The Pragmatics of Compliments in Selected Hausa Social Contexts

Abubakar Sadiq Musa,
Eric O. Bosin
And
Esther Iowar
Department of Languages, Kaduna Polytechnic, Kaduna.

Abstract
The purpose of this study is to highlight and discuss the speech act of compliments among the Hausa native speakers. The work aims at examining the basic strategies of compliments along with their responses within the Hausa social contexts. It also examines how social variables like age, gender, and social relationships affect the expression of compliments and compliment responses. In any communicative situation, people grapple with choices as to which form of language to use in a variety of social situations, therefore making speech a complex human activity. This sociolinguistic complexity can either make or break social relationship among members of a community. Several native speakers of Hausa language take the two forms of the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) with several scenarios in each, to cover the possibility of different social situations. The speech act data (compliments) are analyzed according to models proposed by Pomerantz (1978), Wolfson and Manes (1980), Herbert (1989), Ye’s (1995). The study then reveals three basic compliment expression strategies namely admiration, appreciation, and feeling. These strategies are realized either explicitly or implicitly by the use of certain semantic carriers like positive verbs, adjectives and nouns. Also revealed by the study, are the three compliment response strategies: acceptance, mitigation, and rejection. Like in other speech communities being studied, this research reveals that compliments are aimed at showing solidarity in order to consolidate social relationship in the Hausa community, and that they are highly context sensitive.

Introduction
Pragmatics studies the use and understanding of language. It involves the process of expressing meaning by the speakers. Crystal and Varley (1993:54) are of the opinion that: Pragmatics is the study of the factors that govern our choice of language (the sounds, construction, words) in social interaction, and the effects of our choice upon others. The subject includes the analysis of what it means to be appropriate and cooperative in our speaking behaviour, and it thus begins to explain what it involved when we use language to convey politeness, intimacy, playfulness, rudeness, awkwardness, and a range of other social attitudes.

Pragmatics can therefore be seen as a systematic way of explaining how language is used in context. It also seeks to explain the aspects of meaning which cannot be found in plain sense of words or structures, (Thomas 1983). In other words, pragmatics is the study of meaning in context. It also deals with particular utterances in particular situations, and is especially concerned with various ways in which many social contexts can influence how language is used.
The language we use in real life situation has various positions in our daily life. Therefore, in the process of expressing ourselves, we have to clarify who speaks to whom, when, where, what, and why. In normal situations, when we have conflicting opinions with one another, we respond differently. For example, to an elder we could say: “I am not sure if I’d agree with you”; to a colleague we could say: “I cannot agree with you” or “I could not go along with you” and to a good friend we could say: “I totally disagree with you”, (Quan (2001:104). Similarly, in different occupations and on different occasions, the language we use is different. For example, “a boy at home must call his mother (who is a teacher) mum, but at school he must call her Mrs” Stalnaker, (1998:82).

In everyday life, there are a number of speech acts we can choose to show positive politeness, for example, greetings, thanks, friendly terms and expressions of concern, as well as compliments. A compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker for some “good” (possession, characteristic, skill, etc) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer Holmes, (1988:17).

Compliments and compliment responses have been described as highly formulaic speech acts according to Wolfson and Manes, (1980). For instance, the most appropriate response to a compliment is “thank you” in western societies. However, Chinese would most of the time reject compliment. Despite the strong awareness of the prescriptive form, many speakers still feel embarrassed by compliments and feel uncomfortable when they respond to them (compliment) Hu, (1944).

This study is set out to investigate the characteristics of speech act of complimenting and compliment responses in Hausa social contexts. The work would, hopefully, add to the literature of speech act of complimenting set in African languages and offer useful information for cross-cultural communication. This study will also investigate and establish various ways in which compliments can be expressed and be responded to in Hausa language. In this study, the speech act and politeness theories of Austin (1962), Searle (1969), Grice (1975), Leech (1983), and Brown and Levinson (1987) are examined. In the analysis of compliments and compliment responses in Hausa, this study examines both social constraints and individual variables to which this speech act is sensitive. These variables include age, gender, and social relationship.

**Speech Act Theory**

The emphasis on language in use in the latter half of the twentieth century led to the increased interest in studies in the field of pragmatics. Tseng, (1999) states that one important approach in pragmatics is the application of the notion of speech acts. He posits that the essential insight of speech act theory is that language performs communicative acts. The founding father of speech act theory, British philosopher John Austin, proposes the concept of “performatives”, which states that the issuing of an utterance is the performing of an action. He further distinguishes performatives from constatives, that is, declarative statements whose truth or falsity can be judged. Sentences
such as “I do” (as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony), “I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth” (as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stern), and “I bet you two dollars it will rain tomorrow” are all examples of performatives. He further notes that to achieve their performative function as speech act, such utterances need to meet certain contextual conditions, called felicity conditions, which were later formalized by Searle (1969).

Searle (1969) builds upon Austin’s work and proposes a systematic framework by which to incorporate speech acts, or more specifically, illocutionary acts, into linguistic theory. Searle (1969) states that “the speech act is the minimal unit of communication.” Being aware of the significance of context, Searle (1969) takes Austin’s felicity conditions a step further and systematizes the nature of the conditions as: the prepositional content condition, the preparatory condition, the sincerity condition, and the essential condition, which are necessary for a particular utterance to count as a given act; that is, for the successful performance of a particular speech act, a set of felicity conditions that correspond to the speech act performed have to be met. Searle (1969) also introduces several ideas that contribute to the application of speech act theory to discourse, such as the classification of speech acts and indirect speech acts.

Following many studies of compliment responses of many speech communities, especially native English speakers Pomerantz (1978), Holmes (1986), and Herbert (1989), Abolaji (2003) conducts a study on compliments by examining 1200 compliment responses ethnographically collected among speakers of Nigerian English (ESL variety). In his analysis, he compares the compliment response patterns realized by Nigerian speakers of English in his corpus with what has been reported in the other English communities. The findings of his research suggest areas of both convergence and divergence. The divergent patterns underline cultural difference in responding to compliments, thus providing information that might be necessary for cross-cultural communication.

**Theoretical Framework**

Much of the preoccupation of linguistic analysis revolves around the speaker's (S), as well as the hearer's (H), ability to process, construct, and decipher the meaning of communicative utterances (Searle, 1996). One of the powerful theoretical paradigms that impacted on the course of linguistic inquiry in this regard is Speech Act Theory (SAT) Austin, (1962), Searle, (1969). In fact, according to Nuyts, the appeal that SAT has on linguistics can be primarily attributed to the fact that it does not consider language as a mere “isolated structural phenomenon”, but rather, presents it as performing action within contexts (Nuyts, 1993). SAT shifts the focus rather, towards the achievement of these actions by virtue of its socially conventionalized context. Despite the introduction of context in analysing speech utterances, the driving force behind this theoretical conceptualization of SAT is geared toward essentially “mapping utterances into speech act categories” Levinson, (1983). Levinson (1983) further argues that in order for a speech act to conventionally perform a given illocutionary act; it must specify the nature of its context in the form of felicity conditions. These felicity conditions are divided into three subcategories, namely,
the preparatory conditions, which check the speaker’s ability to perform A, the sincerity conditions, which are the conditions that the speaker wants inorder to perform A, Green, (1996), and the executive condition, which checks the adequateexecution of the speech act Allan, (2001). In view of the forgoing, this study is conducted within the premise of socio-pragmatics.

**Methodology**

The variables used in this study are of different levels which include social relationship, age, and gender. These variables are used in the selection of participants as well as in designing the socio-linguistic situations in the questionnaire. The data in this study are numerical and were collected from different groups of nativespeakers of the Hausa language through the use of the Discourse Completion Test (DCT). The data also comprised different patterns of compliment expressions and compliment responses adequate to represent socially differentiated situations which could be analyzed statistically so as to provide satisfactory description.

Data were obtained from one hundred (100) native speakers of Hausa language from Zazzau emirate, most of whom were students. The participants’ responses were divided into three parts. The first part was about compliment strategies for which the researcher followed Ye’s (1995), and Zahra’s (2005) with some alterations. The second part was about compliment response strategies for which the model of Pomerantz, (1978) and Wolfson and Mane’s (1980) were adopted with some alterations too.

**Analysis of Data**

**Basic Compliment Strategies**

Since people usually complement each other to achieve solidarity, most compliments depend on a positive evaluation in expression of admiration. However, appreciation and feeling expressions were used by the participants.

Participants expressed their appreciation specifically using the word ‘Ina godiya’- (I’m grateful) and ‘Na gode’-(Thank you) or non-specifically. These expressions occurred when complimenting a teacher’s personality because of the teacher-student relationship. More so, a mother used appreciation to encourage her child, and soon.

Expressing a feeling was a preferable strategy to maintain solidarity particularly amongst students, and from teachers to their students and vice-versa about achievement. This strategy was manifested in various semantic components: (Kindness, pride, jest, longing, happiness and prayer). For example,

i. *Ka huta gajiya.* (Have a pleasant rest)- kindness.

ii. Ina alfahari da kai. (I’m proud of you)- being proud.

iii. Ba sabon ba… (You’re not used to it)- not used to something.

iv. Zan yi kewar ka/ki (I’ll miss you)- longing
v. Na yi maka murna… (I’m happy for you)- happiness.

vi. Allah Ya sa alheri… (God bless)- prayer.

Participants modified their expression of admiration in different realizations as for instance, to admire a friend after losing some weight, participants showed their admiration by notifying the change. Participants also used exaggeration more frequently. To admire a friend’s performance though she/he was complaining about it, participants employed the use of assurance by swearing. The data further revealed that to compliment a friend’s ability, simile was used. A metaphor was also used to admire the beauty of a friend, while comparison was used to compliment a person’s beautiful dress. Lastly, participants added congratulation to compliment one’s achievement. For example:

i. *Kin fi kowace mace kyau a duniya.* (You’re the prettiest girl in the world)- exaggeration.

ii. *Wallahi, ka taka rawar gani.* (I swear, that was remarkable)- Assuring.


iv. *Kana taka leda kamar Maradona.* (You play football like Maradona)- simile.

v. *Ke ce tauraruwa ta mai haske.* (You’re my shining star)- metaphor.

vi. *Ko ke fa, rigar nan tafi waccan.* (How do you see it? This gown is better than that)- comparison.

vii. *Wannan abu yayi. Barka!* (This is excellent. Congratulations)- congratulations.

The example given below illustrate that emotion signaled the speakers’ sentiment to intensify their wondering by the expressions- tirkashi (wonderful), wai-wai-wai (Oh, my goodness), Kai! (You!), and Allah (God). E.g.


ii. *Waiyo Allah! Ka yi masifar kokari.* (Oh my God! You have done very well)- invocation.

iii. *Kai! Kai ka ci duk kwallayen.* (Wow! You scored all the goals)- exclamation.


**Rejection of Compliments**

Refusal was realised by not accepting the compliment because some participants did not agree with the complimenter either evenly as in “…ban son ba’a” (I don’t want a joke) or in combination with different realisation to mitigate refusal, such as expressing appreciation and showing gladness as in “Na gode da irin wannan washin” (Thanks for the flattery) and “To, naiyi murna da jid haka daga wurin ka” (I’m glad to hear this from you). One participant rejected the compliment because of the misinterpretation of the complimenter’s intention. Nonacceptance was absent when a teacher complimented a student’s dress, an older person complimented a younger person’s achievement and when a boss complimented his employee’s personality. Participants also showed their doubt about the sincerity of a tailor’s admiration of their appearance. In this case, there is a logical justification for their suspicion because of the source of the compliment. One participant politely rejected a compliment by
showing his embarrassment as in “Don Allah ka daina. Ka na sani jin kunya” (Please stop it. You are embarrassing me).

Summary of Findings
From the analysis of the data, a number of observations can be made about compliments and compliment response behaviour in Hausa social contexts.

1. Participants responded naturally in the DCT. Responses were long, consisting of opening and ending sentences in Hausa. Participants used different semantic components (positive adjectives, positive noun, and positive verbs) to explicitly express compliments with varying degrees of occurrence. Participants were also non-specific, in the sense that they did not employ the use of any of the above semantic components.

2. There was an extreme divergence in responses by the participants. Some of them were conservative to compliment a teacher or a teacher to compliment a student, especially if they are not of the same gender. But others freely expressed their compliments explicitly because they have different characters with different attitudes based on many factors such as self-confidence, exposure, etc.

1. Participants were aware of the socio-pragmatic norms governing speech act of complimenting in their speech community. Therefore, a student would not compliment a teacher implicitly, using such strategies like interrogative expression, encouraging, and expression of surprise. Implicit expressions (interrogative, encouraging, and expression of surprise) had the highest occurrence in the case of an older person complimenting a younger person, while implicit expressions like, request, and desire to emulate were mostly used by younger persons complimenting older persons.

2. Expression of feelings was used by participants to show compliments. This strategy was used separately, or in combination with other basic compliment strategies. Additionally, our data reveal that participants used different devices and forms to modify the basic compliment strategies.

Conclusion
In conclusion, this paper shows divergence in giving and responding to compliments in ascending and descending interpersonal relationships. The corpus shows how social contexts affected the participants’ responses in expressing and responding to compliments. For instance, interrogative expressions, encouraging, request and jest rarely took place between unequal status (teacher-student, employer-employee, older-younger, and so on). Whereas some participants admired a teacher’s or employer’s beauty, possession of garment and personality directly, others did not respond on account that, there should be limitation in these kinds of relationships. In the responses generated from varied contexts, the participants accepted compliments in different realizations depending on four considerations: the type of relationship between interlocutors, age and gender of interlocutors, the attribute complimented, and setting. For instance, the humorous ‘praise upgrade strategy’ which violates the modesty maxim, did
notoccur between a student responding to a compliment from a teacher, this reflects the participants’ awareness of social appropriateness.

References