

Sociolinguistic Competence in the Complimenting Act of Native Chinese and American English Speakers: A Mirror of Cultural Value

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Key words

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cross-cultural pragmatics

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Abstract

The present study examines sociolinguistic features of a particular speech act, paying compliments, by comparing and contrasting native Chinese and native American speakers' performances. By focusing on a relatively understudied speaker group such as the Chinese, typically regarded as having rules of speaking and social norms very different from those of Westerners, this paper aims at illuminating the fact that, in cross-cultural communication, foreign language speakers have to pay close attention to sociolinguistic rules of the target language in addition to structure and discourse rules to meet the needs of linguistic accuracy and fluency. This is due to the fact that such rules play an indispensable role in appropriating the proper use of linguistic forms. The data for this study were collected using ethnographic observation pioneered in this field by Wolfson and Manes (1980). The analysis will first explore both the features of distribution of paying compliments, and the functions they may serve in spoken exchanges for native Chinese and American English speakers. To present a fuller picture of the socio-cultural features this speech act may represent in Chinese and American societies, the analysis will further focus on the issues of topics, the addresser-addressee relationship, and culture-specificity versus universality.

1 Introduction

It is now a well-known fact that, in intercultural communication, foreign language speakers, in addition to acquiring grammatical rules to achieve linguistic accuracy, need also to internalize sociolinguistic rules that can assist them in the choice of appropriate forms. Perhaps the fascination that researchers hold for cross-cultural encounters originates from the serious trouble which foreign language speakers may encounter due to a lack of sociolinguistic awareness. Oftentimes mastery of linguistic forms combined with sociolinguistic confusion can make these speakers

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seem so improper or incompetent as to cause cross-cultural misunderstandings and even offense when they can understand only the literal meaning of the words but do not know the sociolinguistic rules of use for interpreting those words. Such rules can never be treated lightly if foreign language speakers aim not only to employ grammatically correct forms but also to know when to use these forms and under what circumstances.

Within the movement to focus on sociolinguistic competence in cross-cultural communication, empirical studies on speech acts play a vital role by serving as a means to define to what this competence actually refers. Speech act research has thus contributed significantly to avoiding cross-cultural miscommunication. Speaker populations from a variety of cultural backgrounds, including native speakers of English, German, Hebrew, Japanese, Spanish, and so forth have been studied, however, cross-cultural studies have paid relatively little attention to native Chinese speakers' speech act behavior (Yu, 1999a). To learn more about such behavior, the present study, which examines the sociolinguistic features of a much used, yet intricate speech act, compliment offering, examines native Chinese and native American speakers' performances of this act. By focusing on a relatively understudied speaker group such as the Chinese, typically regarded as having rules of speaking and social norms very different from those of Westerners, the present paper aims at illuminating the fact that, in cross-cultural communication, foreign language speakers have to pay close attention to sociolinguistic rules of the target language in addition to structure and discourse rules to meet the needs of linguistic accuracy and fluency. Complimenting is chosen in that this speech act, while seemingly common and simple at a first glance, is often considered so complex so as to cause a great deal of trouble in intercultural encounters (e.g., Wolfson, 1989). The data for this study were collected using ethnographic observation pioneered in this field by Manes and Wolfson (1981). The paper will first discuss both the distribution of strategies for paying compliments, and the functions they may serve in spoken exchanges for Chinese and American English speakers. To present a fuller picture of the socio-cultural features this speech act represents in Chinese and American societies, the analysis will center on compliment topics, addresser-addressee relationships, and universality versus culture-specificity related to the complimenting act.¹

¹ Throughout this paper, *Chinese* refers to Mandarin Chinese, which is based on the Beijing dialect and is the official language used in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China on Taiwan (ROC). In addition, given that not all Americans are native English speakers and that not all native English speakers are Americans, the investigator would like to specify here that throughout this study, the use of *Americans* and *English speakers* both refer to Americans whose mother tongue is American English. However, the Chinese subjects in this study come from Taiwan. Thus, the claims made about Chinese speakers' behaviors are based on the Taiwanese data and may not fit the behavior of Mainland Chinese speakers.

2 Background

2.1

Universality versus culture-specificity of speech acts

When it comes to linguistic behavior like speech acts, the issue of universality versus culture-specificity has been of great interest to pragmatics. Some scholars claim that speech acts operate by universal principles of pragmatics (e.g., Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1975, 1979), by which communicative interaction between speaker and addressee is governed, as well as by some general mechanisms such as principles of cooperation (Grice, 1975) or of politeness (e.g., Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987; Leech, 1983). Furthermore, it is suggested that the strategies for realizing specific linguistic behavior are essentially identical across different cultures and languages, although the appropriate use of any given strategy may not be identical across speech communities (Fraser, 1985). In contrast, other theorists maintain that speech acts vary in both conceptualization and realization across languages and cultures, and that their modes of performance are mainly motivated by differences in deep-seated cultural conventions and assumptions (e.g., Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Green, 1975).

The issue of universality versus culture-specificity in speech act studies is still hotly debated. Typical of this debate are the opposing views of Searle (e.g., 1975) and Wierzbicka (e.g., 1991). For example, Searle (1975), supporting Austin's (1962) claim that speech acts are semantic universals and hence not culture-bound, maintains that across languages and cultures, there are general norms for realizing speech acts and conducting politeness behavior, and that while the forms embodying these norms may vary from one language to another, the cross-cultural differences are not that important. However, Wierzbicka (1991), providing examples from Polish and Japanese, objects to this universalistic stand and contends that choosing circumstances for performing certain speech acts is based on cultural norms and values rather than on general mechanisms. She argues that any existing claims to universality in speech act behavior are necessarily subjective and ethnocentric. Given the fact that only a few speech acts and languages have been studied in the literature, existing claims for universality are severely called into question by studies such as Wierzbicka's (Yu, 1999a, 1999b, 2003).

To examine whether there are universal pragmatic mechanisms in speech act realization, Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) engaged in a comprehensive study that can be considered the most ambitious and comprehensive speech act study to date—the Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project. They focused on three dialects of English and five other languages to investigate whether or not there were universal pragmatic principles in the realization patterns of requests and apologies. Although seeming to support claims for universal categories of main request and apology strategies, their findings indicated not only that the particular manifestations of these strategies were not similar across languages, but that these strategies carried different social meanings across cultures. Nevertheless, there was an inherent flaw in this study, that is, its potential Western bias, for all languages studied were either Western or heavily affected by Western cultures. It is conceivable that only when

speech act research is extended to include more non-Western languages, especially those like Chinese which are reputed to bear very different socio-cultural conventions from the Western languages, could substantive universal claims be warranted (Yu, 1999a, 2003). Accordingly, the present study widens the scope of speech act studies by examining the Chinese language, and may hence shed some light on the issue of universality versus culture-specificity.

2.2

The function of a compliment

Research has shown that complimenting involves a variety of linguistic functions. It is argued that the main function of compliments is to establish solidarity between speaker and addressee (e.g., Herbert, 1989; Holmes, 1988; Manes, 1983; Wolfson, 1989; Yu, 1999a). Manes (1983), for example, maintains that praise in American English functions to both establish and reinforce solidarity between speaker and listener. Wolfson (1983, p.86) essentially argues along the same line as Manes, contending that by offering compliments, the speaker in effect expresses approval or admiration toward the listener, and that solidarity between interlocutors thus emerges or is established. In other words, compliments can be considered social lubricants that serve to “create or maintain rapport.” Compliments may also be employed to serve other functions (e.g., Manes, 1983; Wolfson, 1983). A commonly seen phenomenon in human interaction, for instance, is that people frequently offer praise to reinforce or encourage the desired behavior in specific situations, such as teaching and learning. Another possible function compliments may serve is to strengthen or replace other speech acts like apologizing, greeting, reprimanding, or thanking, or to soften acts such as criticism, or even to serve as acts like sarcasm or a conversation opener (Wolfson, 1983, pp. 86–93).

The above-noted functions of compliments are based mainly on research centering on American English speakers. Like all variation in linguistic behavior, variation in speech act behavior may be affected by socio-cultural parameters. Studies have shown that the function of compliments in one society can be very different from that of another (e.g., Herbert, 1989; Herbert & Straight, 1989). For example, in a study on American and South African English compliments, Herbert and Straight (1989, p.44) found that, whereas American compliments serve to *negotiate* social solidarity, South African praise functions “non-negotiatively, probably as a way to *affirm* such solidarity.”

Based on Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987) thesis, the act of complimenting can also be seen as a kind of positive politeness strategy, that is, action that attends to the addressee’s positive face by including him or her in the group. This is due to the fact that the act of complimenting signals concerns about the addressee’s positive face by noticing or attending to the addressee’s face desires. However, there are two reasons why complimenting itself can also be deemed as a face-threatening act. Firstly, it may connote that something about the addressee is admirable or interesting to the speaker, thus giving the former some reason to think that he or she may have to take action to protect the object of the latter’s desire (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.66), or even making him or her feel compelled to offer the object complimented to the latter

(Holmes, 1986, p.487). Holmes shows that in Samoan culture, complimenting could be a very face-threatening act because a given speaker's expression of admiration for an object will in general impose an obligation on the hearer to offer that object to the speaker. It therefore comes as no surprise to find that the Samoan may respond to a compliment such as "*What an unusual necklace. It's beautiful.*" with something like "*Please take it.*" Secondly, the act of complimenting usually requires the addressee's response and, as Pomerantz's (1978) constraint system argument has suggested, it does not seem to be an easy matter for the addressee to give an appropriate response that could resolve the conflicting constraints of agreement and self-praise avoidance (Holmes, 1986, 1988, 1995). Because complimenting can function both as a positive politeness device, as well as a face-threatening act, it seems obvious that compliments are indeed very complex.

It thus appears that, whereas both Manes' and Wolfson's studies reveal that the function of compliments in a given culture could be identified "emically" within its specific linguistic and socio-cultural context, Herbert and Straight's study indicates that we could have a better understanding of the distinctive features of compliment functions through contrastive analyses, that is, "etic" comparisons. It seems that only through a contrastive study of compliments in different societies, especially those with very different cultural norms like Chinese and American societies, can researchers possibly learn more about the universal or culturally specific features of this speech act. This is one of the primary goals that the present study was aimed to achieve.

3 The corpus

3.1

Data collection

The data of the present study were collected by the investigator and his assistants over a two-year period (2001–2003) in the Taipei and Boston metropolitan areas. Because the purpose of the study lies in comparing and contrasting Chinese and Americans' performances of the complimenting act in their mother tongue, the Chinese and American English data were from native speakers of each group living in their respective native area, and the data collectors were native speakers of the relevant language they were observing.

Data collection was based on an ethnographic approach that uses field observations to gather data — a method adapted from Wolfson and Manes' (1980) pioneering research on the speech act of compliments. In the present study, each field worker was asked to note as soon and as accurately as possible the exact compliment exchange and relevant contextual information he or she observed in his or her everyday life right after each exchange had taken place. All data collectors recorded compliments, responses, the sex and approximate age of the speaker and addressee, the relationship of the interlocutors, the setting in which the exchange took place, and any interactional characteristics such as small talk and/or supportive moves that led up to or followed the compliment. The resulting corpus of compliments included exchanges between dyads such as professors and students, employers and employees, landlords and tenants, customers and salespersons, total strangers, neighbors, mere

acquaintances, friends, co-workers, and family members. In some cases speaker and addressee were of similar status and age, while in others considerable asymmetry existed. The topics of the compliments included appearance, possessions, personal attributes, accomplishments, friends, family, pets, etc.

The heavy burden put on field workers trying to record all the above information makes it questionable whether data collected in this way can accurately reflect real-life language use. In fact, it has been suggested that data gathered via field observations may be “limited in both quality and quantity” (Labov, 1984, p.30) because field workers, who often have to rely only on their memory and observational skills to recall linguistic data, may miss important, decisive information such as hedges, modifiers, and intensifiers (Golato, 2003; Kasper, 2000; Lehrer, 1989). Therefore, to address this potential limitation, the present study, unlike most ethnographic studies which do not use any audio-taping or video-taping instruments in field observations, required the field workers to audio-tape the observed spoken exchanges.² Only while the field workers were audio-taping did they try to take notes on the exact compliment exchange as well as record contextual information they observed. Each worker was asked to informally audio-tape five hours of off-task interactions in ordinary conversations every week during the school term with a digital recorder, a compact, pocket-sized device that can record and save a large amount of voice files on a memory chip without using a tape. These observed off-task interactions, which refer to the behaviors students engaged in when doing things unrelated to the pedagogic work of the day, such as having a chat or spending time with family members or friends, mostly occurred in mundane, everyday conversation. On-task interactions, such as those taking place in the classroom, were excluded because research has shown that such interactions, which are often seen in institutional settings, are functionally and sequentially very different from off-task ones (Golato, 2003; Levinson, 1992). To avoid including data from very different settings so that the results of the analysis may be called into question, this study focused only on compliments in ordinary talk, that is, off-task behavior. Simply put, the purpose of using a recording device is that the field workers can conveniently refer to recorded data to make their carefully taken notes more complete and reliable. Over the two-year data-collecting period, there were 885 hours of interaction that were observed for each speaker group.

There are two other reasons why a recording device was employed. First, although field workers were specifically trained to find compliments based on a coding scheme in order to achieve standardization (see the Coding Scheme section), the field workers’ reliability to hear compliments still remained questionable. That is to say, it still seemed difficult to ensure that there was not any coding drift during the two years of fieldwork; therefore, the possibility that the data obtained may be

² Because of the ethnographic design of the present study, it appeared not feasible to get participants’ approval for audio-taping beforehand. However, after the observed speech act occurred, the field worker explained the research procedure to the participants in order to get their approval. If a given participant did not agree what had been audio-recorded could be used in the study, the data collected were excluded.

a result of varying attentiveness by the different coders to the interactions cannot be eliminated. The audio-taped data can help reduce this concern because data of this sort allow for the repeated and detailed analysis of interactions in their real-life context. Second, while it seemed rather hard to control for all possible extraneous variables (e.g., interactors' status, distance, gender, age, etc.), some variables such as the hours of interaction and the types of spoken interactions, could be held constant through audio-taping. This reduced problems of validity in the findings for cross-linguistic comparison (e.g., Nunan, 1992; Watson-Gegeo, 1988; Yuan, 2001), since the data-gathering circumstances and procedures were made as identical as possible for the two speech groups.

Nevertheless, the credibility of cross-group comparisons and the generalizations beyond the current findings may still be questioned, for it seems impossible to have the data collected ethnographically under the exact, same circumstances for each group, that is, with all possible variables held constant, such as equal numbers of observed participants and speech situations. LeCompte and Goetz (1982) have argued that one way to guard against the threat of comparability and generality for ethnographic data is to make sure the construct under investigation not only is not unique to a particular group, but also is shared across different groups. Obviously, the design of the present study meets this criterion. Therefore, while this study has followed the general guidelines of ethnographic research, the investigator will employ the current findings as a basis for the extension of the conclusions obtained to the broader context.

The Chinese corpus considered here consists of 410 exchanges; the American corpus consists of 789 exchanges. Because one focus of this study is the frequency of the complimenting act, the observed exchanges were tokens rather than types. This was done so that a speaker complimenting his or her addressee by saying "nice shot" and another speaker saying exactly the same thing to a different addressee, would be counted as two exchanges. In the Chinese data, 356 participants produced 410 compliments, while in the American English data, 636 participants produced 789 compliments. All the interactions observed for the Chinese and American groups occurred among the largely middle class interlocutors within the college community who held or were pursuing a college degree or held white-collar positions at the time of recording. The speakers ranged in age from 18 to 55 years, with the majority being in their early twenties.

3.2

Coding scheme

One major purpose of the present study was to analyze how the complimenting act is realized in naturally occurring situations for Chinese and American English speakers. A number of researchers have empirically developed classification systems for the realization of compliments in terms of directness level (Knapp, Hopper, & Bell, 1984; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 1989; Te, 1995; Yu, 1999a). Thus, two broad, mutually exclusive strategies for paying compliments were identified in the present study:

(a) *Direct Compliments*, which refers to remarks including linguistic forms that directly and unambiguously frame these comments as compliments, such as:

- (1) "Isn't the food great!"³
- (2) "I'm impressed a lot!"
- (3) "I really like your hair that way."

(b) *Indirect Compliments*, which refers to remarks which would be seen as compliments by the addressee, although the positive semantic carrier generally associated with complimenting is missing at the level of the linguistic form. Despite the fact that the linguistic forms of these utterances are indirect and less conventionalized so as to allow the addressee to make other possible interpretations of the intended meaning, this type of comment can usually be interpreted as having complimentary force. Hence, it seems obvious that compared to direct forms, indirect compliments need more inferences on the part of the addressee to reconstruct the intended meaning conveyed in the message by the speaker. For example:

- (4) "Wow, I hope I'll have a coat like this."
- (5) "Your boyfriend is a very lucky man."
- (6) "Wow, what did you do to your hair?"

Given that the investigator grouped the participants by native-language background and then compared the naturally observed group's compliment performance, native-language background was the independent variable in the present study, and the two groups were levels of the independent variable. In contrast, the observed compliment performances were the dependent variables, that is, the two mutually exclusive strategies.

3.3

Reliability of coding

In order to achieve interrater reliability, 20% of the data from each group was randomly selected to be independently coded by a second rater (Cohen, 1960). An American English speaker coded the set of English data, whereas a Chinese speaker coded the Chinese data. A corrected-for-chance level of kappa of at least .85 was considered acceptable in the present study. The interrater agreement coefficients were 97% and 94% for the English and the Chinese data, respectively.

3.4

Data analysis

Given the two main strategies, *Direct* and *Indirect*, a nonparametric test using the χ^2 statistic was employed to compare the two groups on a nominal variable with two categories. The specific null hypothesis is that there is no difference in compliment strategy performance for these two groups. A .001 alpha level of significance was chosen as the cutoff point for testing the null hypothesis.

³ All examples in this paper are taken from actual data naturally observed for this study.

In addition to the frequency of occurrence and the function of complimenting, the following were also examined: the topic on which it centers, the addresser-addressee relationship, and the universality issue. Again, wherever appropriate, a nonparametric test using the χ^2 statistic was used to compare the two groups on a nominal variable. A .001 alpha level of significance was set as the cutoff point for testing the null hypothesis.

4 Compliment strategies

Table 1 includes all the compliment strategies adopted by Chinese and American English speakers in their 410 and 789 exchanges in the corpus respectively. An examination of the distribution of Chinese and American English compliment strategies in the two broad categories indicates (a) that complimenting frequency is much lower for Chinese speakers than for English speakers, (b) that direct complimenting was the most often adopted strategy for both speaker groups, and (c) that Chinese speakers used indirect compliments proportionately more than Americans did.

Table 1

Percentage (and raw frequencies) of compliment strategies for speaker groups

COMPLIMENT STRATEGY	Speaker Group			
	Chinese		Americans	
	Number	%	Number	%
Direct compliment e.g.: Great job!	334	81.5	719	91.1
Indirect compliment e.g.: When did you learn to play like this?	76	18.5	70	8.9
Total	410	100	789	100

In this study, these descriptive statistics were further tested by the χ^2 test of homogeneity to determine whether there was any significant difference in the level of complimenting performance among the two speaker groups. Given that the computed χ^2 value (23.58, $df=1$, $p<.001$) exceeds the critical value (10.827), the null hypothesis was rejected, and the conclusion was that the speakers in the various groups adopted different compliment strategies.

However, because the χ^2 value was computed over all cells, a significant χ^2 value did not indicate which cells were major contributors. That is, we would not know exactly which speaker group's enactment of what compliment strategies has to do with the overall strategy-enacting differences among groups. Thus, the standardized residuals (R) were computed to reveal further detail of group differences. The analysis of residuals indicated that, in comparing the observed frequencies with the expected frequencies, there were more Chinese speakers than expected who

complimented indirectly, and fewer American English speakers who did so ($R = 3.69$ and -2.66 respectively).

It should be noted that there seem to be conceptual differences of directness/indirectness between Chinese and English speakers. Although the two main strategies adapted from previous research to distinguish directness and indirectness seem to be valid in English, many Chinese speakers believe that the Chinese tend to consider these strategies equally direct when presented as single utterances. For the Chinese, a common practice to realize indirectness is to resort to supportive moves and/or small talk at the discourse level (Zhang, 1995; Yu, 1999b). A supportive move is an optional element that serves to intensify the complimentary force of a given compliment. In a Chinese compliment sequence such as Example (7),

- (7) “Nǐ yídìng huā le hěnduō xīsi.”⁴
 you must spend (perfect tense marker) many thoughts.⁵
 Nà zhǔyì hěn bàng.”
 that idea very great

你一定花了很多心思。那主意很棒!

‘You must have put a lot of thought into it. That’s a very clever idea.’

the part of the sequence “Nǐ yídìng huā le hěnduō xīsi 你一定花了很多心思” (*‘You must have put a lot of thought into it’*) can be considered a supportive move, for it is an optional element that strengthens the complimentary force. When a supportive move occurs on its own, it can be raised to the status of the core compliment. For example, in a Chinese compliment sequence:

- (8) “Nǐ wénchǎi hǎo xiāng. Nǐ cā shénme xiāngshuǐ.”
 you smell very aromatic. you put on what perfume
 妳聞起來好香。妳擦什麼香水?

‘You smell great. What kind of perfume are you wearing?’

the supportive move “Nǐ cā shénme xiāngshuǐ 妳擦什麼香水” (*‘What kind of perfume are you wearing?’*), when occurring on its own, can be considered a core compliment. Under this circumstance, one can regard it as an indirect strategy. In respect to small talk, it usually refers to utterances that touch on topics other than those related to the intended action. For example, in a Chinese compliment sequence such as Example (9).

⁴ Throughout this article, all Chinese characters are transliterated following the *pinyin* system, which is the official transcription system used in the PRC and is widely adopted in scholarly writings on Chinese in the West (Li & Thompson, 1981).

⁵ To help readers better understand the Chinese data presented in this study, a line that is a morphemic, word-for-word translation is included for all the Chinese examples.

- (9) “*Méi xiǎng dào zài zhèlǐ*
no think (complex stative construction) at here
pèng dào nǐ. Nǐ bāng
touch (complex stative construction) you you help
le yíge dà máng.”
(perfect tense marker) one big busy
沒想到在這裡碰到你。你幫了一個大忙。

‘I didn’t expect to meet you here. You’re such a big help.’

the part of the sequence “*Méi xiǎng dào zài zhèlǐ pèng dào nǐ* 沒想到在這裡碰到你” ‘*I didn’t expect to meet you here*’ is considered small talk.

Furthermore, Chinese indirectness can be accomplished through information sequencing (Yu, 1999b), that is, through prefacing one’s intended illocutionary force with small talk or supportive moves. According to Chinese norms, the more one employs this kind of linguistic device, the more indirect one’s speech appears to be. Thus, indirectness in Chinese discourse tends to consist of a “because ... therefore” structure, rather than a “therefore ... because” structure (Kirkpatrick, 1991). Moreover, whereas small talk and/or supportive moves are only considered optional in realizing indirectness for English speakers (Færch & Kasper, 1989), in most cases Chinese indirectness cannot be realized or perceived without the presence of such external modification. This is especially true when the degree of imposition incurred by the speaker’s speech act on the addressee seems high. The act of requesting is a good case in point as it usually causes some kind of burden on the hearer. Research has shown that for native Chinese speakers, supportive moves and/or small talk are likely to be found *before* the core request in seemingly high imposition situations, whereas for American English speakers, they usually occur *after* the core request (Yu, 1999b). A similar tendency was also observed in this study in the following Chinese and American compliment sequences:

- (10) “*Hài! Wǒ gāngcái pái zài nín hòumiàn, suǒyǐ yǒu*
hi I just now line at you behind so have
jīhuì zhùyì dào nín dǎqiú.
chance notice (complex stative construction) you play ball
Nín yǒu cháng lái zhèlǐ mā? Huòxǔ
you have often come here (question marker) perhaps
wǒmen gāitīān kěyǐ yìqǐ liànxí. Wǒ juéde nín
we someday can together practice I think you
qiú dǎ de mǎn hǎo
ball play (complex stative construction) very well
de”
(phrase-final particle)

嗨! 我剛才排在您後面, 所以有機會注意到您打球. 您有常來這裡嗎? 或許我們改天可以一起練習. 我覺得您球打得蠻好的.

'Hi, I stood in line right behind you, so I got a chance to see you play. Do you often come here? Maybe we can practice together some day. I think you play pretty well.'

(11) *"Nice shot! Wanna play together sometime?"*

Although complimenting, compared to requesting, generally imposes less burden on the addressee (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987), supportive moves and/or small talk can still be easily found in the Chinese data collected for this study. Table 2 shows the frequency distribution of supportive moves and/or small talk per compliment for the two speaker groups.

Table 2

Percentage (and raw frequencies) of supportive moves and/or small talk per compliment for speaker groups

	<i>Speaker Group</i>	
	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Americans</i>
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Number</i>
Supportive moves and/or small talk	249	77
Total compliments	410	789
Percentage per compliment	60.7	9.8

The table suggests that, whereas the complimenting utterances of Americans were mostly so straightforward that few supportive moves or little small talk were used, Chinese speakers employed such moves or talk much more frequently so that many of their complimenting sequences tended to be longer, as we can see above in Examples (9) and (10). In practice, native Chinese speakers' use of small talk and/or supportive moves has to do with a socio-cultural convention that embraces a communicative style valuing reciprocal face work very highly. Resorting to such talk or moves is a strategy by which both parties can constantly assess ongoing conversation so as to make appropriate face adjustments to each other whenever necessary. That is, small talk or supportive moves can help both speaker and addressee observe each other's mood and attitude, thereby fine-tuning the face distance and relationship between them and generating a harmonious atmosphere to conduct interpersonal transactions. With this kind of interactive adjustment, a balance of face between interlocutors can be achieved (Scollon & Wong-Scollon, 1991; Zhang, 1995). Accordingly, the use of linguistic devices that serve functions like supportive moves or small talk plays a very important role in Chinese politeness behavior and face concerns (Yu, 1999b). An interesting phenomenon frequently observed in Chinese compliments, but not American, is the tendency to employ small talk or supportive moves in situations

where offering a compliment is socio-culturally appropriate. This may be the way Chinese speakers express their indirectness.

5 Compliment frequency and function

The finding that native Chinese speakers tended to offer compliments substantially less often than Americans seems to suggest that where complimenting is concerned, the former appear to act conservatively. This difference did not come as a surprise in that compliments have been found to occur in a much wider variety of speech situations in American culture than in other cultures (e.g., Wolfson, 1989). For example, it is common for Americans to compliment a stranger in order to show their friendliness, but if a Chinese speaker did so in a Chinese context, this act could cause some embarrassment for the addressee, as observed in the following compliment exchanges. Both exchanges take place at a school cafeteria between two female college students who are total strangers, American English and Chinese speakers, respectively:

(12) A: “*Wow, that’s a nice hat.*”

B: “*Thanks.*”

A: “*Where did you get it? By the way, my name is Jane. I just moved in last week.*”

B: “*Oh, nice to meet you. My name is Jill.*”

...

A: “*Maybe we can get together sometime.*”

B: “*Sure, that would be nice!*”

...

(13) A: “*Hài! Gāngcái hǎoxiàng wǒmén gānhǎo zuò zài*

Hi just now seem we coincidentally sit at

fùjìn. Duìle wǒ júede nǐ zhè yīfú,
nearby By the way I think you this cloth

mán hǎokàn de”

very good-looking (expletive)

嗨! 剛才好像我們剛好坐在附近。對了, 我覺得妳這衣服蠻好看的!

‘*Hi, we were just sitting near each other. By the way, I think you look great in this dress.*’

B: “*Háihǎo la!*

so so (expletive)

還好啦!

‘So so!’

A: “*Nǐ cháng lái zhèlǐ ma? Júede*

you often come here (question mark) think

zhèlǐ dōngxī rúhé?”

here thing how

妳常來這裡嗎? 覺得這裡東西如何?

'Do you come here often? How do you like the food here?'

B: "Mǎmǎhūhū la!"

so-so (phrase-final particle)

馬馬虎虎啦!

'Just so so!'

...

A: "Gǎitiān shuōbúding kěyǐ zài yìchǐ liáoliáo."

another day maybe can again together have a chat

改天說不定我們可以再一起聊聊。

'Maybe we can get together again.'

B: "Kànkàn ba! Wǒ zuìjìn hěn máng,

look, look (expletive) I recently very busy

yǒu jīhuì zìrán huì zài xuéxiào zài

have opportunity naturally will at school again

pèng dào miàn de.

meet (complex stative construction) face (expletive)

看看吧! 我最近很忙, 有機會自然會在學校再碰到面的。

'We'll see. I've been very busy recently. We'll probably meet again at school.'

In these two exchanges, compliments appear to function primarily as a conversation opener for the speaker to try to establish some rapport with the addressee. Generally, American English speakers would not find such situations particularly strange or uneasy, for as suggested earlier, one of the main functions compliments serve in American English is to establish solidarity with the addressee. This is not so for the Chinese. This may be the reason why in the Chinese example above, the addressee seemed to keep a good distance from the speaker's gesture of kindness. In fact, it is often the case that the act of complimenting a stranger would backfire for the Chinese. Not only is this behavior generally considered inappropriate, but also the addressee may think that the speaker is in effect contriving something (Yu, 1999a).

We can obtain a better understanding of cross-cultural variation by linking ways of speaking to broader patterns of social and cultural organization. As noted earlier, the speaker could establish solidarity with the addressee by offering compliments. Given that the Chinese tend to offer fewer compliments in everyday discursive activities than Americans, the question arises whether the Chinese have less of a need to establish solidarity than native English speakers. In trying to account for the frequency difference in the complimenting act between South African and American English speakers (the frequency of the former is significantly lower than that of the latter), Herbert (1989) contends that there is lesser call to establish solidarity in elitist societies

(or at least in those where the boundaries between strata are not fluid), such as the Republic of South Africa, than in democratic societies, such as the United States. Because people in democratic societies tend to value the notions of human equality and democracy more, they feel a greater need to attempt to establish solidarity with the addressee. That is, the greater frequency in offering compliments for the American people may have to do with their higher degree of belief that all human beings are born equal. Herbert further argues that compliments in American culture function primarily as a vehicle to negotiate solidarity between speaker and hearer, whereas compliments in South African society serve mainly as an instrument to show the speaker's admiration.

Whereas Taiwan is not an elitist society like the Republic of South Africa and, in many respects, can be considered a democratic country like the United States, Herbert's analytic framework seems to work well in accounting for the lower frequency of paying compliments in Chinese society. Oliver (1971) argued that Chinese society traditionally legitimizes a hierarchical class structure that places a high value on subordination to and respect for authorities. This concept is still deep-rooted in Chinese society, and hence may affect people's way of thinking (e.g., feeling less need to establish solidarity with the addressee) and, in turn, determine their way of speaking (giving fewer compliments). Therefore, compliments in Chinese culture, like those in South African society, may be primarily used to display the speaker's positive assessment of some object or concern relevant to the addressee instead of offering solidarity. In other words, compliments in these two cultures, compared to those in American culture, may serve a more restricted set of functions and are thus more limited in discourse.

Although Herbert's (1989) arguments, at first glance, appear to provide a helpful explanation for the differences in compliment behavior between South Africa (and China) the United States, his analysis may be somewhat incomplete. Although Herbert asserts that compliments function primarily as ways of negotiating public equality in American society, he does not explain why that is such an important and difficult negotiation for Americans. In fact, we see the impact of compliments as an attempt to create a public sense of democracy and equal status, and, in conformity with cultural conventions, to counteract private realities of social distance and hierarchical relationships. Consequently, there is much to negotiate in American society due to the co-existence of the perception of equality with the reality of hierarchy. The speaker, therefore, needs a fair amount of positive politeness (proposed by Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987) as a cultural strategy to bridge this conflict.

In contrast, the same conflict may exist in South Africa or Taiwan, but it is valued differently. That is, friendly relations between interactants might disrupt existing (and valued) hierarchical relationships. Hence, negotiations to resolve the conflict are demonstrated through the avoidance of positive politeness and, therefore, a lower incidence of compliments. Put another way, Herbert's argument that Americans' positive politeness, realized through the complimenting act, originates from their deep-rooted notion of democracy and equality appears somewhat simplistic. It fails to recognize that, in addition to political belief, cultural norms play an important role in determining language behavior.

In fact, a further analysis of how the manner and degree of cross-cultural behavior is varied shows that the primary factor behind the cultural norm is face, which is related to whether or not speakers' behavior can be considered appropriate or polite. In Chinese culture, the speaker is generally expected to employ compliments as assertions of admiration. Failure to live up to this cultural expectation may suggest that the speaker does not take the addressee's face into account, thereby damaging his or her own face. In American culture, however, it is common practice for the speaker to employ compliments to establish solidarity or rapport. Abiding by these cultural norms can be seen as giving face to the addressee, and thus can be considered polite (Yu, 1999a).

Even though the above discussion appears to account for the frequency difference in complimenting behavior between Chinese and American cultures by drawing on a seemingly dichotomous position, a word of caution is in order. That which was suggested in these discussions is only a common tendency for the performance of a complimenting act in each society. In other words, it is not simply that Americans employ compliments only to negotiate solidarity, whereas Chinese people praise only when they want to show genuine admiration. There are, in fact, many commonalities in compliment function between the two cultures. As shown in the data, the Chinese also used compliments to negotiate solidarity, while Americans also offered compliments when they wanted to show genuine admiration. In addition, as aforementioned, compliments could also serve to replace other speech acts such as apologizing, greeting, or thanking, and so forth, and both speaker groups employed compliments this way. For example, compliments that appeared to be used as an expression of gratitude were found in the following Chinese and American English spoken exchanges, both of which took place when the speaker was leaving the apartment of the addressee who just treated him or her a meal.

- (14) *Jīnwǎn de cài zhēn hǎo. Gǎitiān*
tonight (nominalizer) dish really good another day
dào wǒ jiā zuòzuò. Huàn wǒ qǐnkè.
come I home sit, sit change I treat

今晚的菜真好。改天到我家坐坐。换我请客。

'The food tonight was delicious. Come over to my house some other time and let me treat you to a meal.'

and

- (15) *"I loved the dessert. I'll be back for some more some other time."*

In addition to exploring the sociolinguistic features of the distribution of compliments and the functions they serve in spoken exchanges, other aspects of this speech act are also worth studying. To present a fuller picture of the cross-cultural differences in complimenting, the remaining part of this paper will draw on naturally observed data to examine this speech act from other perspectives. As Fishman (1965) has so strongly pointed out, a main issue in sociolinguistic studies is understanding who says what to whom and when. The next two subsections will focus on how variables

related to this issue, such as the compliment topic and addresser-addressee relationship, affect complimenting behavior.

6 Compliment topics

Studies have shown that most compliments focus on only a few topics. For example, it is found that compliments in American English mostly fall into two main categories: (a) appearance and/or possessions; and (b) ability and/or performance (e.g., Knapp, Hopper, & Bell, 1984; Manes, 1983; Wolfson, 1989). Studies of other varieties of English (e.g., Herbert, 1989; Holmes, 1989) and other languages (e.g., Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 1989; Ye, 1995) also revealed that these topics were the most often occurring ones — although acceptable topics vary cross-culturally.

The same procedure was used to test coding reliability for the main compliment strategies. Here inter-rater agreement coefficients for compliment topics were 91% and 94% for the English and Chinese data, respectively. Table 3 shows the distribution of compliment topics by speaker group. Based on the χ^2 statistic for Table 3, 39.28 ($df=2$, $p<.001$), we know that the speakers in the two groups complimented on different topics. The major contributors to this statistic are the compliment topics in three main categories (“appearance and/or possessions,” “ability and/or performance,” and “others”) by Chinese speakers and on “ability and/or performance” by Americans. Analysis of the residuals indicated that there were fewer American English speakers than expected who complimented on “ability and/or performance” ($R=-2.68$). Also, whereas there were fewer Chinese speakers who complimented on “appearance and/or possessions” and other topics ($R=-2.65$ and -2.24 respectively), there were more who complimented on “ability and/or performance” ($R=3.72$).

Table 3

Percentage (and raw frequencies) of compliment topics for speaker groups

COMPLIMENT TOPIC	Speaker Group			
	Chinese		Americans	
	Number	%	Number	%
Appearance and/or Possessions for example, You look very lovely today!	149	36.3	392	49.7
Ability and/or Performance for example, Great job!	234	57.1	303	38.4
Others for example, I'd sure hate to lose you!	27	6.5	94	11.9
Total	410	100	789	100

Typical compliments on appearance and/or possessions in Chinese and American English are shown in Examples (16) and (17).

- (16) “Nǐ tóufǎ jiǎn de búcuò.”
you hair I cut (complex stative construction) not bad

你頭髮剪得不錯。

‘Your hair is really great.’

and

- (17) “That’s a really nice jacket. Did you just get it?”

Typical compliments on ability and/or performance in Chinese and American English are shown in Examples (18) and (19).

- (18) “Tài shuài le! Nǐ zěnmē bàn dào de?”
very handsome (perfect tense marker) you how do
(complex stative construction) (expletive)

太帥了! 你怎麼辦到的?

‘That’s excellent. I don’t know how you do it.’

and

- (19) “That’s a very nice piece of work.”

The majority of compliments on “other topics” pertained to personality/whole person, as illustrated in the following examples:

- (20) “Nǐ de gèxìng zhēn hǎo.”
you nominalizer personality really good

妳的個性真好。

‘You’ve got a great personality.’

and

- (21) “I really enjoyed your company.”

The Chinese speakers’ tendency to compliment on ability and/or performance can be accounted for by the fact that the Chinese traditionally tend to emphasize the virtues and qualities of individuals, and thus do not regard good looks or possessions as having great social value (Yang, 1987). This does not mean that physical appearance and/or material possessions are neglected, but, rather, that too much attention paid to these aspects generally means less attention is paid to one’s abilities and/or virtues. There are two other considerations that may contribute to the fact that the Chinese focus less on the speaker’s appearance and/or possessions. First, implicitness is culturally preferred in discourse exchanges. Thus, the act of explicitly admiring a person’s appearance and/or possessions will usually be regarded as uncultivated (Ye, 1995). Second, physical appearance in Chinese socio-cultural contexts traditionally has a sexual implication, and is, therefore, seen as taboo in social interaction (Hsu,

1953). Because of these cultural constraints, it seems reasonable that the compliment topics chosen by native Chinese speakers show a strong preference for performance and/or ability over appearance and/or possessions.

In contrast, the main function of compliments for English speakers, as aforementioned, seems to be the ability to establish or create solidarity between speaker and addressee. Their inclination to compliment on appearance and/or possessions has to do with the fact that newness is very highly valued in American society. Thus, offering a compliment is appropriate whenever an acquaintance is seen with something new (Wolfson, 1989). This is the type of praise most often heard, and it is generally employed as an expression of solidarity (Holmes, 1988). It is no wonder, then, that a number of studies have shown that Americans appear to compliment on appearance/possessions more often than on performance and/or ability (e.g., Holmes, 1986, 1988, 1995; Knapp, Hopper, & Bell, 1984; Lee, 1990; Wolfson, 1984). Thus we see a substantial cultural difference between Chinese and American societies concerning the preferred compliment topic.

7 Addresser-addressee relationship of compliments

Table 4

Percentage (and raw frequencies) of compliments by relative status for speaker groups

<i>RELATIVE STATUS</i>	<i>Speaker Group</i>			
	<i>Chinese</i>		<i>Americans</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>
Recipient is higher in status	20	4.9	118	15.0
Recipient is equal in status	346	84.4	599	75.9
Recipient is lower in status	44	10.7	72	9.1
Total	410	100	789	100

It has been argued that the relationship between addresser and addressee is an important factor affecting compliment behavior because “who” and “whom” elements often constitute the most valuable components of any sociolinguistic or speech act study (Wolfson, 1989). This relationship reflects two important parameters in pragmatics research: social status and distance. A speaker’s social status is one crucial variable in language variation. This applies to compliments without exception, for it seems obvious that people of different social status vary in their strategies, topics, and frequency of complimenting. Table 4 shows the distribution of Chinese and American English speakers’ compliments by social status in relation to the addressee. For both speaker groups, the great majority of compliments occur in interactions between people of equal status. This finding is consistent with Holmes’ (1988) study on New Zealand English and Wolfson’s (1983) study on American English. The χ^2 statistic for Table 4

is 26.99 with two degrees of freedom ($p < .001$). The major contributors to this statistic are the different influences of higher-status complimentees on Chinese speakers and Americans. The analysis of residuals indicated that when the recipient was higher in status, there were more Americans than expected who offered praise, whereas there were fewer Chinese speakers who did so ($R = 2.85$ and -3.96 respectively).

This observed difference may have to do with the Chinese socio-cultural convention noted above, which legitimizes a vertical class structure following Confucian political philosophy that places special emphasis on respect for and subordination to the authorities. This Chinese tradition discourages lower status individuals from taking the initiative in talking to higher-status persons unless some legitimate reasons exist. If the lower status individual should breach this implicit social convention, this may offend the higher status person or be thought of as shameless flattery by their peers. Although such a tradition has long been considered outdated and thus appears to play a minor role in modern Chinese society, it is still deeply rooted in the minds of the Chinese people. By contrast, in American culture, impositions generally appear to be seen as insignificant, and relative power as not important. In other words, the asymmetric power relations in conversational dyads are often not recognized. Therefore, taking the initiative in speaking to a person of higher status, even if there are no legitimate reasons, will generally not incur offense. This may explain why Chinese speakers tend to give many fewer compliments to higher status addressees than do American English speakers. Another interesting cross-cultural difference can be observed when a compliment takes place in such a situation. That is, the compliment is usually accompanied with small talk and/or supportive moves for Chinese speakers, as shown in (10), whereas this is not necessarily the case for Americans.

Another interesting finding concerning the cross-cultural difference between Chinese and American English speakers is that where status is concerned, there were more compliments downwards than upwards for Chinese speakers, whereas there were more compliments upwards than downwards for Americans. The Chinese cultural convention mentioned above could serve as an account for why this is so for the Chinese. However, the pattern observed from the unequal encounters for Americans seems intriguing. This pattern was shown in Holmes' (1988) study on New Zealand English, but was not consistent with the finding from Wolfson's (1983) study on American English, in which "the great majority of compliments which occurs in interactions between status unequals are given by the person in the higher position" (p.91). As Holmes suggested, the key to unraveling the seeming inconsistency between the two studies, both of which used ethnographic field observations to collect data, may lie in the fact that particular speech situations tend to correlate with particular patterns. Wolfson's study appeared to include data from interactions in institutional settings such as the classroom, in which almost all the compliments would be utterances addressed by the teacher to the student, while much of the data in Holmes' study came from informal interactions between friends (p.498). As mentioned above, only data from informal interactions in ordinary conversation, rather than those in institutional settings, were collected in the present study. This may account for the pattern observed for Americans being similar to that in Holmes' study, rather than Wolfson's.

Social distance is another indispensable parameter for researchers in identifying variation in language use. Speakers with different social status vary in deciding whether or not to compliment, or to what extent they feel motivated and/or comfortable to compliment, depending on how well they know each other. Table 5 shows the distribution of Chinese and American English speakers' compliments by relative distance to addressee. It seems that for both speech groups, the great majority of compliments occur in interactions between interlocutors who are casual friends, co-workers, non-intimates, and acquaintances rather than intimates or total strangers. This finding is consistent with previous studies (e.g., Manes, 1983; Wolfson, 1983, 1989). The χ^2 statistic for Table 5 is 56.99 ($df=2$, $p < .001$). The computation of standardized residual indicates that all three "distance" relationships for both groups are major contributors to this significant χ^2 value. Thus we know that (a) when the recipient is a total stranger or an intimate, there were more Americans than expected who offered compliments, whereas there were fewer Chinese speakers who did so ($R=3.22$ and -4.45 for strangers and $R=2.24$ and -3.11 for intimates respectively), and (b) when the recipient is a friend, there were fewer Americans than expected who offered compliments, whereas there were more Chinese speakers who did so ($R=-2.00$ and 2.78 respectively).

Table 5

Percentage (and raw frequencies) of compliments by relative distance for speaker groups

<i>RELATIVE DISTANCE</i>	<i>Speaker Group</i>			
	<i>Chinese</i>		<i>Americans</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>
Recipient is a stranger or a distant acquaintance	9	2.2	95	12.0
Recipient is a friend or a colleague	369	90.0	565	71.6
Recipient is a close friend or an intimate	32	7.8	129	16.4
Total	410	100	789	100

In both groups, the majority of compliments are exchanged between interlocutors who are neither intimates nor total strangers. However, we see that American English speakers offered significantly more compliments to strangers and intimates than Chinese speakers. The following two reasons may contribute to the observed differences. On the one hand, social distance appears to be seen as an easily surmountable boundary to everyday interactions in American culture, while in Chinese culture, a vertical social class structure is still observed. As a result, the general level of seriousness of face-threatening acts (in this case, offering compliments) tends to be low in American culture, whereas it tends to be high in Chinese culture. We thus see many more Americans pay compliments to total strangers. On the other hand, implicitness is culturally preferred in spoken exchanges for the Chinese so they are often conservative in expressing what they feel about other people. This is not the case

for the Westerners (Ye, 1995). Hence it came as no surprise to find that Americans tended to compliment their intimates more often.

Obviously the relationship between interlocutors has a decided influence on the realization of the complimenting act. In fact, this relationship has much to do with another important variable that researchers in sociolinguistics and speech act studies need to take into account, that is, the context, which concerns when and where the interlocutors perform the observed speech acts. It is often difficult for nonnative speakers to know when to offer which kinds of compliments in which speech situations because this matter is related to “both the role and the relative status of participants in the interaction, as these interact with the topic of the compliment” (Wolfson, 1989, p. 113). In other words, different variables often interact with one another in a unique way within a given speech community to make the context in which a given compliment can be considered appropriate very complex. Therefore one must gain a better understanding of the addresser-addressee relationship from an emic point of view to be able to learn about the cross-cultural differences in terms of when and where a given act can be seen as being properly performed from an etic perspective.

For example, the corpus in this study showed that for Americans, when the compliment topic fell into the performance/ability category, the variables status and distance seemed to make influential differences. Thus in almost all the compliments which occurred between people of unequal status, it was the higher status speaker, someone the addressee already knew, who offered compliments in a non-reciprocal fashion. A similar trend was found in the Chinese compliments. Where the topic was appearance/possession, however, status and degree of acquaintance appeared to have little effect for Americans. It thus came as no surprise to find that upper- and lower-status addressers were nearly equally likely to offer their addressees praise on appearance/possession and that many compliments of this type occurred between total strangers. In contrast, in Chinese unequal-status compliments, it was mostly the higher status person who the addressee already knew who paid compliments non-reciprocally. The interaction of topic and addresser-addressee relationship in American compliments is also reported by Wolfson (1984).

8 **Universality versus culture-specificity**

The conventional use of language has been one of the central concerns of the claim to universality in pragmatics research. For compliments, linguistic conventionality can be realized from the distinction between direct and indirect compliments. As mentioned earlier, the illocutionary force of direct compliments is explicit and unambiguous, whereas indirect compliments involve implicitness and ambiguity. In addition, direct compliments appear to be formulaic in nature and their intended complimentary force can be readily recognized by the person receiving the compliment. In contrast, indirect compliments can be full of variety and require much more inference for the addressee to interpret the meaning. Both types of compliments vary regarding two aspects: (a) the level of complimentary force, that is, illocutionary transparency, and (b) the level of standardization, that is, conventionality of means and form (Blum-Kulka, 1989). Generally, the more standard and formulaic the means and form of the act of complimenting are, the higher their relative level of illocutionary transparency

will be. Based on the fact that direct compliments, unlike indirect compliments, are conventionally associated with some specific sets of positive semantic carriers and syntactic patterns, we can respectively regard direct and indirect compliments as the conventional and non-conventional means as well as the form of complimenting.

For the conventional use of a given speech act, generally the conventions of means and linguistic form combine to signal its illocutionary force, whereas for non-conventional realization, the means and form are, in principle, open ended. Thus its pragmatic force is often heavily context-embedded (Blum-Kulka, 1989). In practice, universality scholars often take a strong interest in the conventional aspect of speech acts and propose their theses based on linguistic conventionality across different cultures and languages (e.g., Bach & Harnish, 1979; Cole & Morgan, 1975; Searle, 1969, 1975). In the present study, the investigator, along the lines of these theorists, focused more on the conventional use of praise—direct compliments. As will be shown, we can look further into the issue of universality versus culture-specificity by discussing the conventional realization of the act of complimenting.

The data in this study indicated that direct and indirect compliments were found in both Chinese and English. This demonstrated the cross-linguistic validity of these two strategies and suggested the universality of the category of conventional form, that is, direct compliments—at least for the two languages studied. However, in addition to sharing some universally pragmatic distinctive features in order to be assigned to the same category of conventionality, what remains to be seen for these direct strategies is (a) if they are cross-linguistically equivalent or (b) if they would retain the potential of their respective illocutionary force in translation (Blum-Kulka, 1989).

To answer these questions, we need to analyze the participants' responses from each of the following two perspectives: (a) the convention of means employed, that is, the propositional content that specifies the type of contextual features referred to; and (b) the convention of form used, that is, the specific wording that specifies the positive semantic carriers and syntactic patterns necessary to realize a given act (Blum-Kulka, 1989; Searle, 1975). As far as the convention of means for performing specific speech acts is concerned, Searle's (1975) formulations on how we can indirectly perform directives such as requests (p. 72), and commissives such as offers (pp. 81–82), are the most widely cited and discussed. However, it seems that the literature to date has not specifically centered on the speech act of compliments. Based on American English compliments collected in this and other studies (e.g., Knapp, Hopper, & Bell, 1984; Manes & Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson, 1989), the investigator, following Searle's method of formulating the performance of directives and commissives, will propose a succinct, generalized list of conventional means for the act of complimenting in American English and then discuss whether this act in Chinese can fit into the proposed list.

There are three general groups of utterances that can be employed to pay direct compliments in American English (Yu, 1999a):

Group 1: Utterances referring to some aspect of the addressee that is deemed as praiseworthy by the speaker.

Typical examples of Group 1 are as follows:

- (22) “*Your blouse is very beautiful.*”
- (23) “*What an adorable kitty you have!*”
- (24) “*You have a great smile.*”
- (25) “*You’re looking good.*”
- (26) “*You’re a doll.*”

Group 2: Utterances referring to the addressee who has done something which is considered praiseworthy by the speaker.

Typical of examples of Group 2 are as follows:

- (27) “*You really did a good job.*”
- (28) “*You sang very well.*”
- (29) “*You handled that situation really well.*”

Group 3: Utterances referring to the speaker who shows a positive feeling toward some aspect of the addressee.

Typical examples of Group 3 are as follows:

- (30) “*I enjoyed your presentation.*”
- (31) “*Boy! I like your skirt.*”
- (32) “*I wish I could manage my work like you do.*”

These three generalizations also characterize native Chinese speaker’s direct compliments, as can be seen in this and other studies (e.g., Ye, 1995), suggesting the universality of the categories of direct and indirect compliments. Such universality claims must, however, be evaluated with many more languages. Searle’s (1975) universal formulations are a case in point. Blum-Kulka et al.’s (1989) study shows that although certain of his generalizations for indirect requesting hold for all four languages studied (i.e., English, French, Hebrew, and Spanish), others only hold for some. For example, in all these languages, Searle’s claim that one can issue a request by querying the preparatory condition (e.g., “*Could you do me a favor?*”) is indeed confirmed, but his argument that one can also make a request by stating that the preparatory condition holds (e.g., “*You can leave*”) does not hold true for Hebrew (nor Chinese) (Yu, 1999b). Thus, Blum-Kulka (1989) believes that Searle’s universality generalizations “are more biased by the English examples analyzed than warranted by the theory” (p.64).

Indeed, while Chinese and English share the three basic types of means proposed above, we can nevertheless observe some cross-cultural differences. Take for example the third group of utterances, that is, those referring to the situations in which the speaker shows a positive feeling toward some aspect of the addressee. Although “*I like this shirt*” and “我喜歡這襯衫 *Wǒ xǐhuān zhè chènshān*” (“*I like this shirt*”) are equivalent in means, they are not equivalent in their conventionalization of complimentary force because the word “喜歡 *xǐhuān*” (“*like*”) in Chinese is semantically stronger than “*like*” in English. In other words, the complimentary force of this word in Chinese is weaker than its counterpart in English. Therefore, this Chinese word,

due to its stronger semantic force, is employed in indirect requesting more often than in complimenting; in contrast, “*like*” in English, due to its stronger complimentary force, is used in complimenting much more frequently than in requesting.

Another cross-cultural difference can be found in the different realizations of the means. Again, the third group of means can serve as a case in point. In English, the syntactic pattern “I-love-NP” is often used by the speaker to express his or her positive feeling toward the addressee. However, Chinese people usually do not employ this kind of syntactic frame in their compliments. The fact that this syntactic pattern and the positive semantic carrier, “愛 *ai*” (*love*), are not generally used in complimenting by the Chinese suggests that a true pragmatic equivalence in the convention of form between Chinese English does not actually exist. The universality of this aspect is, thus, not supported by empirical evidence.

The discussion above indicates that cross-cultural differences exist in many regards. In fact, some theorists, while arguing for a universalistic stand in speech act performance, do note that there are cross-linguistic differences (e.g., Fraser, 1985; Searle, 1975). For example, in discussing the universality of conventional indirectness, Searle (1975) acknowledges that “the standard forms from one language will not always maintain their indirect speech act potential when translated from one language to another” (p. 76). Nevertheless, Searle and his followers consider these differences unimportant based on the fact that the standard forms used with higher frequencies to perform a given act share a set of convention of means across different languages. Such differences are not thought to be a challenge to the basic framework of the universality program (Blum-Kulka, 1989; Fraser, Rintell, & Walters, 1980). Although there are similarities between the means and form employed by both groups in this study, the lack of cross-linguistic equivalence between specific realizations of direct complimenting is crucial because it is often a source of serious cross-cultural miscommunication. Re-considering the “I-love-NP” pattern, we find that English speakers use it very often in their compliments, but the literal translation in Chinese would generally be interpreted either as an inappropriate gesture or as an odd remark.

9 Conclusions

The present study has shown that research on speech acts can yield crucial socio-linguistic information of great value for cross-cultural understanding. Information of this sort is an important facet of communicative competence which nonnative speakers have to attend to because knowing when and how to perform a particular speech act has to do with the inherent politeness connotation in a given speech community (Holmes, 1989; Hymes, 1974; Wolfson, 1989; Yu, 1999a). More important, this information can help second language speakers learn how misunderstandings or even offense in intercultural communication may occur.

We have seen from the above discussion that cultural norms play a crucial role in compliment behavior. On the one hand, native Chinese speakers might wonder if American English speakers actually mean what they say in their frequent complimenting because Chinese compliments are usually an expression of genuine admiration, rather than an offer of solidarity. On the other hand, native English

speakers may deem Chinese silence or indirect utterances as inappropriate or even rude in situations where paying direct, straightforward compliments could be regarded as socio-culturally proper. This is because American compliments are typically used as an offer of solidarity, rather than an expression of genuine admiration. Therefore, the influence of cultural norms can never be ignored because an acceptable behavior in one culture may be very inappropriate in another.

This study was designed to observe a common, daily act in light of substantial differences in cultural norms between Chinese and American societies. It is hoped that the scope of hitherto mostly English-centric speech act research can be widened by focusing on a less studied group. The findings have indicated that in terms of strategies, frequency, function, topics, and structural features, Chinese compliment behavior is indeed significantly different from that of Americans. As suggested, cultural norms play an important role in the observed differences. Accordingly, much research on other cultures which, like Chinese, have a very different way of thinking from that of the West, needs to be carried out in order to help us better understand a given speech group's behavior in cross-cultural communication.

One major contribution of this line of study is that by examining speech acts in a cultural context, we are able to analyze cross-cultural patterns of social behavior. This provides insight into the forms and rules of language use and the dynamics of socio-cultural interaction. This insight can be of great help to foreign language learners because nonnative speakers need to understand how such interactions operate in the target language society in order to acquire sociolinguistic competence (Wolfson, 1989). The present paper contributes to the cross-cultural evidence for evaluating the universality of speech acts through an in-depth analysis of compliment behavior across both Chinese and American societies. Studies focusing on this aspect of language use can yield interesting socio-cultural information of considerable value for cross-cultural understanding and communication.

Last, it should be noted that the crux of this paper deals primarily with cross-cultural differences in giving compliments. Its focus was restricted to the influence of cultural norms and did not include the possible influence of gender. Therefore, whereas admittedly gender is an important factor in complimenting (e.g., Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1988; Wolfson, 1989), the analyses reported in this study were not specifically geared toward the influence of this variable. The difference in language use between women and men has long been an issue of interest in the study of language. One focus for future research, therefore, may be the analysis of gender differences in compliment behavior for different speaker groups and how this factor interacts with topic and addresser-addressee relationships (i.e., status and distance) to affect the complimenting act in cross-cultural communication. Only by this type of in-depth analysis can researchers gain a better understanding and present a fuller picture of this speech act.

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