

American Compliments

Functions of Compliments

In American English we use compliments for a variety of reasons:

- To express admiration or approval of someone's work/appearance/taste ([Manes, 1983](#); [Herbert, 1990](#)).
- To establish/confirm/maintain solidarity ([Manes & Wolfson, 1981](#); [Wolfson, 1989](#)).
- To replace greetings/gratitude/apologies/congratulations ([Wolfson, 1983, 1989](#)).
- To soften face-threatening acts such as apologies, requests and criticism ([Brown & Levinson, 1978](#); [Wolfson, 1983](#)).
- To open and sustain conversation (conversation strategy) ([Wolfson, 1983](#); [Billmyer, 1990](#); [Dunham, 1992](#)).
- To reinforce desired behavior ([Manes, 1983](#)).

A great majority of compliments are addressed to people of similar age and status to the compliment giver ([Knapp, Hopper, & Bell, 1984](#) [©]).

Acceptance responses occur only about a third of the time. In American English, two thirds of the time respondents to compliments do something other than to accept them ([Herbert, 1990](#)).

Major compliment topics can be classified into 3 categories:

1. appearance/possessions

Compliments on someone's appearance or possessions are the most common type of compliments in American English. "Your blouse looks **beautiful!**" is an example of an **adjectival compliment**. About 2/3 of adjectival compliments use the words *nice*, *good*, *pretty*, *great*, or *beautiful* ([Manes & Wolfson, 1981](#)). *Good* is often used for performance and *nice* is mostly used for appearance/attire ([Knapp et al., 1984](#) [©]).

"I really **love** your car!" is an example of a compliment that contains a **semantically positive verb**. *Like* or *love* are used 90% of the time in this type of compliment. Some other semantically positive verbs that are used would be *admire* and *be impressed* ([Wolfson, 1989](#)).

2. performance/skills/abilities

"You did a good job!" and "You are such a wonderful writer" are examples of compliments on performance/skills/abilities.

Concise compliments such as "Nice shot!" are typically given by male speakers ([Herbert, 1990](#)).

3. personality traits

Such comments as "Good boy" and "You're so sweet" are compliments on the addressee's personality traits. This category of compliments occurs less frequently than those on appearance/possessions and performance/skills/abilities ([Holmes, 1988](#)).

In terms of sentence structure, compliments in American English can be classified into 9 categories.

NP = noun phrase

ADJ = adjective

PRO = pronoun

V = verb

ADV = adverb

1. Your blouse is/looks (really) beautiful. (NP is/looks (really) ADJ)
2. I (really) like/love your car. (I (really) like/love NP)
3. That's a (really) nice wall hanging. (PRO is (really) a ADJ NP)
4. You did a (really) good job. (You V a (really) ADV NP)
5. You really handled that situation well. (You V (NP) (really) ADV)
6. You have such beautiful hair! (You have (a) ADJ NP!)
7. What a lovely baby you have! (What (a) ADJ NP!)
8. Nice game! (ADJ NP!)
9. Isn't your ring beautiful! (Isn't NP ADJ!)

Above passages from [Manes & Wolfson \(1981\)](#), p. 120.