

“NICE SHOES!”- “THANKS”/ “IT’S CHEAP”: COMPLIMENT RESPONSES, CULTURAL OR SOMETHING ELSE?

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Abstract

This study explores the nature of compliment responses (CR) in two distinct speech communities: Indonesian and Australian speakers. Complimenting and responding to compliments vary across cultures, and this research focuses on how cultural and societal norms influence these responses. Drawing on Hofstede's cultural dimensions, the study examines differences in the way compliments are acknowledged or rejected in both communities, specifically on two types of compliments: possession and appearance. A Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was administered to 20 university students—10 from Indonesia and 10 from Australia—capturing their responses to compliments from classmates, close friends, and lecturers. The study finds that both communities predominantly use the "Accept" strategy, with Australian speakers utilizing this strategy more frequently than Indonesian speakers. However, Indonesian speakers show a higher use of "Reject" and "Evade" strategies. The study also highlights cultural nuances, with Indonesian responses varying based on the relationship to the compliment giver, while Australian responses are more influenced by the type of compliment. The findings suggest that the degree of "Face Threatening Acts" (FTA) varies between the two communities, with Indonesian responses often reflecting a higher level of "negative face" threat. The research provides insights into cross-cultural politeness strategies and complements previous studies on compliment responses. Limitations include the small sample size and focus on only two types of compliments. Future studies could further explore the role of gender and age in shaping CR patterns across different communities.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the nature of compliment response (CR) in two different speech communities and compare the result. Giving compliments and responding to it are considered as an interactional goal that varied from one culture to another. As Sucuoğlu and Bahçelerli (2015) stated in their study that while in some culture acknowledging compliments is the normal responses, in other cultures denying it is more appropriate responses. Based on this statement, contrastive study is conducted in two speech communities, Indonesian and Australian speakers. Therefore, the linguaculture to compare are Bahasa Indonesia and Australian English. Bahasa is an official language of Indonesia. There are so many variation and dialects of Bahasa Indonesia across the country. Australian is also famous for being multicultural with the English speakers from different social background. Based on Hofstede

(2019) six cultural dimension, these two communities differ in every aspects. For example, under the categories of *power distance* and *individualism*, these two communities almost opposite to each other, *power distance* is much higher in Indonesia than in Australia. On the contrary, for the *individualism* aspect, Indonesia is much lower than Australia. These two aspects are significant because CR is part of politeness strategy and communication aspects of *power* and *solidarity* are connected tightly with these aspects of culture.

This study is only focus in specific type of compliments and compliments responses. Several previous studies had been conducted in different communities about this topic, in American-English and Thai (Gajaseni, 1994), British-Spanish (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001), Chinese and Australian-English (Tang & Zhang, 2009). A study by Ibrahim and Riyanto (2004) specified in Indonesian and American speakers, they argues that different CR in these two communities is because of cultural background. Interestingly, they also find a similarity between this two speech communities but did not elaborate on it. This similarity can be trigger from different kinds of aspects, from the same type of compliments to the similar relationship of the speakers involve. According Holmes (1988) to be valued as compliments, utterances must have topics addressing interlocutor positively. These topics of compliment can be categorised as compliment type such as appearance, ability, possession, personality, and other. This current study focuses on CR resulted from a type of appearance and possession type of compliment. Therefore, the research question is "*how do the Indonesian differ and similar from their Australian counterparts in giving compliment responses on possession and appearance type of compliments?*".

RESEARCH METHOD

A methodology used to answer this research question is a discourse completion task (DCT). This methodology is widely used in investigating pragmatics and speech acts (Jebahi, 2011). There are in total 20 participants who taken this task using online google form (*see Appendix 1*). Each of the google form delivered in the language of each community. There are two sections consist of participants background information and DCT. In the DCT section there are in total six question, three question represents possession compliments type and the remaining three expresses appearance compliments type. Three different *power* and *solidarity* relations been given, compliments from classmates, close friends and lecturers. Indonesian speakers are represented by 10 university students who study in Canberra. All the participants are coming from different dialects background of Bahasa Indonesia. For Australian-English community, the data was taken from 10 university students in Canberra who has English as their first language. The number of male and female participants on both communities is balanced.

Data analysis is carried out using the CR categories by Holmes (1988) which is also used by Tang and Zhang (2009) in their study. There are three macro level strategies which are *Accept*, *Reject*, and *Evade*; also, there are ten micro level strategies within these macro-strategies (Table 1). In total, there are 120 CR data excerpts collected from the two communities in this study.

Table 3
Holmes' CR categories

Macro level CRs	Micro level CRs	Examples
Accept	Appreciation token	"Thanks"; "Thank you"; "Cheers"; "Yes"; "Good"
	Agreeing utterance	"I know"; "I am glad you think so"; "I did realize I did that well"; "Yeah, I really like it."
	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."
	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	Disagreeing utterance	"Nah, I don't think so"; "I thought I did badly"; "Nah, it's nothing special"; "It is not"; "Don't say so."
	Question accuracy	"Why?"; "Is it right?"; "Really?"
	Challenge sincerity	"Stop lying"; "Don't lie"; "Don't joke about it"; "You must be kidding"; "Don't, come on."
Evade	Shift credit	"That's what friends are for"; "You're polite"; "No worries"; "My pleasure."
	Informative comment	"It wasn't hard"; "You can get it from [store name]"; "It's really cheap."
	Request reassurance	"Really?"

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

In the macro level strategy, both communities using *Accept Strategy* more often than the two others strategy. However, the percentage of using this strategy is higher in Australian-English community than it is in Indonesian community. Australian-English community using 88.3% of accept strategy in their CR while only 68.3% of Indonesian speakers perform this strategy. *Evade Strategy* is coming in the second place in the both of communities. Indonesian speakers showed 21% of this CR strategy while Australian-English usage only 8.3%. The remaining data categorised as *Reject Strategy*, performed much more in Indonesian community made up 10% of the data while only 3.33% in their counterparts' community. In this macro-stage analysis, there are three data excerpts from Indonesian community that cannot be categorised using CR strategy. They are the data non-verbal acts consist of twice of 'only smiling' and a 'humming' (hmmm). It occurs that this type of non-verbal is using as *Evade Strategy* in this context, but this CR categories does not include any non-verbal CR in their criteria.

Looking at the macro findings in the specified aspects of *possession* and *appearance* compliments type, none of Australian-English speakers are using *Reject Strategy* on *possession* while it occurs 4 times in Indonesian speakers. Interestingly, on *appearance*, the frequency of rejects is the same in the two communities (twice), but Indonesian speakers using *Evade Strategy* far more frequent than Australian-English, 9 times and 3 times respectively.

These findings on the macro-level CR strategy is similar with Tang and Zhang (2009) studies in Chinese and Australian-English communities. In line with this, using the different CR categories, the findings on Ibrahim and Riyanto (2004) on Indonesian and American speakers also showed that 'accept strategy' is more frequent on English speaker than Indonesian speaker. Data excerpt for this macro level CR strategy from this study, for examples (see Appendix 2):

Accept Strategy

Australian-English: "Thanks!"; "Ahhh Cheers. I just got it actually!"

Indonesian: "Makasih"; "Wah, Terimakasih!"

(Thanks); "(Wow, Thank you)

Reject Strategy

Australian-English: “What are you talking about I look the same as always”

Indonesian: “Nggak kok, udah lama...”

(Not at all, it is an old things)

Evade Strategy

Australian-English: “Yeah, it was pretty cold this morning”

Indonesian: “Masa sih?”

(Really?)

Moving to the micro level of strategy, the use of combination of two or more micro level strategy appears in both communities. While this phenomenon is only found in several Indonesian's excerpts, Australian-English speakers' use it more frequently and significantly. Australian-English speakers mostly express the combinations of *appreciation token* with other micro level strategy such *return compliment*, *question accuracy*, and *informative comment*. This trend is shown across the data and it is very rare that the speakers only use one strategy. This finding is clearly stated on Herbert (1989)'s study explaining that whether English speakers are questioned on how to response to compliments, most likely they have unanimous agreement to response with '*thank you*'. In Indonesian community, the combination strategy is slightly different. Among a few combinations in this community, it can be categorised as *disagreeing utterance* followed by *downgrading*, *challenge sincerity* and *question accuracy*. Most of the time, Indonesian speakers only use one strategy with a short answer defining by less than three words.

Discussion

Based on the findings above, the difference on how the community's response to compliment showing that in communication, Indonesian and Australian use compliments functionally vary to each other. According to politeness theory of Face Threatening Acts (FTA) (Brown & Levinson, 1987) , compliments are considered as positive speech acts but at the same time attacking a negative face of addressee. Both of the communities considered compliment as a positive speech acts but differ in the degree of attacking negative face. The CR response from Australian speakers which are mostly under the categories of *appreciation token* indicates in this community, compliments are mostly attacking positive face. Meanwhile, for Indonesian speakers, the degree of attacking negative face is slightly higher than their Australian counterparts. This can be seen from the higher *Reject Strategy* on this community and also strategy combination used. Furthermore, Herbert (1989) argues that in English, compliments can be function as *greetings* or *opener*. This is the reason the CR from Australian speaker are much longer than their Indonesian counterparts. The CR used to continue the conversation and taking as one of the small talk topics. Mukminati and Patriana (2005) explained that receiver of compliments in in Indonesian community feels the conflicts of giving response to compliments, by accepting it, a person might indicate arrogant, and by rejecting it might hurt the interlocutor feeling. Giving this conflicted situation, simply giving CR '*thank you*' meaning to accept the compliments but indirectly does not agree with the contents of the compliments. This explanation in line with the data shown on relatively short answer by the Indonesian speakers.

Turning to CR on *possession* type of compliments, while in Australian-English speakers there is no significant change of CR pattern on different compliment givers, Indonesian speakers performed different CR based on who give the compliment. The

possession compliment type is focusing on fashion items of shoes, bags, and jackets given by a classmate, a close friend, and a lecturer. Australian speech community shown the same pattern on these three settings, most of them using CR of *appreciation token + informative comment*. These informative comments are mostly on where the compliment receiver got their fashion items. Several data excerpts on Australian speakers also shown the occurrence of gesture of smiling which spread evenly on the settings. Indonesian speech communities have a similar CR pattern when the compliments coming from a classmate and a lecturer. They simply give CR of *appreciation token*. However, the actual phrases used is different in these two contexts. In the settings of a lecturer, responses appear in the full and formal version of gratitude follow by honorific pronoun to address a lecturer, ‘*Terimakasih Pak/Bu*’ (*Thank you Sir/Mam*). For the classmates, the speakers’ CR using the short type ‘*makasih*’ (*thanks*) also consider as an informal version of gratitude. This is utterly different with Australian community where some of CR to a lecturer using ‘*cheers*’ instead of ‘thank you very much’. Slightly contrasting pattern demonstrate on the CR of a close friend’s compliment, Indonesian speakers tend to use *disagreeing utterance* and *shift credit*. The content of their utterance is about “*udah lama*” (*this is an old bag*), this utterance also shown once from an Australian speaker’s CR.

Moving to the *appearance compliment type*, in these settings the converse pattern appears. While Indonesian speakers’ CRs are stay the same as the previous setting, Australian speech community use different CR strategy for this context. In this setting, compliments given by the same person as before, they comment on “*looking nice*” and being “*handsome/pretty*”.

Indonesian speech community maintaining to have similar reaction on complements from a classmate and a lecturer. The exact same pattern appears on CR for a lecturer’s compliment, using formal and honorific pronouns, while for a classmate’s compliment, several CRs categorised as *challenge sincerity* or *request reassurance*. More interesting CR pattern happens on Australian speech community, in this context, Australian speaker’s CR on a classmate compliments are mostly using *appreciation token + return compliments*. They demonstrate CR by complimenting their classmates saying “*you look nice too*” or giving back compliments on something else like hairstyle. On a close friend’s CR, Australian speakers express with *challenge sincerity* and *shift credit*. They still perform appreciation token but followed by these strategies. The 3.33% of *Reject Strategy* on the macro level analysis for Australian speech community are in fact from this context on a close friend complementing on *appearance*. Non-verbal data excerpts are also shown frequently in this context, like smiling, laughing, and exhaling air, and also joking statements. These joking statement consist of “*So, I was ugly before?*” and “*I guess you are losing your eye sight!*”. For a lecture’s CR, Australian keep using *appreciation token* follow with *informative comment* and even *return compliment*.

Comparing with the previous study, a Rees-Miller (2011)’s research are mostly about relation of English compliments and gender, but several parts of her findings are in line with this current study specifically on *appearance compliments type*. The settings in this study is not concern on the gender of compliments giver, however the data collection have an information on the compliment receiver’s gender. According to Rees-Miller (2011), *appearance compliments* between women is functioned as ‘phatic communication’ which is an interaction of small talks to socially involve mainly by increasing solidarity and intimacy. On the findings above, *return compliment* is a significant strategy to use by Australian speakers on CR of *appearance*. It is indeed that three out of four CRs *return compliments* strategy are performed by female speakers. This indicates that solidarity becomes the main

reason to perform this type of CR. By making a compliment back to the giver, speakers hinted that they are happy, and open to start a new conversation to the compliment's giver. Moreover, Rees-Miller (2011) also argues that complimenting on *appearance* can increase a positive mood of a receiver. This is might be a possible explanation on the non-verbal's findings on the data, which are sign post of positive mood like smiling and laughing. As for this non-verbal, it happens in not only in Australian speakers but also in Indonesian speakers.

Based on the detail analysis on both topics of compliments, Indonesian speakers tend to change their CR according to relationship of a compliment givers while for Australian speakers this CRs pattern attach more on the type of compliment given. Wolfson (1981) argues that speech acts including compliments are tightly bound by the culture. Looking back at the *power distance* in Indonesia which is quite high perhaps the reason to explain different CRs based on the givers. It is clearly seen that for CR from a lecturer who considered to have more *power* are very different with the one from a close friend. This also happen to a classmate who considered to be equal but less familiarity. In the same study, a compliment example from Indonesian speakers taken from a very strange topics according to English speakers' perspective, like saved money and bought a sewing machine which categorised as *accomplishment*. This could be a hint on the CR pattern of Indonesian speech community which did not change according to the topics. It can be simply because the two compliments type in this study is not widely use in this community. So, the type of CR did not vary on these two contexts. Moving to the Australian speech communities, in Rees-Miller (2011)'s study the two most significant data are coming from *appearance* and *performance compliments*. So, in English these particular two categories are widely accepted and common in interaction. While in *possession* categories, Australian speakers do not show any significant pattern is because it is not as common as the other categories. It is also worth to mention that one of the Australian male participants after completing the DCT commenting on how hard it was for him to answer on complementing something he wore. This could be an insight to the result of CRs *possession* type pattern on Australian speech community.

CONCLUSION

Finally, in giving compliment responses on *possession* and *appearance* type of compliments Australian-English and Indonesian speech community have several similarities and differences. The similarities shown on in the macro level analysis, both of communities have the same CR patterns using mostly *Accept Strategy* follows by *Evade Strategy* and *Reject Strategy*. The difference on these community are shown on the micro level analysis. While *appreciation token* in Indonesian speakers solely used, Australian speakers mostly use this micro level strategy in combination with others. Based on the CRs result, the function of compliments also differs in these speech communities. Both of communities considered compliments are positive speech acts but Indonesian speech community given more degree on attacking '*negative face*' than it is in their Australian counterparts. The difference also found in the specific analysis on *possession* and *appearance*, relationship factors affect the CRs from Indonesian speakers whereas Australian-English speakers' CR change based on type of compliments given.

This paper is a small-scale study which has several limitations. The small number of participants, there are only twenty speakers in total. There only two types of compliments given as a setting, as it cannot picture compliment responses (CR) in general. The participants could not represent the whole communities in general but still can give a glimpse of the CRs pattern in both communities. The background of participants can also be the limitation, as this study only include students in tertiary education. For future study, considering the age group

and gender both for the compliments giver and receiver can make the broader horizon in studying complement responses in different speech community.

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