

The Use of Complimenting Expressions in Palestinian Arabic: A Descriptive-analytical Perspective

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Abstract

Compliments are expressions of positive evaluation that commonly occur in everyday conversational encounters. This paper aims at raising second language cross-cultural pragmatic awareness through investigating the use of complimenting expressions in Palestinian Arabic which are related to certain social variables, namely, gender, age, education and the place of living. The results show that females use more variation in giving compliments than males and that age, place of residence, and level of education are key factors in expressing compliments; both education and age are inversely proportional with the most intimate expressions. However, the results necessitate a detailed explanation of the expressions of compliments that are used when performing the speech act in different contexts or situations. The findings provide essential pedagogical implications in second language teaching, avoiding miscommunication as much as possible so as to fulfil the purpose of communication.

Keywords: compliments, intimacy, Palestinian Arabic, pragmatics, speech acts

Introduction

There is no doubt that language plays a significant role in people's life; it is a means of communication and interaction through which people convey and express ideas, attitudes, feelings, willing, intentions and likes and dislikes. It is an indispensable tool of socialization and integration.

Among the most common linguistic phenomena that people experience through languages is socialization among each other via compliments and showing appreciation. These compliments are of varied purposes and intentions; they are widely used to praise, encourage or motivate, thank and even flirt. Holmes (2008) states that compliments are speech acts conveyed to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed to express and manifest something which is positively valued by the speaker and hearer. For her, the primary function of a compliment is affective and social rather than referential or informative.

As compliments vary, it is crucial for language users to know when and how to deliver and respond to compliments. This paper aims at investigating

the speech act of complimenting in Arabic used in the Palestinian community. Besides, it focuses on how different social variables such as gender, age, education and the place of living affect the participants' choice of certain complimenting expression. Studying this kind of speech act reveals how people's choice of language can vary under some social conditions. Like any other speech act, compliment utterances are situated. They are highly affected by the presence of different social and cultural variables such as gender, social class, education, kind of occasion and the intention of the speaker.

The speech act of complimenting is one of the most common and frequent acts which characterizes our daily communication and, more broadly, our culture. Obviously, different mechanisms and strategies for complimenting are used across cultures. Many interrelated factors play an important role in determining the most preferred expressions which are used to compliment people in different societies in various occasions. This study will hopefully give an insight on how the speech act of complimenting is conditioned by different social variables such as gender, age, education and place of living. Moreover, it will shed some light on how power influences our linguistic choices when it comes to compliments. This speech act may represent certain socio-cultural features that one needs to be aware of whenever s/he studies the application of this type of speech act. The importance of studying compliments lies in the fact that such a study can provide second language learners with some preferred compliments that are used in Palestinian Arabic. In addition, it will show them how these preferred strategies reflect certain socio-cultural values in the Palestinian society.

Method of study

The sample selected for the study consists of 130 Palestinian students from different faculties and specializations at An-Najah National University. The sample was randomly chosen in order to achieve a certain degree of objectivity. These students belong to different places of living such as villages, camps, and cities. The participants were both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

The data used in this paper were elicited through distributing a questionnaire in which students were asked to read every statement, and tick the most suitable answer. The statements reflect the most frequent expressions that are used for compliments. The occasions that chosen are also comprehensive, and they cover a wide variety of areas in the Palestinian society. The statements of complimenting are very frequent and they are arranged according to their degree of intimacy and their frequency of use. Each participant was asked to match each occasion with his or her preferred compliment. At the same time each participant was free to leave any item empty according to his or her preferences. The information is categorized in tables and presented in figures in order to show the percentages of the responses collected for each statement in the questionnaire. The description of

the data is based on percentages that appear at the end of each table and not on numbers for ease of comparison.

Review of literature

The need for pragmatics

We human beings are odd compared with our nearest animal relatives. Unlike them, we can say what we want, when we want. All normal humans can produce and understand any number of new words and sentences. Humans use the multiple options of language often without thinking. But blindly, they sometimes fall into its traps. They are all like spiders who exploit their webs, but themselves get caught in sticky strands. (Aitcheson, 1997)

It is obvious that the traditional approach initiated by Chomsky is no longer valid to offer explanation for certain observations and phenomena that take place in real communication. Mey (1993) indicates that “pragmatics is needed if we want a fuller, deeper and generally more reasonable account of human language behavior” (p. 12). Mey has also focused on the relationship between language and users in his definition of pragmatics. In a broader term, pragmatics studies the factors that govern our choice of language in social interaction, and the effect of our choice on others. Here, people are able to produce situations. Kasper (1997) refers to this ability as pragmatic competence.

Moreover, pragmatists are also keen to explore why interlocutors can successfully converse with one another in a certain situation. A basic idea is that interlocutors obey certain principles in their participation so as to sustain the conversation. One such principle is the Cooperative Principle which assumes that interlocutors cooperate in the conversation by contributing to the ongoing speech event (Grice, 1989). Another important principle is the Politeness Principle (Leech, 1983) which maintains that interlocutors behave politely to one another since people respect each other's face (Brown & Levinson 1978; 1987). A cognitive explanation of social interactive speech events is provided by Sperber and Wilson (1986) who hold that in verbal communication people try to be relevant to what they intend to say and to whom the utterance is intended.

Speech acts

When people communicate, they perform speech acts which might not go beyond the range of other people who belong to various cultural backgrounds (Hickey, 1998). In this respect, many linguists consider human communication to be universal. It is believed that through communication, we reflect certain attitudes and the acts being performed correspond to the type of

attitudes being expressed. For example, a statement reflects a belief, a request reflects a desire and the act of compliment carries politeness.

The philosopher J.L. Austin (1962) says that many utterances are equivalent to actions. When says: "I name this ship" or "I now pronounce you man and wife", the utterance creates having three parts or aspects:

- 1) Locutionary acts: simply the speech acts that have taken place.
- 2) Illocutionary acts: are the real actions which are performed by the utterance, where saying equal doing as in welcoming and warning.
- 3) Perlocutionary acts: are the effects of the utterance on the listener.

Some pragmatists such as Searle (1969) have attempted to classify illocutionary acts into a number of categories or types such as representatives, directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives.

Complimenting as a speech act

Speech acts are not expressed similarly in different languages and different cultures and thus they are culture bound. It is of great importance to understand the socio-cultural differences represented in the use of a language in various contextual situation. People need to be aware of this fact so that they can avoid misunderstanding with people from different cultural backgrounds.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines compliment "as a formal act of activity, courtesy. Or respect to show fondness, regard, or respect for someone by giving a gift or performing a favor". Compliments are primarily aimed at maintaining, Enhancing, or supporting the addressee's face (Goffiman, 1971). Compliment refers to giving and responding behavior used to negotiate social identities and relations. Consequently, inappropriate choice of responses can lead to a loss of face. Manes (1983) researched the finite number of indirect realizations of the responses to compliments. Tannen (1996) believes that studying speech acts such as complimenting allows discourse analysts to ask what counts as compliment, who gives compliment to whom, and what function they can serve. This type of speech act is important because it represents and reflects certain cultural and social distinctions between different users of different languages or even between speakers of the same language as the case of this study. Compliments in the Arab culture characterize most of their social interaction because Arabs believe that compliments can help build stronger relations and achieve certain interests. Each occasion is characterized by having its own complimenting expressions which differ according to social variables, such as education, gender, social hierarchy and the place of living as well. The types of compliments are classified into three kinds: verbal, behavioral and non-verbal. In their communication, people use all these types of compliments. Sometimes they use more than one type to achieve more benefits. This study investigates

the first type by taking into consideration the factors of gender, education, age as well as place of living.

Results and Discussion

Strategies and occasions

This study has focused on 10 different occasions which are very common and frequent in Arab and Palestinian society: Passing high school (the Tawjihi) exams, getting a driving license, having new baby or a job promotion, buying a new car, getting a financial prize, buying new clothes, being employed in a certain job, getting a scholarship and moving to a new house.

What makes an Arab produces compliments is not really the same occasion or even a number of occasions that are typical in his or her own culture. Different motivations and reasons are at work here. In order to observe the influence of different social variables on the way people compliment each other, the researcher has chosen four fixed ways of compliments. These four ways are not the only ones but they are chosen because of being common and frequent and to make this study more restricted. These expressions for compliments vary from giving one expression.

- 1) “Mabrouk” i.e., congratulations,
- 2) “Alf mabrouk” i.e., a thousand congratulations to three expressions.
- 3) “Alf alf mabrouk” i.e., a thousand congratulations, thousand congratulations.
- 4) “Alf mabrouk mashallah” meaning a thousand congratulations, Oh, My God!

The difference between these expressions is in the degree of intimacy they have and the rate of their frequency of use. It is very clear that the second and the third ways of complimenting are more intimate than the first and the last because they carry a sense of exaggeration. The general target here is to study how gender, education, age and the place of living affect the choice of the participant’s form of compliment. The findings will be also connected with the concept of power and politeness.

It is very obvious that there is not that big difference in the choice of a complimenting expression between the two genders for the following occasions: passing the tawjihi, job promotion and moving to a new house. However, the females have more concern about the following occasions: new baby, buying a car and getting a scholarship. In these occasions, females choose more intimate expressions than they do with the other remaining occasions. By considering the first three acts of compliments “mabrouk, alfalf mabrouk” females scored the following percentages 42%, 34% and 16% while the males scored 38%, 32% and 15% respectively.

Gender

Table 1

Percentages of respondents' preferences based on gender

Occasion	Alf mabrouk mashallah	Alf alf mabrouk	Alf mabrouk	Mabrouk
Passing the tawjihi exam	(12/113) 3/20	(18/113) 1/20	(60/113) 11/20	23/113) 5/20
Getting a driving license	(5/108)	(7/108) 1/20	(21/108) 4/20	(75/108) 15/20
Having new baby	(23/112) 2/20	(20/112) 5/20	(47/112) 11/20	(22/112) 2/20
Getting a job promotion	(17/111) 4/20	(23/111) 1/20	(25/111) 5/20	46/111) 10/20
Buying a new car	(11/110) 6/20	(25/110) 1/20	(44/110) 6/20	(30/110) 7/20
Money prize	(8/107)	(4/107)	(10/107) 3/19	(85/107) 16/19
New clothes	(8/107)	(4/107)	(10/107) 3/19	(85/107) 16/19
Getting a job	(16/113) 5/20	(29/113) 3/20	(44/113) 9/20	(24/113) 3/20
Getting a scholar ship	(30/109) 2/20	(13/109) 5/20	(40/109) 9/20	(26/109) 4/20
Moving to a new house	(16/111) 1/19	(14/111) 4/19	(37/111) 7/19	(44/111) 7/19
The average in percentages	(14.5%)13.5%	(15%) 16%	(32.5%)34%	(38%) 42%

Between brackets = males

Without brackets: females

A comparison shows that women in general, are more intimate and more responding than men. Gender differences in language use have also been found by scholars such as Coates (1993) and Tannen (1990). These differences in communication and interaction may be the result of different socialization and acculturation patterns. In her book "You Just Don't Understand" (1990), Tannen argues that women speak and hear the language of connection and intimacy, while men speak and hear the language of status and independence. The point that one needs to indicate here is that the intimacy in complimenting others by females is for certain occasions. Complimenting others for having a new baby is a feminist task. On the other hand, female students are also concerned about other occasions such as buying a new car which is in itself a requirement for a prestigious life. Besides, they

also show intimacy on the occasion of getting a scholarship. It seems that people in Palestine now are more aware of the importance of education than before. This is due to the deteriorating political and economic situation in the area.

At the same time, males are more concerned about getting a driving license and winning a financial prize. This difference could be psychological, and it is attributed to the fact that the males in our society have more responsibilities towards their families than females. They are also more interested in driving cars than women. From early stages in their children days, males are more concerned about cars than any other toys. Here, we can conclude that the psychological factor plays a big role in the intimacy of expressions of complimenting.

Place of living

Table 2

Percentages of respondents' preferences based on place of living

Occasion	Alf mabrouk mashallah	Alf alf mabrouk	Alf mabrouk	Mabrouk
Passing the tawjhi exam	(11/60) 4/70	(6/60) 12/70	(36/60) 34/70	(7/60) 20/70
Getting a driving license	(3/59) 1/66	(5/59) 3/66	(13/59) 12/66	(38/59) 50/66
New baby	(15/59) 8/70	(9/59) 15/70	(26/59) 32/70	(9/59) 15/70
Job promotion	(7/59) 14/69	(14/59) 11/69	(16/59)13/ 69	(22/59) 31/69
Buying a new car	(10/59) 13/69	(5/59) 9/69	(13/59) 19/69	(31/59) 28/69
Money prize	(5/60) 10/67	(14/60)12/6 7	(25/60) 26/67	(16/60) 19/67
Buying new clothes	(4/58) 4/65	(1/58) 2/65	(7/58) 6/65	(46/58) 53/65
Getting new job	(10/60) 12/70	(15/60) 16/70	(23/60) 28/70	(12/60) 14/70
Getting a scholarship	(15/59) 14/67	(4/59) 14/67	(24/59) 26/67	(16/59) 13/67
Moving to a new house	(8/58) 8/69	(6/58) 11/69	(20/58) 24/69	(24/58) 26/69
Average of percentages	(15%) 13%	(14%) 12%	(34%) 32%	(37%) 30%

Without brackets=city

Between brackets = village

Table 2 shows that “Alf mabrouk” and “Alf mabrouk mashallah” forms of compliments are intimate and were chosen more by the participants from the village. Meanwhile, those who belong to a city background focus on the first expression “mabrouk”: 37% of those who chose this expression were from villages while the same expression was chosen by 40% of city students. The rest of the percentages which represent the participants from the village are as follows: 34% for “Alf mabrouk”, 14% for “Alf alfmabrouk” and 15% for “Alf mabrouk mashallah” respectively. The percentages of city participants are 32%, 12% and 13% respectively. Participants from the city use less intimate expressions to compliment others when they have new baby, pass the tawjihi exam, and/or get a driving license. Meanwhile, the participants from the city choose intimate expressions like “alfmabrouk” and “alfalfmabrouk” on the following occasions: job promotion, buying a car, having a new house and winning a financial prize.

These findings can be attributed to the whole social framework; in the city, people are more concerned about money, prestige and social distinction while people from the village show more intimacy and solidarity. Moreover, people from the villages cannot avoid congratulating each other since they have more opportunity to meet than those from the city. This is due to the fact that villages are smaller in their areas; thus their people have more opportunities to see each other.

Education

A close observation of the third factor of education tells us that undergraduate students are more complimenting than postgraduate ones (Table 3).

Table 3 shows that the percentages are higher for undergraduates than for postgraduate students. Post graduate students have less time than the undergraduate to meet with others and compliment them whenever there is a need for that. Moreover, they have more independence in their practical life than the undergraduate who still need more involvement in social life.

Table 3

Percentages of respondents' preferences based on education

occasion	between brackets f mabrouk mashallah	without brackets f alfmabrouk	between brackets f mabrouk	without brackets f mabrouk
passing the tawjihi exam	4/116) 6	4/116) 6	4/116) 6	4/116) 6
getting a driving license	111) 6	111) 6	2/111) 6	3/111) 16
new baby	3/115) 6	0/115) 6	9/115) 6	3/115) 6
job promotion	5/114) 6	3/114) 6	5/114) 6	0/114) 6
buying a new car	0/114) 6	3/114) 6	1/114) 6	0/114) 6
money prize	2/113) 6	5/113) 6	4/113) 6	2/113) 6
new clothes	109) 6	109) 6	1/109) 6	9/109) 16
new job	9/116) 6	7/116) 6	7/116) 6	3/116) 6
getting a scholar ship	0/112) 6	5/112) 6	9/112) 6	7/112) 6
moving to a new house	7/115) 6	5/115) 5	3/115) 5	5/115) 5
average in percentages	4%) 6	5%) 6	5%) 5	0%) 6

Between brackets = undergraduate

Without brackets = postgraduate

Age

The last social variable that is studied is age. Since the whole study is conducted at An-Najah national University, age structure is classified into two stages. The first stage ranges from 18 to 25 years old, while the second stage is above 25 years old. This classification is meant to include the postgraduate as well as the undergraduate students. The final analysis of the percentages indicates that the undergraduate students are more intimate and more complimenting than the post graduate (Table 4).

Table 4

Percentages of respondents' preferences based on age

casion	fmabrouk mashallah	Alf alfmabrouk	Alf mabrouk	Mabrouk
Passing the tawjihi exam	(9/61) 7/73	(6/61) 10/73	(36/61) 35/73	(7/61) 21/73
Getting a driving license	(3/60) 2/69	(4/60) 4/69	(15/60) 11/69	(38/60) 52/69
New baby	(8/59) 13/73	(13/60) 12/73	(26/60) 33/73	(6/60) 18/37
Job promotion	(8/59) 13/73	(13/59) 12/73	(15/59) 15/73	(23/59) 33/73
Buying a new car	(12/60) 11/72	(7/60) 7/72	(15/60) 19/72	(26/60) 35/73
Money prize	(8/60) 9/71	(8/60) 18/71	(30/60) 21/71	(14/60) 23/71
New clothes	(5/60) 3/676	(4/60) -	(6/60) 7/67	(45/60) 57/67
New job	(10/61) 12/73	(14/61) 18/73	(26/61) 27/73	(11/61) 16/73
Getting a scholar ship	(19/60) 13/70	(3/60) 15/70	(25/60) 25/70	(13/60) 17/70
Moving to a new house	(7/59) 10/72	(7/59) 11/72	(23/59) 22/72	(22/59) 29/72
The average in percentages	(16%) 13%	(17%) 15%	(36%) 30%	(34%) 42%

With brackets: (18 - 25) years old

Without brackets = above 25 years old

The least intimate expression “mabrouk” was chosen by 42% of the participants who are above 25 years old, and by 34% of those who are between 18-25 years old. At the same time, the more intimate utterances were chosen by students whose age range from 18 to 25. It seems that education and age are strongly connected as two social variables which influence the choice of complimenting expressions. When students are older and more educated, they show less intimacy in choosing a complimenting expression.

In a pilot study carried by the linguist Wolfson (1981) of the University of Pennsylvania, it was found that the type of compliment given was related to the age of the giver. The young were found to be more complimenting than the old. This can lead to the conclusion that young people with less educational achievements are more intimate than those who are older with better educational status. Therefore, the speech acts of compliment reflect the need to have more social support from the people around since the choice of certain

complimenting expression is based on the previous factors, then definitely it is a pragmatic act that is contextually determined.

Compliments and power

For Bourdieu (1977), every linguistic interaction, however personal and insignificant it may appear, bears the traces of the social structure that it both expresses and helps to reproduce. Therefore, in his words “what speaks in not the utterance, the language, but the whole social person” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 653). In the model, Bourdieu (1986) described the economics of linguistic exchanges where word and authority coincide. This authority must not be understood as belonging to a certain physical institution; it may be any relation between speaker and listener. Every utterance we produce seems to be affected by the amount of the capital we possess. Bourdieu talks about four types of capital. Two of them, relevant to this study, are the cultural and the social capital. This means that the different forms of knowledge, skill, education and other factors such as age and the place of living can determine, to a great extent, a certain utterance. Therefore, it is not surprising, in this study, to see that the act of compliment is associated more specifically with the type of occasion more than with the existence of a particular social variable alone. This may lead us to assume that the act of complimenting expresses a hidden need to receive more acceptance and appreciation from others. We are in a market where we sell and buy. Those who are at the top of the pyramid are less needy to express their compliments intimately and this is due to the large amounts of different types of capital they possess.

Conclusion

By connecting the speech acts of compliments with different social variables, one can notice that the complimenting speech acts which range from the least to the most intimate ones are affected differently when they are connected with gender, place of living, education, age and power. In some previous studies by Tannen (1990) and others, it has been proved, through large amounts of data analysis and actual observation, that females are more intimate and more social than males. Here in this study, one can see similar findings but with some slight differences. The intimacy of the complimenting speech act is not only based on gender, but the occasion. These occasions reflect either their roles in the society or their future aspiration. In some occasions such as getting a driving license, males were more intimate in their compliments than females. This is due to certain psychological factors as well as the different rules that males and females have in our society. Another determining factor is the place of living. Generally speaking, students who come from villages chose more intimate expression to compliment others than those who come from cities. The point that needs to be indicated here is that the intimacy of expression by students from villages did not hold for all

occasions. The occasions that deal with business, money and social distinction were not expressed intimately by students with village back rounds. A final observation is that both education and age are inversely proportional with the most intimate expressions. It is clear that, when students are older and more educated, they become less needy for intimate compliments. Being more educated and older give students “a reserve fund” or in Bourdieu's terms “capital” instead of being more complimenting and thus more polite with others.

Note on Contributor

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