

Politeness and Compliments: A Sociolinguistic Study

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Introduction

In a context related to language history, Burke (2004) says as follows.

Politeness is one speech domain which has attracted cultural historians, while insult has attracted still more. (Burke 2004:58)

Politeness is a field in which not only cultural historians but also sociolinguists are very interested. Particularly, in studies of gender differences in language, politeness is often used as one of the variables. Insult, on the other hand, is a face-threatening act (as this will be discussed below) and is used as a variable to measure politeness in studies of gender differences in language.

However, it is no easy task for us to explain accurately what politeness is. On writing my master's thesis, I attempted to define accurately the term 'politeness' that is used in studies of gender differences in language, distinguishing it from our everyday language notion of politeness. Afterwards, I considered the notion of 'compliments' because they are often used as one of the important variables in this kind of study.

In my master's thesis, I discussed whether gender differences in politeness strategies and compliment usage can be found or not. From this viewpoint, I also referred to cultural differences between Japan and the West, particularly New Zealand, by comparing my findings with Holmes' (1995). In order to do so, I collected two types of data. First, I questioned 112 Japanese people (who consist of 49 men and 63 women). In terms of consciousness or views of compliment usage and politeness strategies, this questionnaire was helpful.

Second, I recorded several conversations. They consisted mainly of recorded conversations occurring spontaneously between Japanese people and some conversations taken from television programmes such as *Tetsuko No Heya* or *Waratte Iitomo*.

In this article, I will not refer directly to my findings but discuss the fundamental sociolinguistic frameworks to define accurately what politeness is and to find gender differences in compliment usage.

1. Attempting to Define Politeness

1.1 Social Distance and Context

In Japanese society, for example, if we hope to be regarded as being polite, we are required to use language appropriately according to context. We must speak appropriately according to the relationship between speaker and addressee. More specifically, when we talk with our superior, we will be evaluated as being polite if we talk using appropriate honorific words such as respect forms and humble forms.

The relationship between speaker and addressee is determined by several factors such as age, sex, and social status. Holmes (1995) calls this 'social distance.' For example, in a company organization, the president has a higher status than the manager does, and it seems that the relationship between the president and the manager is rarely intimate or equal in most Japanese company organizations. Therefore, the fact that the social distance between them is considerably large requires that the manager use polite speech. Otherwise, he or she would be regarded as impolite. On the other hand, when we talk with acquaintances or strangers, we need to talk to them politely unlike friends or family members even if they are the same age or seem to be younger because there is a greater social distance between them and us. By contrast, if we speak formally when we talk with our friends or family members, we can be regarded as impolite. This is because the social distance is close. In this way, what can

be evaluated as being polite can vary according to the social distance between speaker and addressee. In other words, being polite means not only being linguistically polite but also behaving politely according to the social distance. In addition, as Holmes says that 'politeness is an expression of concern for the feeling of others' (1995:4), avoiding offending addressee, avoiding intruding or imposing something on addressee, listening actively to addressee, giving compliments, and using back-channels are instances of polite behavior. With respect to this, she also says as follows.

... politeness may take the form of an expression of good-will or camaraderie as well as the more familiar non-intrusive behavior which is labelled 'polite' in everyday usage. (Holmes 1995:5)

Though we tend to recognize the non-intrusive behavior as polite behavior in everyday usage, we should notice that the expression of good-will, camaraderie, or even solidarity can be considered as polite speech behavior in certain contexts in a wide range of meanings when we study gender differences in language. Therefore, even if an utterance seems to usually function as an insult, it can be a good-will, camaraderie, or solidarity marker and can be regarded as a polite speech instance in a certain speech community in which the relationship is strongly associated. According to Holmes, rugby players use insults such as *bastard* and *wanker* to express camaraderie or solidarity (see Holmes 1995:10). Though these are apparently typical examples of swearwords, they actually function not as swearwords but as camaraderie or solidarity markers in this particular group. In another example, if a superior tells his or her subordinate 'What a nice job!', it is not always a polite speech act to express the admiration. It can be an irony depending on the context.

Consequently, when we consider what politeness is, we should assume that politeness is always dependent on context. Moreover, we should also assume that being polite means not only being superficially or linguistically polite but also behaving politely.

1.2 A Technical Term—'Face'

As is discussed above, politeness is strongly associated with context. On the basis of this assumption, I will look at definitions of politeness that have been given. When we try to define what politeness is, the concept of 'face' is crucial for us. Accordingly, first of all, I will look at the concept of 'face.'

'Face' is one of technical terms in sociolinguistics and is derived from Goffman (1967). Brown and Levinson (1987) define the term 'face' on the basis of Goffman's definition and classify it into 'negative face' and 'positive face' as follows.

negative face: the want of every 'competent adult member' that his [*sic*] actions be unimpeded by others.

positive face: the want of every member that his [*sic*] wants be desirable to at least some others. (Brown and Levinson 1987:62)

To put it another way on the basis of their definition, we can redefine the negative face as needs for avoiding being disturbed or something being imposed on us. On the other hand, the positive face can be redefined as needs for being favored or admired by others. Everybody has face needs and consequently people tend to cooperate in maintaining mutual face in social life. Moreover, people sometimes (or often) try to satisfy each other's face needs.

Holmes (1995) also refers to functions of language in connection with the concept of face. Though language serves various functions, she particularly focuses on the referential function and the affective function. According to her, the referential function of language plays roles of conveying information, facts, and content, while the affective one plays roles of conveying feelings and social relationships (see Holmes 1995:3-4). For example, a speech act which serves the referential function is an interaction such as a response "Yes, it does." to the question "Does this train stop at Shinagawa?" That is, the interaction simply conveys information that "the train stops at Shinagawa." It does not serve the

affective function because it does not convey any feelings. On the other hand, speech acts which function affectively are acts such as greeting, making an apology, and giving a compliment. In addition, these acts can satisfy positive face needs of others in general.

Note that emphasis on functions of language will contribute to the prevention of misinterpretation that being merely superficially or linguistically polite is essentially polite. In other words, if we only focus on the referential function of language, we may misinterpret politeness as being superficially or linguistically polite regardless of contexts but, if we also focus on the affective function of language, we can consider positive face needs and therefore we can accurately define what politeness is.

1.3 'Positive Politeness' and 'Negative Politeness'

In this section, I will consider how we can define politeness in context. Consider the following two examples illustrated by Coates (1993).

Example 1: You're looking marvelous!

Example 2: I know exactly how you feel. (Coates 1993:130)

First, I consider the example 1. It expresses the feeling of admiration for the appearance of the addressee and it can be regarded as a kind of compliment. The example 2, on the other hand, expresses sympathy or concern for the addressee. In addition, considering each function of language, each utterance focuses on feelings of addressees rather than conveying facts or content. That is, both the examples 1 and 2 have the affective function rather than the referential one. Consequently, we can recognize each utterance as satisfying positive face needs of the addressees.

Though both utterances can not be regarded as particularly polite in terms of language usage, they can be regarded as polite speech because they express admiration, sympathy, or concern for addressees. Moreover, they can be

considered as positively polite speech because they satisfy positive face needs of addressees. Look at the following example 3. It is also taken from Coates (1993).

Example 3: I'm awfully sorry to bother you but I've run out of milk—
could you possibly lend me half a pint? (Coates 1993:129–130)

Speech acts such as making a demand or request, intruding on autonomy and freedom of others, or even giving a suggestion or advice that others do not want can be face-threatening acts. From this viewpoint, most utterances can be face-threatening acts, depending on the situation or context where it occurs. If we only say, 'Please lend me some milk' in context such as the example 3, we can be regarded as making a demand and as being impolite as well as threatening face of the addressee. Therefore, polite people not only avoid obvious face-threatening acts such as insulting, demanding, commanding, or giving directions but also make efforts to express their requests indirectly or to mitigate their utterances (see Holmes 1995:5).

In example 3, the requesting act is likely to be regarded as a face-threatening act. However, the speaker accompanies his or her request with apology for his or her intrusion and makes an effort to satisfy negative face needs of the addressee by mitigating the request as we make efforts to be polite in everyday language usage. Consequently, because the example 3 satisfies negative face needs of the addressee, we can regard it as a negatively polite utterance.

1.4 Definition of 'Politeness'

As I have discussed above, politeness is strongly associated with face. In addition, politeness can be classified into negative politeness, which we tend to regard as being polite in everyday language usage, and positive politeness, which is based on concern for others. When we consider what politeness is, it is important for us to focus on contexts in which speech acts occur and functions

of language or utterance rather than superficial or linguistical politeness. As Coates (1993) points out, we can define politeness as 'satisfying the face wants⁽¹⁾ of others' (Coates 1993:130).

2. Considering What Compliments are

2.1 Concept of Compliments

We have seen that being superficially or linguistically polite is not the same as being truly polite. Paying attention to the contexts in which utterances occur and functions of utterances or language is important when we consider what politeness is.

As Holmes (1995) suggests, we can classify functions of language into the referential function and the affective function (see Holmes 1995:3). Moreover, speech acts which function affectively correspond typically to acts such as greeting, making an apology and paying a compliment. In the following sections, I will focus particularly on 'compliments.'

Paying a compliment is a speech act that plays a role of the affective function and therefore we can regard it as a speech act that satisfies the positive face needs of the addressee. In other words, paying a compliment is a positive politeness device. Though we can express positive politeness in various ways such as conveying gratitude, paying a compliment is one of the most obvious ways for us to express positive politeness. So, first of all, I attempt to define what is 'compliment.'

2.2 Definition of 'Compliment'

In general, people often compliment and are complimented by someone in everyday language usage. People often pay a compliment to each other. Therefore, it does not seem to be so difficult for us to speculate what paying a compliment is. However, it is important to understand compliments on the

basis of the concept of face needs when studying gender differences in language.

The positive face needs of the addressee are intrinsically satisfied by receiving a compliment and consequently paying a compliment is a speech act to express positive politeness for the addressee. As a general rule, we should assume that complimenters are interested in and express positive evaluation or admiration of recipients or their attributes. Taking this into account, Holmes (1995) defines 'compliments' as follows.

A compliment is a speech act which 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 1995:117)

Basically I also adopt her definition. In addition, in order to identify compliments in more detail, we have to focus on their functions because there are speech acts that superficially satisfy this definition as compliments. This is because speech acts which we can superficially regard as compliments do not necessarily function as praise or conveying positive evaluation. This is also because perception of compliments can be different according to cultural or social values. We should assume that compliments can serve as irony, flattery, compliance, harassment, or even insult and therefore we should recognize the concept of compliments in a wide range of meanings and functions. On the basis of this, we will look at the types of compliments in the following section.

2.3 Types of Compliments

What types of compliments are there? Brown and Levinson (1987) illustrate the property of compliments with a diagram and suggest that compliments are speech acts which notice and attend to the hearer's interests, wants, needs and goods (see Brown and Levinson 1987:102; Holmes 1995:116). Paying a compliment is a speech act that suggests that the speaker is interested in the

addressee or his or her attributes such as possessions. Therefore, they point out that paying a compliment is a positive politeness strategy. Though, as Holmes (1995) explains, 'You're looking good.' or 'Is that a new suit?' are simple and short comments, these comments show that the speakers are interested in the appearance of the addressee or in the clothes; i.e. attributes of the addressee (see Holmes 1995:117). Consequently, we can recognize them as a kind of compliment. Here, it is important to note that 'You're looking good.' and 'Is that a new suit?' are different kinds of compliments. In the former, the speaker directly compliments the hearer, while in the latter, the speaker indirectly compliments the hearer by positively evaluating the possession of the addressee; i.e. clothes. Therefore, we should notice that compliments can be classified into direct compliments and indirect compliments. On the basis of this, I assume that, in Japanese society, indirect compliments may occur more often than direct compliments when people in Japanese society convey praise or express admiration. I will consider the difference in the concept of social value of the compliments between different cultures in the following section.

2.4 Differences in the Concept of Compliments between Different Cultures

It is often said that Japanese people tend not to praise or compliment others so often. On the other hand, it is often pointed out that Americans or New Zealanders in the corpus investigated by Holmes (1995) tend to praise or compliment others relatively often. Kitao and Kitao (1989) point out this as follows.

Americans frequently praise their addressee or admire the possessions of the addressee. (...) Intimates and married couples mutually praise and therefore this lubricates human relations between Americans.

(Kitao and Kitao 1989:40, my translation)

On the basis of this, they suggest that contexts in which compliments occur

and responses to them are important to build and maintain the good relationship between the speaker and the addressee. In addition, they refer to differences in the social or cultural value of compliments between different cultures or societies. They provide the following examples.

Example 4: Your necklace is pure gold, isn't it?

Example 5: That's a nice ring. It must be expensive.

(Kitao and Kitao 1989:40)

These examples can be regarded as compliments by Japanese people and function as interactive lubricants for Japanese people, while they can be regarded as impolite or rude utterances by Americans. Kitao and Kitao (1989) suggest that paying a compliment on monetary matters or the possession of expensive goods is not valuable for Americans or is regarded as impolite behavior in some settings (see Kitao and Kitao 1989:40–41). By contrast, the following examples are valuable for Americans as compliments.

Example 6: You look nice today.

Example 7: I love your new car.

(Kitao and Kitao 1989:40–41)

It seems that Americans tend to like or choose direct compliments. Differing from examples 4 and 5, they tend to express their feelings directly when complimenting the addressee as in example 6 or praising a possession of the addressee as in example 7. By contrast, Japanese people tend to be reluctant to convey praises, to mitigate their complimentary expressions and to compliment possessions of the addressee indirectly. In other words, Americans use direct compliments more often, while Japanese people use indirect compliments more often. From this point of view, Barnlund and Araki (1985) make the following remark.

Americans appear to compliment more frequently, more often in close

relationships; praise somewhat different attributes; be more explicit and extreme in giving praise; and readily accept or extend the compliments they receive. In contrast, the Japanese appear to exchange fewer compliments, more often in less intimate relationships; praise a wider variety of attributes; be more indirect and modest in expressing admiration; and tend to question or deny compliments given to them.

(Barnlund and Araki 1985:15)

They point out that the frequency of compliments and the social relationship between complimenters and recipients are different between Japanese people and American people. In addition, as I will discuss below, there are different functions of compliments and contexts and types or functions of compliments can be changed according to the social relationship between complimenters and recipients. Consequently, the concept of compliments can be different according to cultures. It is polite for Japanese people to express modestly, mitigate their expression or use an indirect compliment when paying a compliment. Concerning this, Tsuda (1994) suggests that compliments in English are often exaggerated and this is the reason why they function as positive politeness device, while compliments used by Japanese people tend to be expressed modestly and therefore tend to play negative politeness device (Tsuda 1994:86). Though she points out that compliments in English are often exaggerated, this is because Americans or New Zealanders tend to make their remarks or comments frankly and directly, and therefore this may be regarded as exaggeration by Japanese people. Japanese people, on the other hand, tend to value 'the virtue of modesty,' use modest expressions or condescend to express their feelings or ideas. It is also an important factor that the system of honorific words is highly developed. As a result, compliments for Japanese people are used to satisfy negative face needs rather than positive face needs. This is where the concept of compliments is different between Japanese people and Western people, particularly Americans or New Zealanders. From this viewpoint, we can say that Japanese people often prefer indirect

compliments to direct compliments because they tend to regard compliments as negative politeness device. Consequently, as Barnlund and Araki (1985) point out, if we pay a direct compliment so often or give a praise excessively in Japanese society, addressees may wonder what the intent of this utterance is, and regard us as unpleasant or impolite people. Moreover, the utterance can be regarded not as a compliment but an irony or flattery.

Taking into consideration such differences in the concept of compliments between different cultures, I will look at functions of compliments in the following section.

2.5 Functions of Compliments

Why do we pay a compliment? Holmes (1995) suggests that compliments are usually aimed at making others feel good (see Holmes 1995:118). Complimenters may aim to be positively evaluated by recipients or to give recipients good impression by paying a compliment. By contrast, a speaker may pay a compliment in order to express envy or jealousy. Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that paying a compliment can cause a special turn-taking (see Brown and Levinson 1987:232). In other words, compliments are likely to produce responses from the addressee even if the response is so-called 'minimal response.' If we take account of these facts, we can say that compliments can serve a variety of functions.

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, a compliment is 'a remark that expresses praise or admiration of sb.' That is, a compliment is a speech act that generally focuses on positive evaluation, goodwill or admiration. However, it is clear that both the speaker and the addressee do not necessarily interpret compliments literally. Compliments do not always focus on positive evaluation or positive meanings. Though it is common that compliments are used to please addressees and tend to satisfy positive face needs of addressees, it is also common that speakers pay a compliment with negative meanings such as scorn, irony or insult by complimenting excessively. Moreover, even if a

speaker pays a compliment positively, the addressee may interpret it not as a positive politeness device but as an expression of negative meanings and therefore miscommunication can occur. In other words, even if a compliment is intended to be used as a positive politeness device, it does not necessarily function as a positive politeness device. As I have discussed, we should pay attention to the function of compliments when we consider compliments or politeness, and in order to do so, we should also pay attention to the contexts in which compliments are used.

For example, if a subordinate baldly or directly compliments his or her superior in Japanese society, the speech act is more likely to be interpreted as flattery or compliance. This is because the subordinate may aim to build good relationship between him or her and his or her superior and to improve or reinforce his or her social evaluation by paying a compliment. Therefore, in Japanese society, compliments used in such context can imply 'flattery' because, as a result of reflection of sensitivity to social status, most Japanese people unconsciously or consciously comprehend that, if the subordinate baldly or directly compliments his or her superior, his or her social evaluation of it may get worse regardless of intention that the complimenter originally attempts to improve his or her social evaluation and the speech act may function as a face-threatening act. Consequently, I speculate that, if people are in a position of subordinate or in formal settings, they tend to avoid paying compliments directly or baldly in such cases. Supporting this view, Holmes (1995) illustrates an intriguing remark. She suggests that, when a speaker pays a compliment, a hierarchical relationship can occur between the speaker and the addressee (see Holmes 1995:119). It is generally said that compliments are based on solidarity and often function as a social lubricant, and therefore speakers can easily go on conversation by receiving responses relatively easily. However, in order to appreciate these advantages, it is assumed that compliments function as conveying positive meanings, that is, function as praise or positive evaluation. As we have seen, compliments do not always function as conveying positive meanings, particularly in Japanese society.

According to Holmes (1995), the speech act 'praise' tends to be conveyed from a superior to the subordinate downwards (see Holmes 1995:134). She illustrates the following example.

Example 8

Teacher: This is excellent, Jeannie. You've really done a nice job.

(Holmes 1995:119)

In this example, it is clear that the teacher is the superior and Jeannie is a student, that is, the subordinate. We can see that the speech act 'praise' is conveyed from the superior to the subordinate in this interaction. So we can say that compliments functioning as expressing positive evaluation or positive meanings imply a hierarchical relationship between the speaker and the addressee.

By contrast, she also suggests that compliments from a subordinate to the superior can be regarded as flattery or compliance. With respect to this, Barnlund and Araki (1985) also point out that Japanese people appear to regard a larger proportion as flattery (see Barnlund and Araki 1985:12). For example, in a Japanese company organization, a subordinate may pay a compliment to his or her boss such as "Thanks to your management, we can concentrate on our job." rather than a direct or baldly praise such as "Your management is excellent." This is because indirect expressions tend to be regarded as more polite and appropriate than direct expressions in Japanese society. Making efforts to avoid bald expressions is highly valued in the society. If the subordinate pays a direct compliment to his or her boss without considering the social relationship, the boss can interpret the speech act as a face-threatening act and an irony. Or alternatively, the subordinate can be regarded as behaving challengingly and ignoring the social norms or orders as well as playing up to the boss. Compliments are more often used by Japanese people to express negative politeness to establish and maintain the relationship rather than to express positive politeness as a social lubricant. Moreover, for many Japanese

people, a measure of politeness is how they avoid direct bald compliments. Therefore, people are willing to pay a compliment at its face value as a praise, to mitigate their expression of the compliment, or even to avoid paying a compliment, and are reluctant to pay a compliment according to the social relationship or social distance. To sum up, people change their behavior toward paying a compliment according to them.

Taking this different behavior into account, Barnlund and Araki (1985) classifies compliments used by Japanese people into *sanji* and *oseji*. They point out as follows.

To the Japanese, "Sanji" was also felt to be an honest expression of praise, although it implied a more modest and subtly expressed one. "Oseji", on the other hand, might be honest or not, but could be used simply to promote conversation or more harmonious relations.

(Barnlund and Araki 1985:12)

Sanji functions as a positive politeness device, while *oseji* functions as a negative politeness device. Japanese people classify compliments into *sanji* and *oseji*, according to the function of compliments or the contexts in which compliments are used. In my speculation, when Japanese people attempt to praise or use *sanji*, it tends to be done through the third party. If a speaker uses *sanji* face to face, the addressee may doubt what the speaker is saying or may not take the utterance at its face value. In other words, when Japanese people truly attempt to praise or convey *sanji*, it will be done through the third party or in a speech for the contexts such as in a party or banquet. Conversely, when Japanese people attempt to flatter or use *oseji*, it seems to be done face to face.

Unlike *sanji*, *oseji* assumes that there is a tacit agreement between the speaker and the addressee that they do not always take the utterance at its face value. Therefore, if *oseji* is used in inappropriate way, it is highly likely to be a face-threatening act for the target for the *oseji*. In this way, Japanese people classify compliments into *sanji* and *oseji*. Consequently, we can classify the functions of

compliments into several types. For example, Holmes (1995) attempts to classify them as follows.

- 1 To express solidarity
- 2 To express positive evaluation, admiration, appreciation or praise
- 3 To express envy or desire for hearer's possession
- 4 As a verbal harassment (Holmes 1995:121)

As discussed above, in western societies such as American society, compliments are used to express positive politeness. However, in Japanese society, compliments are used to express not only positive politeness but also meanings or implications different from it. Therefore, we can classify compliments into *oseji* and *sanji*. Taking her consideration into account, I will be able to consolidate functions of compliments used by Japanese people as follows.

- 1 To express solidarity (as a *sanji* or an *oseji*)
- 2 To express positive evaluation, admiration, appreciation or praise (as a *sanji* or an *oseji*)
- 3 To express envy or desire for hearer's possession (as a *sanji* or an *oseji*)
- 4 To express flattery, compliance or irony (as an *oseji*)
- 5 As a verbal harassment

As is repeatedly discussed, even if it seems to be superficially functioning as a compliment or praise, it does not always serve as a positive politeness device and does not satisfy the positive face needs of addressees. Because modest expressions are highly or positively valued in Japanese society, indirect and modest compliments tend to be preferred to direct or bald compliments in the society. When we consider compliments, it is more important to focus on functions of compliments and consider which function men and women tend to use more often, paying attention to the cultural value in which the

compliment occurs, rather than simply to consider the frequency of compliments which are used by men and women.

3. Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to examine previous studies and reconsider important variables—'politeness,' specifically 'compliments'—which are useful to study gender differences in language.

The compliment is a specific variable while politeness is a framework for various kinds of variables and therefore it is a crucial concept though it covers a wide range of areas.

As has been suggested, we can define politeness as 'satisfying the face needs of others.' In terms of the concept of compliments, it is important to appreciate the cultural value in which compliments are used and their functions which I classified into mainly five types. In studying politeness and compliments, an appropriate analysis according to contexts is essentially contributive to studying gender differences in language as variables.

I have also claimed in the section of functions of compliments that paying a compliment implies a hierarchical relationship. If the frequency of the usage of different functions of compliments is different between men and women, the traditional view of male dominance in society, which is typically found in Lakoff (1975:7-8), may be more supported.

This kind of fundamental framework to consider politeness and compliments sociolinguistically should be well-established. This sociolinguistic field is very interesting and is strongly associated with our daily language usage and notions of society.

Note

- (1) Though Coates uses the term 'face wants,' this practically means the same thing as 'face needs' which I used. The term 'face needs' is often used in this kind of study

and Holmes (1995) also uses it.

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