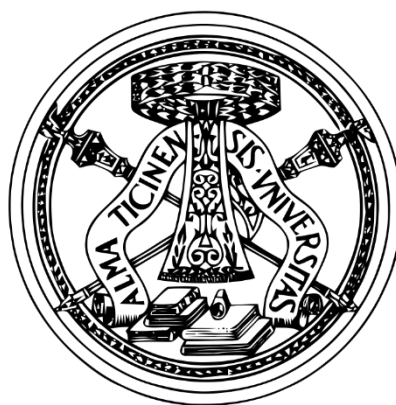


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POLITENESS AND SPEECH ACTS: A STUDY ON RE-
SPONSES TO COMPLIMENTS AMONG ENGLISH AND
ITALIAN SPEAKERS



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ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the speech acts of complimenting and responding to compliments, specifically analysing the main differences and similarities between American English and Italian speakers. In order to do so, this study relies on the theoretical background of pragmatics and politeness theory, mainly taking into consideration the works of Brown and Levinson, Pomerantz, Herbert, and Alfonzetti. The primary goal is to investigate how specific socio-cultural norms influence compliment responses, specifically by comparing how young American and Italian women manage this complex speech act. To gather data, a qualitative and observational method was chosen. The corpus was created by conducting ten covert, face-to-face structured interviews with female university students (five Americans and five Italians). During these interviews, the interviewer gave four specific types of compliments (about physical appearance, personal possessions, academic choices, and linguistic competence) to see how the subjects would respond without them knowing the real purpose of the interview. Following the transcription phase, the compliment-response sequences were first extracted, and a pragmatic annotation was then conducted using a coding system based on Herbert's taxonomy, in order to assign one or more specific strategies to each response. The comparative analysis shows deep intercultural differences based on how these two groups manage what Pomerantz called the conflict between the Agreement Maxim and the Modesty Maxim. The data shows that American young women frequently use direct acceptance strategies by showing a clear preference to respect the Agreement Maxim in order to establish solidarity with the interlocutor. On the other hand, Italian young women show a strong preference for the Modesty Maxim. They tend to avoid accepting the compliment directly because it could be seen as arrogant self-praise. Consequently, the Italian interviewees rely significantly more on disagreement strategies in order to actively downplay the praise and merit, or they use reassignment strategies to easily shift the credit to a third party. Despite these differences, there is one striking similarity: the total absence of the "Praise Upgrade" strategy in both groups. This proves that, while avoiding direct self-praise is a universal rule especially in female interactions, how people actually respond to compliments is definitely a culturally bound phenomenon.

INTRODUCTION

Every day, when people interact with one another, they do much more than just exchange information. According to the speech act theory first introduced by J.L. Austin and later developed by John Searle, when we speak, we are actively performing actions at the exact same time. These actions can be requesting, apologizing, promising, and, of course, complimenting. This thesis will specifically focus on the expressive speech act of complimenting and, as a natural and inevitable consequence, on the compliment response. The act of exchanging compliments is a common communicative practice all over the world, but it can also be considered quite problematic. Compliments are usually seen as "social lubricants" that help to increase solidarity and maintain personal relationships with the interlocutor. However, responding to a compliment can put the recipient in a difficult interactional position. Anita Pomerantz explained this by introducing a specific conversational dilemma: the person receiving the compliment is torn between the desire to accept it and agree with the speaker (respecting the Agreement Maxim) and the need to avoid self-praise and not sound arrogant (respecting the Modesty Maxim). To fully understand this dilemma, it is fundamental to consider the concept of linguistic politeness and the idea of "face", introduced by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson in their Politeness Theory. They argued that every person has a positive face, which is the desire to be accepted by others, and a negative face, which is the desire to be free from imposition. Since every utterance is potentially a face-threatening act (FTA), managing a compliment requires a lot of pragmatic competence. Accepting a compliment too directly might threaten the speaker's own face by making them appear vain, while rejecting it could threaten the interlocutor's positive face by rejecting

their verbal gift. The main goal of this research is to investigate how this specific speech act is managed in two different cultures and languages: American English and Italian. The reasoning for this choice is that compliments are an everyday routine, but they are governed by very specific socio-cultural values. While American English has been widely studied, for instance in the famous quantitative research by Robert Herbert, the Italian context has remained on the margins, despite the great qualitative contributions of Giovanna Alfonzetti. Therefore, there was a need for a comparative analysis that uses the exact same method to evaluate both cultures. In order to gather authentic conversational data, a qualitative and observational method was chosen. The corpus was created by conducting ten covert, face-to-face structured interviews with female university students (five Americans and five Italians). During these interviews, the interviewer strategically gave four specific types of compliments, particularly about physical appearance, personal possessions, academic choices, and linguistic competence, in order to see how the subjects would respond without them knowing the real purpose of the interaction. After transcribing all the interviews, the specific compliment-response sequences were isolated, and a pragmatic annotation was carried out. By employing a coding system based on Herbert's taxonomy, it was possible to assign one or more specific politeness strategies to each response. Furthermore, it was chosen to focus exclusively on women. As the literature suggests, women offer and receive compliments more frequently and tend to use more complex strategies compared to men. Consequently, by analysing female-to-female interactions, it is possible to capture all the complex pragmatic aspects of politeness. Through this analysis, the study aims to answer some main questions: what are the structural and strategic differences between Americans and Italians in responding to different

types of compliments? How does their culture influence their choice between the Agreement and Modesty Maxims? And finally, do the results confirm the existing theories proposed by Herbert and Alfonzetti? In order to answer these questions, the thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 1 will provide an introduction to pragmatics, speech acts, and the concept of linguistic politeness, focusing on Brown and Levinson's theory. Chapter 2 will explore compliments and compliment responses in more depth, presenting the main taxonomies and the intercultural dimension. Chapter 3 will focus on the research methodology and how the data was collected through interviews. Chapter 4 will present the comparative analysis of the results between the American and the Italian corpus, and it will also include the comparison between the obtained results and the literature-based theories. Finally, the Conclusions will outline the general findings of the research, its theoretical implications, and future perspectives.

1. Understanding speech acts in pragmatics

1.1 Introduction to pragmatics

Pragmatics studies the meaning of an utterance not only based on the linguistic knowledge but also based on the context. In other words, it studies the meaning in context. This actually means that through context we could understand for example the status of the people involved in the interaction, the relationship between them, the intention of the speaker et cetera¹. Yule (1996: 4) describes pragmatics as: "the study of the relationship between linguistic forms and the users of those forms"². In contrast to lexis and syntax, where all is visible and explicit, pragmatics concerns itself with implicature, which are the cases for instance when what is referred to "implied meaning" is opposed or different to the mere lexical meaning expressed by lexis and syntax. There are in fact situations when we say something implicitly that can be understood through the analysis of the general context³. Pragmatics can also be considered one of the most difficult aspects of language knowledge to learn because most of the times it comes through experience with the language itself. For example, children acquire pragmatic knowledge in their first language through experience, for instance by having daily interactions with their parents, with other children at school, with their teachers and so forth. What happens is that they receive input from others and also feedback that help them to understand how to use the language in an appropriate way in order to function in their community and society. For this reason, as pointed out by scholars like Kasper and Rose (2002: 5) and

¹ Sadeghghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh, 2016. Theories on Politeness by Focusing on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. Sarab: Islamic Azad University, p.27.

² Sadeghghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ibidem.

³ Sadeghghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ibidem.

Bardovi-Harlig (1999: 234), pragmatics is considered the most challenging and demanding part of learning a language for second language learners, especially for adults. In fact, without the continuous input they might still be considered fluent in the foreign language, but they may lack pragmatic competence and as a result they may find themselves unable to use the language in a socially and culturally appropriate way⁴. In the following sections there will be explanations and insights on two specific topics in the subfield of pragmatics which are: speech acts and speech act theory and the concept and theory of politeness.

1.1.1 The evolution of speech act theory: from Austin to Searle

The speech act theory is one of the most fundamental theories in the study of languages and how they work. This theory has influenced not only philosophy and communication, but also linguistics. In the field of linguistics in particular, which is the one concerning this thesis, we will be looking at the evolution of this theory, starting with the introduction of J.L. Austin (1962: 4) and his initial investigations of the subject and moving on with the introduction of John Searle's (1969: 16) important contributions. In fact, Austin and Searle were the two main pioneers of the theory⁵. It all started with Austin's (1962: 6) distinction between two types of utterances, which are the "constative utterances" and the "performative utterances." With the term "constative," Austin refers to the linguistic expressions that are either true or false and are used to describe facts or states of affairs

⁴ Sadeghoghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ibidem.

⁵ Mabaquiao, Napoleon Jr. M., 2018. Speech Act theory: from Austin to Searle. Manila: De La Salle University, p.1.

in the world⁶. They are what we call “statements”⁷. On the other hand, with the term “performatives,” Austin refers to linguistic expressions that are used to perform certain actions⁸. In other words, it means that while producing an utterance, we are performing an action at the exact same time. For example, let us consider the utterance: “I advise you to seek permission from your parents.” The person uttering this sentence is actually performing the act of advising. In the sentence: “I order you to read a book before going to bed,” the person who is pronouncing those words is in fact performing the act of ordering⁹. Austin talks about the “condition of success” by establishing certain conditions for both constative and performative acts in order to be able to say with certainty that they are one or the other. For instance, the conditions of success for constative utterances are indicated by two separate values: truth or falsity. This means that if a constative represents what it intended to represent, it can be said that that specific constative is true, otherwise we say that it is false. An example could be: “It’s snowing.” In this case, if what the person uttering this sentence is telling the truth and it’s actually snowing, then the statement is true, and we are looking at a constative¹⁰. Whilst, talking about the conditions of success of the performatives, Austin introduced two expressions, which are “happy” and “unhappy” to indicate, respectively, the possible success or failure of the performative acts. The concept behind is that the success of the performatives can be determined by the fact that the action it intends to perform is successfully done, otherwise it is unhappy. An example proposed could be saying: “I promise to attend your birthday party”

⁶ Mabaquiao, Napoleon Jr. M. Ivi. p.4.

⁷ Mabaquiao, Napoleon Jr. M. Ibidem.

⁸ Mabaquiao, Napoleon Jr. M. Ibidem.

⁹ Mabaquiao, Napoleon Jr. M. Ibidem.

¹⁰ Mabaquiao, Napoleon Jr. M. Ivi. p.5.

and not meaning what I have just said or not being sincere about it, means that I did not actually perform the act of making a promise and consequently can be considered unhappy. The most important aspect in order to understand them is thinking about whether the person uttering the sentence is performing the act she intended to perform or not¹¹. Moreover, Austin introduced other important notions about speech acts and particularly about performatives, the first being the difference between explicit and implicit performatives. Addressing firstly the explicit ones, Austin refers to them as the ones where it is clear what kind of action is being performed because it is said explicitly, like: "I advise you..." On the other hand, an implicit performative act is one where, on the contrary, it is not clear what kind of action is being performed. When an implicit performative is being performed, it is usually the context that can help the other interlocutor understand what action is behind the words¹². Austin has also introduced the idea of the categories in which the performative acts can be divided into. The three component acts are: the locutionary act, the illocutionary act and lastly the perlocutionary acts. The locutionary act refers to the actual utterance of the performatives or the words that are used to create the whole sentence. The illocutionary act is the action that is done while pronouncing the utterance. Lastly, the perlocutionary act refers to the reaction or effect that the speaker causes in the hearer by pronouncing the utterance, for example the speaker may want to convince or persuade the interlocutor¹³. Other than Austin, another fundamental linguistics pioneer has been mentioned, i.e. John Searle. Searle is in fact the one who introduced the general term "Speech Act" to refer to what Austin called

¹¹ Mabaquiao, Napoleon Jr. M. Ibidem.

¹² Mabaquiao, Napoleon Jr. M. Ivi. p.7.

¹³ Mabaquiao, Napoleon Jr. M. Ivi. p.8.

“Performative Act”¹⁴. In particular, he concentrated his studies on illocutionary acts, because he believed that these were, and still are, the primary speech acts. Searle proposed a two components structure of the so called “illocutionary act”: firstly, he introduced the “propositional content” as the descriptive core of the sentence, which he also defined as the “what” of the utterance, like for instance the subject and the predicate. Secondly, he introduced the second component, called “Illocutionary Force,” which is the added element to the propositional content and what makes the interlocutor understand how the utterance should be taken. It refers to the action, to what the speaker is doing by pronouncing those words together¹⁵. Austin wrote one of his most renowned works, titled “How to do Things with Words”, in which he included the categorization of performative acts. The five types are commissive, expositives, exercitives, behabitives and verdictives. The commissives acts are used to commit the speaker to a future course of action, which means that the person talking is binding themselves to take some sort of action in the future, like promising something. The expositives are used to clarify the utterances into a conversation in order to structure it. Then there are the exercitives, that are used when the speaker is trying for example to influence or affect the interlocutor and the most explicit examples are: advise, request and order. Austin also talks about the behabitives, which are the ones that will interest the most the main topic of this thesis. They express the speaker’s attitude towards something or someone when there is the need to express some type of emotion or feeling and they also include reactions to someone else’s behaviour or action. The main examples are apologising, thanking, congratulating, complimenting etc. The last ones are the verdictives, which

¹⁴ Mabaquiao, Napoleon Jr. M. Ibidem.

¹⁵ Mabaquiao, Napoleon Jr. M. Ivi. p.9.

express a type of opinion or judgment of the speaker, like estimating, assessing etc¹⁶. Whilst Austin's classification has been defined by scholars like Allan (1986: 175) and Leech (1983: 205) as accurate and complete, he described it as "preliminary and exploratory" and this is the main reason of why Searle (1976: 1) decided to come up with his own classification of the five types of speech acts, which are: the assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives¹⁷. The assertives are the type of speech acts that are used to convince the hearer of the truthfulness of the proposition and some examples are: statements, explanations, and descriptions. Then the directives are the ones that are used by the speaker to get the hearer to behave in a specific way, like what happens with orders, commands, and requests. The illocutionary point of the commissives is instead for the speaker to commit to what he has just said, like in promises, guarantees, vows etc. The expressives, on the other hand, are the ones used to express "the sincerity condition of the speech act" and some examples are apologies, congratulations, thanks, and condolences. Lastly, the illocutionary point of the declaratives is to create a type of change in the world by for example pronouncing specific words, like what happens in ceremonies ("I pronounce you husband and wife"), in graduation ceremonies, in court decisions etc¹⁸. Having discussed Austin and Searle's categorizations of speech acts, it's now fundamental to introduce the two types of speech acts that interest this specific thesis, i.e. complimenting and thanking. In order to properly introduce them, Austin, and Searle's classifications, already introduced, could be used as an explanation tool. In particular, complimenting and thanking speech acts can be categorized like

¹⁶ Mabaquiao, Napoleon Jr. M. Ivi. p.11.

¹⁷ Mabaquiao, Napoleon Jr. M. Ivi. p.12.

¹⁸ Mabaquiao, Napoleon Jr. M. Ivi. p.13-14-15.

this: Austin's "behabitives" and Searle's "expressives." Starting with the behabitives introduced by Austin, they are speech acts that have to do with social attitudes and behaviour¹⁹. They can be described to be either the speaker's attitude or behaviour towards the interlocutor, while producing a compliment, or they could be also described as the opposite, which is the notion of a reaction to people's behaviours and expressions of attitudes, like the case of thanking the interlocutor for the compliment they just made towards you. As already mentioned earlier, they are obviously connected to a way of expressing our feelings and attitudes²⁰. Searle, as already explained, criticized Austin's classification and by doing so he gave other points of view for all the types of speech acts. For the expressives specifically, he said that: "The illocutionary point of this class is to express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content"²¹. For Searle "thank" and "congratulate", which could also include "compliment", are some of the paradigms of expressive verbs. Adapting Searle's definition to these two speech acts that interest this thesis the most, it can be explained by saying that when someone makes a compliment to their interlocutor, their ultimate goal is not to declare something (like constatives), but to express our admiration or appreciation towards the other person. This is the focus of the proposition mainly because we assume the truthfulness of our words²². For instance, if someone says to their interlocutor "What a nice hat!," he is not trying to declare that the object over his head is in fact a hat, nor is he trying to convince him of the fact that he is actually wearing a hat or that he needs to wear

¹⁹ Austin, John Langshaw, 1962. *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p.151.

²⁰ Austin, John Langshaw. *Ivi*. p.159.

²¹ Searle, John Rogers, 1976. *A classification of illocutionary acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.13.

²² Searle, John Rogers. *Ibidem*.

it. The speaker, by taking for granted the fact that he has that hat, is just simply expressing his feeling or attitude towards it. As it can be observed in this example, Searle also declared that an expressive always requires the fact that the property in the proposition needs to always concern the speaker and the hearer. For example, talking about compliments, it is quite clear that the property concerns what the speaker thinks of the hearer and in the case of thanking, it concerns the hearer's attitudes towards what has already been done by the speaker²³.

1.1.2 Expressive speech acts: complimenting and thanking

The “expressive” illocutionary acts classified by Searle have been further explained in more detail by another fundamental author: Norrick (1978: 283) introduced for instance two key aspects, which are the semantic roles and the concept of value, which serve to describe them in more depth²⁴. Talking specifically about the act of thanking, in which there is the hearer who is considered the agent because he is the one who does the action and the speaker who is the patient because he receives it²⁵. Norrick also explained how the case of complimenting, which he declared a part of the act of congratulating, is more complicated: the hearer could in fact take on the role of patient in the case of having received a compliment without having made an active effort, for instance for having inherited a sum of money. On the other hand, the hearer could also be classified as an agent for having actively performed some sort of action, like for having

²³ Searle, John Rogers. Ibidem.

²⁴ Norrick, Neal R., 1978. Expressive illocutionary acts. Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, p.283.

²⁵ Norrick, Neal R. Ivi. p. 284.

climbed a mountain. The hearer is in every sense the protagonist of the triggering event²⁶. The speaker, instead, observes the situation from the outside and consequently fills the role of observer because Norrick considers the level of the event or situation behind the compliment, which is what they are talking about and not the level of conversation, otherwise the speaker would be considered the agent for formulating the compliment with his words²⁷. Norrick also introduced the concept of value by declaring that in both cases of complimenting and thanking the value is positive, which means that for these expressive acts to happen, the observed event must be judged positively, because in the case of observing a negative event like for example that the hearer broke his leg a few days ago, then this event would be evaluated as negative and the act of complimenting wouldn't even be considered as appropriate²⁸. As underlined in Norrick's analysis, defining and assigning these semantic roles to the protagonists of the event and also understanding the positive or negative value of the event, serves to maintain social harmony between interlocutors and at the same time avoiding any type of conflict²⁹. To further understand the reasons behind the interlocutors' choices in the matter, the next section will explore all the dynamics, related to linguistics acts in particular, through the lens of a very essential concept: "Politeness."

²⁶ Norrick, Neal R. Ivi. p. 285.

²⁷ Norrick, Neal R. Ibidem.

²⁸ Norrick, Neal R. Ivi. p. 285-286.

²⁹ Norrick, Neal R. Ivi. p. 290-291.

1.2 The concept of linguistic politeness

1.2.1 Defining politeness: social norms, cooperative principle and Grice's conversational maxims

When someone hears the word “politeness” they might immediately think about what it means to be polite, to have good manners and behave and conduct life in a socially correct way. In the field of linguistics politeness can be defined as:

A working definition of politeness in Pragmatics could be “(a) how languages express the social distance between speakers and their different role relationships; (b) how face-work, that is, the attempt to establish, maintain and save face during conversation is carried out in a speech community.”³⁰

In most studies politeness has been intended as a strategic construction of cooperative social behaviour. For example, Watts (2003: 19) proposed the expression “politic behaviour,” which has been defined as a socio-cultural behaviour that people have in order to establish or maintain personal relationship with the interlocutor³¹. In 1990, another major linguist called Fraser (1990: 219) presented four ways to define politeness in linguistics and these are: “the social-norm view, the conversational-maxim view, the face-saving view and the conversational-contract view”³². The social-norm view refers to the social standards of behaviour in any society. We are aware of the fact that diverse cultures could have a distinct perspective of politeness, which, as a consequence can be both manifested and understood in

³⁰ Sadeghoghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh, 2016. Theories on Politeness by Focusing on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. Sarab: Islamic Azad University, p.28.

³¹ Sadeghoghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ibidem.

³² Sadeghoghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ibidem.

different ways. That way, a specific behaviour aligns with politeness when it is not in accordance with the social norm and aligns with impoliteness when it is not in accordance with the norm³³. Then there is the “conversational-maxim view” which relies on what are called the “Maxims of Grice.” Paul Grice (1975: 45) is considered One of the most prominent figures in linguistics mainly because of his “Co-operative Principle”, which assumes that interlocutors should say what they want to say, when they want to say it and how they want to say it because there is this principle of conversation at the base of every interaction: every participant of an interaction cooperates to achieve a shared purpose and they will make contributions in the conversation based on what is required³⁴. Grice formulated it in 1975 in the following way: ‘Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.’³⁵. In particular, a speaker would normally assume that their interlocutor is being cooperative also based on what Grice called “maxims” and there are four: maxim of quantity, of quality, of relation and of manner. In order, the maxim of quantity suggests that a speaker would normally make his contribution to the conversation as is required by pronouncing the right amount of information, then there is the maxim of quality that says that the speaker should always say what he thinks is true and not what he believes is false. The maxim of relation on the other hand relies on the fact that the speaker should say something that is relevant to the context and the situation, and lastly the maxim of manner that explains how the information should be conveyed, that is in understandable terms and trying to avoid obscure

³³ Sadeghoghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ivi. p.29.

³⁴ Sadeghoghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ibidem.

³⁵ Hossain, Md. Mahroof, 2021. The Application of Grice Maxims in Conversation: A Pragmatic Study. London: Al-Kindi Center for Research and Development, p.1.

expressions. Grice states that interlocutors assume that a cooperative interaction should follow these “norms”³⁶.

1.2.2 Concept of face and face-threatening acts (FTAs)

Returning to Fraser, he refers to the “face-saving view” which actually emphasizes the wants of the participants rather than the interactions themselves³⁷. The concept of face has been first introduced in 1955 by Erving Goffman (1955: 213) with the following definition: “face is the positive public image you seek to establish in social interactions³⁸” and then this definition has been revised by him (1967: 5) with the following one: “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact”³⁹. This means that, when we interact with other people, we present an image of ourselves that is the impression we hope to establish in other people’s mind. The image that we present of ourselves to others can vary depending on several factors, for example: the situation or context, the relationship that you have with your interlocutors and so much more⁴⁰. As it has been anticipated, sociolinguists Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987: 61) took Goffman’s concept of face as the base of the development of the “Politeness Theory” and they also took a step forward by subdividing the concept of face in two distinct categories: positive and negative face. They argued that every person's public self-image is composed

³⁶ Hossain, Md. Mahroof. Ivi. p.3.

³⁷ Sadeghghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh, 2016. Theories on Politeness by Focusing on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. Sarab: Islamic Azad University, p.29.

³⁸ Redmond, Mark V., 2015. Face and Politeness Theories. Ames: Iowa State University, p.4.

³⁹ Redmond, Mark V. Ivi. p.6.

⁴⁰ Redmond, Mark V. Ivi. p.5.

of two simultaneous aspects, which they called 'faces', and they defined the positive one as the ultimate desire to be approved and accepted by others and the negative one as the desire to be autonomous and independent⁴¹. The main idea behind their theory of politeness is that every single person should always respect the interlocutor's face, whether it is positive or negative, because they have the capacity to recognize that as they want their face to be understood, respected and supported, likewise they should be able to do the same towards other people's faces⁴². Going in more depth with the analysis of both faces, the positive face also includes our desire to **see** our values (love, education, loyalty, power) recognized and validated by others, rather than simply maintaining them. For instance, if we want to be the leader on a group project, we hope that the other members of the group will acknowledge and support our positive face that we have shown them. Sometimes, there is a misconception that our negative face is the opposite to our positive, but the reality is that it represents other desires, like the desire for privacy and any type of freedom from imposition. According to Brown and Levinson, face is "something that is emotionally invested, and can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction."⁴³ As can be understood with their definition, face can also be lost and that happens in specific situations where a person is attempting to maintain their face, but this attempt is being challenged by another person. It can be quite clear when a person's face has been threatened because of their emotional reactions, like embarrassment, shame, humiliation, agitation et cetera⁴⁴. Brown and Levinson talked

⁴¹ Redmond, Mark V. Ivi. p.7.

⁴² Redmond, Mark V. Ibidem.

⁴³ Sadeghoghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh, 2016. Theories on Politeness by Focusing on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. Sarab: Islamic Azad University, p.29.

⁴⁴ Redmond, Mark V., 2015. Face and Politeness Theories. Ames: Iowa State University, p.9.

extensively about these specific situations in which the protagonists are various communication acts that can be considered threatening for the face and they consequently named them “face-threatening acts” (FTA), which have been defined as “those acts that by their very nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or speaker”⁴⁵. Face-threatening acts can be made towards both the positive and/or negative face. For instance, some actions by others that can potentially threaten the positive face could be complaints, insults, criticism, disapproval, disagreeing et cetera, while actions that we take that can potentially threaten our own face could be apologies, confessions, self-humiliations and accepting a compliment⁴⁶. On the other hand, actions by others that can threaten our negative face could be orders, requests, suggestions, threats, warnings et cetera and actions we take that could threaten our own face could be accepting an offer or a thank you, making a promise or an offer and do an unrequested favour⁴⁷. It is then clear that every utterance is potentially a face threatening act and for this specific reason Brown and Levinson declare that politeness is involved in correcting those face threatening acts⁴⁸.

1.2.3 Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory

Brown and Levinson (1987: 65) proposed in their seminal work the following hierarchical diagram (Figure 1)⁴⁹:

⁴⁵ Redmond, Mark V. Ivi. p.10.

⁴⁶ Redmond, Mark V. Ibidem.

⁴⁷ Redmond, Mark V. Ibidem.

⁴⁸ Sadeghghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh, 2016. Theories on Politeness by Focusing on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. Sarab: Islamic Azad University, p.31.

⁴⁹ Sadeghghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ivi. p. 34.

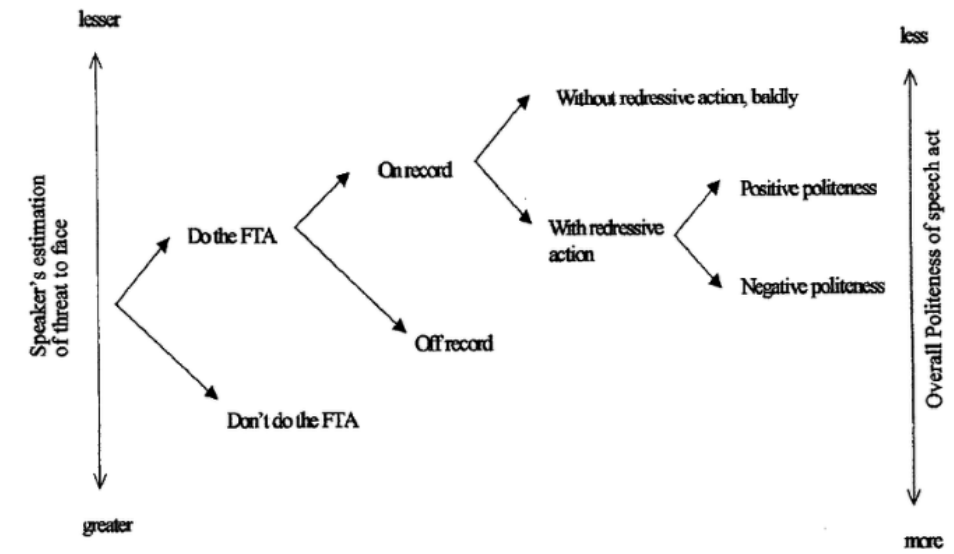


Figure 1: Brown and Levinson's Diagram

This diagram explains in detail all the possible strategies for doing a face-threatening act (FTA). The authors based this hierarchy on how much these acts could potentially threaten the hearer's face and that aspect can be seen on the left of the diagram (from lesser to greater risk). The first division explained is whether the speaker decides to perform the act that could potentially be considered threatening or not to perform it and consequently avoid uncomfortable situations and that choice is normally taken when the speaker considers the act to be too risky⁵⁰. On the other hand, if the speaker decides to do it, they are faced with another choice between two options which are called: "on record" and "off record."⁵¹ The strategy called "off record" means "flouting one of the Gricean (1975) maxims on the assumption that the addressee is able to infer the intended meaning"⁵².

⁵⁰ Sadeghoghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ibidem.

⁵¹ Sadeghoghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ivi. p.33.

⁵² Sadeghoghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ivi. p.31.

This strategy is considered the least threatening linguistic one because it normally means to proceed with the potentially face threatening act indirectly, sometimes treating it as a hint. One example could be instead of asking directly to wash your clothes, with this strategy this act could be performed in this manner: "I wonder if we have any clean clothes."⁵³ On the contrary, the speaker could decide to perform the act directly (on record) by choosing to use a redressive action or without using it. Choosing to do the threatening act without the redressive action is considered without a doubt the most threatening linguistic strategy because the speaker, by doing so, does not pay any consideration to the hearer and for this reason this strategy is also called "bald on record." Taking into consideration the example previously used, the speaker could simply say: "Wash my clothes."⁵⁴ As it can be understood, most of the time the speaker chooses to do the face threatening acts with redressive action because the goal is trying to reduce the negative impact on the interlocutor. Finally, the speaker is faced with another choice: positive or negative politeness. The positive politeness strategy means to emphasize the positive face wants, that is: "to save the hearer's positive face by reducing the distance between them"⁵⁵ and by expressing solidarity and closeness. The example could be: "How about washing the clothes for us?"⁵⁶ On the contrary, the negative politeness strategy emphasizes the negative face wants, that is "to keep the hearer's negative face by valuing the hearer's personal territory"⁵⁷ and by sustaining and respecting their desire of freedom from imposition. The example could be: "Could you wash the clothes?"⁵⁸ Normally, negative

⁵³ Sadeghghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ivi. p.34.

⁵⁴ Sadeghghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ivi. p.33-34.

⁵⁵ Sadeghghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ivi. p.33.

⁵⁶ Sadeghghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ivi. p.34.

⁵⁷ Sadeghghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ivi. p.33.

⁵⁸ Sadeghghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ivi. p.34.

politeness is considered less threatening than the positive one due to the assumption that it creates a respectful distance with the hearer, while with positive politeness there is the risk of assuming a level of closeness way higher than reality and the feelings of the hearer and that can create an inappropriate and overly familiar act. According to Watts (2003: 19), the term “politeness” and consequently what is considered linguistically polite can vary across distinct groups of speakers and this means that it can be perceived in diverse ways across cultures and languages. For instance, one specific group of speakers might consider polite what another group judges as dishonest and arrogant⁵⁹. Watts also states that there are two different types of politeness: the social politeness and the interpersonal politeness (or “tact”). Social politeness: “is originated in people’s need for smoothly organized interaction with other members of their group.⁶⁰” Interpersonal politeness (tact), instead, is used to regulate interpersonal relationships with other people. Both types of politeness are culturally acquired according to Watts⁶¹. Both aspects of politeness will be included in the specific analysis of compliments and responses to compliments, allowing the introduction of the essential cross-cultural study.

2. Complimenting and responding to compliments

2.1 Compliments and compliment responses as speech acts

2.1.1 The multifunctionality of compliments: the social functions

⁵⁹ Sadeghoghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ivi. p.35.

⁶⁰ Sadeghoghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ibidem.

⁶¹ Sadeghoghli, Hossein e Niroomand, Masoumeh. Ibidem.

This chapter will focus on one of the two fundamental speech acts, i.e. the compliment or the act of complimenting. The act of exchanging compliments is a common communicative practice all over the world and at the same time extraordinarily complex and sometimes can also be defined as problematic⁶². Compliments can be described as:

Supportive actions in which the speaker expresses admiration towards the addressee (behavioural aspect) but meanwhile evaluates him/her (verdictive aspect), of course in a positive way, directly (for his/her looks, skills, personality) or for something/someone (objects, animals, people, places) bearing a connection with him/her.⁶³

Compliments can either be made in an explicit or implicit way and in order to formulate an explicit compliment, the speaker normally uses performative utterances where the actual word (compliment) is present, or could also use utterances, short or long, with the use of evaluative words, which are the ones with an intrinsic positive meaning, like positive adjectives (e.g., *bravo* 'good', *intelligente* 'clever'), nouns (*genio* 'genius', *bellezza* 'beauty'), verbs (*ringiovanire* 'to rejuvenate') and adverbs (*bene* 'well')⁶⁴. Sometimes, certain words have an intrinsic positive meaning because of the specific socio-cultural values. For example, in Italy saying to someone *Ma sei magrissimo!* ('You are very slim!') counts as a compliment for our specific society and our socio-cultural values and standards, whilst in another country it could potentially be considered rude, inappropriate, and even

⁶² Alfonzetti, Giovanna, 2013. Compliments and Compliment Responses in Italian. Athens: Athens Institute for Education and Research, p.275.

⁶³ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ivi. p.276.

⁶⁴ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ivi. p.277.

insulting if their cultural beauty standards are different⁶⁵. On the other hand, another possibility to make a compliment is to formulate it implicitly. Giovanna Alfonzetti (2013: 278) states that:

Implicit compliments are formulated by means of indirect speech acts, in which the value judgment is not asserted but implied and had therefore to be reconstructed via Gricean maxims and/or contextual information, which need to be shared by the interlocutors.⁶⁶

An example could be the one reported by the author⁶⁷:

(1) A: You are on the cover of Glamour of this month!

B: Yes right, what is there on the cover? A monkey?

A: It is you with blue eyes

B: Really? Then I want to see it

In this example the speaker A is trying to make a compliment to the speaker B, and it would be interpreted as such only if speaker B assumes that speaker A has intentionally said something false (by violating the quality maxim)⁶⁸. When talking about compliments, it is considered fundamental to underline the fact that these speech acts serve a wide range of functions, the main one being the interactional/phatic function, that is to use compliments as a tool for increasing solidarity between speakers. Another important part of this function refers to the fact that they can also help in opening or sustaining

⁶⁵ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ibidem.

⁶⁶ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ivi. p.278.

⁶⁷ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ibidem.

⁶⁸ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ibidem.

a conversation or even for conversational development in general⁶⁹. Another function is more related to the idea of behaving appropriately according to the social norms and for this reason we normally find them in typical situations like weddings, gatherings with friends, dinners, conferences et cetera. In these situations, precisely, compliments are almost always expected, and their absence would be considered inappropriate⁷⁰. There is also the directive function, in which compliments are mainly used to reinforce a certain behaviour that is desired from the person making the compliment towards the person who will receive it⁷¹. Another important function is to use them in order to gain something from the interlocutor or to make the interlocutor understand that you really like what you have complimented and you would like it as well for yourself. Finally, another function is to soften face-threatening acts such as apologies, requests and criticism⁷². As can be understood, compliments serve a wide range of functions. Compliments are very much used in daily conversations because of all these functions that they serve; for this reason, they can be also defined “ritual acts”, normally used in situations when the speaker wants to make a good impression on others and make sure that their public image is safe and mostly positive or, seeing it from the opposite perspective, when the speaker “aims at satisfying the addressee’s positive face wants”⁷³.

2.1.2 Syntactic structures and semantic categories of compliments in English and Italian

⁶⁹ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ivi. p.279.

⁷⁰ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ibidem.

⁷¹ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ibidem.

⁷² Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ivi. p.280.

⁷³ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ibidem.

In order to understand these speech acts in more depth, it is fundamental to understand how compliments are structured. In this regard, Wolfson and Manes (1980: 115) gathered 1,200 compliments, that were occurring naturally, in American English. By doing so, these authors identified nine categories that would explain how compliments are normally formulated and structured⁷⁴:

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

Figure 2: Manes and Wolfson's categories of structure

According to their theory, most of these 1,200 compliments were structured following the first three types of structure, nonetheless also the other six categories were very much used by Americans⁷⁵. That is evidence that Americans use a very repetitive language when uttering a compliment. Another important aspect of the English structure of compliments is that it is mostly “speaker-centered”, which means that the first-person pronoun “I” is very frequently used by the speaker, typically followed by what is called a verb of appreciation, such as *like*, *love* etcetera. Manes and Wolfson also found out that there are specific adjectives that are very commonly present in

⁷⁴ Ishihara, Noriko, 2010. Compliment and responses to compliments: learning communication in context. Tokyo: Hosei University, p.180.

⁷⁵ Ishihara, Noriko. Ivi. p.181.

compliments, such as *nice*, *good*, *pretty*, *great*, and *beautiful*. This is valid for the specific variety of American English and therefore it is very possible that these adjectives may vary in other varieties of English⁷⁶. Manes and Wolfson also highlighted that speakers usually are not really aware of the formulaic nature of the compliment and that could be because it is considered less rigid compared to the structure of other linguistics acts like for instance with greetings⁷⁷. Compliments are normally longer, non-obligatory and they do not need to be in a specific and fixed position in the sentence or in the discourse and consequently can be found at the beginning, middle or end of the sentence/discourse. Compliments also have many different functions, and they are not really explained in educational settings and therefore they are not taught explicitly⁷⁸. Nonetheless, Manes and Wolfson firmly believe that this formulaic nature of compliments is essential because, in the ideal interaction between two interlocutors, a compliment must be recognized as a “supportive action” and therefore something that can help the positive flow of the conversation. Their idea is that using a typical formula makes the act of complimenting easier, especially when the speaker does not have an intimate relationship with the interlocutor. At the same time, this predictability helps the receiver immediately recognize the compliment. Consequently, this creates a positive and relaxed environment where both individuals acknowledge each other as valuable members of the same social group. Overall, it allows them to recognize and respect each other's positive and negative “face”⁷⁹. For this reason, Manes and Wolfson, together with other authors, believe that explicit and

⁷⁶ Ishihara, Noriko. Ivi. p.181.

⁷⁷ Castagneto, Marina e Sidraschi, Diego, 2017. La formula del complimento in italiano. Napoli: Liguori Editore, p.196.

⁷⁸ Castagneto, Marina e Sidraschi, Diego. Ibidem.

⁷⁹ Castagneto, Marina e Sidraschi, Diego. Ibidem.

formulaic compliments are statistically preferred rather than implicit ones⁸⁰. Regarding the Italian context, Castagneto and Sidraschi (2017: 193) gathered 2,004 compliments formulated in Italian in order to understand mainly how Italians structure their compliments and whether some sort of pattern can be recognized in the structure of explicit compliments.⁸¹ Here is the table (Figure 3) with all the syntactic formulas of Italian compliments⁸²:

0	Performativo esplicito	Complimenti!
1	(PRO Ilp) ⁸ + essere + (INTENSIF.) + *AGG / *SN	Sei troppo carino!
2	(PRO Ilp.) + avere/fare + (AGG) + SN	C'hai due occhi, ragazzi
3	Stai bene (con); Ti trovo in (gran) forma; Ti dona (molto) X	Stai bene con la barba
4	(PRO Ilp.) + V + (SN) + (INTENSIF.) + (AVV)	Ti sei truccata bene
5	Mi piace + (INTENSIF) + F/SN/SP	Mi piace tantissimo quel cappellino
	Mi piaci + (INTENSIF) + SP	Mi piaci con la cuffietta da medico
6	(DIM/PRO Ilp.) +(essere) +(INTENSIF) + *AGG / *SN	Bella camicia
7	Frase con valutazione positiva	A Rita nella cucina non la batte nessuno
8	AGG!	Bello!
9	Che + AGG + (SN)!	Che belle trecce!
10	Che + SN!	Che occhi!
11	(INTERIEZIONE) + come + F!	Mamma mia come sei bello!
12	va' + come + F!	Va' come stai bene!
13	va' che SN/AGG/F!	Va' che bambino!

Figure 3: Syntactic Formulas of Italian Compliments

Contrary to English, in Italian it seems that compliments are more “hearer-centered” because for instance Italians frequently use verbs *essere* and *avere* ('to be' and 'to have') in order to give compliments

⁸⁰ Castagneto, Marina e Sidraschi, Diego. Ivi. p.197.

⁸¹ Castagneto, Marina e Sidraschi, Diego. Ivi. p.193.

⁸² Castagneto, Marina e Sidraschi, Diego. Ivi. p.198.

to their interlocutor, like in the examples in Figure 3: *Sei troppo carino* ('You are too cute') / *C'hai due occhi, ragazzi!* ('You have such beautiful eyes, guys!')⁸³. There are of course other structures that express more the personal taste and opinion of the speaker and are therefore considered more “speaker-centered”, like: *Mi piace tantissimo quel cappellino* ('I really like that hat'). That is the equivalent to the English “I like/I love” and it has been demonstrated with these statistics that these types of compliments, in Italian, are less used than the ones that put the focus on the hearer⁸⁴. There is also another typical strategy that is commonly used in order to save both the speaker and the hearer’s faces and divert the possible pressure of being at the centre of attention from both of them, which is to address the object directly and this is the case of the following examples in figure 3: *bella camicia* ('beautiful shirt') / *che belle trecce* ('what beautiful braids') / *che occhi* ('what beautiful eyes'). This strategy allows the interlocutors to be nice without being too intimate and putting both faces in an uncomfortable situation⁸⁵. Furthermore, the positive evaluation that is contained in the compliment is expressed through the use of: adjectives, adverbs, nouns and verbs⁸⁶. The study conducted by the authors demonstrated that the positive evaluation in compliments is mostly conveyed by adjectives and Italians use the same adjectives over and over again, like *bello* ('beautiful') and *bravo* ('good'), which are the two most used. For this reason, Italians use a lot of intensification in order to bring a slight change to the same adjective, for instance: *sei proprio bello* ('you are really beautiful') / *sei bellissimo* ('you are very beautiful') / *sei molto bello* ('you are very

⁸³ Castagneto, Marina e Sidraschi, Diego. Ivi. p.200.

⁸⁴ Castagneto, Marina e Sidraschi, Diego. Ivi. p.201.

⁸⁵ Castagneto, Marina e Sidraschi, Diego. Ivi. p.203.

⁸⁶ Castagneto, Marina e Sidraschi, Diego. Ivi. p.205.

beautiful') etcetera⁸⁷. In order to fully comprehend compliments, it is also considered fundamental for various authors that have talked about this speech act in particular, to understand all the possible categories of compliments in the sense of “what the compliment is referring to” and the main ones are divided in two broad categories: physical appearance or possession and ability or accomplishments⁸⁸. Manes and Wolfson’s studies showed that compliments on physical appearance and possession are delivered very often and normally people feel free to give them to anyone, like acquaintances, friends, colleagues, while, on the other hand, compliments on ability and accomplishments are given more rarely and when it occurs, they are normally presented in situations where the one giving the compliment is considered of “higher status” and the one receiving it is assumed to be of “lower status”⁸⁹. Having presented the most significant aspects of the speech act of complimenting and actual compliments, the next chapter will focus on the natural consequence of the act of complimenting, which is the compliment response.

2.2 Taxonomies of compliment responses

Compliment responses are considered the natural consequence of addressing a compliment and many authors who have considered compliments as a social ritual that is fundamental in maintaining a positive relationship between interlocutors, have also discussed how even the response of a compliment has the same social and

⁸⁷ Castagneto, Marina e Sidraschi, Diego. Ivi. p.205-206.

⁸⁸ Chen, Rong, 2010. Compliment and compliment response research: A cross-cultural survey. San Bernardino: California State University, p.80.

⁸⁹ Chen, Rong. Ibidem.

interactional power⁹⁰. That is because in certain situations of face-to-face interactions there are some expectations that need to be respected in order to maintain both faces, for instance if a compliment is made to offer affiliation, then if the interlocutor's response is to reject it, it would cause a disruption of the social harmony mentioned before. In other situations, on the other hand, accepting a compliment could suggest arrogance on the hearer's part. There are even situations where the compliment is perceived negatively by the hearer because the compliment sounds insincere or it seems like a comment made out of flattery or envy. All these factors explain perfectly how responses to compliments could vary enormously from situation to situation⁹¹.

2.2.1 Categorizing compliment responses: from Pomerantz's constraints to Herbert's taxonomy

One of the most prominent figures who talked about compliment responses thoroughly is Anita Pomerantz. This author conducted a qualitative study of compliment responses in American English, describing all the possible and most encountered situations in terms of how a person can manage an interaction in which a compliment has occurred, particularly towards them, and consequently presenting the most common responses to compliments⁹². Pomerantz (1978: 81) essentially explains with her study why compliment responses can be considered, as well as compliments, a face-threatening act and in

⁹⁰ Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe, 2016. Complimenting behaviour on Facebook: Responding to compliments in American English. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, p.2.

⁹¹ Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe. Ivi. p.3.

⁹² Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe. Ivi. p.4-5.

order to study this particular problematic aspect of this speech act, she introduced a psychological and social debate, starting with the statement that, although people usually would believe that the preferred response in the majority of situations is accepting the compliment, that is not the case and moreover actually “a large proportion of compliment responses deviate from the model response”⁹³. This author declared in fact that there are many other types of responses to compliments, and she introduced them by stating that there are specific constraints: the first one being the fact that the compliment recipient can choose to either accept or reject the compliment (acceptance or rejection)⁹⁴. At the same time, there is a second constraint which is that the compliment recipient can either agree or disagree with what the compliment towards him/her was about. Anita Pomerantz recognized that these two sets of constraints are strongly correlated to one another because what normally occurs is that acceptance of the compliment is usually performed by agreement and rejection with disagreement⁹⁵. Pomerantz also declared that both “acceptance” in the first constraint and “agreement” in the second one are considered the preferred seconds, which means that these are the socially expected and most natural responses and, on the other hand, “rejection” and “disagreement” are considered the dispreferred seconds, which, on the contrary, means that they are normally considered the most unexpected and face-threatening responses⁹⁶. Given this statement, we would expect to find a very high representation of agreement and acceptance combinations in compliment responses, but the actual data says otherwise: it shows that this expectation does not

⁹³ Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe. Ivi. p.4.

⁹⁴ Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe. Ibidem.

⁹⁵ Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe. Ibidem.

⁹⁶ Pomerantz, Anita, 1978. Compliment Responses: Notes on the co-operation of multiple constraints. New York: Academic Press, p.81.

align with reality because a significant number of compliment responses contain both rejection and disagreement⁹⁷. This is where Pomerantz introduced the third constraint, called “self-praise avoidance”. Self-praise is basically the act of expressing pride in one person’s own abilities, achievements, appearance etcetera, which is then automatically transferred and expressed in the act of speaking highly about oneself. The problematic aspect of the acceptance and agreement of a compliment as a response is that it is considered to be “in conflict with the desire to avoid self-praise”⁹⁸. In order to not make the other person, who made a compliment towards you, think that you are presumptuous and arrogant and consequently to avoid self-praise, the choice is normally to reject and/or disagree with the compliment. The most problematic aspect is then the fact that there is a contradiction between the preference for accepting a compliment and avoiding self-praise and for this specific reason Pomerantz observed various possible compliment response strategies that are employed by speakers⁹⁹. Going into more detail, the acceptance of a compliment is normally “accomplished with appreciations¹⁰⁰” and in regard to the responses to compliments, appreciations are normally expressed through the use of appreciation tokens like *thank you*, *thanks*, *thank you so much*, *I appreciate it*, and so on.¹⁰¹ These acceptance tokens may be followed by some form of agreement, like in the following example¹⁰²:

⁹⁷ Pomerantz, Anita. Ibidem.

⁹⁸ Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe, 2016. Complimenting behaviour on Facebook: Responding to compliments in American English. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, p.4.

⁹⁹ Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe. Ibidem.

¹⁰⁰ Pomerantz, Anita, 1978. Compliment Responses: Notes on the co-operation of multiple constraints. New York: Academic Press, p.83.

¹⁰¹ Pomerantz, Anita. Ibidem.

¹⁰² Pomerantz, Anita. Ivi. p.85.

(2) A: Oh, it was just beautiful

B: Well, thank you + I thought it was quite nice

Another possibility is that the response to the compliment is expressed only by the agreement token, like in the following example¹⁰³:

(3) A: Isn't he cute?

B: Oh, he's adorable

Moving on to the strategy of rejection, the main way to reject a compliment has been proven to be with “disagreement or qualifications of the prior complimentary assertions”. An example of a rejection of a compliment accomplished through disagreement is presented as follows¹⁰⁴:

(4) A: Gee, Hon, you look really nice in that dress

B: Do you really think so? It's just a rag my sister gave me.

The other strategy is to implicitly disagree with the compliment by introducing a second evaluation of the prior statement, as the example shows¹⁰⁵:

(5) A: You did a great job cleaning up the house

B: Well, I guess you haven't seen the kids' room.

¹⁰³ Pomerantz, Anita. Ibidem.

¹⁰⁴ Pomerantz, Anita. Ivi. p.87.

¹⁰⁵ Pomerantz, Anita. Ibidem.

In this last example, the husband makes a compliment, and the wife rejects it by finding the exception that consequently invalidated the husband's assessment¹⁰⁶. According to Pomerantz (1978: 87-88), "While appreciations and agreements are interrelated, appreciations over agreements seem to be preferentially selected for accepting compliments"¹⁰⁷. A form of appreciation is preferred compared to a form of agreement because the speaker is trying to avoid self-praise. If self-praise is performed by the speaker, the recipient could make the speaker aware of the violation, either more implicitly or explicitly. An example could be¹⁰⁸:

(6) A: Just think of how many people would miss you. You would know who cared.

B: Sure. I have a lot of friends who would come to the funeral and say what an intelligent, bright, witty, interesting person I was.

A: They wouldn't say that you were humble.

B: No. Humble, I'm not.

It is nonetheless possible that an act of self-praise may be unnoticed or ignored on purpose, but that doesn't change the fact that this kind of act is normally avoided because it can be turned into something else, like a complaint or an "unfavourable character assessment" and so on¹⁰⁹. Pomerantz also explains the different strategies that a speaker could use in order to solve this problem of not knowing how to respond and either to choose the solution of agreeing with the

¹⁰⁶ Pomerantz, Anita. Ibidem.

¹⁰⁷ Pomerantz, Anita. Ivi. p.87-88.

¹⁰⁸ Pomerantz, Anita. Ivi. p.88.

¹⁰⁹ Pomerantz, Anita. Ivi. p.89.

speaker or the avoidance of self-praise¹¹⁰. The first strategy is called “praise downgrades” and the idea is to use “downgrades”, which means that the recipient of the compliment still agrees with the compliment made by the speaker, but by using “Scaled-Down” evaluative terms in contrast to the terms used by the speaker. An example proposed by the speaker is the following¹¹¹:

- (7) A: Isn't he cute
B: Oh, he's adorable

Another really common strategy to avoid denying the compliment is to shift the attention to someone or something else. Pomerantz divided this general strategy into two more specific ones: the first one is to shift the attention from the initial target (themselves) to another person or to an object and the second one is to return the compliment to the original speaker, so that the attention is back to the initial speaker¹¹². All these compliment response strategies observed by Pomerantz can be summarized with the following figure (Figure 4)¹¹³:

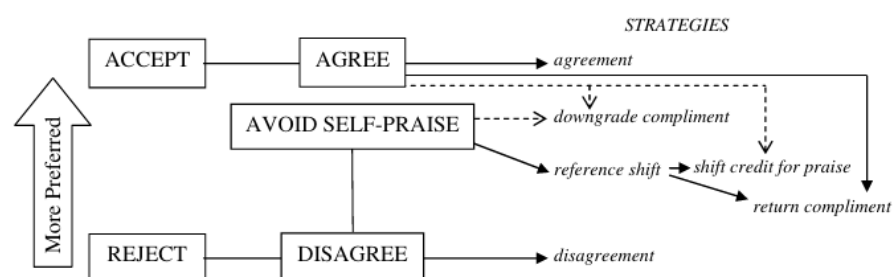


Figure 4: Compliment Responses Strategies

¹¹⁰ Pomerantz, Anita. Ivi. p.92.

¹¹¹ Pomerantz, Anita. Ivi. p.92-93.

¹¹² Pomerantz, Anita. Ivi. p.98-99-100.

¹¹³ Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe, 2016. Complimenting behaviour on Facebook: Responding to compliments in American English. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, p.4.

Despite the fact that Anita Pomerantz was the first author to draw attention to compliment responses, Robert Herbert (1986: 76) created a specific taxonomy dedicated to all the twelve types of compliment responses that he then used in his research study, composed of over 1000 compliment responses made by American students¹¹⁴. He begins his contribution to this topic by quoting Johnson (1979: 43) 115.

When you are complimented, the only response necessary is "Thank you." Don't disparage yourself. If someone admires your dress, don't say, "This old thing, I got it at a bargain basement sale." A simple thank you is sufficient.

The problematic aspect, as already mentioned, is the fact that this potential face-threatening act can create discomfort in different speakers because they often do not know what they should say when receiving a compliment. That is also the main reason why parents, particularly in Western cultures, usually educate their children by making sure that they know that the polite thing to do is always saying "thank you"¹¹⁶. As already explained the simple response "thank you" does not cover all the possible ways in which a speaker could respond, depending on the situation, the relationship with the interlocutor and so much more. Robert Herbert classified these 12 types of compliment responses based on the pragmatic functions that they

¹¹⁴ Herbert, Robert K., 1986. Say "Thank You" - or something. Durham: Duke University Press, p.76.

¹¹⁵ Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

¹¹⁶ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.77.

fill in discourse and by doing so he created categories and subcategories¹¹⁷. The following table (Figure 5) will visually show them¹¹⁸:

TABLE 1

<i>Response Type</i>	<i>Example</i>
A. Agreement	
I. Acceptances	
1. Appreciation Token	Thanks; thank you; [smile]
2. Comment Acceptance	Thanks, it's my favorite too.
3. Praise Upgrade	Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?
II. Comment History	I bought it for the trip to Arizona.
III. Transfers	
1. Reassignment	My brother gave it to me.
2. Return	So's yours.
B. Nonagreement	
I. Scale Down	It's really quite old.
II. Question	Do you really think so?
III. Nonacceptances	
1. Disagreement	I hate it.
2. Qualification	It's all right, but Len's is nicer.
IV. No Acknowledgement	[silence]
C. Other Interpretations	
I. Request	You wanna borrow this one too?

Figure 5: Robert Herbert Taxonomy about compliment responses

In the first main category, called “agreement”, there is a first subcategory which includes all the strategies that can be classified as an “acceptance” of the compliment. It includes appreciation tokens, comment acceptances, and praise upgrades. Appreciation tokens are a form of acceptance of the compliment, which are “not tied to the specific semantics of the stimulus¹¹⁹” and the most common ones are the regular *thank you*, *thanks*, etc., or a smile¹²⁰. Comment

¹¹⁷ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.78.

¹¹⁸ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.79.

¹¹⁹ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.78.

¹²⁰ Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

acceptance is always a way of accepting the complimentary force by also adding a relevant comment to it, like this¹²¹:

(8) Female 1: I like your hair long.

Female 2: Me too. I'm never getting it cut short again¹²².

(9) Male 1: That's a sharp looking car.

Male 2: Yeah. I did the body work myself¹²³.

(10) Female 1: Tina, you have a gorgeous tan.

Female 2: It's my Empire Lake tan. I've been working on it all week.¹²⁴

The last one is the praise upgrade in which “the speaker accepts the compliment and asserts that the complimentary force is insufficient¹²⁵”, like in the following examples:

(11) Female 1: Well, you have a great haircut.

Female 2: That's because I have the greatest hairdresser in the world.

Female 1: Who?

Female 2: Me.

Female 3: Boy, talk about being modest¹²⁶.

(12) Male 1: Looks like a good tan this year.

¹²¹ Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

¹²² Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.85.

¹²³ Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

¹²⁴ Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

¹²⁵ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.78.

¹²⁶ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.85.

Male 2: Thanks. Kinda makes me look even more handsome, doesn't it?¹²⁷.

Another subcategory of the “agreement” is called “comment history”, which is described by Herbert as the situation where the speaker offers some sort of comment about the object complimented. This strategy is considered different from a simple acceptance because the comments are considered impersonal¹²⁸. Three perfect examples could be the following:

(13) Female 1: That's a cute shirt.

Female 2: Every time I wash it the sleeves get more and more stretched out¹²⁹.

(14) Female 1: Those are great shorts, Wendy.

Female 2: They have their own little underwear [sic] in them¹³⁰.

(15) Female 1: I like your shoes. They're cute.

Female 2: I got these two years ago. My dress shoes wore out, so I went to the mall with twenty dollars and got these, and everybody was telling me how dumb I was to get clogs in winter, but I sure did wear them a lot¹³¹.

The third and last subcategory of the agreement is called “transfers” and within this category, two strategies are identified: reassignment

¹²⁷ Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

¹²⁸ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.78.

¹²⁹ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.85.

¹³⁰ Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

¹³¹ Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

and return¹³². The first strategy (reassignment) is when the compliment recipient decides to shift the attention and the praise to the object itself or to a third person, like in these typical situations¹³³:

(16) Female 1: Debbie's hair looks so cute in braids. (Debbie is addressee's three-year-old daughter)

Female 2: Oh, I didn't do it. We were at Kretzmer's today¹³⁴.

(17) Female 1: I like that top.

Female 2: Thanks. It's not mine¹³⁵.

(18) Female 1: That's a beautiful necklace.

Female 2: It was my grandmother's¹³⁶.

On the other hand, in the strategy called "return" what normally happens is that the praise/attention is transferred to the interlocutor who made the compliment¹³⁷. Taking for instance the last example, the strategy of return could slightly change the interaction as follows:

(19) Female: You're funny.

Male: No, you're a good audience¹³⁸.

(20) Female 1: I like your skirt, Sharon.

Female 2: Thanks, Deb. I like yours too¹³⁹.

¹³² Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.78.

¹³³ Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

¹³⁴ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.85.

¹³⁵ Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

¹³⁶ Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

¹³⁷ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.78.

¹³⁸ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.86.

¹³⁹ Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

Moving on to the other main category, as opposed to agreement, there is the “nonagreement” where the recipient of the compliment does not agree with the compliment itself and, consequently, with the speaker¹⁴⁰. In this category, Herbert includes four different subcategories, which are scale down, question, non-acceptances and no acknowledgement¹⁴¹. The first strategy of nonagreement called “scale down” happens when “the speaker disagrees with the complimentary force, pointing to some flaw in the object or claiming that the praise is overstated”¹⁴². Some examples could be:

(21) Female: That’s a nice watch.

Male: It’s all scratched up and I’m getting a new one¹⁴³.

(22) Male: Hey, that’s a really nice car.

Female: You should have seen it two years ago when it was new. It didn’t have the dents then¹⁴⁴.

(23) Female: That’s a nice tie. I like the colours.

Male: Yeah. It’s a little too wide. I’d like to get it narrowed down¹⁴⁵.

In the case of the strategy of the question, the speaker simply questions the sincerity of the compliment made towards them, like in these examples¹⁴⁶:

¹⁴⁰ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.78.

¹⁴¹ Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

¹⁴² Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

¹⁴³ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.86.

¹⁴⁴ Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

¹⁴⁵ Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

¹⁴⁶ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.78.

(24) Male 1: Nice sweater.

Male 2: You like it?¹⁴⁷

(25) Female 1: That dress looks real nice on you, Deb.

Female 2: Are you sure it's not too dressy for this place? I never know what to wear¹⁴⁸.

(26) Female 1: That's a nice outfit.

Female 2: What? Are you kidding?¹⁴⁹

Herbert also includes two subcategories in the category of “non-acceptances”, which are disagreement and qualification. Disagreement is the most direct way of making the interlocutor understand that you do not agree with their statement, in this manner for example¹⁵⁰:

(27) Female 1: Your hair looks good.

Female 2: It's too short¹⁵¹.

(28) Female: Charlie, your haircut looks nice.

Male: Bullshit! She cut it too short¹⁵².

(29) Female 1: You look good in that outfit.

Female 2: No, I don't. I should go on a diet¹⁵³.

¹⁴⁷ Herbert, Robert K. *Ivi*. p.86.

¹⁴⁸ Herbert, Robert K. *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁹ Herbert, Robert K. *Ibidem*.

¹⁵⁰ Herbert, Robert K. *Ivi*. p.78.

¹⁵¹ Herbert, Robert K. *Ivi*. p.86.

¹⁵² Herbert, Robert K. *Ibidem*.

¹⁵³ Herbert, Robert K. *Ibidem*.

The strategy of qualification, on the other hand, is defined by the author as the strategy, in which “the speaker merely qualifies the original assertion, usually with *though*, *but*, *well*, etc. (like *DISAGREEMENT*, but weaker)”¹⁵⁴, as in the following examples:

(30) Female 1: Your portfolio turned out great.

Female 2: It's all right, but I want to retake some pictures¹⁵⁵.

(31) Female: You look good in a moustache.

Male: Yeah, but it itches¹⁵⁶.

(32) Male: I like your haircut.

Female: But I wanted it even shorter¹⁵⁷.

The last subcategory of the “non-agreement” is the strategy of “no acknowledgement”, which represents the situation where the speaker pretends to not have heard the compliment and decides either to remain silent or, to avoid making the conversation more embarrassing, to say something completely irrelevant, like¹⁵⁸:

(33) Male 1: That's a beautiful sweater.

Male 2: Did you finish the assignment for today?¹⁵⁹

(34) Female: Love that outfit, Ed.

Male: /silence/¹⁶⁰.

¹⁵⁴ Herbert, Robert K. *Ivi*. p.78.

¹⁵⁵ Herbert, Robert K. *Ivi*. p.86.

¹⁵⁶ Herbert, Robert K. *Ibidem*.

¹⁵⁷ Herbert, Robert K. *Ibidem*.

¹⁵⁸ Herbert, Robert K. *Ivi*. p.78.

¹⁵⁹ Herbert, Robert K. *Ivi*. p.87.

¹⁶⁰ Herbert, Robert K. *Ibidem*.

The last category introduced in this taxonomy is called “other interpretations”, with the only subcategory called “request”, defined by Herbert as a situation in which¹⁶¹:

The speaker, consciously or not, interprets the compliment as a request rather than a simple compliment. Such responses are not compliment responses per se since the speaker does not perceive the previous speech act as a compliment.

The following examples describe this last circumstance:

(35) Female 1: I like those pants.

Female 2: Well, you can borrow them anytime¹⁶².

(36) Male 1: That’s a nice bike.

Male 2: Let me know if you want to borrow it.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.78.

¹⁶² Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.87.

¹⁶³ Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

The corpus created by Robert Herbert (1986: 79) consists of a collection of 1,062 compliment responses, collected in the 1980s from American undergraduate students. The table below (Figure 6) shows the frequency of occurrence of the various types of responses¹⁶⁴:

TABLE 2

<i>Type</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	
1. Appreciation Token	312	29.38	} 36.35
2. Comment Acceptance	70	6.59	
2. Praise Upgrade	4	.38	
4. Comment History	205	19.30	
5. Reassignment	32	3.01	
6. Return	77	7.25	
7. Scale Down	48	4.52	
8. Question	53	4.99	
9. Disagreement	106	9.98	
10. Qualification	70	6.59	
11. No Acknowledgement	54	5.08	
12. Request Interpretation	31	2.92	
Total	1062		

Figure 6: Robert Herbert data results: frequency occurrence of compliment responses' strategies

The most interesting result of this research was, on the one hand, a very clear representation of the fact that most speakers actually use other ways of responding to compliments rather than the simple *thank you*; on the other, the fact that only 36% of responses included a form of acceptance of the compliment¹⁶⁵. This particular data result shows that the majority of American speakers use, as a response to a compliment, something else other than what is expected to be the “correct” way of responding, which is accepting the compliment.

¹⁶⁴ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.79-80.

¹⁶⁵ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.80.

The strategies “comment history” and “disagreement” were in fact the second and third most popular responses overall¹⁶⁶.

2.2.2 Politeness strategies involved in compliment responses

Other authors besides Anita Pomerantz and Robert Herbert have studied the speech acts of complimenting and responding to compliments by analysing them in terms of linguistic politeness. For example, Janet Holmes (1986: 487) found a connection between compliment responses and the concept of positive and negative face introduced by Brown and Levinson¹⁶⁷. Her idea consists of the belief that a compliment can be considered, as already explained previously, a potential face-threatening act to both faces, which means that accepting a compliment can be considered arrogant and, on the contrary, rejecting one can be considered rude¹⁶⁸. Another fundamental author who contributed to this field of research is Chen (1993), who declared that two of Leech’s politeness maxims, “Agreement” and “Modesty”, could be used to explain why and in what way someone is motivated to either accept or reject a compliment¹⁶⁹. Leech’s (1983: 132) Agreement Maxim adheres to the rule: “Minimize disagreement between self and other; maximize agreement between self and other”¹⁷⁰. This maxim is considered fundamental in terms of politeness because it allows speakers to create solidarity between interlocutors. In terms of compliment responses, following and respecting this maxim would mean to agree with the compliment even

¹⁶⁶ Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

¹⁶⁷ Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe, 2016. Complimenting behaviour on Facebook: Responding to compliments in American English. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, p.4.

¹⁶⁸ Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe. Ivi. p. 5.

¹⁶⁹ Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe. Ibidem.

¹⁷⁰ Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe. Ibidem.

if it has been made towards you specifically because, otherwise, refusing it would have consisted in violating the maxim¹⁷¹. On the other hand, Leech's Modesty Maxim follows the rule "Minimize praise of self; maximize dispraise of self"¹⁷², which means that a speaker is supposed to avoid bragging and to seek ways to act humble. This maxim also applies perfectly to politeness and compliment responses because it explains one of the main strategies used to respond to a compliment, which is to downgrade or even reject the compliment in order to remain humble in the speaker's eyes, because accepting the compliment would mean that this maxim is severely violated and consequently there is a high possibility of putting your social face at risk¹⁷³. Nonetheless, there are risks in respecting these maxims: for instance, agreeing with a compliment means that the speaker has respected the agreement maxim but at the same time has also violated the modesty maxim because his/her acceptance and agreement could be viewed as a way of praising oneself¹⁷⁴. On the other hand, the same problem appears to be present when a speaker rejects or downgrades a compliment, because he/she is respecting the modesty maxim but at the exact same time breaking and violating the agreement maxim because there is a disagreement¹⁷⁵. These authors reveal the main reason why speakers are, at least most of the time, choosing to use more complex strategies to accept a compliment.

¹⁷¹ Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe. Ibidem.

¹⁷² Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe. Ibidem.

¹⁷³ Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe. Ibidem.

¹⁷⁴ Alfonzetti, Giovanna, 2013. Compliments and Compliment Responses in Italian. Athens: Athens Institute for Education and Research, p.281.

¹⁷⁵ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ibidem.

Nonetheless, compliments are still seen as “verbal gifts” that can either be accepted or refused, and in order to be polite, a gift is normally accepted through tokens of appreciation or with a smile¹⁷⁶.

Goffman (1971) in this regard has stated that:

When a ritual offering occurs, when that is, one individual provides a sign of involvement in and connectedness to another, it behoves the recipient to show that the message has been received, that its import has been appreciated, that the affirmed relationship actually exists as the performer implies, that the performer himself has worth as a person, and finally, that the recipient has an appreciative, grateful nature... the giving statement tends to be followed immediately by a show of gratitude¹⁷⁷.

The present thesis focuses primarily on the analysis of complimenting behaviour in face-to-face interactions. Although a considerable body of research has examined compliments in computer-mediated communication, particularly on social media, many of the findings may also provide valuable insights into complimenting practices in everyday face-to-face conversations¹⁷⁸. Cirillo, in 2012, created a corpus of 74 compliment and compliment responses within a game environment. This author essentially came up with other interpretations and strategies in terms of responding to compliments, like interpreting irony as a form of rejection or even laughter (e.g., *ahahah*) as a form of rejection as well, precisely into “change of topic”¹⁷⁹.

¹⁷⁶ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ivi. p.280.

¹⁷⁷ Pomerantz, Anita, 1978. Compliment Responses: Notes on the co-operation of multiple constraints. New York: Academic Press, p.83.

¹⁷⁸ Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe, 2016. Complimenting behaviour on Facebook: Responding to compliments in American English. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, p.6.

¹⁷⁹ Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe. Ivi. p. 6-7.

Cirillo (2012) states that speakers usually resort to using multiple, often conflicting, strategies simultaneously. This allows them to respect Pomerantz's first rule of accepting the compliment (Agreement Maxim) while simultaneously showing modesty and avoiding self-praise, which often translates into rejection or disagreement (Modesty Maxim)¹⁸⁰. Clearly, in face-to-face interactions, speakers are aware of the fact that their faces are more vulnerable compared to online communication and consequently feel more pressured to follow the politeness norms, in order to maintain their own faces and respecting the interlocutors' faces at the same time¹⁸¹.

2.3 The intercultural dimension: English vs. Italian

2.3.1 Compliment responses as a culturally bound phenomenon: the main similarities between Americans and Italians

As already explained in previous chapters, a common aspect that many cultures, including Americans and Italians, experience is the interactional dilemma between the Agreement and the Modesty Maxims, and consequently between the pressure of having to agree with the compliment in order to be polite, but at the same time the fear of sounding arrogant while accepting and agreeing with it¹⁸². The solution of this conflict usually depends on individual choices but also on a system of preferences¹⁸³. Giovanna Alfonzetti (2009: 81), who extensively studied compliments and compliment responses, states that these preferences are produced in the cultural

¹⁸⁰ Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe. Ivi. p.7.

¹⁸¹ Placencia, María Elena, Lower, Amanda e Powell, Hebe. Ibidem.

¹⁸² Alfonzetti, Giovanna, 2009. I complimenti nella conversazione. Roma: Editori Riuniti University Press, p.80.

¹⁸³ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ivi. p.81.

system that surrounds the person receiving the compliment. People are in fact sometimes influenced by their cultural beliefs, ideas, pressures and in general their background and those aspects subconsciously influence their idea of politeness in their response to a compliment¹⁸⁴. The other fundamental aspect that can be found in both Americans' and Italians' responses to compliments is the fact that compliments are recognized as social lubricants. This means that when a compliment is being uttered, the recipient, whether he/she is from America or Italy, will most definitely recognize their function, namely, to establish and enhance solidarity between interlocutors¹⁸⁵. It has been made very clear by every single author that compliments are speech acts universally present, but at the same time they vary substantially depending on the intercultural variations¹⁸⁶. Frequency is the first aspect to consider: in Oriental and North European societies, for instance, the frequency is lower compared to Europe and the United States¹⁸⁷. Despite these similarities between Americans and Italians, there are still deep variations in their cultural norms that consequently differentiate them and their different ways of managing compliments. Norms that vary in compliment exchanges depend on different factors, that will be analysed in the following chapters, and these are: age, sex, status, relationship with the interlocutor and others, focusing mainly on how gender can influence compliment exchanges¹⁸⁸.

¹⁸⁴ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ibidem.

¹⁸⁵ Chen, Rong, 2010. Compliment and compliment response research: A cross-cultural survey. San Bernardino: California State University, p.80.

¹⁸⁶ Alfonzetti, Giovanna, 2009. I complimenti nella conversazione. Roma: Editori Riuniti University Press, p.8.

¹⁸⁷ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. I complimenti nella conversazione. Ibidem.

¹⁸⁸ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. I complimenti nella conversazione. Ibidem.

2.3.2 Main differences between Americans and Italians in managing and responding to compliments.

As already introduced in the previous sections, the reference point of compliment research in American English is Robert Herbert's research and, consequently, the baseline data is the collection of 1,062 compliment responses collected by the author¹⁸⁹. According to Herbert, the majority of non-linguists actively think that the only possible polite response to a compliment has to be the classic thank you, but the reality of Herbert's conversational data suggests the opposite¹⁹⁰: Americans used appreciation tokens (like *thank you*) as a way of accepting the compliment only 36.35% of the time and, on the other hand, Americans seem to respond with other types of responses other than acceptance almost twice as often¹⁹¹. That means that one-third of Americans actually respond with acceptance and two out of three Americans respond with something different, which does not represent the "correct response" that is expected¹⁹². The main strategies that Americans prefer are "Comment History", which is a way of commenting something about the compliment, such as explaining the details of where that item that was complimented comes from. Another strategy is "Reassignment", which is basically shifting the credit to something or someone else, consequently avoiding taking any type of credit for themselves. Other strategies that are preferred, based on Herbert's research, are the "Return" strategy, when the

¹⁸⁹ Herbert, Robert K., 1986. Say "Thank You" - or something. Durham: Duke University Press, p.79.

¹⁹⁰ Herbert, Robert K., 1990. Sex-Based Differences in Compliment Behavior. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.207.

¹⁹¹ Herbert, Robert K., 1986. Say "Thank You" - or something. Durham: Duke University Press, p.80.

¹⁹² Herbert, Robert K., 1990. Sex-Based Differences in Compliment Behavior. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.209.

compliment is shifted back to the person who uttered the compliment in the first place, or even all the different types of strategies that fall under the main category of “Nonagreement”¹⁹³.

Robert Herbert also declared that¹⁹⁴:

Non-Americans’ perception that Americans are insincere in their compliments is - in a sense - correct from the perspective of their non-American cultural orientation where compliment formulas serve a much more restricted set of functions and are therefore more limited in discourse.

That is because in their culture, compliments are not seen as something to give exclusively in moments of true admiration, instead they are mostly used as ice breakers, or to show familiarity, solidarity or even hospitality to foreigners¹⁹⁵. Furthermore, the author states that for Americans, the primary function of a compliment is to establish solidarity and make the hearer feel appreciated. The choice of a response other than mere acceptance follows this exact reasoning. By choosing a complex response strategy, the addressee recognizes the speaker's positive intent while simultaneously avoiding self-praise. This underlying need to balance solidarity and modesty explains why Americans frequently avoid simple acceptance¹⁹⁶. Herbert also adds that the American culture heavily enforces the “Modesty Maxim” because it is based on specific values, like democratic idealism and human equality. Based on the responses in the author’s data it is clear that the “Modesty Maxim” is considered more important and consequently respected and followed more than the “Agreement

¹⁹³ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.211.

¹⁹⁴ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p. 209.

¹⁹⁵ Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

¹⁹⁶ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.211.

Maxim”¹⁹⁷. Moving on to the Italian culture, Alfonzetti (2009: 20) theorized how compliment responses are managed by Italians and the result of her research differs from Herbert’s finding on Americans. As already said, the shared view of compliment with the Americans is that compliments are seen as social lubricants, but Italians also see them as “verbal gifts”, (as already mentioned in section 2.1.1)¹⁹⁸. Since a compliment is seen as a gift, and maybe also because compliments in the Italian culture are considered to be less frequent than in the American one, not accepting the compliment is very often seen as highly offensive. The most accepted response to a compliment is to accept it, which could be seen as a way of reciprocating the gift¹⁹⁹. Alfonzetti explained in detail all the results of her research, a qualitative conversational analysis (whereas Herbert’s research was mainly quantitative). In fact, the author conducted a research based on the analysis of a large corpus of spontaneous speech, that she created by recording actual spontaneous conversations mainly between university students in Catania and Rome²⁰⁰. She explains in detail the reasons why she chose this type of method and why she considers the other method used by Herbert less efficient. First of all, she criticizes Robert Herbert’s methodology called the “notebook method”, which consisted in data that was collected ethnographically by university students, who were specifically instructed to collect compliment and compliment responses in all places of the university. These students basically had to listen to actual conversations and annotate on their notebook all the information

¹⁹⁷ Herbert, Robert K., 1986. Say “Thank You” - or something. Durham: Duke University Press, p.82.

¹⁹⁸ Alfonzetti, Giovanna, 2009. I complimenti nella conversazione. Roma: Editori Riuniti University Press, p.20.

¹⁹⁹ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ibidem.

²⁰⁰ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ivi. p.7.

they were able to gather²⁰¹. Alfonzetti, in this regard, argues that her method is more effective and appropriate, because by recording real interactions between speakers it is possible to gather data without the risk of manipulating or simplifying the data and without losing essential information. At the same time, it allows the researcher to concentrate even on the most complex, longer and implicit types of compliments. She underlined that the compliment itself shouldn't be isolated from the conversation but should be instead analysed within the context and the interactions²⁰². Going back to the results of her research, Alfonzetti states that, being the "acceptance" of the compliment the most common response, it has been noticed that within the verbal response to the compliment, there are usually other signals that can be considered more "emotional" and non-verbal, like open smiles, a friendly and affectionate voice tone and more in general positive attitudes towards the compliment²⁰³. Furthermore, in order to find a solution for the conflict between the Modesty and the Agreement Maxim, the author highlights that Italians try to avoid full agreement in order to not sound arrogant, but they actually prefer to avoid full disagreement or rejection of the compliment, which was discovered by Herbert to be the strategy often preferred by the Americans²⁰⁴. For the Italians, on the other hand, rejecting or disagreeing with a verbal gift has been discovered by Alfonzetti to be quite uncommon. In fact, Italians usually try to compromise between the two Maxims by agreeing and accepting the compliment but immediately saying something to downplay the praise. That strategy often explains the length of the sequences in their compliment responses.

²⁰¹ Herbert, Robert K., 1990. *Sex-Based Differences in Compliment Behavior*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.202-203.

²⁰² Alfonzetti, Giovanna, 2009. *I complimenti nella conversazione*. Roma: Editori Riuniti University Press, p.38.

²⁰³ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. *Ivi*. p.177.

²⁰⁴ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. *Ivi*. p.178.

Whilst Americans usually respond with quick and stereotypical sequences, Italians tend to use longer and more complex sequences, sometimes using jokes, irony and other strategies²⁰⁵. Comparing these two main Italian and American studies, we understand that, on a general level, Americans prioritize the Agreement Maxim whilst Italians prioritize the Modesty Maxim, while both try to manage this very complex speech act in the best way possible for their own personal and cultural values.

3. Research methodology and corpus analysis

3.1 Data collection

This chapter will focus on the methodological framework and on the processes adopted for the creation, collection and finally the analysis of all the data that was used in this research. The approach that was specifically chosen for this thesis has been qualitative and observational, which means that the data was collected by directly observing and documenting not only the verbal behaviours of the protagonists, but also their non-verbal natural ones. Furthermore, it was decided to conduct a comparative analysis, by investigating the differences in the behaviours of the Italians and of the Americans. In the following chapters there will be a more detailed explanation of how all the data was collected.

²⁰⁵ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. *Ibidem*.

3.1.1 Corpus creation

As already underlined before, this research has been characterized by a comparative analysis between two different languages and cultures, the American and the Italian one. In particular, it has been chosen to use structured interviews as the selected methodology in order to fully represent all the pragmatic aspects of the language. All the data derived from the interviews were gathered through interviews that were conducted in exclusively face-to-face informal contexts. For all the interviews, the selected context was the university environment, so that it could represent a neutral and familiar space for all the interviewees, who are, as we are going to see in the next sections, university students. Ten semi-structured interviews were first designed and then carried out. Five interviews were conducted fully in Italian with five young Italian women, whereas the other five were fully conducted in English with five young American women. In order to capture all the details of the interview and consequently of the interviewees' responses, all the ten interviews were recorded. To allow the recording of the interviews it was necessary to get the authorization from the interviewees, who personally signed the authorization for the actual recording itself and for the processing of personal data that was going to come out of the interview. In the present study, the decision was made to create two different types of interviews, one specifically designed for the American girls and one for the Italian girls. The result was consequently the creation of two distinct interviews, characterised by different questions and different topics that were chosen taking into consideration their two very different mother tongues and cultures and country of origin. This study may be considered a mixed-methods investigation, as it primarily adopts a qualitative approach to data collection and the analysis of

the interview data. Nevertheless, the qualitative analysis is complemented by a descriptive quantitative analysis, which is presented and discussed in the following sections. For the purposes of this study, a specific methodological approach was adopted to ensure that the participants did not become aware that the primary aim of the interviews was to elicit different types of compliments and analyse their responses. As briefly mentioned above, the method selected for this research was the structured interview. For each participant group, an interview guide outlining the questions in a predetermined order was developed. The same interview guide was used with all five Italian participants, while a different guide, also following a fixed sequence of questions, was used with all five American participants. In the following section, there will be a detailed presentation of all these aspects that I briefly touched on in this last paragraph, which are mainly the reasons behind the choices made in the research design, how the interviews were created and consequently which questions were asked and which compliments were given in what specific part of the interview and the protagonists of the interviews.

3.1.2 Reasons for the choice of method

As for the reasons behind the main choices that have been made in the first steps of this research, they mainly lie in the literature itself and in the process of understanding the main differences between two authors' choices, who have already been extensively discussed in the previous chapters: Giovanna Alfonzetti and Robert Herbert. Giovanna Alfonzetti could be considered one of the leading figures of qualitative research, contrasting her with the major proponent of quantitative research, who is Robert Herbert. Giovanna Alfonzetti,

in her book titled “*I complimenti nella conversazione*”²⁰⁶, states that the first research that was conducted on compliments was based on American English and over time this specific type of research has been extended also to many other languages of the world. These studies brought to light many profound differences not only from an interlinguistic point of view, but also from an intercultural one, underlining also the main differences in the culture behind the language²⁰⁷. Nonetheless, there has been also another fundamental aspect that has been studied in this research and also chosen as a fundamental aspect to consider in this thesis, which is the conceptualisation of linguistic politeness. As we already explained in the previous chapters, it can be considered a very broad scope in which compliments can be placed²⁰⁸. She also states in her work that²⁰⁹

Italian, however, has inexplicably remained on the margins of this rich line of research, despite the fact that, due to the intertwining of norms and principles that govern its exchange and the high frequency in various communicative situations, compliments are a privileged object of analysis in research conducted from theoretical perspectives and with different methodological approaches.

The author briefly introduces the main methods for the study of compliments, the first one being the famous ethnographic method used in the first American studies. The ethnographic approach essentially consists of what are called “extemporaneous annotations”, namely taking notes from memory after the real-life interactions have

²⁰⁶ Alfonzetti, Giovanna, 2009. *I complimenti nella conversazione*. Roma: Editori Riuniti University Press, p.37.

²⁰⁷ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. *Ibidem*.

²⁰⁸ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. *Ibidem*.

²⁰⁹ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. *Ibidem*.

already taken place. This kind of method was in fact used by Robert Herbert in his extensive research of compliments on American students²¹⁰. Giovanna Alfonzetti critiques this methodological approach based on various reasons, the first one being that according to her what is very likely to happen is that priority is given to collecting compliments that are: “more easily recognizable and memorable”²¹¹. She describes these types of compliments as the ones that are particularly short, explicit and the classic repetitive formulas, at the expense of the ones that are longer, more complex from a structural point of view and the implicit ones that can be considered more difficult to identify for the interviewer²¹². In addition to the consequence of having gathered a collection of highly formulaic compliments, the author also points out that, considering that the process of collecting data is having or listening to real-life interactions and only noting afterwards or on the spot just the compliment that has been made and possibly the answer to it, there is a very high risk of isolating the actual compliment from the conversational contexts. According to Alfonzetti, the natural and unavoidable negative consequence is that²¹³:

This precludes the understanding of the complex pragmatic functioning of compliments, which, like any other linguistic act, derive their value from both situational and conversational context”.

The author states in fact that in real-life interactions that take place in a spontaneous speech, both of those speech acts, namely

²¹⁰ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. *Ivi*. p.38.

²¹¹ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. *Ibidem*.

²¹² Alfonzetti, Giovanna. *Ibidem*.

²¹³ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. *Ibidem*.

compliments and compliment responses, often constitute long, complex, implicit and elaborate sequences that cannot be fully captured with “on-the-spot annotations”. These annotations, as they have been used in Robert Herbert’s research, can be absolutely accurate and well made, but according to Alfonzetti, they are not able to capture the totality of this complex phenomenon²¹⁴. Furthermore, other fundamental reasons behind Alfonzetti’s critique towards this method are that, as already touched on briefly, these notes are subject to the limits of human memory, and also the fact they very often only focus on what has been said and not on how it has been said. For this reason, it is possible to say that this type of method leaves behind the importance of all the pragmatic aspects of the conversational context. These are essentially the reasons behind the choice of excluding this specific method for this study and, on the other hand, choosing the method of recording the actual interaction in order not to have to worry about forgetting fundamental parts of the conversational exchanges, as well as having the opportunity to listen to the recording as many times as it is needed in order to capture the totality of compliment and compliment responses exchanges. Regarding the reasons behind the choice of selecting a specific type of interview, namely the structured one, the main idea was to create two different types of interviews, one specifically made in English for interviewing the five Americans and another one in Italian for interviewing the Italians. The important difference between the two kinds of interviews, apart from the language, is the fact that the interview for the Italians was specifically thought for them. As it will be explained in detail in the next chapters, they are all Italian university students, they have lived all their life in Italy, their mother tongue is Italian

²¹⁴ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. *Ivi*. p.38-39.

and consequently they know the English language as a foreign or second language. On the other hand, the interview for the Americans took into consideration the fact that they have lived all their lives in North America, their mother tongue is English, and they could have different languages other than English as their second or foreign languages. While the core framework of the interviews remained identical to allow for a comparative analysis, it was necessary to adapt the specific content of the questions to the linguistic and cultural background of the two groups of interviewees. Consequently, a tailored "English guide" was used consistently for all five American participants, and an adapted "Italian guide" was used for the five Italian participants. By choosing the structured interview it was possible to expose all participants to the exact same stimuli, meaning that the American girls would have been exposed to the same questions and more importantly to the same four specific types of compliments in the same order, and the same for the Italian girls²¹⁵. The next section will explain in detail the structure of the two interviews, including all the questions that were asked and more importantly how the compliments were covertly inserted in the interview.

3.1.3 Interview design and structure

The creation of the interviews could be considered the first practical aspect of this research that needed to be organized in a very specific way: the goal was in fact to create interviews that were disguised as general conversations about the participant's life and university experience. In this specific research a specific approach was chosen,

²¹⁵ Battisti, Guglielmo, 2018. *Come condurre una ricerca etnografica*. Roma: LUISS Guido Carli, p.20.

called “covert approach”, which essentially means that, in order to avoid people changing their way of talking and responding because they know what the researcher is aiming to study, the researcher avoids at all costs telling the interviewees what the interview is really about²¹⁶. The covert approach could potentially face different ethical problems because it is basically based on the fact that the researcher and/or interviewer necessarily has to lie to his/her subjects. This type of research certainly has its own risks, like for instance the risk of being discovered and consequently of losing trust from the interviewees²¹⁷. Despite the risks, that the researcher needs to be aware of, for some types of research and for this one particularly, it can be considered the necessary type of approach to conduct a specific research. For this research, the need to use the covert approach was even greater, because in order to study compliment and compliment responses it is necessary to not make the subjects aware that they will receive them. In the specific case of compliments, the need to make the compliments sound as spontaneous as possible is fundamental, because there is a very high risk of giving a compliment that doesn’t sound genuine and the unavoidable consequence would be that the subjects could perceive that. Another important reason for adopting this approach is its relevance to a central aspect of this research: linguistic politeness²¹⁸. The subjects were not supposed to be aware that the interviewer was going to give specific compliments otherwise it would have seemed fake and mechanical and this would have potentially led to a loss of face, both of the interviewer and of the interviewee. The interviewee would have lost his/her positive face, which

²¹⁶ Bitto, Giulia, 2022. “Nel senso, chi l’ha mai vista?” Etnografia dell’invisibilità: le autobiografie dei detenuti per mafia nella Casa Circondariale Catania Bicocca. Messina: Università degli Studi di Messina, p.37.

²¹⁷ Bitto, Giulia. Ibidem.

²¹⁸ Alfonzetti, Giovanna, 2009. I complimenti nella conversazione. Roma: Editori Riuniti University Press, p.18.

in this case is the desire of being appreciated, because the compliment received would not have been seen as a “genuine gift”, but rather as something fake and possibly not true. The subjects could have also lost their negative faces, which in this case is the feeling of being manipulated and forced into something, because they would have felt the pressure of having to respond in a socially correct way and consequently losing what the researcher wanted to hear: spontaneity²¹⁹. On the other hand, the interviewer would have appeared as fake and manipulative, and the main risk was to lose the positive face because the image of an empathetic, sincere and honest interlocutor would have immediately been lost. In this specific research it is quite obvious that sounding sincere was the key for the project's success²²⁰. In the specific speech act of compliments, sincerity has a greater importance compared to other speech acts: the compliment needs to sound as sincere and genuine as possible because the subjects need to feel like the compliment itself was born from a real admiration and appreciation and not from an experimental obligation²²¹. Keeping in mind what has been just said about the need of disguise, it has been chosen to make the subjects believe that the interview was going to focus on certain topics like for instance for the American girls: their life in Pavia, their university life and choice of study, their competence in the Italian language, motivation, career and the academic contrast between the American university system and the Italian one etc. The same choice was made also for the Italian girls, who believed that the interview was going to focus on topics like their university life, their choice of study and their exams, their competence in the English language, future idea of career, etc.

²¹⁹ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ivi. p.19-20.

²²⁰ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ivi. p.21.

²²¹ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ivi. p.44-45.

Consequently, the sequence of the questions asked in this specific order was chosen and the result of the interview's structure for the five American girls is reported as follows:

Structured Interview for Americans:

Introduction: Okay, so first of all I am going to ask you again if it's okay to record this interview.

Ice breaker: First of all, how are you? How is your day going so far?

Compliment 1 (about physical appearance): Can I just say that you look really nice! I love your hair.

Topic 1: Life in Italy/Pavia and Italian language

Question 1: First of all, how are you finding your experience here in Pavia/Italy so far?

Question 2: What has been the most surprising thing (cultural shock)? Maybe in terms of the language, the locals or whatever comes to mind.

Question 3: In terms of the language, have you ever studied Italian before (whilst being in America)?

(if the answer is yes=> Question 4a: for how long you have studied it?)

(if the answer is no=> Question 4b: so, are you taking lessons here in Pavia or you just come in contact with the language "naturally"?)

Question 5: so, could you tell me something in Italian, like a word or a sentence (whatever you want), that you have learned? Even a simple word like "ciao"/"Bellissimo" it's okay or a small sentence that you like to hear or say.

Compliment 2 (linguistic competence): "Can I tell you? Your Italian is great!" (if she said like a whole sentence), or "I must say, your pronunciation is really good!" (if she says something really simple).

Topic 2: Motivation/Career

Question 6: Now I wanted to ask you about your studies, what are you studying here in Pavia?

Question 7: Can I ask you what drove you to choose this specific field of study?

Compliment 3 (personal aspect/choice of life): Wow, I find this choice of study really interesting!

Topic 3: Academic Contrast

Question 8: Changing topic, of course I know that you are used to the American university/college system, so can I ask you what are the biggest differences that you've noticed between the Italian University system and the American one? For example, the teaching style, the relationship with the teachers etc...

Question 9: so which system do you prefer?

Conclusion: Okay so I would say that I have finished asking all the questions..

Compliment 4 (physical possession): Okay now that I am done I have to tell you that your (scarf, earrings, clothing item etc) is gorgeous! I was noticing it during the interview, it's really cute!

Also, the sequence of the questions that were going to be asked in this specific order for the second type of interview were chosen. The main difference compared to the interview for the Americans is that the one for the Italians was almost fully conducted in the Italian language, except for the part where the researcher wanted to establish their general level of knowledge of English, by asking a specific question directly in English, in order to obtain their responses in the same language. This choice was made with a specific aim in mind, which was, as will be explained later on, getting to a point where a

specific compliment could be made, like in this specific case a compliment about their linguistic competence in the English language. Consequently, the result of the interview's structure for the five Italian girls that was conducted mainly in Italian, is reported as follows:

Structured Interview for Italians:

Introduzione: Allora innanzitutto ti chiedo se mi dai il permesso di registrare questa intervista.

Ice-breaker: Innanzitutto, come stai? Come sta andando la tua giornata fino ad ora?

Complimento 1: (aspetto fisico): Mi piacciono un sacco i tuoi capelli/il colore dei tuoi capelli.

Topic 1: Università/Percorso di studi

Domanda 1: La prima domanda che ti vorrei fare riguarda il tuo percorso di studi, quindi, posso chiederti di raccontarmi un po' cosa studi al momento, suppongo qua a Pavia? Se stai facendo una magistrale ti chiederei di raccontarmi cosa hai fatto prima nella triennale per arrivare a cosa fai ora, mentre se stai facendo una triennale invece parlami direttamente di quello.

Complimento 2 (scelta personale): Posso dirti? Lo trovo molto interessante come percorso di studi!

Domanda 2: e riguardo a questo, c'è stato un esame o un progetto in particolare che ti ha messa in difficoltà ma che ti ha dato maggiore soddisfazione una volta superato?

Domanda 3: posso chiederti qual è il tuo piano per il futuro? In ambito lavorativo hai già in mente un tipo di lavoro specifico che vorresti fare, magari collegato a ciò che stai studiando?

Topic 2: Lingua Inglese

Premessa: Ora passerei al secondo tema dell'intervista e per farti questa domanda successiva devo spiegarti un po' ciò che invece studio

io: allora io praticamente sto facendo qua a Pavia la magistrale di linguistica e studio principalmente la linguistica italiana e inglese, quindi l'inglese è una casella molto importante nel mio percorso di studi.

Domanda 4: Ora ti farei una domanda e se non è un problema potresti rispondere in inglese anche te? Okay perfect, I wanted to ask you what type of relationship you have with the English language, if you study it at university or you come in contact with the language outside of the classroom context (so on your own, for example if you watch English TV series or films), if you studied it only in the past and not anymore etc?

(Risposta in inglese)

Complimento 3 (competenza linguistica): Posso dire? Hai proprio una bella pronuncia / hai un ottimo inglese! (Dipende da come parlano).

Topic 3: Esperienze all'estero (studio o lavoro)

Domanda 5: L'ultima domanda che ti farei è se hai per caso fatto delle esperienze all'estero o ti piacerebbe farle (sia di studio, tipo Erasmus sia lavorative)? Se sì dove?

Conclusione e Complimento 4 (possesso personale): Okay perfetto direi che abbiamo finito con le domande, spero ti sia piaciuta questa intervista. Tra l'altro ora che ho finito posso dirti che ho notato per tutto il tempo i tuoi orecchini/gonna/giacca ecc., sono bellissimi!

Having shown the general structure of the two interviews that were conducted, it is essential to underline the fact that, as already explained, these interviews can be categorized as structured interviews because the interviewer gave importance to the order of the questions, that was always maintained and also made sure not to skip any questions. As regards to the actual formulation of the questions, the

structures reported show the ideal formulation for them, but for the fact that the interview was conducted in a very informal way among girls and the goal was to make both the situation and the protagonists comfortable, there was the possibility of freedom and flexibility. In order to create a genuine interview, the interviewer didn't want to memorize the questions exactly as reported above but rather formulate them a little bit differently depending on the situation, the feeling with the interviewee and other contextual variables. The same was also valid for the actual compliments that were inserted between the questions and the answers: the formulation of the compliment could slightly change according to the situation and the interviewee, but the order of the compliments was supposed to be maintained exactly the same, also because the compliment was always made immediately after having spoken about that specific topic that the compliment was going to be about. In this regard, it is appropriate to introduce the actual compliments: the selection of the four categories of compliments that were chosen for this research was strategically informed by the various taxonomies introduced in the literature in general and in particular in Alfonzetti's and Herbert's works. The four types of compliments that were chosen were: 1) compliment about physical appearance, 2) compliment about a personal aspect of life, specifically personal choice of study, 3) compliment about linguistic competence and 4) compliment about personal possessions. Giovanna Alfonzetti (2009: 10) stated that in her corpus, the majority of compliments that were given were directed at the physical appearance such as:²²²

²²² Alfonzetti, Giovanna, 2009. *I complimenti nella conversazione*. Roma: Editori Riuniti University Press, p.10.

Natural gifts (such as beauty in general or, more specifically, legs, physique, skin, hands, etc.); elegance; hairstyle, haircut, or hair colour; maintaining fitness, being thin, and especially being young...

In this specific research, it was chosen to start the interview by giving this exact compliment in order to immediately break the ice and give off positive and warm vibes. Furthermore, it was chosen to compliment specifically the hair because it has been considered the most neutral and less personal one. This specific choice has to do with negative politeness because the intention was to avoid sounding and appearing too personal and intrusive and therefore not invading their personal space, the interviewees being strangers. The second type of compliment that was chosen was the one about personal possessions, which is actually considered very common, even by Alfonzetti herself, who declared that the majority of these types of compliments are directed at material objects (especially clothes and accessories)²²³. The third type of compliment that was specifically chosen for this research was the one on “skills or abilities” as Alfonzetti stated in her primary work on compliments²²⁴. The author provides some examples of this category, such as cooking or decorating the home; however, since the interviewer in this project didn’t know the subjects personally, it was decided to compliment a specific ability or skill, namely linguistic competence. In fact, the Italian language competence of the Americans was complimented and the English language competence of the Italians, which of course do not represent their first language, but a second or a foreign one.

²²³ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. *Ivi*. p.10.

²²⁴ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. *Ibidem*.

The last type of compliment that Giovanna Alfonzetti talks about is the one on personality traits such as kindness, sweetness etc²²⁵. Considering the same reasoning explained just now, namely that the interviewer didn't personally know the interviewees and consequently the protagonists of the interaction were strangers, it was not considered appropriate to compliment aspects of their personality. Instead, it was chosen to compliment a specific part of their life, in other words, a personal choice that influences their life. Considering that the interviewees gave a lot of information about their personal choice of study, it was considered appropriate to compliment this specific aspect of their life. It was also chosen to reflect cultural values and social roles because sometimes what is appreciated when receiving a compliment acts as a mirror of what the community they live in, and their culture appreciates in its members. The main objective of giving these four types of compliments to each subject was to observe how they would have responded and if the compliment responses would differ substantially between the ones given by the Americans and the one given by the Italians. Another fundamental aim was to analyse whether some conclusions could be drawn both on the rules governing linguistic politeness, which could vary from one culture to another, and to also note differences between the two cultures and see whether the socio-cultural values of the countries and the language of belonging would shine through in their responses.

²²⁵ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. *Ibidem*.

3.2 Selection criteria and analysis of the protagonists: number of participants, context, gender, age, nationality.

In this specific section, the criteria for the selection of the protagonists and the analysis of them will be presented and explained. The main reason for choosing to interview 10 total subjects, and consequently maintaining a small sample of subjects, was based on the choice of doing a qualitative type of research, in which, as already explained in the previous chapter, it is planned to analyse how the chosen topic can vary in a small sample. Considering the fact that the idea for this specific research was also to understand the differences between two cultures and languages, respectively Italian and American English, the logical choice of choosing five Americans and five Italians followed. Talking about other information about the subjects that were chosen for this project, all girls, both American and Italian, fall within the 20-26 age range and, as briefly said before, they are all university students, either in their bachelor's or master's degree. It was for this specific reason that the majority of the questions that were asked were about their course of study. Furthermore, the American girls were chosen specifically because they have lived all their lives in America and they were just temporarily living in Italy, specifically in Pavia, for a short period of time and consequently it was possible to ask the question about the Italian language, followed by the compliment. As for the Italians, on the other hand, they were chosen also considering the fact that they knew English as a foreign or second language, and therefore it was possible to compliment their English after listening to them talk and respond in that language. This specific requirement was easily met because of the fact that the English language has now become one of the most important and spoken

languages in the whole world and nowadays it is considered normal especially for young people to know at least a basic level of English. One fundamental trait that was specifically chosen for this project is that all ten of the subjects are women, and that was a deliberate choice based on the literature on compliments and compliment responses. Robert Herbert (1990: 202) focused part of his research on sex-based differences in compliments and compliment responses, highlighting first of all the fact that out of the 1,062 compliment events in his corpus, the majority of them were “Female-Female”, which means that the compliment is given by a woman and the recipient is also a woman²²⁶. The author also stated that: “the literature of sex-differentiating language behaviour suggests that women employ more personal focus than men in many contexts”²²⁷. This translates into the fact that women appear to employ first person compliments regardless of the sex of the compliment addressee. Of the Female-Female compliments there is a very high percentage in Herbert’s study, specifically 82.4% with first and also second person compliments compared to a very low 31.6 percent of Male-Male interchange²²⁸. On that note, the two most used forms of first-person compliments are “I like X” and “I love X”. Whereas when talking about second person compliments we are referring to compliments that start with “You” or “Your” like for instance “You look very nice” and “Your hairstyle is amazing”²²⁹. Another positive aspect considered was that Holmes (1986, cited in Herbert 1990: 205) noted that: “the syntactic form of women's compliments strengthens their positive force significantly and that men use a form which attenuates or

²²⁶ Herbert, Robert K., 1990. *Sex-Based Differences in Compliment Behavior*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.202.

²²⁷ Herbert, Robert K. *Ivi.* p.204.

²²⁸ Herbert, Robert K. *Ivi.* p.205.

²²⁹ Herbert, Robert K. *Ivi.* p.206.

hedges on complimentary force more often than women”²³⁰. Giovanna Alfonzetti (2009: 8-9) also declared in her studies that in many societies women are the favourite targets of compliments from men, but especially from other women. She states that also in her research the overwhelming majority of compliments are exchanged between women and she mentions that usually women are the ones who offer and also receive compliments more²³¹. Having talked about gender-differences in giving compliments, Robert Herbert also talks about it in compliment responses, saying that women tend to perceive compliments not as objective valuations like men do, but instead as tools for solidarity and affiliation. Herbert also declared that “compliments that are offered by males are more likely to be accepted than compliments offered by females”²³². In his corpus, Female-Female compliment exchanges exhibit the lowest direct acceptance rate compared to a higher percentage in interactions with males involved²³³. The logical explanation behind it is strictly connected with the concept of linguistic politeness as women tend to avoid the direct acceptance of the compliment like the classic *thank you* because it could be potentially seen as a sign of self-praise and vanity, whilst what women want in these types of exchange is creating equality and not to distance themselves from a hierarchical point of view²³⁴. It was consequently chosen to employ only women in this specific project also because they normally tend to avoid the simple “Thank you” and use a wider range of more complex, longer and articulated responses and strategies²³⁵. By choosing to conduct the interviews in this way, a

²³⁰ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.205.

²³¹ Alfonzetti, Giovanna, 2009. I complimenti nella conversazione. Roma: Editori Riuniti University Press, p.8-9.

²³² Herbert, Robert K., 1990. Sex-Based Differences in Compliment Behavior. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.212.

²³³ Herbert, Robert K. Ibidem.

²³⁴ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.208.

²³⁵ Herbert, Robert K. Ivi. p.221-222.

pragmatic richness was assured. And the logical step forward was to use only women for both the Italian and English interviews because a more accurate cross-cultural comparison was possible. Finally, regarding ethical considerations and privacy, it must be noted that all the names of the interviewees reported in the transcriptions and examples in the following chapters are pseudonyms. The participants' real names have been changed in order to protect their anonymity.

3.3 Interviews transcriptions' process

In order to reach pragmatic richness, it was chosen to follow Giovanna Alfonzetti's (2009: 38) advice during the transcription process. The author, as already explained in the previous chapters, states that the compliment should not be isolated from the conversational context because this would preclude a full understanding of compliments which draw their value from both the situational and conversational context²³⁶. For this specific reason, it was chosen to transcribe all the parts of the interview and not exclusively the compliment and the response, so that it would be possible to insert them in the context and understand them at a deeper pragmatic level. The interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Word. For the transcription process, a simplified transcription system was adopted in order to ensure clarity and readability during the subsequent analysis. However, specific transcription conventions were also employed, as outlined below:

- 1) (...) to indicate pauses.
- 2) [laughter]/[risata] to indicate some kind of laughter.

²³⁶ Alfonzetti, Giovanna, 2009. *I complimenti nella conversazione*. Roma: Editori Riuniti University Press, p.38.

- 3) [smile] to indicate a positive signal of appreciation like a smile.
- 4) Repeated vowels (e.g. *graaazie/thank youuu*) to indicate vowel lengthening.

Another fundamental aspect to underline is that during the transcription process it was chosen not to correct the possible mistakes or grammatical errors that were produced and made by the interviewees because the goal was to maintain the speech exactly as it was. This choice was mostly made in order to keep in mind that pragmatics studies the real use of language, which includes all the little imperfections of speech, which only make it real.

3.4 Introduction of the annotation scheme and its labels

This section will focus on the creation and analysis of the Italian corpus, created with all the data that were first gathered during the interviews of the five Italian girls and subsequently annotated using a specific scheme of annotation that will be presented as follows: Pomerantz (1978)²³⁷ was actually the first researcher to draw attention to the topic of compliment responses and most importantly, she declared how there is actually a very wide range of response types. Robert Herbert, following and respecting Pomerantz's theories, developed between 1986 and 1990 the 12-strategy taxonomy for compliment responses that was actually extensively explained in the previous chapters²³⁸. In order to use an effective and reliable scheme of

²³⁷ Pomerantz, Anita. 1978. *Compliment Responses. Notes on the co-operation of multiple constraints*. New York: Academic Press.

²³⁸ Herbert, Robert K., 1986. *Say "Thank You" - or something*. Durham: Duke University Press, p.78.

annotation for analysing all the different strategies that were used during the interviews' compliment responses and also for the fact that Herbert's taxonomy is considered by many linguists the gold standard and the universal model used by researchers who study compliment responses, it was chosen to create the annotation scheme using the exact same 12 strategies as labels. The tagset that was consequently used to annotate every single compliment response is the following:

Table 1: Annotation Scheme

Category	Strategy (English)	Italian Translation
Agreement	<i>1. Appreciation Token</i>	‘Token di Apprezzamento’
	<i>2. Comment Acceptance</i>	‘Accettazione con commento’
	<i>3. Praise Upgrade</i>	‘Amplificazione dell’elogio’
	<i>4. Comment History</i>	‘Commento sulla storia’
	<i>5. Reassignment</i>	‘Riassegnazione del merito’
	<i>6. Return</i>	‘Restituzione’

Category	Strategy (English)	Italian Translation
Non- Agreement	<i>7. Scale Down</i>	‘Minimizzazione’
	<i>8. Question</i>	‘Domanda/ Verifica’
	<i>9. Disagreement</i>	‘Disaccordo’
	<i>10. Qualification</i>	‘Qualificazione’
Other Interpretation	<i>11. No Acknowledgment</i>	‘Mancato Riconoscimento’
	<i>12. Request Interpretation</i>	‘Interpretazione come richiesta’

4. Comparative analysis of compliment responses

This specific chapter will focus on presenting all the fundamental data on compliment responses that were collected during all the interviews. Furthermore, the annotation scheme that was specifically created for this type of research and its labels will be presented and explained in detail as they represent the core of the fundamental annotation process.

4.1 Qualitative analysis of the Italian corpus: results of frequency and politeness strategies mostly used

The frequency results of all the politeness strategies used by the Italians will first be presented in the following tables (Figure 7 and 8) and subsequently discussed:

ITALIANE	Physical Appearance	Personal Choice (of study)	Personal Competence (linguistic)	Personal Possession	Total
Appreciation Token	4	0	3	5	12
Comment Acceptance	1	3	0	0	4
Comment History	0	0	0	0	0
Return	0	0	1	2	3
Question	2	0	0	2	4
Reassignment	0	0	0	2	2
Scale Down	2	0	1	0	3
Disagreement	0	1	2	0	3
Qualification	0	1	3	1	5
No Acknowledgment	0	1	0	1	2
Request Interpretation	0	0	0	0	0
Praise Upgrade	0	0	0	0	0

Figure 7: Strategies used by Italian interviewees

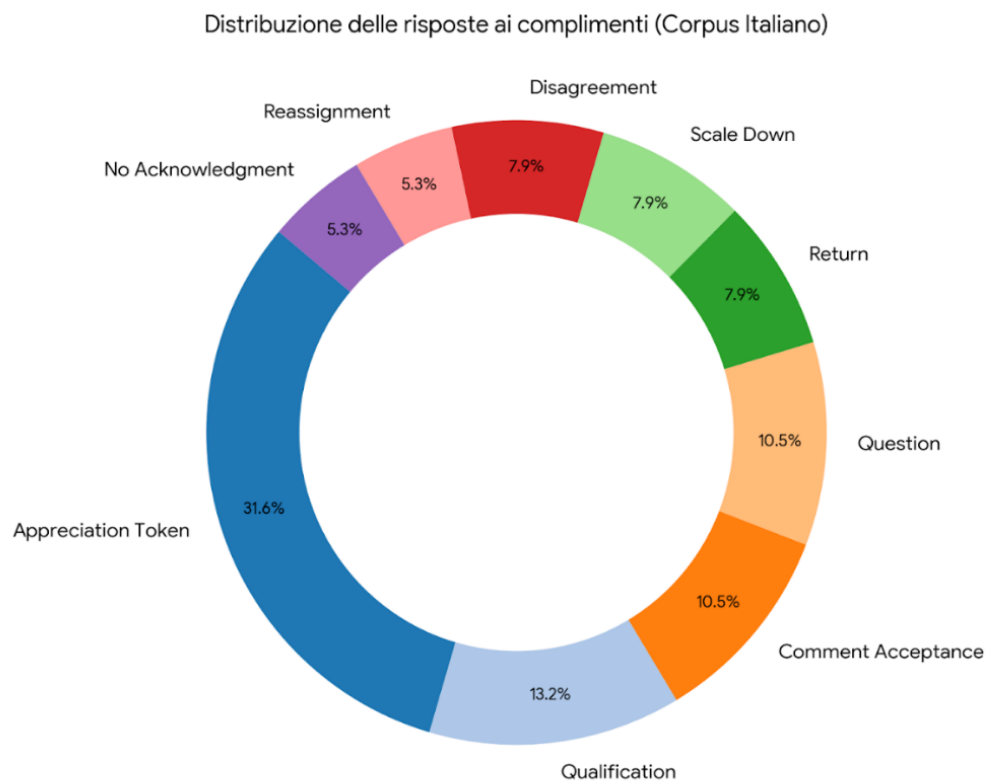


Figure 8: Answers to compliments in the Italian Corpus

The previous graphs were created after the process of annotation in order to allow a more specific analysis of all the data. As can be seen, the highest percentage of all is the strategy of the “Appreciation Token” which represents the most common and expected response among speakers, i.e. *grazie* ‘thanks’ and all the other variants; in this specific corpus it was also the typical smile of appreciation. It can be said that this specific result was to be expected: what was most surprising was the use of other strategies of agreement, namely Comment Acceptance, Return and Reassignment. In Example (1), we can see the strategy of “Comment Acceptance”, as the interviewee decides to accept the compliment about her choice of study by making a comment about it:

(1) Interviewer: Ah okay, beh, devo dire che penso sia molto interessante come percorso di studi.

Interviewee (Giulia): sì, sì, sì, figo

Interviewer: È figo?

Interviewee (Giulia): Sì! è molto cioè ti apre anche un po' la mente, ha diverse applicazioni... [they continue to talk a bit about what she studies].

This specific strategy was mostly used in this category of compliment, which is the one about the personal choice (in this corpus, the choice of study). A plausible hypothesis for this tendency lies in the nature of the complimented object itself. Unlike compliments on physical appearance or innate abilities, a choice of study can be treated as an external, objective topic of discussion. By employing the "Comment Acceptance" strategy, the interviewees can agree with the interviewer's positive assessment and therefore respecting the Maxim of Agreement and fostering solidarity by shifting the focus of the praise onto the academic field itself rather than their own merit. In doing so, they successfully adhere to the Maxim of Modesty as well, as praising an academic discipline is not perceived as an arrogant act of self-praise. Here is another example:

(2) Interviewer: Comunque come percorso studio sembra super interessante!

Interviewee (Martina): [laughter] Mh, a me personalmente, poi io sono di parte, a me piace molto non avrei mai scelto onestamente lingue per le imprese, cioè loro fanno tre lingue che ci sta, però secondo me hanno delle materie un po' buttate a caso [she continues to talk about professors and exams].

In Example (3), we can see four different strategies of acceptance of the compliment in action, the first two being the “Question” and the “Reassignment” and the other two at the end of the interaction being the “Appreciation Token” and the “Return”:

(3) Interviewer: Ok, perfetto quindi sto guardando un attimo qua, ma ok direi che abbiamo finito con le domande. Eh, basta spero ti sia piaciuta, tra l’altro posso dirti, ho guardato tutto il tempo i tuoi orecchini, mi piacciono un sacco.

Interviewee (Giulia): Questi? Me li hanno regalati i miei l'anno scorso.

Interviewer: Sì? Usi più l'argento o l’oro? Io sono ossessionata da questa cosa ahahah, però boh, sui capelli biondi, cioè secondo me stanno bene tutte e due.

Interviewee (Giulia): Su di me non lo so perché, non lo so

Interviewer: non lo so io ti vedo bene l'argento per esempio.

Interviewee (Giulia): Grazie [laughing], che carina

In Example (3), the “Question” strategy is included in the category of “Agreement” despite the fact that in the original taxonomy created by Herbert, it was inserted in the category of “Non-Agreement”. Alfonzetti called this specific strategy *richieste di conferma* ('requests for confirmation'), as she states that questions are very much used with many different intentions. This type of reaction to a compliment is consequently labelled in different ways by different authors, like for instance Herbert, who considered it a form of Disagreement. According to Alfonzetti (2009: 90)²³⁹:

²³⁹ Alfonzetti, Giovanna, 2009. I complimenti nella conversazione. Roma: Editori Riuniti University Press, p. 90.

Actually, conversational analysis of a sufficiently large corpus of spontaneous speech shows that this kind of reaction can be found in sequences with very different structures, and only the placement in the conversational and situational context allows us to determine exactly the type of action the speaker is performing and the underlying reason: avoidance, acceptance with correction, disagreement, questioning of sincerity or appropriateness.

Consequently, it was decided, for this specific corpus analysis, to interpret this specific strategy according to the pragmatic context behind the interaction and in the previous example it is clear that the question “*Questi?*” was not a way of disagreeing with the compliment but perhaps a way of asking for confirmation or even taking a moment to decide how to respond to the compliment. Returning to Example (3), it can be said that the “return” strategy is used to restore the interactional balance by paying a compliment back to the interviewer. The only two strategies, among the strategies of agreement, that were not employed were the “Praise Upgrade” and the “Comment History”. The avoidance of the strategy of the “Praise Upgrade” can be considered a predictable and expected result, as noted by Alfonzetti:²⁴⁰

All these features show that in response to compliments, agreement is a non-preferred response, because of the operation of the Maxim of Modesty, which requires minimizing self-praise and would instead be violated if the recipient showed full agreement with a compliment directed at them.

²⁴⁰ Alfonzetti, Giovanna, 2009. *I complimenti nella conversazione*. Roma: Editori Riuniti University Press, p.72.

This means that people, generally speaking, tend to respect the Maxim of Modesty, which requires minimizing self-praise as much as possible in order to avoid sounding too full of themselves and arrogant. Consequently, Alfonzetti stated that it is often possible to clearly see “the orientation of the co-participants towards a series of behaviours that reveal the implicit recognition of socio-pragmatic restrictions on self-praise, which can theoretically be assumed as a consequence of this maxim of politeness”²⁴¹. According to her, in the light of the Maxim of Modesty, the strategy of agreement in general is much more frequent in the case of compliments that do not directly concern qualities of the recipient, such as physical appearance, beauty, talent, skills, character traits, but rather about objects or other people that are related to them in some way²⁴². It is also very common to see reactions that are closer to an “Acceptance” of the compliment, rather than an actual “Agreement” and that is simply because it is considered less damaging to the Maxim of Modesty²⁴³. While the absence of the strategy of “Praise Upgrade” was to be expected as we said, the absence of the strategy of “Comment History” would be considered more surprising, considering the fact that Alfonzetti declared that this specific strategy is normally very much employed by the Italians as a mitigation strategy. What is really behind this particular result is the fact that two specific strategies that were employed could have been potentially labelled as “Comment History”, but instead it was chosen to label them as “Reassignment”. These two instances are the previously discussed Example (3) and the following Example (4):

²⁴¹ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. *Ibidem*.

²⁴² Alfonzetti, Giovanna. *Ivi*. p.75.

²⁴³ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. *Ibidem*.

(4) Interviewer: Tra l'altro adesso che abbiamo finito, posso dirti che mi piace tantissimo il tuo orologio, l'ho notato tutto il tempo.

Interviewee (Chiara): ti piace? Me lo sono fatta regalare l'anno scorso a Natale.

The reasoning behind this choice is the fact that, from a pragmatic point of view, the primary intention of the two participants was always to avoid self-praise and actively attribute the personal merit of good taste to a third party and therefore not to provide “historical” and factual information about the object. Moving on to the strategies included in the category of “Non-Agreement” in Herbert’s taxonomy, the ones that were used by the Italian interviewees were the following: “Scale Down”, “Qualification” and “Disagreement”.

In Example (6), we can observe different strategies used by the recipient to mitigate the compliment about her ability to speak English and to avoid self-praise:

(5) Interviewer: Infatti devo dire che è un buon inglese!

Interviewee (Sofia): ahahahah [loud laughter] okay

Interviewer: Non pensi? Sì!

Interviewee (Sofia): Mhh [laughter] non penso però penso di aver imparato a buttarmi un po' di più in queste situazioni.

In this very interesting interaction, where the compliment is negotiated over several turns, we can see a very slight sign of acceptance of the compliment with the “okay”. However, the earlier laughter also reveals, besides what could be just a sign of embarrassment, a potential sign of the fact that she does not fully believe the

compliment that she just received, especially considering the two strategies of “Disagreement” employed immediately afterwards. The interviewer, who noticed the initial embarrassment, decided to dig deeper and see how the interviewee would manage this situation. The interviewee knows how accepting the compliment would have probably put her in an uncomfortable position of sounding too arrogant, so she opted for an explicit disagreement (*Non penso* [‘I don’t think so’]), followed by the strategy of “Qualification” (*però penso di aver imparato a buttarmi un po’ di più in queste situazioni*). The interesting aspect of this analysis is that we can clearly see “Pomerantz’s Dilemma” in action: she disagreed with the compliment to avoid self-praise (consequently respecting the Modesty Maxim), but at the same time there is also the need to respect the Agreement Maxim in order to avoid the risk of offending the person who gave the compliment. The solution that she finds is a way of accepting the compliment in a different way, that is by adjusting the compliment to make it align with the image of a modest person that she wishes to project to the interlocutor, and by doing this, she attributed to herself a slightly lesser merit than the one in the initial compliment. Another interesting strategy used to mitigate the force of the compliment is the “Scale Down” strategy, as shown in Example (7):

- (6) Interviewer: Ah ok, io uno stamattina infatti va bene però è andato bene. Vedremo. sembra bene. Ok, allora adesso diciamo che posso iniziare con le varie domande. Tra l’altro posso dirti? mi piacciono un sacco i tuoi capelli!
- Interviewee (Elena): grazie! Sono un po’ spanati perché è un po’ umido

In this specific example we can clearly see the use of an appreciation token, followed by this sentence (*Sono un po' spanati perché è un po' umido* ['They are a bit frizzy because it's a bit humid']), which is, again, a strategy aimed at respecting both the Maxim of Agreement and the Maxim of Modesty at the same time. The last strategy that was used was the one called “No Acknowledgment”; Alfonzetti stated that in the specific case of avoiding acknowledging a compliment received, there are three different sub-strategies: the first being the simplest one, which is directly ignoring the compliment with silence²⁴⁴. The difficult situation arises especially when the interaction is only between two people. The second sub-strategy is shifting the topic to something that has nothing in common with the compliment just received. This is the case where another maxim is being violated, which is the “Relevance Maxim”, in order to respect the Maxim of Modesty²⁴⁵. The third and final sub-strategy is connected with the second, because it is the situation in which the recipient of the compliment changes the topic to something that has been mentioned beforehand or that is actually relevant to the topic of the conversation and is not totally out of place like in the previous subcategory²⁴⁶. Example (8) illustrates a very complex use of many different strategies, including the topic shift at the end of the interaction:

(7) Interviewer: Tra l'altro adesso che abbiamo finito, posso dirti che mi piace tantissimo il tuo orologio, l'ho notato tutto il tempo.

Interviewee (Chiara): ti piace? Me lo sono fatta regalare l'anno scorso a Natale.

²⁴⁴ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ivi. p.104.

²⁴⁵ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ibidem.

²⁴⁶ Alfonzetti, Giovanna. Ivi. p.105.

Interviewer: Ma è il che marca è? sembra il Daniel Wellington.

Interviewee (Chiara): è molto molto simile infatti. L'unico problema è che io ho sempre avuto orologi e non li ho mai tolti tipo in piscina e queste cose qua e il problema è che questo qua non tiene per niente... [she continues to comment on the problems with her watch].

Interviewer: è comunque bello [soft laughter]

Interviewee (Chiara): [in a low voice, slightly embarrassed] grazie grazie... [immediate topic shift]. Non so se sia stata utile.

In this specific case of the strategy “No Acknowledgment”, we can notice the use of the last topic shift that Alfonzetti talked about, when the recipient of the compliment changes the topic to something relevant to the actual interaction. In this example, the interviewee asks the interviewer at the end of the conversation whether her answers were useful for the purpose (unknown to her) of the interview or not. To conclude the analysis of the Italian corpus, it is fundamental to underline how there is a clear connection between the choice of the strategy of response to employ and the object of the compliment and therefore the four different categories of compliments that were given. As for compliments about physical appearance (in this specific corpus about hair), and about personal possessions, a predominant presence of the “Appreciation Token” has been noticed. Looking specifically at the compliments about possessions, normally objects like jewellery, a really frequent use of the strategies of “Reassignment” and “Return” has been noticed. Talking specifically about the compliment about personal linguistic competence in the use of the English language, the strategies of “Qualification” and

“Disagreement” dominate this category because in this specific case the desire to avoid self-praise is considered very important in order to avoid sounding arrogant. As for the last category of compliment, the one about the personal choice of study, the total absence of appreciation tokens stands out particularly. This is a very interesting result because it almost seems like all the girls treated this compliment as an objective affirmation of something that is an established fact, therefore giving the possibility of agreeing with the compliment without self-praising. All these results essentially confirm the fact that different types of compliments can be seen as potentially face threatening in different ways.

4.2 Qualitative analysis of the English corpus: results of frequency and politeness strategies mostly used

The frequency results of all the politeness strategies used by the Americans will first be presented in the following tables (Figure 9 and 10) and subsequently discussed:

Strategy	Physical Appearance	Personal Choice (of study)	Personal Competence (linguistic)	Personal Possession	Total
Appreciation Token	5	0	4	5	14
Comment Acceptance	1	4	1	1	7
Comment History	2	0	0	4	6
Return	1	0	0	1	2
Question	0	1	1	0	2
Reassignment	0	0	2	0	2
Scale Down	1	0	0	0	1
No Acknowledgment	0	1	0	0	1
Disagreement	0	0	0	0	0
Qualification	0	0	0	0	0
Request Interpretation	0	0	0	0	0
Praise Upgrade	0	0	0	0	0

Figure 9: Strategies used by American interviewees

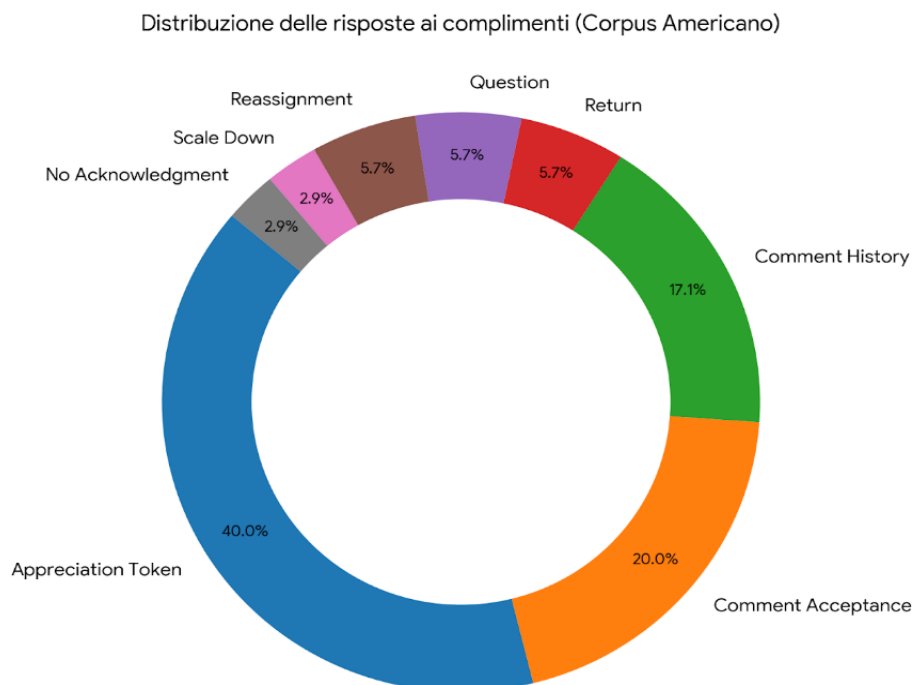


Figure 10: Answers to compliments in the English corpus

As can be seen, perfectly mirroring the findings from the Italian corpus, the highest percentage overall belongs to the “Appreciation Token” strategy. This represents the most common and socially expected response among speakers, typically taking the form of “thank you” and its variants, or, in this specific corpus, a smile of acceptance. The predominance of this strategy was to be expected in both the Italian and American cultures; however, the American results show an even higher percentage of usage for this specific strategy, reaching precisely 40%, compared to the 31.6% observed among the Italians. This result shows that the American girls opted more often for a simple use of a token of appreciation, rather than more complex strategies. A very interesting result is the fact that the Americans employed fewer complex strategies compared to the Italians. On that note, what was most surprising was actually the frequent use of two other strategies of agreement, namely “Comment Acceptance” and “Comment History”. These two strategies represent the two main strategies, other than the Appreciation token, that were mostly employed by the American interviewees, and another interesting fact is that the strategy of Comment history was used in 6 different occurrences, whilst it was noticed as completely absent in the Italian corpus. In Example (8), we can see the strategy of “Comment Acceptance” in action, as the interviewee decides to accept the compliment about her choice of study by making a comment about it:

(8) Interviewer: I must say that I find this choice of study really interesting.

Emily: Yeah? There’s a lot to it, a lot of people are like: “Oh wow, that’s so unexpected!”

Another fascinating result that has been observed in the American corpus is the use of another strategy, that was included in the main category of “Non-Agreement” by Herbert (1986), as it has been already presented in the previous chapter, which is the “Question”. As already discussed, this specific strategy can be interpreted as a form of appreciation of the compliment, as a surprised reaction, as a way of asking for confirmation or even as a way of taking time to decide how to answer the compliment received. Therefore, at least in this specific analysis of the results obtained in both cultures, this strategy has been mainly used with a positive perspective, like in Example (8) when she asks “Yeah?” before proceeding with her full answer. The same positive and surprised tone in the question is noticeable in Example (9), where the strategies of “Question” and “Comment Acceptance” were used as a response to a compliment about Emily’s Italian pronunciation:

(9) Interviewer: Okay, perfect. I must say that your pronunciation is really good actually.

Emily: Really? Oh, that's good.

In Example (10), the strategy of “Comment History” can be observed:

(10) Interviewer: Okay, I just wanted to tell you that I was noticing during all the interview your earrings, they are really cute. I love them.

Chloe: Thank you-I made them. If you ever want earrings like this... I make them 'cause I have so much free time that I don't know what to do with. I don't have six jobs, so what do I do?

Interviewer: They are really cute!

Chloe: I will send you pictures!...

In this interaction, it is possible to see that Chloe decided to first use a classic token of appreciation and subsequently make a comment about the story of the complimented object, namely her earrings. Example (11) has been included to show a response to a compliment made about a t-shirt, in which the three main strategies used by the American girls are employed, namely “Appreciation Token”, “Comment Acceptance”, and “Comment History”:

(11) Interviewer: Yes, we have more free time we are more relaxed about what we study. Okay. Perfect. Okay, so I finished asking all the questions, so we are done. Hope you enjoyed these questions. And I wanted to say that I was looking at your t-shirt during all the interview. It's really nice.

Emily: Thank you! I love snoopy! I have a beagle at home, so... they're the best.

Interviewer: Yeah also mine! Really cute!

Emily: Thank you!

We can see that Emily accepted and agreed with the compliment by saying “I love Snoopy” and by making a comment about the complimented topic. Herbert (1986, 1990) and Pomerantz (1978) declared in their studies the fact that in the American culture, accepting a compliment, and consequently respecting the Maxim of Agreement, is often seen as the best way of validating the positive face of the compliment giver and maintaining or establishing a social positive relationship. This is therefore the explanation behind the fact that the results obtained in the American corpus showed how they used almost every single strategy of agreement and acceptance, including

the fact that three of them (the ones just explained) were actually the ones used the most. The only strategy, among the strategies of agreement, that was not employed was the “Praise Upgrade”. It can be noticed that this specific strategy was not employed by both Americans and Italians and the reason behind it is the fact that this specific strategy represents the extreme and insurmountable limit, in the sense that the person using this strategy is not only violating the Modesty Maxim, but also committing the “social transgression of boasting” as Alfonzetti carefully explains: “È invece non preferenziale per chi riceve il complimento, per il quale mostrarsi pienamente d’accordo equivarrebbe a commettere «the social transgression of boasting» (Leech 1983: 136)”²⁴⁷. The other two strategies of “Agreement” that were employed by the American girls were the strategy of “Return” and “Reassignment”. In Example (12), we can see the interviewee’s intention of returning the compliment with the classic “so do you!”:

- (12) Interviewer: Yes! I just wanted to say that you look really nice, I love your hair.
Hannah: Oh, thank you, so do you!
Interviewer: Thank you!

In Example (13), instead, the interviewee tries to justify the fact that she knows a little bit of Italian by giving the merit to a third person, through the strategy of “Reassignment”:

²⁴⁷ Alfonzetti, Giovanna, 2009. *I complimenti nella conversazione*. Roma: Editori Riuniti University Press, p.75.

(13) Interviewer: Whatever you want but just by hearing that I can already see that you have a great pronunciation!

Jessica: grazie [laughter] [tries to say something in Italian immediately after but she couldn't]

Interviewer: We can switch back to English of course

Jessica: I know yes, but basically I learned Italian from my ex-boyfriend, who was Italian, that's why.

Having established both through the literature and the results obtained in this specific research that American women, specifically young, tend to give compliments to other girls in order to establish immediate solidarity, the apparent logical consequence was thought to be the frequent employment of the strategy of "Return". However, the empirical data gathered in this study, alongside the established pragmatic frameworks on compliment responses strategies, reveals a different reality: rather than resorting to a reciprocal compliment in order to balance the exchange, American female speakers usually prefer to graciously accept the compliment and consequently respect the Maxim of Agreement. The "return" strategy, although intuitively seeming like the most direct way to show mutual solidarity, remains marginally employed compared to the other strategies of accepting and agreeing with the assertion. Moving on to the strategies of "Non-Agreement" that were employed by the Americans, we immediately notice how they actually used less of these strategies compared to the Italians, and that is explained by the same principle of them preferring to respect the Maxim of Agreement over the Maxim of Modesty. Compared to the Italians who showed the use of all the strategies of "Non-Agreement", the American interviewees used the strategy of "Scale Down" only once and not even once the strategies of

“Disagreement” and “Qualification”. Example (14) shows the one case of the “Scale Down” strategy being used:

(14) Interviewer: Okay okay. By the way you look really nice, I love your hair.

Jessica: Thank youuu-I was like I didn't want to do my makeup because I have to go somewhere else later and I was like I don't feel like doing it, and so I put a little bit of self-bronzer on because every now and then I do like... you know the self-tanning stuff?

After the first token of appreciation, that has shown to be quite typical of their responses, Theresa chose to minimize the force of the compliment declaring her “lack of commitment” or general laziness of putting on her make-up. She basically accepted the compliment but underlined at the same time that that is not a really big achievement and she did the bare minimum. The last strategy that was used, although only once, was “No Acknowledgment”, as can be seen in Example (15):

(15) Interviewer: Interesting. I find that choice of study really interesting I would say!

Chloe: [no answer, just a smile]

This strategy was used to ignore the compliment with silence, but whilst still making sure to show appreciation with a smile.

4.3 Comparative analysis and discussion between the results and the literature-based theories

Having analysed all the strategies that were used both by the Italians and the Americans, it turns out to be fundamental for this specific comparative analysis between the two languages and cultures, to compare and confront the results obtained by presenting the most interesting ones. First of all, the main general result that stands out immediately is the structural difference between the Italian and American interviewees: the Americans tend to use more direct and concise formulas compared to the Italians that use, on the other hand, a much broader and complex range of strategies. The American girls have shown a 40% use of the classic “Appreciation Token” strategy, combined with both a 20% of “Comment Acceptance” and a 17.1% of “Comment History”. These were the strategies that were used the most by the Americans and were actually really frequent in their responses, as it is shown by the percentage results. As opposed to the Americans, despite the fact that the Italian girls have shown a high percentage as well for the strategy of “Appreciation Token”, precisely of 31.6%, they also showed a wider range of strategies in their responses, with the majority of the strategies being used with more or less the same frequency. That is to say that all the other strategies that were employed show more or less similar percentages of use. These results illustrate consequently how young women handle compliments and how they manage their response depending on their cultural background: American girls clearly have shown less difficulty in managing this type of interaction, by showing most of the times that they felt comfortable enough to respond in a very simple and direct way. On the other hand, Italian girls showed how they struggle more in managing the compliment and they prefer opting for more

strategies in order to navigate the social pressure normally associated with the act of receiving a compliment. Janie Rees Miller, in 2001, built a corpus on compliment and compliment responses based on spontaneous interactions between American girls collected in university settings. In her study, she declared, using Locher and Watts (2005, 2008) terms, that "compliments are a routine, unmarked part of the relational work that women do in unstructured settings"²⁴⁸. By saying that, she stated that American young women, specifically students, tend to consider compliments a routine, something that they are used to hearing on a daily basis. She also added²⁴⁹:

I would suggest that appearance compliments between women serve as phatic communication, a kind of small talk that can establish and maintain social relationships through increasing a sense of solidarity and intimacy through shared values.

The author firmly believes that the compliment-compliment response interaction serves as phatic communication, which basically means that union between them is typically created by "a mere exchange of words", in this specific case by receiving a compliment and exchanging a response to it in order to negotiate a social relationship and increase solidarity, which is, once again, the main rule behind the Maxim of Agreement, which the Americans have shown to respect the most, compared to the Maxim of Modesty²⁵⁰. On a final note, the results show clearly how American girls are extensively accustomed to this particular routine and that is the reason why they

²⁴⁸ Rees-Miller, Janie, 2011. Compliments revisited: Contemporary compliments and gender. Amsterdam: Elsevier, p. 2682.

²⁴⁹ Rees-Miller, Janie. Ibidem.

²⁵⁰ Rees-Miller, Janie. Ibidem.

navigate these interactions with ease and confidence, compared to the Italian girls who are, on the contrary, not accustomed to them as much and they consequently view the act of receiving a compliment as a more delicate and socially sensitive topic of conversation. The second main result observed through the data is the tendency of Americans, as already mentioned on various occasions through the previous chapters, to respect more the Maxim of Agreement over the Maxim of Modesty and the tendency of Italians, on the contrary, to respect the Maxim of Modesty more than the Maxim of Agreement. As can be observed in the percentages of strategies used by the American interviewees, they showed almost a zero rate of disagreement strategies because, for them, rejecting a compliment represents a true social affront and they, therefore, avoid doing so at all costs. In contrast to this way of managing compliments, the Italian interviewees have shown that they actively use a wider range of “Non-Agreement” strategies much more often, in order to avoid agreeing with the compliment. However, evidence indicates that they avoid rejecting the compliment in a direct and potentially face-threatening way but rather employ strategies like for instance “Scale down” and “Qualification” in order to tone down the compliment or move it away from oneself always in a polite way to avoid creating any type of conflict. Considering the results obtained, data suggests that Italian girls tend to respect the Maxim of Modesty more than the Maxim of Agreement, because, in the Italian socio-pragmatic context, fully agreeing with a compliment directed at oneself is culturally perceived as a direct act of self-praise. This typical behaviour is also observed by Castagneto (2006), who highlights a difficulty in direct acceptance of a compliment in female-to-female interactions. The author notes that Italian women heavily rely on what she defines as “limited acceptance”, which translates into a difficulty in accepting

compliments directly and by, as a consequence, using mitigations and deflections²⁵¹. She also added that, based on her research results²⁵²:

Because women are aware of their greater capacity for politeness, they are more careful in responding to compliments from other women, which could also set up pre-sequences of other speech acts or hide a different illocutionary force. But paying more attention to politeness means more negotiation work, and therefore longer compliments, made up of more turns.

This means that, considering the fact that women naturally possess a heightened awareness of what are the politeness dynamics, they tend to be more cautious when receiving a compliment from other females and in order to protect their image and avoid potentially looking vain, they prefer to do a lot of “negotiation work”²⁵³. This clearly explains why Italian girls’ responses are longer, involve more speaking turns, are considered more complex compared to the direct and short American responses. The choice of Italians to employ a wider range of strategies on many occasions essentially comes from their general tendency to adhere more closely to the Maxim of Modesty, which translates, as already mentioned, to a wider use of more complex and layered responses in order to avoid sounding potentially arrogant and full of themselves. A closer look at the data also reveals that their choice of response strategy can be defined as intrinsically tied to the specific category of compliment: when, for instance, a compliment about the personal linguistic competence or their personal choice of

²⁵¹ Castagneto, Marina, 2016. *Le risposte ai complimenti in Italia: questioni di gender*. Milano: Sodalizio Glottologico Milanese, p.174.

²⁵² Castagneto, Marina. *Ibidem*.

²⁵³ Castagneto, Marina. *Ibidem*.

study occurred, American women display remarkable confidence by using very direct strategies like the classic “Appreciation Token” and “Comment Acceptance” to validate their personal achievements and paths. In contrast to this type of reaction, these two specific types of compliments are the ones that trigger the highest level of discomfort among the Italian girls: in fact, to avoid sounding too arrogant, they actively downplay their merit by relying on strategies like “Disagreement”, “Qualification” and “Scale Down”. This contrast persists even in compliments about physical appearance: despite the fact that both groups default to basic “Appreciation Tokens” as a polite baseline, Italian women often try to mitigate the praise whilst American women accept the compliment straightforwardly without many problems. However, this difference becomes particularly fascinating when observing how the interviewees managed compliments directed at personal possessions, such as clothing and accessories. It has been observed that Americans frequently use the strategy of “Comment History” with enthusiasm, as in the case of the girl who proudly explained that she actually crafts her own earrings as a hobby (see Example 10) or the girl who shared her fondness for the cartoon character Snoopy (see Example 11). They essentially used this specific strategy to share personal information and build solidarity with the interviewer. On the contrary, Italian girls predominantly handled this type of compliment by using very often the strategy of “Reassignment”: the intention behind it was for instance stating that the item was a gift. By doing so, they successfully shifted the credit and merit away from themselves. Ultimately, despite all the cultural differences that emerged from the comparative analysis of the results, one striking similarity was revealed that essentially acts as the exception that proves the rule, namely the complete absence of the strategy of “Praise Upgrade” in both corpora. This finding

unequivocally demonstrates that, regardless of the cultural background and the emphasis and importance that was given to the Maxim of Agreement by the Americans and to the Maxim of Modesty by the Italians, direct self-praise remains a universally unacceptable behaviour in female socio-pragmatic interactions and specifically in compliment-compliment response situations.

Building on these empirical findings, the comparative analysis of the data collected in this research largely confirms all the theoretical frameworks that are outlined in the literature. The results obtained confirm the observations made by Robert Herbert (1986, 1990) regarding the American context and Giovanna Alfonzetti (2009, 2013) regarding the Italian one and they also demonstrate that, although both groups face the dilemma theorized by Pomerantz (1978), i.e. the conflict between the Maxim of Agreement and the Maxim of Modesty, they resolve this interactional challenge in different ways, due to their respective cultural systems. Regarding the American pattern, the results from the corpus showed how American English speakers tend to prioritize the Maxim of Agreement to maintain positive solid social relationships. Robert Herbert's research documented 36.35% of cases of the strategy of "Appreciation Token" being employed, which aligns perfectly with this data, and it even strengthens it, recording a 40% usage rate among the American interviewees. Furthermore, the frequent use of "Comment Acceptance" and "Comment History" strategies confirms the tendency of Americans to accept the compliment by adding relevant and often personal commentary in order to maintain solidarity. Finally, the absence of strategies of "Disagreement" in this corpus underlines Herbert's assertion that, in their culture, rejecting a compliment is perceived as a social affront that could potentially disrupt the main function of the compliment as a social lubricant. On the other hand, the results obtained in the Italian

corpus faithfully reflect Giovanna Alfonzetti's theoretical assumptions, highlighting a very obvious preference for the Maxim of Modesty. The author stated that Italians normally consider the direct acceptance of a compliment as a potential act of self-praise and consequently prefer to avoid it by choosing to employ a wider range of strategies, using complex and longer sequences. They showed a preference for mitigation and deflection strategies, including the active use of "Non-Agreement" strategies, which fully confirms Alfonzetti's observation that Italians often employ a significant amount of negotiation work to downplay praise and to protect their social face. Ultimately, the empirical evidence gathered in this study strongly confirms the established literature behind the act of compliment responses. By validating Herbert and Alfonzetti's frameworks, the results obtained confirm that the socio-pragmatic management of compliments is undeniably a culturally bound phenomenon.

CONCLUSIONS

This research was conducted with the main goal of understanding how women manage compliments and compliment responses, and specifically how their cultural background influences this complex social ritual. By analysing a corpus of ten face-to-face structured interviews with American and Italian young women, the study brought to light profound differences, but also some important similarities. First of all, the analysis showed that both American and Italian speakers face the dilemma introduced by Pomerantz (1978), namely the conversational conflict between the pressure to accept a compliment and the need to avoid self-praise, in very different ways. American participants showed a clear preference for the Agreement Maxim. In fact, they managed the compliments very easily and directly, mostly using “Appreciation Tokens” (like a simple *thank you*) and adding “Comment Acceptance” or “Comment History”. For Americans, a compliment is mostly a routine act used to create immediate solidarity between interlocutors, so accepting it directly is seen as the politest way to respond and respect the other person’s positive face. It is also important to underline that American girls showed almost a zero rate of disagreement strategies. In their culture, rejecting a compliment represents a true social affront, so they actively avoid doing it. Furthermore, when praised about their personal linguistic competence or their choice of study, they displayed remarkable confidence, using direct strategies to validate their personal achievements and paths. On the other hand, the Italian interviewees showed a completely different tendency, relying much more on the Modesty Maxim. The data suggests that, for Italians, accepting a compliment directly is often perceived as an act of self-praise. Consequently, in order to avoid sounding too arrogant, Italian girls used

much longer and more complex sequences, doing a lot of “negotiation work”. They still used appreciation tokens like the Americans, but almost always followed by strategies like “Scale Down”, “Qualification”, “Disagreement”, and “Reassignment”. By doing so, they actively tried to downplay the praise and merit or even to transfer it to others in order to protect their social image and avoid appearing vain. Consequently, whilst Americans avoid using Disagreement strategies entirely, Italian women frequently use them to tone down the compliment or move the focus away from themselves, always in a polite way. This contrast was especially clear depending on the category of the compliment. For instance, compliments about linguistic competence or academic choices triggered the highest level of discomfort among the Italian girls, pushing them to actively downplay their merit to avoid looking vain. Even when complimented on personal possessions, Italians preferred the “Reassignment” strategy (for example, stating that an item was a gift) to successfully shift the credit away, whereas Americans used “Comment History” to share personal stories and build intimacy. Despite these main differences in their cultural norms, there is one striking similarity: the complete absence of the “Praise Upgrade” strategy. None of the interviewees, both American and Italian, used this strategy, proving that direct self-praise is considered a face-threatening act in both cultures, and is strictly avoided especially in female interactions. Moving on to the theoretical implications, the results of this study confirm the existing literature. In particular, the American corpus confirms Robert Herbert’s theory that Americans prioritize the Agreement Maxim, while the Italian corpus strongly supports Giovanna Alfonzetti’s qualitative observations about the Italian preference for mitigation and modesty. This proves that linguistic politeness is not exactly the same everywhere, but a culturally bound phenomenon. Finally, it is important to

acknowledge some limitations of this research, which can naturally serve as a starting point for future perspectives. Firstly, the sample size consisted of ten participants; while this number is perfectly suited for an in-depth qualitative and observational analysis, it does not allow for statistical generalizations, which would require a significantly larger amount of data. Furthermore, the informants for this study were exclusively female university students. It is crucial to underline that this was a deliberate methodological choice: existing literature strongly suggests that female-to-female interactions are pragmatically richer, as women tend to employ a wider, more complex, and fascinating range of politeness strategies when exchanging compliments. However, future studies could build on this foundation by also including male participants, cross-gender interactions, and individuals of different ages and social statuses to observe how these variables affect the responses to compliments. Additionally, since this research focused specifically on how Americans and Italians manage linguistic politeness, future investigations could be expanded to other countries and cultural backgrounds to explore how different socio-pragmatic norms govern compliment responses globally. Lastly, another interesting perspective would be to examine how these compliment responses evolve in online communication and on social media, in order to understand whether these specific cultural differences and face-saving strategies remain the same in a digital context.

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