

Compliments in Chinese and American English: A Contrastive Analysis

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Abstract: The compliment is one of the most widely used speech acts in Chinese and American English. While both in Chinese and American English compliments are employed to extend greetings, show encouragement, extend gratitude and open up a new topic, differences do exist in terms of topics, formulas, and responses. A contrastive analysis of compliments in Chinese and American English will help increase the awareness of cultural factor in Teaching English as Foreign Language (TEFL), thereby improving cross-cultural communications and interactions.

Introduction

Compliments are commonly and widely used both in Chinese and American society to greet, encourage, thank, and to open a conversation. As a polite speech act that explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone for something that is valued positively by the speaker and hearer, a native speaker of a particular language is taken for granted to know when and how to offer and respond compliment appropriately. For example,

1) 甲: 你的字写得真好, 学的是什么体啊?

A: Your handwriting is beautiful, what style are you following?

乙: 哪里, 哪里, 我还差得远着呢, 什么体也不是。

B: No, it's nothing. I am just scratching.

2) A: Your French is good. Where did you learn your excellent French?

B: Thank you. I learned it at my university.

It is clear that a Chinese and an American respond to a compliment differently. For a simply compliment like the above, a Chinese tend not to accept the compliment though the particular compliment itself to his talent in handwriting is well appreciated. As for an American, he or she normally accepts the compliment with pleasure. This paper attempts to

call attention to the necessity of paying attention to cultural factors in TEF by identify and analyzing the possible differences of compliment usage in Chinese and American language so that cross-cultural communications and interactions would be effectively undertaken.

Topics for Chinese and American Compliments

Both in Chinese and American societies, compliments are employed to start a conversation. Appearances, talents, ability, and achievements are common topics in Chinese and American language.

1. Complimenting appearance

The appearance of a speaker or hearer such as color of skin, clothing, style, etc. is a major topic of compliment, but the difference is that sex is an important factor for consideration when a Chinese is to compliment the appearance of a hearer.

3) 今天你真精神!

You look handsome today.

4) 多漂亮的毛衣啊!

What a beautiful sweater.

In the Chinese society, if the hearer is a male, complimenting his appearance as shown in example 3) is appropriate. But the speaker has to be very careful if he or she is to compliment a female hearer because it is against rules governing the speech act of compliment in Chinese unless the speaker is very intimate to the hearer. But it is all right for a Chinese speaker to compliment a hearer of same sex with regard to the appearance. Besides, age or social status is also a factor that affects the speech act of compliment if this speech act happens between two interlocutors of same sex. A senior speaker can compliment a junior hearer's appearance but not vice versa. For example:

5) 甲: (年长或上级) 小李, 你这身打扮真精神。

(A senior speaker to a junior hearer) You look terrific today.

Complimenting the appearance of a hearer is more flexible in the American society, and a female hearer tends to welcome or appreciate compliments of her appearance be it is from a male or female speaker.

6) You're wearing a lovely skirt. You look sexy.

7) Your new sweater looks great on you. I really like the style.

Compliments in examples 6) and 7) are quite appropriate to a female hearer in American English regardless of the sex of the speaker. But it would be inappropriate or even rude in the Chinese context.

2. Complimenting talent or ability

The talent or ability is another major topic of compliments in both Chinese and American societies. But again there are two differences between the two languages. First, compliments by an American speaker would focus more on the achievements by a hearer as a result of hard work and less on the talent or ability of the hearer. For example:

8) You've done a great job.

9) You made a great presentation. I like it.

But a Chinese speaker tends to compliment a hearer's quality or talent. For example:

10) 你真能干，把家操持得这么好。

What a capable housewife. You take so good care of your family.

11) 你脾气真好，对孩子这么有耐心。

You have got such a good temper and are so patient to kids.

The second difference is that in American society compliments on one's ability are usually made by the speaker of higher social status because they are serious judgments that have to be made by capable people. Obviously it would be inappropriate for a speaker with lower social status to make such compliments to a hearer with higher social status. For example:

12) I'm satisfied with what have done.

13) (A native speaker to a non-native speaker) I must applaud your excellent English. I wish my Chinese were as good as your English.

In the Chinese context, however, it is not uncommon to have compliments from a junior official to compliment his or her superior. For example:

14) 刘教授，您知道得真多，我现在明白了。

You're so knowledgeable, Professor Liu. Now I fully understood this point.

Clearly, example 14) would be very inappropriate in American context. In fact it could be regarded as a flattery rather than a compliment.

Formulas of Compliments in Chinese and American English

One may have noticed that examples of compliments above, either Chinese or American English, have been highly formulaic in nature. Manes & Wolfson believe that only three basic syntactic patterns would suffice the expression of compliments. They are:

NP is/looks (really) ADJ (e.g., “Your blouse is beautiful”)

I (really) like/love NP (e.g., “I like your car”)

Pro is (really) (a) ADJ NP (e.g., “That’s a nice painting”)

As for Chinese, there has been so far no comprehensive study on the formulas of Chinese compliments. But it is clear that compliments in Chinese context are viewed as a means or intention to show respect, therefore, should be very polite. On many occasions, a Chinese speaker when making compliments tends to play down himself or herself to show his or her respect to the hearer. Instead of “你” (you), its honorific form “您” (you) is often used. Moreover, the honorific form of you is often employed at the very beginning of a sentence. For example:

15) 您的设计多有创意啊。

What an original design.

16) 您这件毛衣很漂亮，您看上去年轻多了。

Your sweater is very beautiful. You look much younger.

“Lack of originality” is another feature of compliments in both Chinese and American English. Highly restricted set of adjectives and verbs are used in both Chinese and American contexts when make compliments. The most frequently used adjectives are those words like “nice”, “good”, “beautiful”, and “pretty”. For verbs, words such as “like” and “love” are two commonly used ones. And in Chinese one may find a similar feature.

If there is any difference, one feature stands out. An American speaker likes to express his or her view in a directly way, therefore the first person is more used. For example:

17) I like the way you talk.

18) I am so proud of you.

While a Chinese speaker is more likely to use second person when he or she wants to compliment:

19) 你的房子真漂亮。

Your house is very beautiful.

20) 你儿子真乖。

Your son is so cute.

Responses to Compliments in Chinese and American English

Responses to compliments in Chinese and American English are so different that one can easily find the influence of two cultures on the usage of compliments. Examples 1) and 2) clearly show the two different responses to the compliment, i.e. an American tends to appreciate a compliment by saying “thank you” while a Chinese would prefer to deny though it does not necessarily mean he or she does not welcome the compliment.

Further analysis of different responses to compliments in Chinese and American English reinforce this point. In Chinese context, even for the hearer who wants to accept the compliment, he or she would choose to deny or not to show full acceptance. For example:

21) 甲：好久不见，你越活越年轻了。

Long time no see. You look much younger.

乙：哪能啊，你别拿我开玩笑。

Oh, no. Don't tease me.

In American English, however, even if the hearer does not fully agree with the speaker's compliment, he or she would prefer to appreciate first then deny, i.e. a strategy of “acceptance or acknowledgement and transfer”. For example:

22) A: You did very well on your presentation. You're a great public speaker.

B: Thank you. I took a lot of preparation.

23) A: That's a lovely blouse you're wearing!

B: Well, I went shopping on Saturday and happened to see it in one of the stores.

An interesting point has to be made here is that language teaching and learning would affect the way to respond to compliments. A learner would tend to employ the responses of the language he or she is learning. For example, if an English learner comes across with compliment of “Your English is excellent”, he or she is more likely to respond with “Thank you”, and for a Chinese learner of American, if his or her Chinese is complimented, he or she would react with “哪里，哪里” (No, no). But when the Chinese learner receives Chinese

compliments, he would more likely to react in the typical Chinese way. So is the American learner of Chinese.

Discussion

Many attempts have been made to explain the factors contributing to the differences of compliment strategy between Chinese and American English, but it appears that none of them has been able to provide a satisfactory answer. It is clear that the compliment, like any other speech act, reflects a variety of cultural norms and values and in so doing serves to express and maintain these values of a particular language. Compliments in Chinese and American English should not be the exception.

Firstly, in the Chinese culture, modesty is always regarded as one of the most important virtues. Denigrating others while elevating self is widely perceived as being “arrogant” or “boasting”, therefore should be avoided. In American English, individualism and the value of mutual respect and acknowledgement are highly valued. Therefore, for a particular compliment, an acceptance is preferred over a denial as people tend to believe respect and acknowledge others and choose to be treated in the same manner in social interactions. Understanding this cultural difference is extremely important in the sense that a modest Chinese who is denigrating or humbling himself or herself should not be misunderstood as incompetent or ineffective. And an acknowledging American should not be viewed as arrogant or boasting.

Secondly, different topics appropriate for complimenting in Chinese and American English are attributed to different values in Chinese and American cultures. While the appearance of female in Chinese can be complimented, it is not as widely as that in American context. Rather it is sex sensitive and restrained. As shown in examples above, in Chinese context, a male speaker has to be very careful to compliment a female so as to avoid the inappropriateness or even rudeness. Obviously this difference is greatly due to different social status in the two cultures.

Thirdly, the relationship of the speaker and the hearer is another important point that should be taken into account when a compliment is used, particularly in terms of compliments of one’s ability or talent. In American society, equality is highly valued and achievements are

greatly appreciated. In Chinese society, however, complimenting is sometimes hard to differ from flattery. One has to be very carefully so as to make a compliment more appropriate.

Conclusion

The above analysis on the whole has disclosed some different features of compliments in Chinese and American English. It is found that while both Chinese and American English use compliments widely in social interactions, there are differences between the two languages in terms of the topic, formula, and response of compliments. Although this analysis is by no means to exhaustive, and in fact very preliminary, it is the author's genuine belief that understanding these differences, which are not as simple as "Chinese saying 'no' to compliments and American saying 'thank you', would help improve the effectiveness of cross-cultural communications and interaction. Therefore, TEF should start to increase awareness of cultural factors in language teaching and learning no matter what level it is, be it at the level of secondary education or higher education.

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