

# Compliment and Compliment Responses: A Comparative Study between Dari and English Native Speakers

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**Abstract-** Communication and interaction with others are important aspects of our lives. While we are interacting with other people, sometimes it happens that we either praise them, or they praise us, which is called compliments. Giving and receiving compliments varies across cultures. Therefore, the present study was conducted to find whether there is any difference in compliment responses between Afghan and American performers on TV talent shows. Data was collected from ten hours of videos of both Afghan and American TV talent shows from which sixty samples of compliment responses (30 of Afghan and 30 of American performers) were randomly selected. The findings of the study revealed that Afghan and American performers responded to compliments in similar manners. In other words, both mostly produced acceptance compliment responses.

**Keywords:** Compliment, Compliment Response, Dari, Compliment Type

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A compliment is a ceremonial act or expression as a tribute courtesy, which is also a remark addressed to anyone, implying or involving praise (Oxford English Dictionary, 2010). Wikipedia defines compliment as an expression of merit, encouragement, or congratulation. We sometimes give compliments to others and receive them as well in our everyday situations. Therefore, researchers working with different languages and various fields are greatly attracted by compliments and/or compliment responses. We can take different interpretations out of a compliment in different contexts and participants such as 'You are beautiful', if a woman talks to her female colleague, it could function to soothe the conversation although it is understood to mean less than it declares; however, if a woman talks to her male boss, it could interpret to have her purpose. How people respond to the compliment is also deemed important since compliment is a mutual interaction of giving and receiving.

According to Holmes (1995), paying compliments show friendly aspect, and it is one of the most common ways of doing positive politeness. Holmes adds that a compliment is an act of speech that grants credit implicitly or explicitly to someone other than the speaker. He further argues that compliments usually address a person for some good characteristics, possessions, attributes and skills which are valued positively by both the speaker and the hearer. In several studies, compliments are determined as expressive speech acts having multiple functions.

Many studies have been conducted in the field of sociolinguistics, particularly on the use of compliment and compliment responses in different domains and cultures; however, it was difficult to find a comparative scholarly work on the verities of compliments and compliment responses in the Afghan and American TV talent shows. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the similarities and differences among Afghan native speakers and American English speakers using compliment responses.

### 1.2 Compliment Response

Compliment response is whether you "agree with the speaker" or reject it to "avoid self-praise" (Pomerantz, 1978). Different frameworks of Compliment Response (CR) classification have been given by researchers as the classic frameworks of CR categorization are those suggested by Holmes (1989, 1993). He classified CRs into three main types: Accept, Reject, and Evade. Each type was then divided into smaller categories.

#### 1.2.1 Type 1: Accept

- Appreciation Token: It is a verbal acceptance of a compliment. (E.g. *Thanks or Thank you.*)
- Agreeing Utterance: The addressee agrees with the complimentary force by means of a response semantically fitted to the compliment (E.g. *Yes, I really like it; I know.*)
- Downgrading: The force of the compliment is minimized or downgraded by the addressee. (E.g. *"All is the result of your kind help."*)

- Utterance: The addressee accepts the compliment and asserts that the compliment force is sufficient. (E.g. “*I enjoyed doing it.*”)
- Return compliment: The praise is shifted to the addresser/ one who compliments. (E.g. “*It’s not bad, you’ve got beautiful cloths too.*”)

1.2.2 Type 2: Reject

- Disagreeing Utterance: Here, the addressee directly disagrees with addresser’s assertion (E.g. *No, it was not that good.*)
- Question accuracy: In this situation, the addressee might want a repetition or an expansion of the original compliment or question. (E.g. *Really?*).
- Challenge Sincerity: Although the addressee agrees with the complimentary force, s/he does not accept the praise personally. Rather, s/he impersonalizes the complimentary force by giving impersonal details (e.g. *Yes, I bought it from Kabul.*).

1.2.3 Type 3: Evade

- Shift Credit: This type of response is given when the addressee may choose not to accept the full complimentary force offered by qualifying that praise, usually by employing words such as *but, yet, etc.* (e.g. *Yes, but I like Ahmad Zahir more.*).
- No Acknowledgement: This type of response is given when the addressee gives no indication of having heard the compliment. That is, s/he employs the conversational turn to do something other than responding to the compliment offered (E.g. *Silence.*)
- Request Reassurance: The addressee interprets the compliment as a request rather than a simple compliment (e.g. *Do you want me to redo it?*).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Compliments occur, as discussed earlier, in conversations between two people in different contexts. Holmes (1986, p. 485), as cited in Cheng (2003), considers compliments or praises as a “speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some good (possession, characteristics, skill, etc.) that is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer.”

There are numerous empirical studies on giving and responding to compliments in different cultures. Besides, many of such research studies have a comparative form where the writers compares the characteristics of using and responding to compliments in their native culture to that in English—mainly the US.

According to Han (n.d.), one of the forerunners in the research area of compliment and compliment responses is Pomerantz (1978). Pomerantz found out that while responding to a compliment, the complimented face two challenges: to agree with the complimenter and to prevent self-praise. As Han puts it, Holmes (1988) criticized Pomerantz for not giving “precise proportion of each type of response” (p. 21). Holmes, based the study in New Zealand, developed the following taxonomy.

Table 2.1: Holmes Compliment Responses Type

Accept	Appreciation token
	Agreeing
	Downgrading
	Return
Reject	Disagree
	Question
	Challenge sincerity
Deflect/Evade	Shift credit
	Informative comment
	Ignore
	Legitimate evasion
	Request reassurance

The above-mentioned division of compliment response types has formed the basis of many comparative studies on the compliment types. The taxonomy forms the basis of the present paper as well. There are several empirical researches which have tried to find out whether there is any difference in compliment responses across cultures.

Chen (1993) investigated the similarities in responding to compliments between American English speakers and Chinese speakers. His findings suggested that Chinese speakers produced more rejection responses than American English speakers who produced mostly acceptance responses to compliments. Besides, his study questioned Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory. Parallel to Chen’s study, Yu, Fu, and Hou (2007) found out that there is a difference in using compliments and responding to them by Americans and Chinese.

Similarities and differences in responses to compliments by Thai adult students and American native English speakers were studied by Cedar (2006). He interviewed 12 Thai students and 12 native English speakers. A total of 142 compliment responses were extracted and transcribed. The study, like the study conducted by Chen (1993), found that Americans, unlike Thai students, used mostly acceptance and positive elaboration compliment responses.

Nelson, Al-Batal, and Echols (1996) studied the similarities and differences in compliment responses by Syrian and native English speakers. Unlike the previous studies such as Chen (1993) and Cedar (2006), this study found that compliment responses produced by native English speakers contained 50% acceptance, 45% percent mitigation and 3% rejection while the compliment responses produced by Syrians contained 67% acceptance, 33% mitigation, and 0% rejection. Nelson, Al-Batal, and Echols suggested that American and Syrians are very likely to produce more acceptance and mitigation responses when they are being complimented.

There are also a number of comparative studies on the compliment and compliment responses between Persian and English such as Eidi (2013), Shahsavari, Alimohammadi and Rasekh (2014), Boroujeni, Domakani, Sheykhi (2016), Shamsabadi and Rasekh (2014), Shabani and Zeinali and Karimnia and Afghari (2011). All of these studies revealed that there is a difference in responding to compliments by native Persian speakers and English native speakers and that Iranians use more non-acceptance and reassignment response strategies while English speakers use more acceptance responses. The reasons behind this difference as suggested included the absence of linguistic knowledge (Shahsavari, Alimohammadi and Rasekh, 2014), differences in the cultural norms and values (Boroujeni, Domakani, Sheykhi, 2016; Karimnia and Afghari, 2011), native language (Persian) transfer (Shamsabadi and Rasekh, 2014).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a corpora of data which were collected from Youtube. For the purpose of this study, three Afghan TV talent shows namely: Afghan Star, Super Star, and The Voice of Afghanistan, where Afghan young singers express themselves and show their talent in singing, and two American talent shows namely X Factor (singing) and America’s Got Talent (general) were selected. Compliment and compliment responses of Afghan citizens in different episodes from 2014 to 2016 were extracted and likewise for American citizens from 2011 to 2015. There were four judges in each episode, all giving individual compliments to each participant at the end of his/her performance. In a random selection, only one judge’s compliment was selected for each participant. Attention was focused on the judges’ compliments and compliment responses of participants. In total, both Afghan and American shows were watched for 10 hours – 5 hours each. Data were then extracted based on what was deemed as compliment and compliment responses. An overall 90 compliment instances were collected from both shows (50 compliment instances from the American singing talent shows and 40 from the Afghan singing talent shows.) From the total number of collected data, an overall 60 sample compliment and compliment responses (30 from Afghan shows and 30 from American shows) were randomly selected for the purpose of data analysis.

### 4. FINDINGS

In order to calculate the frequency, mean score of the compliment response types in Dari and English, SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) was used. From the total number of compliment response instances on Afghan and American Talent TV shows (Dari=30 and English=30, Total N=60), 8 types of compliment responses were found at micro level. These types included appreciation token, agreement utterance, downgrading, qualifying utterance, return, questioning accuracy and ignoring. In both Afghan and American performers’ responses to compliments, appreciation token and ignoring the compliment had the highest frequencies as seen in Table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2: A Comparison of Compliment Response Types by American and Afghan Performers

Compliment Type at Macro Level	Compliment Type at Micro Level	Compliment Responses Types in Dari		Compliment Responses Types in English	
		Number	Percentile	Number	Percentile
Acceptance	Appreciation Token	20	66.7	15	50
	Agreement Utterance	0	0	3	10

	Downgrading	1	3.3	0	0
	Qualifying Utterance	0	0	1	3.3
	Return Compliment	4	13.3	0	0
		Total N=25	83.3	Total N=18	63.3
Rejection	Disagreeing Utterance	0	0	0	
	Questions Accuracy	0	0	1	3.3
	Challenge Sincerity	0	0	0	0
		0	0	Total N=1	3.3
Evasion	Shift Credit	0	0	0	0
	Informative Comment	0	0	0	0
	Ignore	5	16.7	9	30
	Legitimate Evasion	0	0	0	0
	Request Reassurance	0	0	0	0
		Total N=5	16.7	Total N=9	30
Subtotal		N=30	100	N=30	100

According to Table 4.2, 20 (Total N=30), Afghan performers on the talent shows produced ‘appreciation token’ type of compliment response which makes up 66.7% of all the responses made. Similarly, it was found that majority of American performers (15, N=30) on American talent TV shows, produced the same compliment response strategy which forms 63.3 % of all the responses made. In addition, 1(3.3%) compliment response was a downgrade strategy and 4 (13.3%) compliment responses were return strategy produced by Afghan performers while these two strategies were absent among American performers’ compliment responses. Besides, there was 1 (3.3%) rejection strategy (question accuracy) produced by American performers while rejection strategy is not produced by any of the 30 Afghan performers. Finally, Table 4.1 also indicates that both Afghan and American performers used evasion strategy, 5 (16.7%) and 9 (30%) respectively.

From the discussion above, it can be understood that Afghan performers used more appreciation token and return strategies than American performers while American performers used more agreement and evasion compliment response strategies.

## 5. DISCUSSION

In the present study, efforts have been made to answer one basic question: what are the compliment response strategies employed by Afghan and American performers on talent shows?

To answer the question, Holmes taxonomy was used as the basis for categorizing the types of compliments. Holmes has divided compliment responses into 12 types which include three major categories: 1) acceptance (appreciation token, agreement utterance, downgrading, qualifying utterance and return compliment), 2) rejection (disagreeing utterance, questions accuracy and challenge sincerity) and 3) evasion (shift credit, informative comment, ignore, legitimate evasion and request reassurance).

From these 12 types of compliment responses at the micro level, Afghan performers on talent shows in response to the judges’ compliments employed, in order of the frequency, appreciation token, ignore, return and downgrade.

American performers on the talent shows, from those 12 types of compliment responses in order of the frequency, used appreciation token, ignore agreement, qualifying and questions accuracy.

With a glance at Table 4.2, it can be understood that Afghans use more acceptance strategies (83.3%) than the American performers (66.7%). This finding is unlike of several studies conducted in Asian countries like in Thailand by Cedar (2006), in China by Chen (1993) and by Yu, Fu, and Hou (2007), in Iran by Eidi (2013), Shahsavari, Alimohammadi and Rasekh (2014), Boroujeni, Domakani, Sheykhi (2016), Shamsabadi and Rasekh (2014), Shabani and Zeinali and Karimnia and Afghari (2011). All of these studies found that their fellow citizen (as participants) used less acceptance form than Americans. However, the findings of this study is in line with the findings of Nelson, Al-Batal and Echols (1996) who conducted their study in Syria and found that Syrian used more acceptance forms than Americans.

## 6. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the present study was conducted to answer two questions: 1) What are the common types of compliment response employed by Afghan and American performers on talent TV shows? and 2) Is there any difference in the use of types of compliments responses between Afghan and American performers on talent TV shows?

The study found that 'appreciation token' and 'ignore' compliment response types were the most common ones not only among Afghan performers but also among American performers. In addition, the present study found that there is no difference in the use of compliment response types between Afghan and American performers.

Due to the small scale (small number of performances) of this study, its findings cannot be generalized. Therefore, there is a need to conduct a similar study in the future using a larger sample so that making generalizations on the use of compliment response types by Afghan and American talent TV shows performers becomes possible.

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