

# **A Study of Compliments across Cultures: The Effect of Sociolinguistic Transfer on EFL Learners**

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The purpose of this research was to examine how Korean and Japanese EFL learners' speech act of compliment is transferred from their native cultures when they are interacting in English, and to investigate if the two cultural groups display different or similar strategies in giving and responding compliment. The subjects were 20 intermediate-level Korean and Japanese university students, who participate in KWCCDL program. Based on the English chatting data between Korean and Japanese EFL learners, the study demonstrated the sociolinguistic transfer phenomenon among NNS, and found that there were great similarities, along with some interesting differences between two groups when giving and responding compliment in English.

## **1. Introduction**

There is variability across cultures regarding sociolinguistic norms and behavior pattern. People use the rules of speaking from their native speech community when interacting with members of other speech community. The differences in sociolinguistic rules across cultures cause some difficulty for second language learners. Even if the learners have developed great ability in phonology, syntax, and semantics of the target language, miscommunication may occur if s/he has not acquired the knowledge of when to speak what to whom appropriately. One of the sources of intercultural miscommunication emphasized by the findings of cross-cultural studies is sociolinguistic transfer. Sociolinguistic transfer is "the use of the rules of speaking of one's own cultural group when interacting with members of another group" (Chick, 1996, p.332).

The compliment is a particularly suitable speech act to investigate when comparing cultures because it acts as a window through which we can view what is valued in a particular culture. According to Holmes, a compliment is defined as "a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speakers, usually the person addressed, for some 'good' (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer" (1988a, p. 485). Olshtain and Cohen added that "the speech act of complimenting is intrinsically courteous and enables the speaker to make use of available opportunities to express and interest in the hearer" (1991, p. 158).

The most extensive research on American compliments was conducted by Wolfson

and Manes who collected over 1,000 compliments in a wide range of situations. They found that approximately 80% of American compliments fall into the three syntactic patterns: NP is/looks (intensifier) ADJ (e.g., Your sweater is (really) nice), I (intensifier) like/love NP (e.g., I (really) like your car), and PRO is (intensifier) (a) ADJ NP (e.g., That's a (really) good question.) (Manes, 1983; Wolfson, 1983; Wolfson & Manes, 1980).

Comparative studies of Japanese and American compliments were conducted by Daikuhara (1986). According to her, one of the most remarkable differences between structures of complimenting in American English and those in Japanese was the fact that "I like/love NP" pattern never appeared in Japanese data. In her study, several verbs such as *niau* ("suit"), as in "*Kosuchumu ga oniai desune* (That costume suits you well.)" were used sometimes (2%), but the equivalents of "like" or "love" were never used. The word "love" in Japanese, *aishiteru* or *daisuki*, sounds too strong to be used in compliments or even in other situations. In studies of Korean compliments, Jeon (1996) and Baek (1998) found similar patterns with Japanese data. Among Korean compliments, 'YOU V (intensifier) ADJ (51%)' and 'NP is/looks (intensifier) ADJ (24%)' were the most preferred forms, whereas the pattern 'I like/love NP' never or hardly occurred in their data.

Regarding the compliment topic, it is closely related to a variety of cultural norms and values of a given society because a compliment functions as a judgment or as an overt expression of approval (Baek, 1998). With regard to compliment topics, Manes and Wolfson (1981) found that English compliments fall into two major categories with respect to topic: those having to do with appearance (apparel, hair-do, homes, furniture, automobiles, and other possessions) and those which comment on ability.

Studies in other speech communities have shown that complimentable values vary across cultures. In the Japanese society, one's appearance, which is greatly valued in English speaking communities, is not the most frequently mentioned topic (Barnlund & Araki, 1985; Daikuhara, 1986). The most frequently referred topic is that of one's ability and achievement. In the Korean speech community, Baek (1998) reported that compliments on a person's personality occur more frequently in Korean than in English. In her study, the most frequent words for complimenting personality are '*chakhada* (good-natured),' '*bujireonhada* (diligent),' and '*yeeuibareuda* (polite).' She noted that these comments are based on a person's conduct or moral behavior which conforms to social norms or his/her role-expectation in the given situation. These studies on compliment topics suggest that it is important for nonnative speaker to know not only proper topics for compliments in the target language but also the underlying value of the target culture.

Considering compliment responses, several researches have indicated that American speakers exhibit great ingenuity in avoiding the simple acceptance of compliments (Herbert, 1986, 1989; Permorantz, 1978). Holmes (1988a), with her New

Zealand data, identified 12 strategies and classified these into three broad types: Accept, Reject, and Deflect/Evade. Her analysis showed that Accept was the most preferred response type (61% of all the responses).

It is interesting to see that the response patterns vary greatly across cultures. In non-western languages, the acceptance rates are much lower than those in English speaking communities (Baek, 1998). Japanese and Korean people are reported to hardly accept compliments. Daikuhara reported that the most frequent responses to a compliment in Japanese were, “*Ie, ie* (No,no.)” or “*Sonna koto nai* ( That’s not true.)” The very frequent use of “No, no” as a response is unique to native speakers of Japanese, as the quality being complimented is rarely denied by speakers of American English (1986). Among Americans, such disagreement, when it occurs, is usually restricted to interaction between intimates (Wolfson, 1983). Jeon (1996) compared compliment responses of Koreans with those of native speakers of English. The results showed a contrast in the denial of compliments—American (0.5%) vs. Korean (8.8%). She asserted that this is because Koreans are likely to choose more negative response strategies out of politeness and by adhering to the ideals of humility and modesty (Lim, 2000). Baek (1998), comparing the English compliment responses with her own data, also found that the majority of the compliments in Korean are deflected (42.75%). In her analysis, a striking result was that the single strategy of ‘No acknowledgment’ accounts for 29.98% of the responses in Korean, whereas it occurs only 5.08% in American English. Baek noted that ‘being modest’ is the main underlying motivation for not responding to compliment with explicit words. This is because silence is a type of indirectness, which as an aspect of modesty, is highly valued in Korean culture (Klopf & Park, 1982).

Although much work on compliment has been done to date from cross-cultural perspective, I think more studies which put special focus on EFL situations, should be conducted in order to ascertain that there is sociolinguistic transfer when non-native speakers of English (NNS) communicate in English with members of another group. In addition, when considering little research has been done on speech act of young generation who may have slightly different value system from older generation, more up-to-date study comparable with previous studies is also needed.

The purpose of this research was to examine how Korean and Japanese young EFL learners’ speech act of compliment strategies are transferred from their native cultures when they are interacting with each other in English, especially with subjects who have been exposed only to EFL situation, and to investigate if the two non-native cultural groups display similar or different strategies in producing speech acts of giving and responding compliment. The assumption of this paper is that Korean and Japanese learners of English share many similarities, as inferred from the previous literatures, but there will be some interesting differences in terms of their pragmatic strategies.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Subjects**

Subjects were 10 pairs of Korean and Japanese students who participate in KWCCDL Project: 10 Korean EFL students in Korea University and 10 Japanese EFL students in Waseda University. (Hereafter I will refer to Korean EFL learners as KEFL and Japanese EFL learners as JEFL.) They all participated in the KWCCDL Project which was jointly conducted between two universities. Their grades range from freshmen to senior of each school. They were asked to evaluate their proficiency level by themselves in questionnaire and they all reported their level as intermediate, and they were judged to be in the same range of proficiency level. Most of them had no or little learning experience in English speaking country, which means they had little amount of exposure to the target language's norm of the speech act of complimenting. The relationship of the interlocutors is new friends and most of subjects shared equal status.

### **2.2 Materials**

The data used in this research were extracted from the KWCCDL project conducted during the period of fall semester of 2002. Once a week, students were asked to text chat on general topics in English. The data were natural samples of text chatting in English.

The reason to choose CCDL data in this cross-cultural interlanguage pragmatics studies, is that this data, I think, is valid in respect that speech acts here are produced in real-life, and spontaneous situation, compared with test-like discourse completion task or questionnaire.

### **2.3 Analysis**

For analysis, all of the compliment and response corpus appeared in the chatting data were extracted. The collected data were analyzed in terms of compliment structure, topic and response. Then more specifically, I classified several types of each category as below, and counted the relative frequencies of each type of categories.

#### 1. Types of compliment structure:

- |                                 |                                      |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1) NP is (intensifier) ADJ      | 2) NP looks/seems (intensifier) ADJ, |
| 3) I (intensifier) like/love NP | 4) How ADJ!                          |

#### 2. Topics of compliments:

- |                         |                         |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1) Appearance/ clothing | 2) Performance/ ability |
| 3) Personal traits      | 4) Country              |

#### 3. Types of response:

- |                                 |                      |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1) Appreciation (ex. Thank you) | 2) Return compliment |
| 3) Denial                       | 4) No Response       |
| 5) Question                     | 6) Praise Upgrade    |

### 3. Results

It was investigated that compliment behavior didn't occur so frequently in my data (58 tokens), compared to other speech act behavior like apologizing (102 tokens). From the data, it was observed that Koreans and Japanese give compliments to each other at about same rate - Korean (28 tokens), Japanese (30 tokens).

#### 3.1 Compliment Structures

I found that compliment structures appeared in KEFL and JEFL interaction in English fall into four types. Table 1 shows the relative frequency of four major syntactic patterns used by the two speaker groups.

**Table 1. Major Syntactic Structures of the Compliment Given by Korean and Japanese Speakers of English**

Syntactic structures	KEFL		JEFL	
	N	(%)	N	(%)
NP is (intensifier) ADJ	18	(64.3%)	18	(60%)
NP looks/seems (intensifier) ADJ	6	(21.4%)	7	(23.3%)
I (intensifier) like/love NP	0	(0%)	2	(6.7%)
How ADJ!	4	(14.3%)	3	(10%)
Subtotal	28	(100%)	30	(100%)

As shown in Table 1, the order of preferred syntactic structures of the compliment for both sides was about the same. Among 28 compliments given by KEFL and 30 by JEFL, 'NP is (intensifier) ADJ' was the most preferred form (KEFL: 64.3%, JEFL: 60%), and 'NP looks/seems (intensifier) ADJ' was the next preferred one (KEFL: 21.4%, JEFL: 23.3%), followed by exclamatory sentences such as 'How ADJ! (14.3%, 10%)' while 'I (intensifier) like/love NP' was the least preferred for both cultures (0%, 6.7%). When considering NS's very frequent use of the verb *like* and *love*, it was obvious that both KEFL and JEFL used limited syntactic form, inclined to "be verb +ADJ." Clearly, the findings indicate that both KEFL and JEFL use the most popular form of compliment in their own cultures, even in interacting in English. Interestingly, the pattern 'I (intensifier) like/love NP' structure was never found in Korean data. This result may be explained by considering the use of words 'love' or 'like' in Korean is inadequate to be used in complimenting situations. Likewise, for Japanese, this pattern marked the least frequency in my data as in Daikuhara's (1986) study where the equivalent verbs of "like" or "love" were never occurred. This may lead Korean and Japanese to feel that the frequent use of "I love NP" structure in compliments in American English sounds strange and exaggerated.

### 3.2 Compliment Topic

In my data, I observed that compliments fall into four categories with respect to topic: those having to do with appearance/clothing, those which comment on performance/ability, those on personal traits, and those on each other's country. Table 2 illustrates the distribution of compliment topics given by Korean and Japanese students.

**Table 2. Topic of compliment**

Topic	KEFL	JEFL
	N (%)	N (%)
Appearance/ Clothing	11 (39.3%)	12 (40%)
Performance/ ability	9 (32%)	7 (23.3%)
Personal traits	5 (18%)	8 (26.7%)
Country	3 (10.7%)	3 (10%)
Subtotal	28 (100%)	30 (100%)

In terms of topic, Table 2 shows that the most popular topic for both Korean and Japanese was about appearance or clothing (KEFL: 39.3%, JEFL: 40%). This is a different result from the studies of Jeon (1996) and Baek (1998) who reported that compliments on a person's personality occur more frequently in Korean than in English. It is also different from the study of Barnlund and Araki (1985), which reported that Japanese most frequently praise skill and work and study. This result that the most popular topic for both sides is about appearance or clothing may be explained by considering the subjects were limited to young generation who are greatly interested in appearance, clothing and cute belongings.

32% of Korean data and 23.3% of Japanese data fell into the performance/ ability category, which occurred the second most frequently. Among this category, most of the portion concerned academic work or English ability. This result seems to reflect the value of this particular speech community, which is very academically oriented, especially English oriented.

Even though data of KEFL is slightly different from Baek (1998)'s who noted that the most frequent words of Korean for complimenting personality are 'chakhada (good-natured),' 'bujireonhada (diligent),' 'yeeuibareuda (polite),' and so on, personal trait was also an important topic for both sides (Japanese: 26.7%, Korean: 18%). That may be resulted from the notion that Korean and Japanese tend to value on personal trait and prescribed norms.

One interesting fact is that Korean and Japanese students enjoyed comparing each other's country and giving compliments. The close and competitive relationship between Japan and Korea, and the interest on each other's country seemed to be reflected in this data.

### 3.3 Compliment Responses

I observed compliment responses between KEFL and JEFL interaction fall into six categories in my data. Table 3 provides an analysis of the distribution of the compliment responses in the Korean and Japanese CCDL data.

**Table 3. Compliment responses**

Type of Response	KEFL		JEFL	
	N	(%)	N	(%)
Appreciation (i.e.Thank you)	12	(40%)	15	(50%)
Return compliment	6	(20%)	3	(10%)
Denial (i.e.No)	8	(26.7%)	7	(23.3%)
No Response	3	(10%)	1	(3.3%)
Question	0	(0%)	2	(6.7%)
Praise Upgrade	1	(3.3%)	2	(6.7%)
Subtotal	30	(100%)	30	(100%)

The most frequent type of response was appreciation for both KEFL (40%) and JEFL (50%). Next preferred response was denial. There was also a similarity in the frequency of denial of compliments—KEFL (26.7%) and JEFL (23.3%). Even if denial was not the most frequently occurred response, this result can be said to provide important evidence that the sociolinguistic norms of their native speech communities were greatly transferred into this response. Because, as presented in the review of literature, when Koreans or Japanese were engaged in interactions with their native speaking community, they were most likely to disagree with compliments. They never or rarely uttered “Thanks” or “Thank you.” This may be due to the rules regarding deference and politeness, as suggested in Daikuhara (1986), which often require the recipient of a compliment to avoid self-praise. Therefore, this showed the pragmatic transfer from their native culture.

Then, let’s think about how we can explain the result that the Korean and Japanese participants were most likely to accept compliments with responses such as “Thank you.” in English interactions. This contrastive result may be interpreted as that Korean and Japanese follow prescriptive norms of compliment responses of native English speakers when they are engaged in English interaction.

Interestingly, Korean English learners always responded “Thank you” for the compliment about their country, Korea. They never denied for this topic. Even upgrade praise was occurred once (1 out of 30 tokens) in Korean data when Japanese interlocutor mentioned the superiority of mobile phones made in Korea. Both KEFL and JEFL in my data showed similar response for compliment on their own nations. They expressed positive appreciation for this topic with smile emoticons (i.e., ^^), and even with upgrading the praise. This result may be explained by considering both countries

belong to East Asian culture where people put much value on the respect and royalty toward their own nations.

Next point to be mentioned is when complimented about their appearances or clothing, they tended to appreciate, while more than half of denial was occurred when complimented about their English ability or work performance like “Your pronunciation is good” or “You did well in class” in both of data. 70~80% of the compliments responded with denial fell into the ability/performance category, and the rest into the appearance/possession category. This result indicates that the students participating in this project are not satisfied enough with their English ability, which means that they are eager to improve their ability more.

A contrast was shown in the return of compliment and no response. Return occurred more in Korean data (20%). Returning a compliment is a way of showing respect or politeness to the complimenter in order to maintain social relationship between the participants. In my data, KEFL were appeared to focus on maintaining good relationship more than JEFL were. No response occurred more in Korean data than in Japanese. That is because Koreans, when feeling awkward for the compliment, are sometimes responding with a smile or silence without giving any verbal expressions.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The analysis of 58 examples of compliments and 60 of responses has shown that there are many similarities and some interesting differences between KEFL and JEFL’s compliment speech act behavior in English. It has also been proved that there exists crucial pragmatic transfer from Korean and Japanese sociolinguistic rules into the speech act of complimenting in English, with clear evidences in the areas of syntactic patterns, topic of compliments and compliment responses. That is, there are some possibilities of cross-cultural misunderstandings when these NNS of English are engaged in the speech act of complimenting with native speakers of English. For example, the typical Korean and Japanese response to compliments such as denial, or no response/ acknowledgment may cause unpleasant misunderstandings to native speakers because they may feel that their good intentions are unappreciated.

There is evidence that acquisition of nativelike production by NNS may take many years (Olshtain &Blum-Kulla, 1984) because the sociocultural strategies and the sociolinguistic forms are not “picked up” easily. (Cohen, 1996, p.409) Therefore, English teachers should help the EFL learners to develop and internalize their linguistic and sociolinguistic skills in expressing and interpreting compliments. In addition, the instruction should aim to develop students’ awareness of target language’s social and cultural norms and values related to complimenting so that they will not be misunderstood by native speakers of English when they are engaged in conversation with them.



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