Compliment responses in Peninsular Spanish. Exploratory and contrastive study conducted on women from Madrid, Valencia, Catalonia, Andalusia and Castile-Leon

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to examine the influence of the “origin” variable when responding to compliments on physical appearance and belongings in Spain. Participants of the research are female native speakers of Spanish from five Autonomous Communities. Data was gathered by using secret recordings. Results of the research showed that mitigating was the most common compliment response used by women. Despite cultural differences between the Autonomous Communities, no statistically significant results were found.

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Introduction

Compliments have been defined as speech acts that “(…) explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some ‘good’ (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer” (Holmes, 1988:446).

Compliments tend to reduce social distance and strengthen the bonds of solidarity and friendship between individuals, thus it is a positive politeness strategy (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Holmes, 1988). Furthermore, compliments have been understood as a sociolinguistic practice commonly used by women (Wolfson, 1983; Holmes, 1986, 1988, 1995; Lewandowska-Tomarszczyk, 1989; Herbert, 1990; Corn-Arevalo, 2010 and Rees-Miller,
The interest in the study of this speech act emerged in the late 70s and early 80s with the pioneering work of Pomerantz (1978) on compliment responses. Subsequently, Manes and Wolfson (Manes, 1983; Manes and Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson and Manes, 1980) studied the use and compliments’ formulation in American English. Their research had considerable impact on the scientific community and led to the development of several studies from different fields including pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and conversational analysis.

The majority of research on compliment responses has focused on conducting comparative studies between two languages in the field of intercultural pragmatics. Thus, the study of Chen (1993) between Chinese and American English, Gommans (2010) between Dutch and Italian, Ramajo (2012) between Lebanese Arabic and Spanish and Lázaro (2012) between Spanish and Japanese. To a lesser extent, there are some comparative studies between two varieties of the same language, being English the most common one. Thus, the study of Holmes (1988) between New Zealand and American English and Herbert (1989) between South African and American English. Few are the studies conducted on regional variation within the same country and therefore, the present research focuses on language variety in compliment responses used by women in different regions of Spain: Madrid, Valencia, Catalonia, Andalusia and Castile-Leon. Using the Ethnographic method, we will analyze the similarities and differences found in the strategies and sub-strategies used to respond to compliments in communicative exchanges among 30 women aged between 25 and 80 years old and linked by kinship or friendship bonds. Therefore, the present study falls within the scope of variational pragmatics (Schneider and Barron, 2008) which analyzes the impact of factors such as age, gender, social distance or regional origin in language use.

1. Studies on compliment responses in Spanish

Compliment responses have drawn the attention of researchers due to the diversity of strategies that can be used. In order to maintain a well-balanced relationship between the interlocutors, the complimentee is expected to show agreement with his/her interlocutor and at the same time to avoid self-praise. Consequently, there is a conflict between the need of being modest and trying to avoid disagreement with the interlocutor. Choosing the right answer from the wide range of compliment response strategies causes a dilemma for the complimentee. The choice of a strategy depends on sociopragmatic principles and cultural politeness rules.

Regarding Spanish compliment responses, Lorenzo-Dus (2001: 118) determines that one of the most common patterns of compliment response among Spaniards is to request a repetition and possibly an expansion of the compliment by using questioning formulas. She also highlights the frequent use of irony as a strategy to create a climate of trust between interlocutors. On the other hand, according to Siebold (2006), Spaniards tend to use acceptance as a mechanism of positive politeness. Ramajo (2012) supports this statement and mentioned that thanking is not a common response among Spaniards. According to Choi (2008) and Lázaro (2012), the use of expressions of solidarity is preferred to create a favorable environment and confidence between interlocutors.

Some gender differences in relation to compliment response strategies were also found. According to Maíz-Arévalo (2010:200) when female speakers are complimented by other women, it is frequent that they reject or mitigate the compliment. This behavior can be explained by their wish to create rapport and belong to the same group, where all members share the same privileges and there is no difference between them.

2. Data and Methodology

A corpus of 15 audio-recorded conversations in Peninsular Spanish was collected for the study of compliment responses. 30 Spanish women from various Autonomous Communities participated in the research.

In order to collect real language samples, an observational and exploratory design based on the Ethnographic method was chosen because it allows researchers to work with spontaneous and natural data. According to Manes and Wolfson (1981:115) it is the only reliable method for collecting data about the way compliments function. Secret recordings were the data collection instrument for the present study.
3. Data Analysis

A classification of compliment responses was created in order to analyze the data. The taxonomy comprises of several compliment response strategies that combine various linguistic and paralinguistic resources used by native speakers to respond to a compliment. Compliment responses are also influenced by several internal (process and mental activity, intention, motivation, etc) and external factors (social meaning, cultural patterns, context, etc).

The researchers have observed a great variety of compliment response strategies and different combinations between them. The classification of compliment responses for the present study is based on the taxonomy of Ramajo (2012) and Choi (2008) and it comprises of 4 macro-strategies (acceptance, rejection, mitigation and deflection) that consist of several substrategies.

Table 1. Compliment response strategies used in the present study.

| Macro-strategies | Substrategies          |
|------------------|------------------------|
| Acceptance       | Showing agreement      |
|                  | Giving an explanation or information |
| Rejection        | Showing disagreement   |
| Mitigation       | Downgrading            |
|                  | Doubting               |
|                  | Questioning            |
|                  | Asking for reaffirmation|
| Deflection       | Ignoring               |

4. Results of the Study

4.1. Compliment response strategies

Mitigation and rejection (60%) were frequently used by the research participants. Accepting represents 27% and diverting only 13% of compliment responses. Asking for reaffirmation was the most common strategy to downgrade the compliment.

Conversation 12 (Andalusia) Translation:
M Anda, que bolso más chulo tienes. M Hey! What a cool bag!
C ¿De verdad te gusta? C Really? Do you like it?
M Hombre, me encanta. M Of course, I love it.

Conversation 2 (Madrid) Translation:
L Qué bonita tu camiseta ¿no? L What a nice T-Shirt, isn’t it?
H ¿Qué camiseta? H Which T-Shirt?
L La que llevas puesta. L The one you are wearing.
H ¿Por? H Why?

Downgrading and questioning were also used as mitigating strategies representing 11% of compliment responses.

Conversation 10 (Andalusia) Translation:
M ¡Qué chuli la camiseta! M What a cool T-Shirt!
L Del año de la pera... L It is so old...

Conversation 13 (Castile-Leon) Translation:
M Elvira que te veo muy delgada. M Elvira you are so thin!
E ¿Sí? Pues no sé de qué será, será del estrés. E Really? I don’t know, maybe it is because of stress.

For rejecting the compliment, research participants showed disagreement (11%).

Conversation 5 (Valencia) Translation:

M Mira qué zapatillas más chulas que lleva la tita. M What nice sneakers she is wearing!
F Sí F Yeah!
M* ¡Pero chica, no! M* No way!

Despite the frequent use of downgrading strategies, “giving an explanation” featured 22% of compliment responses.

Conversation 9 (Catalonia) Translation:

E Me gusta el pañuelo ese. Está chulo el pañuelo. E I like this foulard. It’s nice.
M Me lo compré en los Encantes del Clot donde la Gloria. M I bought it in Los Encantes del Clot, at Gloria’s shop.

Conversation 14 (Castile-Leon) Translation:

C ¿Qué pulseras tan bonitas! C What beautiful bracelets!
S Esta es de la India. De Lourdes. S This one is from India. Lourdes got it for me.

4.2. Comparative analysis

After using a chi-square test, results of the study were not statistically significant (p>.05). As shown in the graph below, women from Madrid and Andalusia frequently used downgrading strategies, whereas women from Catalonia featured more accepting responses. Women from Valencia and Castile-Leon used a similar percentage of downgrading and diverting strategies.

![Graph showing percentage of substrategies according to participants’ origin.](image-url)
As shown in the table below, a specific pattern that determines the prototypical characteristics of a community was not found in the study.

| Strategies                              | Madrid     | Valencia | Catalonia | Andalusia | Castile-Leon |
|-----------------------------------------|------------|----------|-----------|-----------|--------------|
| Agreement + Explanation                 | 33.33%     | 0        | 0         | 0         | 0            |
| Questioning + Doubting                  | 0          | 0        | 0         | 0         | 33.33%       |
| Questioning + Downgrading + Asking for reaffirmation | 0          | 0        | 0         | 33.33%    | 0            |
| Doubting                                | 33.33%     | 0        | 0         | 0         | 0            |
| Giving an explanation                   | 0          | 0        | 66.67%    | 0         | 33.33%       |
| Ignoring                                | 0          | 33.33%   | 0         | 0         | 33.33%       |
| Showing disagreement                    | 0          | 33.33%   | 33.33%    | 0         | 0            |
| Asking for reaffirmation                | 33.33%     | 33.33%   | 0         | 33.33%    | 0            |
| Downgrading                             | 0          | 0        | 0         | 33.33%    | 0            |
| Total                                   | 100%       | 100%     | 100%      | 100%      | 100%         |

5. Conclusions

The “origin” variable did not show statistically significant results in the present study. Data shows that the cultural values of each Autonomous Community did not have an impact on compliment responses as members of each Community share common values and cultural patterns due to their coexistence.

In the light of the results, the influence of “gender” as a social variable was observed as shown in the studies of Wolfson (1983), Holmes (1986, 1988, 1995), Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1989), Herbert (1990), Maíz-Arévalo (2010) and Rees-Miller (2011).

When the compliment exchange takes place between two women, a higher percentage of downgrading or rejecting strategies occurs. According to Maíz-Arévalo (2010:200), this behavior is due because women share the feeling of belonging to a group in which all its components share the same privileges and where no differences exist between its members. Therefore, any kind of competitiveness is avoided in order to maintain balance in the group relationship.

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