consumer goods which they need and desire. The acquisition of goods, ranging from sheepskin coats to washing machines to the trivial purchases of everyday life, is often regarded as an accomplishment – by oneself and by fellow members of the society (cf. Wedel [1986] for a detailed description of everyday life in pre-democratic Poland). Perhaps for this reason, such acquisitions are often prominently displayed and are prominent topics in conversation. Several speakers of Polish observed *independently* to the author that conversation at social gatherings seems to consist of little more than an exchange of news concerning things one has acquired or 'arranged'. In view of the above, it is perhaps not surprising that possession compliments have such a high incidence in the sample. In both Polish and English, one is struck by the centrality of appearance/possession compliments, reflecting the importance of these features in both societies.

## COMPLIMENTS AND CONGRATULATIONS

It was noted earlier that the category of compliments shares a number of features with congratulations. According to Norrick (1980: 297), compliments are made on personal qualities and possessions whereas congratulations refer to accomplishments or to good fortune. The two are further distinguished in that compliments tend to reflect the personal judgment of the speaker whereas congratulations are less personal. This distinction is akin to that proposed by Marandin (1987: 74-6), who attributes the central distinction between the two speech acts to the attitude of the speaker *vis-à-vis* the addressee. Compliments are designed to please the addressee whereas congratulations are not. It would seem, further, that the two are sometimes distinguished on the basis of the attitude of the speaker toward the topic of the speech act. The sincerity condition for compliments specifies admiration as the speaker's experiencing emotion (Norrick 1980: 296), but recognition of an achievement or accomplishment is sufficient for the act of congratulation. Complimenting someone on a new car, for example, expresses admiration for the car and for the addressee's judgment in purchasing it; congratulating someone who has won a new car in a lottery expresses recognition of good fortune and does not commit the speaker to admiration of the car.

Although it is not possible to prove the relationship, there is good reason to believe that the two acts of complimenting and congratulating are more alike in Polish than in English, and, specifically, that the high frequency of possession compliments in Polish reflects the function of these acts as congratulatory on the acquisition of a new possession. Given the difficulty of the consumer supply situation, acquisition is an accomplishment. Members of the society often remark on this fact. The aspect of the addressee's good taste/judgment in some particular acquisition is not entirely comparable in English-speaking and Polish-speaking societies. When an English speaker in the United States, New Zealand, or South Africa is complimented on a new sweater, new shoes, or a new car, the complimenter expresses admiration for the object complimented and for the addressee's judgment in choosing to acquire this object, the addressee having selected this particular object from the scores of similar objects available in consumer-oriented societies. This situation did not usually obtain in Poland during the period of fieldwork. Some Polish speakers have reported an obligation to comment favorably on an acquaintance's new possession, just as American speakers report such an obligation for changes in an acquaintance's appearance, especially hair. If some comment on a prominent new possession is not forthcoming, speakers seem to assume a negative valuation and may explicitly demand comment, for example, *Nie podoba ci się mój X?* 'Don't you like my X?' When later questioned about the sincerity of their praise, speakers occasionally attribute the act of complimenting to social obligation, noting the obvious newness of the

object, its probable cost, difficulty of acquisition, etc. These aspects, as well as any aesthetic appreciation, enter into the act of complimenting. That is, it is often the *fact of acquisition* that is the topic of the speech act, and this situation has much in common with the act of congratulating. Further support for such an analysis comes from the observation that speakers very often introduce the topic of their new possession into conversation by complaining about its high cost, the length of time spent waiting in line to purchase it, or by noting their 'good connections' which directed them to the object. Compliments follow such commentary.

Finally, the link between compliments and congratulations is strengthened by the existence of a token in which the topic of the compliment is, for example, a new refrigerator, a hot-water heater, or an unremarkable kitchen cabinet. Speakers compliment on such objects because they recognize the achievement of acquisition, not because they find the refrigerator aesthetically pleasing.

It is, of course, not possible to prove the validity of an analysis such as that proposed above. One might look at patterns of responses to compliments as a source of relevant information on how addressees perceive compliments. When asked about the appropriate way in which to respond to a compliment in Polish, speakers most often report that the compliment should be downgraded or rejected. Those Polish speakers who are familiar with English often contrast the two languages, reporting that English speakers say *Thank you* and accept compliments offered, whereas Polish speakers will most commonly disagree with the compliment. This folk belief also appears in the scholarly literature; for example, Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1989: 75) claims that the convention of avoiding self-praise 'seems to be the highest among Poles, less strong in British English, and the weakest with the American English speakers'.<sup>3</sup> There are certainly instances of this kind in the data:

- (25) A: *Ale ładne masz butki!*  
'What nice shoes you have.'  
B: *Ale miewygodne.*  
'But comfortable.'
- (26) A: *Dzisiaj bardzo dobrze wyglądasz!*  
'You look very well today!'  
B: *Oo, w tej chwili to nie bardzo.*  
'Oh, not so well at the moment.'...
- (27) A: *Tadeusz, naprawdę masz rewelacyjne spodnie!*  
'Tadeusz, you really have terrific pants!'  
B: *Luz-blues, Ameryka lata trzydzieste!*  
'Slick, America of the thirties!'

- (28) A: *Masz ekstra zapalniczkę.*  
'You've got a super lighter.'  
B: *Fajna, prawda?*  
'Neat, isn't it?'
- (29) A: *Masz bardzo ładną sukienkę.*  
'You have a very pretty dress.'  
B: *Wiem, jest śliczna*  
B: 'I know, it's lovely.'...

The high incidence of such acceptances contrasts sharply with the rate of acceptance among American university students (Herbert 1989) and New Zealand speakers (Holmes 1988). This incidence is also the more remarkable in the light of Polish speakers' claims of not accepting complimentary force. It may be that the compliment formula is used to express recognition of achievement/effort in acquisition, a use to which the formula was not traditionally put, and that this usage elicits bold acceptance as a response.

## CONCLUSION

Building upon previous work on English compliments, this chapter has provided a sketch of Polish compliments from a contrastive perspective. Polish compliments, like English compliments, are highly formulaic, with almost 85% of the corpus described as variants on four basic syntactic patterns. Further, semantic expression is highly predictable, especially in adjectival and adverbial compliments, which account for 83% of the sample. Wolfson and Manes (1980) have previously raised the question of why (English) compliments should be formulaic. Unlike greetings, leave-takings, blessings, etc., compliments occur rather freely in conversation. Holmes (1988) found that 21.5% of her New Zealand sample occurred as greetings, 5.6% as closings, and 72.9% as 'other'. It is generally assumed that the formulaicity of compliments derives from their need to be recognized anywhere in discourse as tokens of good will, offers of solidarity, or as expressed by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1987: 15) – 'une espèce de cadeau verbal'. Compliments are acts of social negotiation. Addressees must recognize them as such, and addressees are then faced with the problem of acknowledging/accepting or rejecting/deflecting the offered praise, that is, of responding to the compliment. Compliment responses in English have been analyzed in detail by Pomerantz (1978), Herbert (1986, 1989), and Holmes (1988); cf. Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1987) on French compliment responses.

The prominence of possession compliments in Polish was noted, and this prominence was tied to the anthropology of everyday life in the former People's Republic of Poland. Specifically, compliments on possessions,

particularly new possessions, recognize an achievement/accomplishment on the part of the addressee, who has managed by persistence, personal connections, or simple good fortune to acquire some desirable consumer item. In this regard, this subset of Polish compliments blurs the distinction between compliments and congratulations. They are superficially compliments, almost always encoded in the semantic and syntactic formulae described above, but they also operate as expressions of congratulations, a fact acknowledged in many response types and also described by informants. This type of approach to the analysis of speech acts obviously derives from the discipline known as 'the ethnography of speaking', in which language and speech are taken to pattern independently and to interact with other patterns of sociocultural organization, for example, cultural value systems, religion, political organization, an approach championed in the works of Dell Hymes (for example, 1962).

Speech acts are obviously multifunctional. On the other hand, compliments express admiration on the part of the speaker and they also serve as offers of social negotiation (cf. Wolfson 1988). On the other hand, these expressions may be put to particular uses. For example, compliments may be used for personal profit, to which we attach the label 'flattery', or they may serve as responses to compliments when addressees respond to a compliment by offering a return token, for example,

- (30) A: I like your hair short, Sharon.  
B: Thanks, Deb. I like yours too.

thereby re-establishing the balance between interlocutors. The multifunctional character of compliments is further reflected in their rather free occurrence in discourse.

Compliment events (compliment + response) provide interesting information on sociocultural values and organization. As has previously been noted, the topics of compliments reveal the values which are positively regarded within some particular society. Clothes and general appearance are of great importance in Polish- and English-speaking societies. There are numerous compliments on youthful appearance, but none on aged appearance; many compliments on weight loss, but virtually none on weight gain. In addition to these reflections of cultural values, patterns of compliment events reveal social organization. Who compliments whom, in which circumstances, with what purpose, on which topics, eliciting what response, etc.? Finally, the frequency of the act of complimenting may itself provide some insight into the sociology of compliment work. For example, many non-Americans have commented (often unfavorably) on the high frequency of compliments in American English. These comments come from speakers of other varieties of English, for example, New Zealand speakers (Holmes and Brown 1987), South African speakers (Herbert 1989) and second



language speakers of English from a wide variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Judging by their own norms, these groups often report a suspicion that Americans are 'insincere' in their complimenting; cf. Herbert and Straight (1989). When questioned, after having complimented acquaintances on new possessions, Poles often reveal noncomplimentary attitudes toward the objects they had explicitly complimented on moments earlier. The most commonly cited reasons for such acts of complimenting include: (1) an assessment that the item was very expensive, and (2) a report that the item is difficult to acquire. Neither of these values is explicitly encoded in the expression of compliments although both are acceptable topics in conversation; speakers may report with pride on the sum of money paid for an object or on the byzantine circuit of connections and acquaintances that enabled them to 'arrange' (*zalatwic*) its acquisition. It may be that the compliment formula serves to offer the addressee an opportunity to introduce these facts in conversation. A view of the subset of compliments on possession as a type in which the compliment-congratulation distinction is blurred is compatible with the above reports. The compliment is not necessarily a statement of aesthetic appreciation, although it bears that form. A traditional form is put to new use in response to changes in the organizational patterns of everyday life. ...

## NOTES

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The fieldwork upon which the analysis of Polish compliments rests was conducted over approximately 30 months in Poznań, Warsaw, and Lublin during 1983-1985, 1987, and 1988. Fieldwork was concluded in December 1988, and the writing of the chapter was done during the first half of 1989. There have been significant political, social, and economic changes in Poland since that time. The ethnolinguistic analysis presented later rests upon the ethnography of everyday life at the time of fieldwork. Any difference between the 1983-1988 data and those which might be collected now is a matter for empirical investigation.

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- 1 The following conventions are used in Wolfson and Manes' statements of syntactic patterns: a. *really* stands for any intensifier, b. all verbs are cited in the present tense, c. *look* stands for any linking verb other than *be*, d. *like* and *love* stand for any verb of liking, e. ADJ stands for any semantically positive adjective, f. ADV stands for any semantically positive adverb, g. NP stands for a noun phrase which does not include a semantically positive adjective, and h. PRO stands for *you, this, that, these, those*.

- 2 *Nowy* 'new' does not figure in the list of most commonly used adjectives since *nowy* is generally used to introduce the compliment; examples such as (23), where *nowy* carries the complimentary force, are rare.
- 3 Pomerantz (1978) was the first to note that the difficulty of responding to a compliment derives from the conflict in two conversational postulates: (1) agree with speaker, (2) avoid self-praise.

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