

A Sociopragmatic Analysis of Compliment Responses in Persian

Hamid Allami

Assistant Professor, Yazd University

hallami@yazduni.ac.ir

Maryam Montazeri

M.A., Yazd University

m.montazeri89@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper reports on the findings of a study designed to investigate the cultural and social complexities governing the compliment responses among the Persian native speakers. 200 Persian respondents took a 24-item Discourse Completion Task (DCT) while 15 native field workers were also set responsible for collecting the examples of complimenting exchanges they either observed or participated in. The results suggested a significant effect for the treated intervening social variables of age, gender, educational background, social distance, and relative power as well as compliment topics in determining the type of compliment response. The responses were further suggestive of the contextual effects of the three systems of hierarchical, solidarity and deferential as well as a newly coined system as kinship system.

Keywords: Speech Acts, Compliment Responses, Sociocultural Variables, Politeness, Discourse Completion Tasks

Received: January 2011; Accepted: December 2011

1. Introduction

A detailed investigation of the speakers' underlying pragmatic knowledge requires an operational definition of the key notions representing this knowledge domain. To this end, speech acts appear to be of great help in that they contribute significantly to construction of every day communication. The performance of speech acts entails sociocultural as well as sociolinguistic knowledge. The former refers to the ability to select appropriate speech act strategies to suit social variables of age, gender of the speaker, social class and status in interactions. Yet, the sociolinguistic one conforms to the skill at selection of appropriate linguistic forms, registers or levels of formality to express speech acts.

The speech event of complimenting is discussed to be generally structured as an adjacency pair (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973 as cited in Herbert, 1990, p. 201) in a way that A compliments B, B responds/acknowledges what A has said. As a multifunctional speech act, complimenting can show gratitude, open or close a conversation, or soften a criticism or request (Wolfson, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Billmyer, 1990). Despite their simplicity at the first glance, compliments can function both as positive politeness devices, as well as face-threatening acts, hence their complexity. In some cultures, complimenting is applied in a way to make people feel good; meanwhile, in the others complimenting might connote the speaker's willingness towards the addressee's belonging, being reacted against via the recipient's offering the object of compliment and possibly leading to embarrassment to a speaker from a different culture. Therefore, a comprehensive study of such speech acts in certain communities will be helpful in relation to the discovery of their related social norms.

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Although a few studies have been conducted on Persian compliments (Boori, 1994; Yamini, 1996; Sharifian, 2008; Heidari, Rezazadeh, & Eslami Rasekh, 2009), a group of determining factors has been set on the outside. One rarely attended to aspect of these compliments is politeness. It is defined as a constraint on linguistic expressions as a variable of *face* that is emotionally recognized (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Three important factors of solidarity (D), power relation (P), and the weightiness of the imposition (R) contribute to this public self-image.

These factors, along with compliment topics and the participants' age, gender and educational background were attended to in an attempt to provide a clear picture of Iranian speakers' social and cultural values governing their compliments and compliment responses. Although pragmatic knowledge of Iranian speakers is well investigated in other speech acts, little empirical research, if any, has been conducted in this area with a focus on the exclusive effect of such investigated controlling variables as social distance, relative power and educational background.

This study is, hence, developed toward answering the following research questions:

- 1) What are the major compliment response types in Persian?
- 2) Do topic, social distance and relative power play any role in determining a specific type of compliment response?
- 3) Do gender, age and educational background significantly affect the type of compliment response?

2. Background

Politeness is one of the culturally defined concepts in need of close investigation in the course of interactive communications. Corresponding to

the concepts of negative and positive face, negative politeness is founded upon deference, i.e., use of indirect speech acts to respect a person's right to act freely. On the other side, positive politeness is defined as seeking a positive relationship between the interlocutors with respect to one's needs to be liked and understood. In Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms, complimenting is a kind of positive politeness strategy which addresses the hearer's positive face with the complimenter noticing the complimentee's interests and needs. They further state that compliments, in a darker side, can be perceived as face-threatening acts when the complimenter is understood to envy the addressee or would like to obtain something belonging to the addressee.

Leech (1983) proposed his politeness principle with reference to conversational maxims in terms of a relationship between self (S) and other (H). He listed six politeness maxims to be in action in conversations: *Tact maxim* (in impositives and commissives), *Generosity maxim* (in impositives and commissives), *Approbation maxim* (in expressives and assertives), *Modesty maxim* (in expressives and assertives), *Agreement maxim* (in assertives), and *Sympathy maxim* (in assertives).

In an attempt to suggest a comprehensive account of effective sociological variables, Scollon and Scollon (2001) introduced a collectivist concept of 'self' which is connected to family or group membership in Asian cultures as opposed to their Western individualistic counterparts. Independence and involvement were also defined as two sides of face accounting for the desire to be considered as a normal member of the society and freedom from the imposition of others, respectively. They maintained that three politeness systems of deference, solidarity and hierarchy are developed through variation in power and distance originated, in turn, from differences in age, gender, wealth, education, physical strength and any other factors perceived in human

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life. The current sociological factors of 'power' (P), 'distance' (D) and 'imposition' (R), as noted by Brown and Levinson (1987) were hereafter accounted for by "hierarchy", "deference", and "solidarity", respectively.

The inequalities in the social status and distance of the interlocutors, and hence the underlying social patterns, lead to different reactions to the compliments through various compliment response types. In hierarchical politeness system (+P, +D) the participants respect each other due to the difference in their social status (superordinate, subordinate). The participants were equal or near equals in deference politeness system (-P, +D), yet treated each other at a distance with a range of independence politeness strategies out of respect for each other. Concerning the third case, there is no assumed power or distance difference in solidarity politeness system (-P, -D).

One of major areas of concern in the field of pragmatic research is the lack of comprehensive sociolinguistic studies by the native speakers of particular languages. In contributing to such growing body of knowledge in Persian, Boori (1994), based on a corpus of 838 compliment events, suggested that in response to compliments, Persian speakers employed the following 18 response types: (1) Appreciation token, (2) Appreciation token plus a politeness formula, (3) Appreciation token plus comment/reassignment, (4) Non-verbal acceptance, (5) Comment acceptance, (6) Comment, (7) Offering, (8) Praise upgrade, (9) Comment history, (10) Reassignment, (11) Return, (12) Entreaty, (13) Scale down, (14) Question, (15) Disagreement, (16) Qualification, (17) No acknowledgement and (18) Request interpretation. The general tendency was to agree with the addressor through Return, Offering, and Comment as the most frequent response types (accounting for 43% of all the responses).

In an ethnographic gender-based investigation of Persian compliment patterns, Yamini (1996) found that in line with American findings, women gave

and received more compliments either to or from other women. Besides, a bulk of compliments, mostly on possession, was exchanged between equal statuses, friends, intimates, relatives and colleagues rather than strangers. In terms of compliment responses, females showed signs of politeness in using the agreement pattern of Appreciation Token plus Politeness Formula more than men. Being less assertive than men, women used the Question strategy more often than men for non-agreement. This study, on the other hand, revealed the recipients' preference for Offering, Appreciation token and Appreciation token plus a politeness formula which accounted for 57.17% of the compliment responses.

Sharifian (2008), in a study of the relationship between speech acts and cultural values, examined the speech act of complimenting from Persian speakers in their first and second (English) languages. Based on the findings, the linguistic nature of pragmatic strategies might be affected by the cultural schemas of a speech community. In this regard, the effect of the cultural schema of *adab* (politeness) in giving a compliment and *shekasteh-nafsi* (modesty) in encouraging individuals to refrain from any thought or behavior that implies an 'egotistic essence' was elucidated. The modesty schema, therefore, includes the tendency to negate or scale down compliments, downplay a talent, skill, or possession, reassign a compliment to a third party, such as parents or God, or return the compliment to the speaker.

In a more recent investigation of compliment responses, Heidari et al. (2009) reported on gender-based compliment responses among Iranian teenage EFL learners. Based on the results of a written DCT which controlled for topics of appearance, character, ability and possession, females recorded a higher use of evasion and rejection than acceptance strategies. Indeed, females showed a similar, if not higher, preference for implicit responses compared to

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explicit ones. Yet, for males explicit compliment responses appeared more desirable. This tendency to avoid self-praise, indeed, is accounted for by the females' modesty and subordination in Iranian society.

3. The Study

The present study was developed with the aim of discovering the underlying principles which govern the type of compliment responses by Persian native speakers. To this end, the data was collected through two complementary methods of observation and Discourse Completion Task (DCT). The compatibility of these two methods was then investigated through an assessment of the similar frequent response patterns with respect to the controlling variables in separate corpora. Following the proof for such a supplementary relation, the data were added up to represent one major corpus. It was then analyzed with respect to two types of response categories as well as frequency distribution across gender, age and educational background. It was further attempted to account for the observed patterns through different tenets of the politeness issue.

3.1. Participants

On the DCT side, the scenarios were first derived from a simple preliminary questionnaire administered to a supportive group of 15 Persian native speakers who were given a sheet of paper illustrating a compliment and were asked to note down the most recent compliments they had made, received or witnessed. Then, the most frequent topics were selected from a corpus of about one hundred compliments around which 24 scenarios were developed.

Following the development of the main Persian DCT, 200 Persian native speakers were selected from both genders (100 males and 100 females), different age groups (36 under 20, 75 between 21-30, 49 between 31-40, and 40 above 40) and different educational backgrounds (76 diploma, 55 university student and 69 university graduated).

Besides, on the ethnographic side, a group of 15 female field workers (all MA students of Yazd University from different areas of Iran) were asked to fill a questionnaire and note down a sequence of at least ten compliment exchanges from every day interactions, without selection or censorship. The observers were also asked to be careful enough to take a clear note of the context, sex, relation, age group as well as educational background of the interlocutors. Although the field workers' female dominance may bring about a potential source of bias, the results still remained suggestive in the field.

3.2. Instruments

This study was developed through a triangulation of data collection methods in a way that necessary quantitative data was derived from both DCTs and field observation.

The DCT started by asking demographic questions regarding gender, age and educational background of the participants. 24 items were developed around the earlier recognized most frequent compliment topics of possession, skill/ performance, appearance, and personality traits as well as controlling social distance (either close or distant) and relative power (equal, low or high). A close look at the questions distributed across the examined factors is presented in Table 1. The participants were then asked to reply having the option of giving 'no response' or 'smiling' besides any other verbal account, to their preference.

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Table 1. Classification of DCT Items Based on Compliment Topics, Social Distance and Relative Power

Topic	Status of Receiver	Social Distance	DCT Item	Topic	Status of Receiver	Social Distance	DCT Item		
Possession	Equal	Close	#19	Appearance	Equal	Close	#20		
		Distant	#17			Distant	#14		
	Low	Close	#23		Low	Close	#22		
		Distant	#15			Distant	#16		
	High	Close	#21		High	Close	#24		
		Distant	#13			Distant	#18		
	Skill/ Performance	Equal	Close		#7	Personality Trait	Equal	Close	#8
			Distant		#1			Distant	#2
Low		Close	#11	Low	Close		#12		
		Distant	#3		Distant		#4		
High		Close	#9	High	Close		#10		
		Distant	#5		Distant		#6		

The next stage of data collection was carried out through a field observation scheme assigned to the observers to keep a detailed record of compliment exchanges. The resulting corpus of compliments included exchanges between dyads such as professors and students, employers and employees, neighbors, friends, co-workers, and family members. Due to the interest of the study, the field workers kept records of the actual sequences (compliments and the succeeding responses), along with the situation, gender, approximate age, and the educational level of the interlocutors as well as the relationship between them. The required quantitative data concerning the main social variables of the research were then derived from these interpersonal complimentary accounts.

3.3. Procedure

The Persian DCT was administered in person to 200 native Persian speakers who were given adequate time to complete the questionnaires at their own pace. The reason behind was the fact that due to the high number of questions (24 items) seeking spontaneity in providing responses would possibly touch the borders of affective factors such as stress leading to unreliable records. Throughout the process of data analysis, the ambiguous ritual response patterns such as *qabele šoma ro nædare* (it is not worthy of you) (as either offer or scale down) or *šoma lotf darid* (that's so kind of you) (as either return or scale down), some of the participants were interviewed individually on their feelings and intentions underlying their responses so that the researchers would specify the appropriate strategy for the suggested responses with regard to compliment topics as well as solidarity and the rate of imposition between the interlocutors. This latter point is, indeed, grounded on the fact that sometimes a single response might serve more than one function in the course of an interactional exchange (Sharifian, 2008).

In the next stage, the findings of the field workers tended to lend themselves to the basic findings of the former stage. Here, the participants' detailed records of compliment exchanges elaborated more on the nature of this speech act among Iranians. In this part, the female dominance of the field workers might have introduced a bias in the results. Since a proportion (10%) of the recorded compliments was addressed to the researchers, the number of female recipients is probably higher than it would be if the data had been collected by two groups of male and female field workers equal in number. Pertaining to this "sex-related confound" (Golato, 2005, p. 84), the compliments with informants as complimenters or recipients were omitted, yet

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the compliments between females were again more frequent than compliments between males (8% vs. 67.5%).

Finally, the results suggested by these two corpora (under one comprehensive corpus) revealed certain Persian cultural norms and widely accepted attitudes or even rituals governing Persian speakers' complimentary behavior.

Importantly, during the coding of the compliments and compliment responses, a sample of each corpus was examined by two other raters (one male and one female) to achieve inter-rater reliability. For each part, 20% of the data (40 Persian questionnaires, 8 English, and 30 compliment exchanges recorded by field workers) was randomly exposed to recoding by a second and third rater as suggested by Cohen (1960, as cited in Yu, 2005, p. 98). In this way, another sex-based confound would be remedied for through coming up with an average reliability rate of these two opposite-sex coders.

3.4. Results

The corpus of compliment responses was coded following the modified versions of two classification schemes suggested by Boori (1994), whose categories are derived from Herbert (1990), and Chiang and Pochtrager (1993). In the cases of compound responses with more than one category, the perceived intention of the speaker was relied on in assigning specific categories to them. For example, note the following response: *xeyli mæmnun, lotf darid* (Thank you very much, its very kind of you). This was coded as return, although the first part of the response would have been coded as appreciation token had it occurred in isolation. Similarly, *motešækeræm* (thank you), with an utterance like *?ænjam væzife ?æst* (it's my duty) was categorized as scale down while it would be coded as appreciation token in isolation. Utterances which

did not fit these former categories were categorized according to the nature of data such as *nuše jan* (bon appetite) which, as a newly born category in the present corpus, was often used in response to compliments on one's skill in cooking. Furthermore, following Herbert (1990), request interpretation category is not treated as compliment responses by themselves since the complimenter's assertion has not been perceived as compliment on the part of the addressee (*mixay bedæmeš be to?* (you wanna borrow this one?)).

Needless to say, in the case of some apparently multiple-function responses such as *qabele šoma ra nædareh* (It is of no value to you!) functioning as either offer or scale down, the respondents were individually consulted to determine their intention as a guide toward the appropriate coding of responses. Thus, at the micro level of analysis, with a recorded average inter-rater reliability of 0.89, the compliment responses were categorized into 17 patterns as follows:

1. *Appreciation token*; a verbal acceptance of a compliment that is not tied to the specific semantics of the stimulus like *mersi* (thanks) or *xeyli mæmnun* (thank you very much).
2. *Politeness Formula*; the acceptance is somehow tied to the semantics of the stimulus like *nuše jan* (bon appetite).
3. *Comment Acceptance*; the addressee accepts the complimentary force and offers a relevant comment on the complimented topic like *xodæm hæm ?æz ?an xošæm mi ?ayæd* (I myself like it, too!)
4. *Non-verbal Acceptance/Smiling*.
5. *Comment*; the receiver offers a comment on the topic like *xodæm ?entexabeš kærdæm* (I myself have selected it).
6. *Offering*; the addressee offers the complimented object to the speaker like *qabeli nædare* (It is of no value to you!)

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7. *Praise Upgrade*; the addressee accepts the compliment and asserts that the compliment force is vivid and it has always been true of her/him like *hæmiše xoštīp budæm!* (I have always been handsome!)
8. *Comment History*; the addressee offers a comment on the complimented object which shifts the force from the addressee with a reference to the past like *?æz jonub bærayæm ?aværdænd* (they've brought it for me from the South).
9. *Reassignment*; the addressee agrees with the compliment assertion, but the complimentary force is transferred to some third person as in *kado-ye xahæræme* (my sister gave it to me as a gift) or to the object itself like *xodru hæstænd* (they are wild flowers).
10. *Return*; the praise is returned to the first speaker as in *xubi ?æz xodetune* (it's you who are good), *lotf darid* (It's kind of you!), or *çešmatun qæšxæng mi-bine* (your eyes see it beautifully).
11. *Entreaty*; the addressee apparently asks the speaker not to compliment her/him, since s/he thinks s/he does not deserve it as *xahes' mikonæm* (I entreat you).
12. *Scale Down*; the addressee disagrees with the compliment, pointing to some flaw in the object *jenseš xub nist, ræng-o-ru dare* (it is not of good quality, it looks good).
13. *Question*; the addressee questions the sincerity or the appropriateness of the compliment as *jeddæn?* (Do you mean it?)
14. *Disagreement*; the addressee asserts that the complimented object is not worthy of praise like *næ baba* (not at all!) or *šuxi mi-koni* (you must be joking!)
15. *Qualification*; the addressee qualifies the original assertion like *...væli geran næxæridæm* (...but I didn't pay that much!)

16. *No acknowledgement*; the addressee gives no response and remains silent.
17. *Request Interpretation*; the addressee, consciously or not, interprets the compliment as a request rather than a simple compliment as in *bedæmeš be to?* (Do I give it to you?)

In the next stage of data analysis, each compliment response was placed in one of Chiang and Pochtrager's (1993) categories: acceptance, positive elaboration, neutral elaboration, negative elaboration, and denial. However, based on the nature of data, two more groups as 'Smiling' and 'No Response' were added in reaction to those responses which did not fit their schema. A description of this modified version of classification appears as follows:

1. *Acceptance*; refers to ritual 'thank you', i.e., agreement with no further elaboration, e.g., *mæmnun* (Thank you), *mæn hæm hæmintowr fekr mi-konæm* (I think so, too) or *xošhalæm ke ?æz ?an xošet ?umade* (I'm glad you like it.)
2. *Positive Elaboration*; includes account, history, positive comment, efforts, return of compliment, such as *qermez rang-e mored-e ?ælaqe-ye mæn-e* (Red is my favorite color) or *sæxt ruš kar kærdæm* (I worked hard on the project).
3. *Neutral Elaboration*; entails seeking confirmation or shift of credit as in *væqæ?æn* (Really?), *?intowr fekr mi-koni* (Do you think so?) or *sæliqe-ye xahæræme* (It's my sister's choice!).
4. *Negative Elaboration*; concerns downgrading, duty or responsibility or need for improvement as *hænuz jaye pišræft dare* (I still need a lot of improvement) or *?ænjam vazife ?æst* (It's my responsibility.)
5. *Denial*; suggests mere No or a negative opinion as *næ ?æslæn* (No, not all) or *çændan hæm ?ali nist* (That's not great.)

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6. *Smiling (laughing)*; enfold a non-verbal expression of embarrassment without any overt verbal response.
7. *No Response*; the addressee suggests no indication of having heard the compliment.

With an average rater consistency of 0.93, the following divisions were attended to in attribution of the responses to new major classes:

1. *Acceptance*: Appreciation token and Comment Acceptance.
2. *Positive Elaboration*: Politeness Formula, Comment, Offering, Praise Upgrade, Comment History, Return, and Entreaty.
3. *Neutral Elaboration*: Question, Reassignment.
4. *Negative Elaboration*: Scale Down, Qualification.
5. *Denial*: Disagreement.
6. *Smiling (laughing)*: Non-verbal acceptance/ Smiling.
7. *No Response*: No acknowledgement.

4. Persian Compliment Responses

Based on a corpus of 4950 compliment responses (4800 from the Persian DCT and 150 observed cases) this section deals with the distribution of responses with respect to compliment topics, social distance and power of the interlocutors, and the gender, age and educational background of the recipients from two perspectives: micro and macro level analysis.

4.1. A Micro-Level Account

At first, a general picture of the range and frequency of all the responses is drawn in the following table.

Table 2. Frequencies of Compliment Response Types at Micro Level Analysis

Response Type	F*	%**	Response Type	F	%
Comment	1234	24.9	Question	161	3.3
Reassignment	866	17.5	Scale down	146	2.9
Appreciation token	597	12.1	Praise upgrade	128	2.6
Offering	367	7.4	Request interpretation	92	1.9
No acknowledgement	310	6.3	Politeness formula	60	1.2
Comment acceptance	249	5.0	Entreaty	60	1.2
Disagreement	245	4.9	Qualification	49	1.0
Return	188	3.8	Non-verbal acceptance/ Smiling	34	0.7
Comment history	164	3.3	Total	4950	100.0

* Frequency; ** Percentage

Remarkably, the first three patterns accounted for more than half of the responses (about 54.5%) with comments taking the lead). Overall, Iranians did not show a tendency toward leaving the compliments unanswered. Rather, they give some comments on the complimented topics with a simultaneous acceptance implication. Some examples are *axær mæn mædræke xošnevisi daræm* (well, I have a calligraphy certificate) in response to a compliment on good handwriting, *çon be ?ædæbiyat ?ælaqe daræm* (it's due to my interest in literature) in response to a compliment on a well-written article or *?adæm næbayæd delbæsteye donya bašæd* (one should not grow fond of the world) given by one complimented on his feeling of deep contentment. Reassignment appeared as the second common response type in an attempt to agree with the compliment assertion, yet to make a third person, God or even the object itself responsible for that specific condition. For instance, *kare xanomæm bude* (it has been my wife's cooking), *lotfe xodast* (it's because of God's beneficence), or *qæza xodæš xošmæze ?æst* (the food is delicious by itself) were the cases among the recorded responses. Coming to the next frequent category, a simple

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mæmnun, *motešækeræm* or *mersi* (thanks, thank you) worked either singly or as an inseparable primary part of the other response utterances.

Interestingly, the investigated factors of social distance, relative power, gender, age, and educational background along with the compliment topics proved to be significantly effective ($p < 0.05$) in determining the type of response.

The compliments on the people's belongings were mainly responded with offering the same object to the speaker (25.7%) through utterances like *qabele šoma ro nædare* (it's not worthy of you) or *male šoma* (take it). Commenting on the topic (18%) was the next frequent type of response in this category. Reassignment (21.8%) and comment (20.6%) were major response patterns in dealing with compliments on skill or good performance. The Persian respondents basically reassigned their success to the treated object like the flowers in *?in ha xodru hæstænd* (they are wild flowers), parents, teachers, God, a family member, or another associate. A decisive (thanks)-appreciation token- or 'no, that's not the case'-disagreement- were less frequently occurring response types (14% and 10.3%) coming after the former two. In response to compliments on gesture, shape and overall appearance the recipients mainly tried to accept their companion's attitude with a comment on the issue (29%) as in *?in ræng ra ta be hal næpušide?æm* (I have not tried this color till now). Later frequent strategies were to reassign the force to the coach, salesperson or hairdresser (17.6%) and simple acceptance via 'thanks' or similar patterns (15.6%). Finally, comments (32.5%) had the highest use in response to compliments on personality traits like patience and contentment.

Reassignment (21.6%) and return (10.2) were the next categories. In the return category responses like *?in ra ?æz šoma yad gerefte?æm* (I have learned

it from you) or *šoma lotf darid* (its very kind of you) were seen in which the complimentary force is attributed to the speaker.

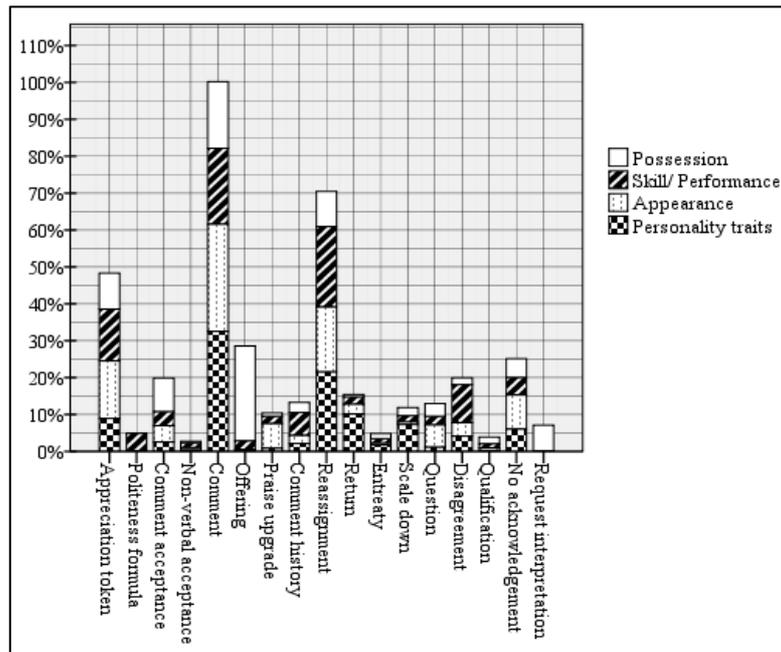


Figure 1. Distribution of Compliment Responses across Compliment Topics

The relation between the interlocutors is highly sensitive to distance and power. People are of either close or distant relation to each other in social interactions. They may be close friends, family members or classmates on the one hand or colleagues, neighbors or strangers on the other. Furthermore, they may be of equal status toward each other as friends, classmates or colleagues, low status for the recipient as a worker, student or the child, or high status as a boss or older sibling (See Figure 2 below).

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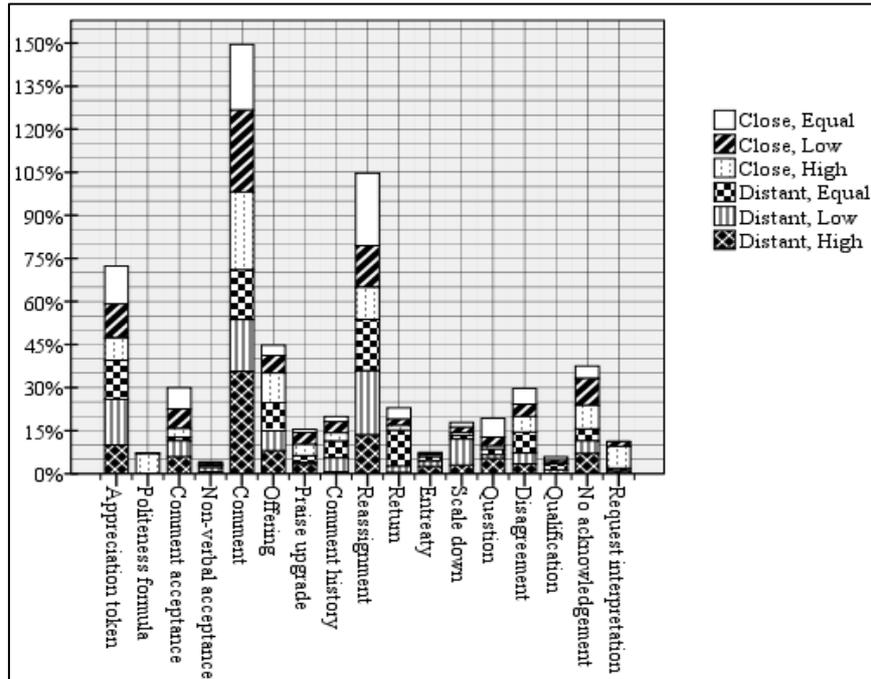


Figure 2. Distribution of Compliment Responses across Social Distance and Relative Power

Three patterns of reassignment, comment and appreciation token were the integral parts of response domain taking more than 45% of the responses in each of the above relations. People used politeness formulas merely in relation to a family member or a friend not always but merely in the situations where their role appears as an authority (6.9%). The recipients tended to use comment acceptance with an inferior irrespective of the distance (12.4%) as well as in an equal status for close (7.4%) and higher position for distant relations (5.9%). In close relations, the complimented object was often offered to the speaker whenever the recipient was in a higher position (10.3%), whereas in distant relations they offered the object in either equal (9.8%) or high (8%) positions. This suggested the clarity of the compliment assertion

(praise upgrade) mainly in a lower (4.1%) and higher (3.2%) position in close and distant relations, respectively. A reference to the past on the complimented topic was more usual in distant relations among either equal (5.8%) or low (4.8%) status complimentees. The compliment force was basically returned to the speaker in distant relations with equal status participants (12.4%). The recipients used to downgrade the compliment force through a reference to some inadequacies in distant relations and their low status (9.1%). Questioning the truth and disagreement with the compliments were common in close relations and equal positions (6.6% and 5.4% respectively) as well as distant and high-status relations (5.2% and 3.4%, respectively). The low and high position in close relations as well as the higher in the distant led to silence (9.4%, 8.3 % and 7%, in turn). Finally, it is basically in close and higher status relations where the hearers treated the compliment as a request (7.7%).

As Figure 3 shows, men took precedence over females in the use of comment (27% vs. 22.9%), reassignment (18% vs. 17%), offer (8.1% vs. 6.7%), and disagreement (5.2% vs. 4.7%) whereas they lagged behind the latter in other response types such as appreciation token (9.8% vs. 14.2%), question (2.1% vs. 4.4%) and comment acceptance (4.5% vs. 5.6%). The other response types behaved similarly across the gender accounting for a sort of shared sense toward compliments.

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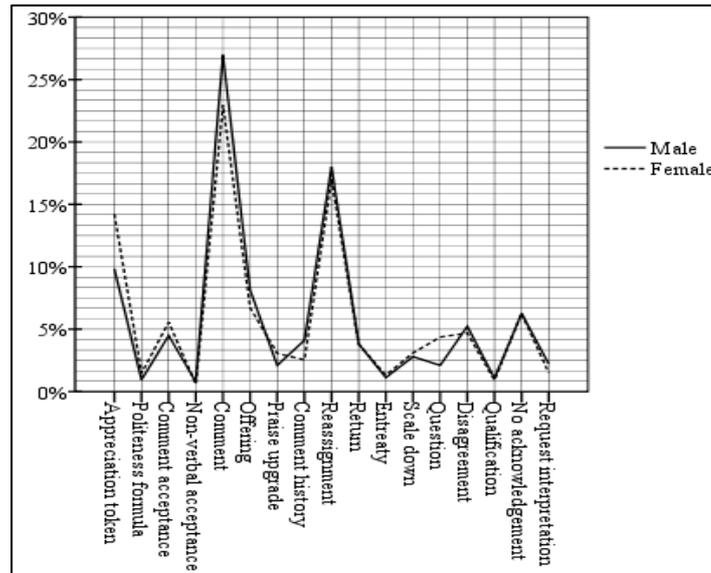


Figure 3. Distribution of Compliment Responses across Gender

Different age ranges also affected the type of response among the participants. Interestingly, the between-21-and-30 young participants who were still experiencing the world under different roles in family, university and working groups, significantly made use of all the response types. Figure 4 shows that their line of response frequency did not touch the axis while the other groups' was on the verge of it. The variety of contexts led them to a varied use of responses while the limitation on the others restricted such diversity. Although the patterns of comment, reassignment, appreciation token, and offer were common among these different age groups, the 31-40 group had a bigger share in comment (30.9%), the under-20 in reassignment (18.1%) and offer (8.5%) and the above-40 in appreciation token (14.5%).

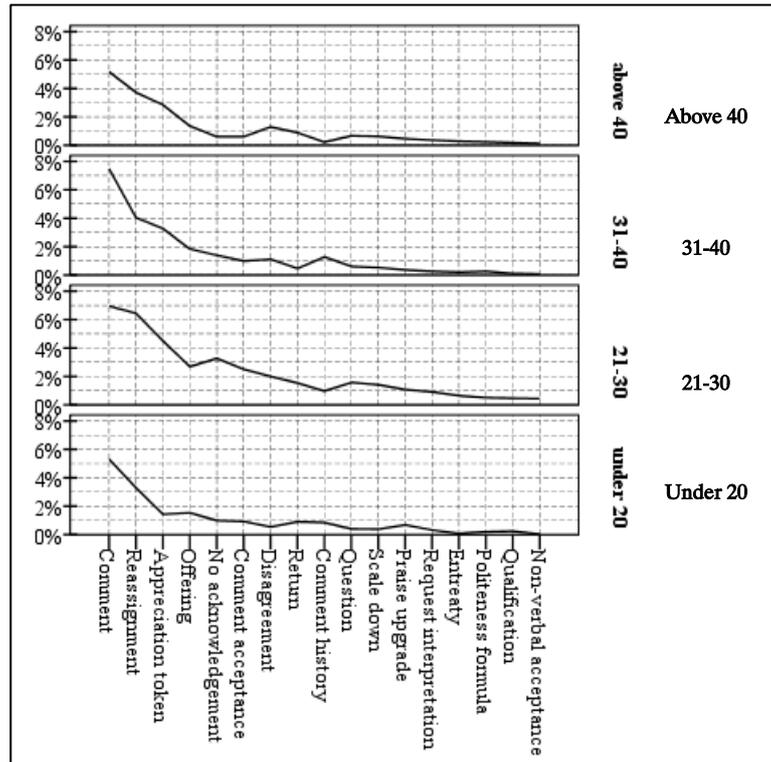


Figure 4. Distribution of Compliment Responses across Age Groups

Finally, the effect of education level was examined in determining the preferred type of response. Keeping the common response types aside, the lower educated people found offering the complimented object as more appropriate to their level (8.7%), whereas the graduated tended to disagree with the speaker (7.1%). Meanwhile, the students resorted to silence or made an irrelevant contribution to response (7.7%). This latter might also suggest a sense of ambivalence in providing an appropriate response. This sense disappeared as a result of graduation and active role in the society as it can be seen in relation to the graduates. The following figure makes these suggestions more concrete.

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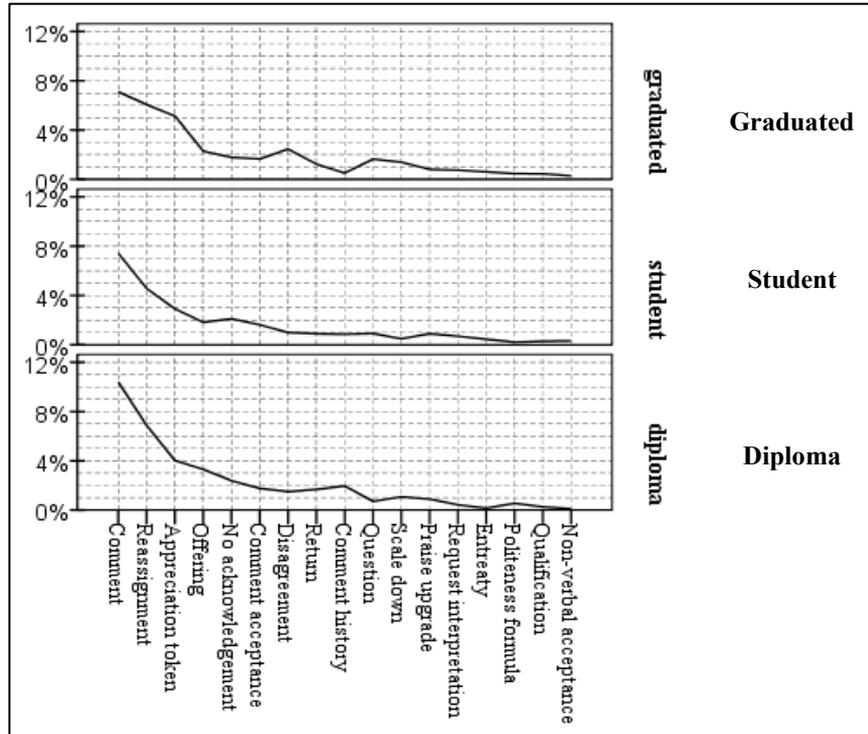


Figure 5. Distribution of Compliment Responses across Education Levels

In the next part the compliment responses will be examined from a macro level point of view to pave the ground for a suggestion of the underlying cultural norms affecting the response types. Meanwhile, the role of social affective factors certainly will not remain unnoticed.

4.2. A Macro-Level Account

In this part of the study, the compliment response patterns will be scrutinized following the modified version of the classification by Chiang and Pochtrager (1993). As it was pointed out, request interpretation was the result of the hearer's misconception of the compliment; hence it cannot be ranked with the

other response types in their attribution to a new taxonomy. To prevent a manual omission of these response types that undoubtedly led to a reduction in the corpus, 92 request interpretation responses were treated as system missing to solve the dilemma of existence and ineffectiveness. Henceforth, the following range of responses was concluded:

Table 3. Frequencies of Compliment Response Types at Macro Level Analysis

Response Type	F*	%**
Positive Elaboration	2141	43.3
Neutral Elaboration	1087	22.0
Acceptance	846	17.1
No Response	310	6.3
Denial	245	4.9
Negative Elaboration	195	3.9
Smiling	34	0.7
System Missing	92	1.9
Total	4950	100.0

* Frequency; ** Percentage

About two thirds of the data (65.3%) were explained via two main categories of positive and neutral elaboration. In other words, in 43.3 percent of the cases the Persian speakers tended to suggest a comment on the complimented topic or return it instead of simply accepting by a single thank you. Furthermore, prior to taking the compliment literally they either sought the speakers' certainty in what is said through a question or tried to shift the compliment force to another person or even the object itself in 22 percent of the time. Accepting the compliment was the third major category followed by silence, disagreement and suggestion of a negative idea on the complimented topic. Least frequently, the compliments were reacted to by no words and/or a single smiling.

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Compliment topics appeared to store the most frequent category i.e., positive elaboration as a fixed part in their response distribution. Although questioning the truth and reassignment were the next category shared by topics of performance (25.2%), appearance (24.2%) and personality traits (24.4%), compliments on possessions were more frequently accepted (18.9%) in the second place. This latter pattern then appeared in the third place for the other three categories and neutral elaboration was in the third place for possession (14.4%). The compliments on possession and appearance were then responded to by silence (5.1% and 9.2%, respectively) though in a lesser extent. Meanwhile, the skill and personality trait based compliments were disagreed with (10.3%) or negatively commented on (7.5%).

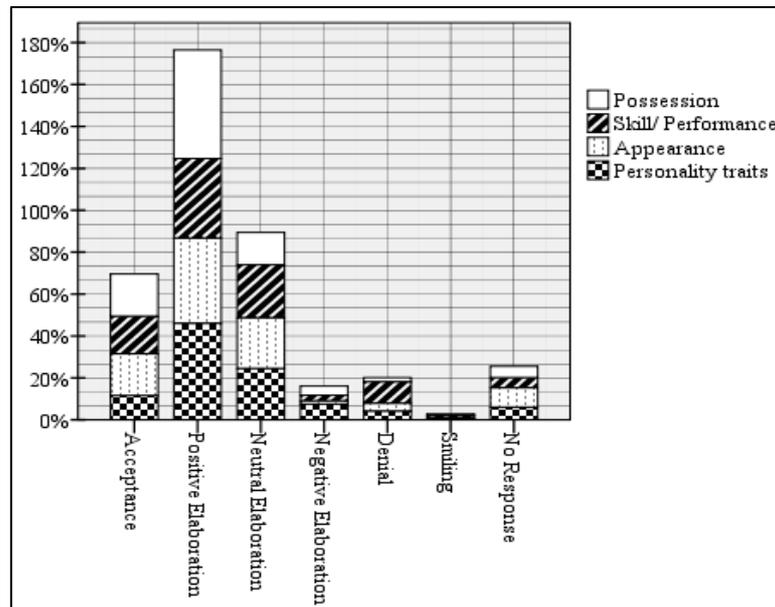


Figure 6. Distribution of Response Categories across Compliment Topics

Positive elaboration as a common resort occupied the first place irrespective of the type of relation. Put differently, people in all of the interactions used to accept the compliment through giving a comment on the

complimented topic, no matter they were close friends or strangers, of equal, low or high status. Yet this category was more common in close relations where the recipient was in a higher position. Neutral elaboration, as the next common category was more frequently applied to the close relations of equal status (32.3%) or interactions between strangers in any power status of low (25.6%), equal (21.3%) or high (21.2.%). In terms of acceptance, distant relations with the recipient in a lower position (21.5%) along with the close relations with equal (20.7%) and low status (18.5%) dominated the category. Denial was most often used in distant relations of equal status in 7.3 percent of the time. In close relations of either low (9.4%) or high (8.3%) power positions, the recipients found the appropriate situation to remain silent in response. Finally, distant relations with the recipient in a lower status were dominated by negative elaboration category wherein the compliment is negated in return. This latter relation also set the ground to give a smile in response (1.4%).

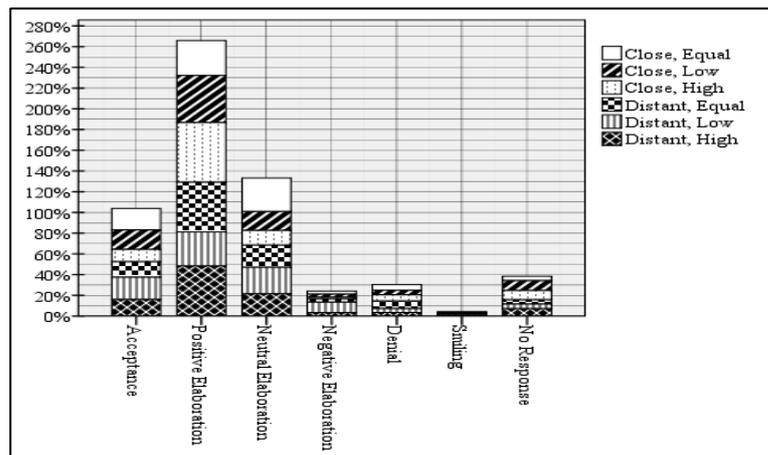


Figure 7. Distribution of Compliment Response Categories across Social Distance and Relative Power

Figure 8 suggests that males and females pursued a similar order of response categories in terms of frequency. There are positive elaboration, neutral elaboration, acceptance, no response, denial, negative elaboration and

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smiling from the highest to the lowest. Meanwhile, men showed more preference to positive elaboration (46.1% vs. 40.5% for women) and denial (5.2% vs. 4.7%). At the same time, women remarkably rated over men in neutral elaboration (22.7% vs. 21.2%) and acceptance (19.8% vs. 14.3%) categories.

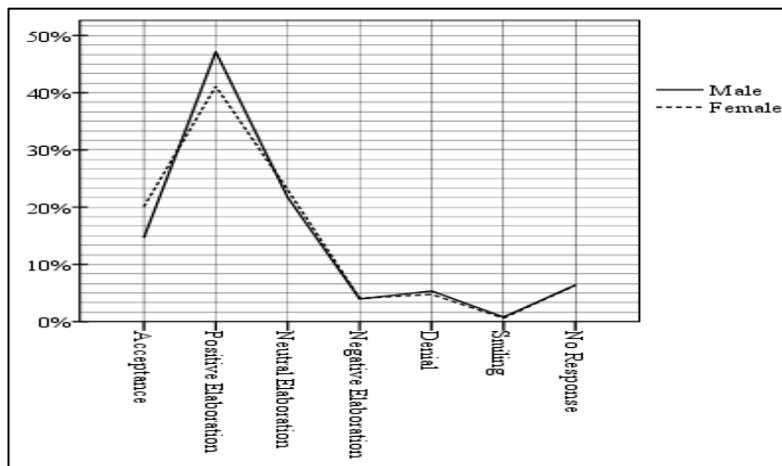


Figure 8. Distribution of Compliment Response Categories across Gender

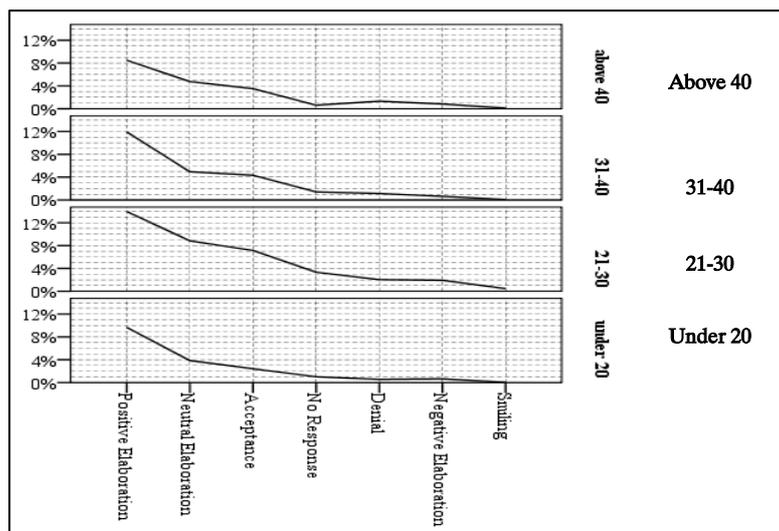


Figure 9. Distribution of Compliment Response Categories across Education Level

As it is clear in Figure 9, all age groups followed a similar order of frequency in their response categories that is positive elaboration, neutral elaboration, acceptance, no response, negative elaboration, denial and smiling. With respect to positive elaboration the youngsters and the 21-to-30 young people made the most (52.3%) and the least (36.2%) use of the related patterns. The middle-aged (23.7%) along with these latter young people (22.9%) were the frequent users of neutral elaboration response category.

Interestingly, the only common users of all the other categories were the same young group. That's why it was earlier mentioned that they were the only group in the balanced use of all the response categories. Notably, the middle-aged (17.6%) and the 31-to-40 young people (17.6%) were also rather frequent users of acceptance category.

According to Figure 10, concerning the role of education level, the diploma and the students followed the similar frequency order of positive elaboration, neutral elaboration, acceptance, no response, denial, negative elaboration and smiling. Meanwhile, the more experienced graduated recipients showed a bit different order. They went for denial and negative elaboration after the same first three patterns. In other words, they tended to disagree with or negate the compliment rather than remaining silent keeping their sensation secret from the speaker. These graduates also more frequently used neutral elaboration (24%), acceptance (19.6%), denial (7.1%), and negative elaboration (5.3%). The students' higher tendency toward no response (7.7%) and smiling (1.1) might be rooted in their lack of experience and world knowledge leading them to silence or a simple smile prior to uttering even a single word.

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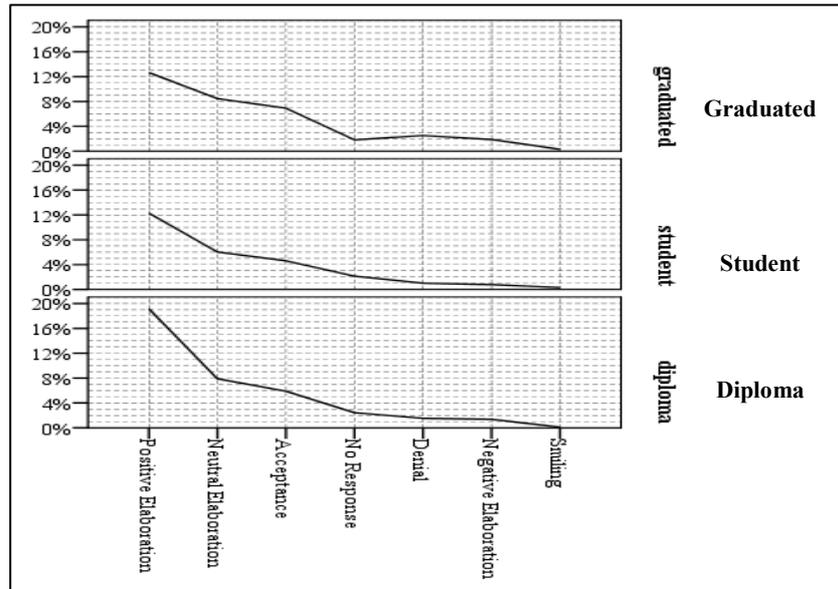


Figure 10. Distribution of Compliment Response Categories across Education Level

Following this close examination of response tendencies among Persian native speakers, the time comes to discuss the findings to be fulfilled in the next section.

5. Discussion

The earlier studies on complimenting emphasized the compliments' primary active role as 'social lubricants' (Holmes, 1988, p. 486) to 'create or maintain rapport' (Herbert, 1990, p. 202). Responding to the first research question, the native speakers' tendency toward acceptance highlighted the same major function among the Iranians. At the same time, their positive politeness affiliation (Brown & Levinson, 1987) was further approved of through the complimenter's noticing of and attending to the complimentee's interests and needs. Among the earlier established common response types (Boori, 1994; Sharifian, 2008; Yamini, 1996) three patterns of comment, reassignment and

appreciation token proved highly frequent in a way to occupy more than half of the response corpus. The addressees, in general, did not tend to directly accept the compliments; rather, they preferred to lower the complimentary force via other patterns like commenting on the complimented topic or shifting the force through assigning the basis of an ability or potential to others. Actually, the *agreement maxim* (Leech, 1983) necessitated a maximizing of the expression of agreement between the speakers which was fulfilled through acceptance strategies. Meanwhile, an attendance to the politeness required manifestation and hence, appeared in speech through indirect inclinations. Although not significantly effective, request interpretation -the position of which appeared to be three to the last in the frequency order- proved a determining role in investigating the darker side (Brown & Levinson, 1987) of the compliments. Compliments can be perceived as face-threatening acts when the complimenter envies the addressee or would like to obtain something belonging to the addressee. Hence, this minor response category provided evidence as to a lesser extent treatment of compliments as face-threatening acts by the Persian speakers.

Looking differently from another angle, positive elaboration and neutral elaboration accounted for more than almost 65 percent of the response categories. The earlier high accounts of giving positive comments or returning the compliment to the speaker as well as the tendency to shift the force of the compliments led to such high percentages for positive and neutral elaboration, respectively. Interestingly, the macro level category of acceptance entailing simple agreement assertions occupied the third place as that of appreciation token to highlight the earlier suggestion of indirect acceptance preference. In relation to the neutral elaboration category, *modesty maxim* as well as *approbation maxim* (Leech, 1983) seemed to be tightly bound to the

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addressees' behavioral patterns in response to the compliments. The former suggests minimizing the expression of praise by the addressees that is satisfied by reassignment, while the latter motivates the respondents to maximize praise of the complimenter, what is achieved via return response category.

The second research question asked about the possible role of intervening variables of topic, social distance and relative power in determining the compliment response types to which the answer is positive with all the factors playing their own significant roles. Meanwhile, gender was the only factor previously attended to by the other practitioners.

The compliments on belongings were mostly attended to via offering the complimented object to the speaker. This looks to be in line with the requirements of *tact maxim* to maximize benefit to the speakers. *Modesty maxim* governs the reactions to the skill or performance issues in the addressees' reassignment attempts to lower the complimentary force. Meanwhile, commenting on the other two complimented areas of appearance and personality traits was simply a tendency toward their indirect acceptance. Concerning the relative social factors of distance and power, the politeness systems suggested by Scollon and Scollon (2001) along with an additional suggestive system could apply to all the recorded response types.

The assumptions of unequal power status and distant relations of the hierarchical politeness system set the ground for the respondents to suggest acceptance, negative elaboration and comment history major and minor response categories. In such almost alien contexts the respondents behaved differently in their application of compliment response categories. First, the lower status addressees tried to establish 'common grounds' (Chen, 1993, p. 58) with their speakers giving their gladness accounts or express their gratitude via thanking them. Comment history as one of the positive elaboration sub-

categories was also used in addressing the superordinates to slightly decrease the worth of the object by an emphasis on the role of factors like a lengthy search period, a long period of practicing, etc. Then, to agree with the complimenter and avoid self-praise at the same time the subordinate respondents took refuge in scale down and qualification response categories to indicate two things: either to play down the value of the complimented objects by referring to their defects or to suggest the praised trait as merely a requirement of their tasks not a sort of natural talent.

The deferential politeness system encompassed equal power position and distance in the interactional contexts. In such situations the participants are supposed to suggest their responses out of respect for their addresser. With this background, the complimentees frequently tended to return the complimentary force to the speaker in an attempt to maximize benefit to him/her, too, in line with the earlier noted *tact maxim*. Furthermore, such respect in a strong sense could even lead the recipients to disagree with the speaker in spite of the truth of the compliment.

The third solidarity politeness system entailed equal, close relations between the interlocutors out of which neutral elaboration major response category was raised. Questioning the truth of the statements as well as assigning the reasons of the success to other third person forces resulted from this category in the respondents' attempts to avoid self-praise.

Finally, some response categories were suggestive of the fourth 'kinship politeness system' in the Iranian contexts. In this system, the speakers are in an unequal power status and close relation in their interactional exchanges. The major positive elaboration response category except the two earlier discussed sub-categories of comment history and return was the main response type in this system. In this area, the higher status recipients showed a tendency toward

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commenting on the complimented topic, offering the object to the speaker, suggesting the speaker to take further advantage of the object by using politeness formula and stating the clarity of the compliment in their use of praise upgrade. Notwithstanding, among these four minor categories, the use of politeness formula, offering and praise upgrade were specifically stated in the course of upward close relations.

In terms of the third research question, the three factors of gender, age and educational background proved effective in suggesting certain compliment response types. The frequent use of certain response types was also affected by the respondents' gender-based preferences. In a way different from the earlier findings (Yamini, 1996), men established higher degrees of using comment and offering from the positive politeness main category, reassignment and disagreement. Besides, the request interpretation cases were more frequent among the male participants. These findings, indeed, could be interpreted in line with the earlier gender-based contributions made by Holmes (1988).

Accordingly, the men highly treated compliments as face-threatening acts and viewed them as less positive means for establishing solidarity. Therefore, their high frequent records of disagreement and request interpretation would be originated from this tendency which might by itself has resulted from their common inclination in taking the literal aspects of the speakers' utterances. On the other hand, for females the major acceptance category as well as questioning occupied the first three major responses. This higher tendency toward thanking or proposing acceptance under the guise of positive statements among women might be rooted in their different behavioral norms in treating the compliments as positively affective speech acts to establish rapport. In other words, their attempt to maintain the course of communications without appearing awkward leads them to accept their

speakers' positive statements. Questioning, further, highlights the efforts to attain two simultaneous purposes of expressing acceptance and avoiding self-praise.

Besides the earlier studied factors, the role of different age groups in determining the response frequencies could not be ignored. In this area, the youngsters were found to frequently make use of reassignment and offering. The young age, indeed, appeared to automatically create certain social boundaries to prohibit the recipients from certain other response categories. As a result, they tried to indirectly accept the compliments through shifting the force or offering the object to the speaker to increase their benefit, too.

Moreover, the young 21-30 group also tried the reassignment category as well as the other neutral elaboration sub-category of questioning. The other two older age groups significantly tended toward the acceptance subcategories of appreciation token and comment acceptance. In other words, their higher age range and life experience sets the ground to naturally accept the compliments especially those topics dealing with skill or performance and personality traits.

Finally, a look at the education levels, suggested differences in the frequent response types across the three levels. While the lowest educated people indicated high records of offering the complimented objects, no acknowledgement was the case with the students. This latter pattern could be suggestive in that this in-between still-developing group of participants might have had difficulty in recognizing the utterances as compliment, hence their silence. Meanwhile, the graduated respondents who were in positions well above the other groups of people developed their responses toward the denial and negative elaboration major categories. The shared attempts to accept the compliments and avoid self-praise at the same time guided the responses to

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scale down and qualification categories. In the meantime, they felt free in frequently disagreeing with the lower level complimenters making them incompetent as to their appropriate expressions.

6. Conclusion

The present study tried to contribute to the existing literature on speech acts, in general and complimenting, in particular. A focus on the sociolinguistic variables in performing such illocutionary acts proved helpful in examining the unnoticed or less attended-to corners of the earlier studies.

Accordingly, for the native Iranian speakers, *modesty maxim* and *approbation maxim* (Leech, 1983) highly governed such particularly frequent response categories as positive and neutral elaboration and hence, prevented the simple agreement reactions to the complimenters.

In relation to the compliment topics, *tact* and *modesty* maxims governed the responses to the compliments on objects and skill issues, respectively. Yet, the compliments on appearance and personality traits were indirectly accepted. As to the social distance and power concerns, acceptance, negative elaboration and comment history response categories were grounded in hierarchical politeness system while return or disagreement rooted in the deferential politeness system and solidarity politeness system raised neutral elaboration response category. Besides, kinship politeness system was suggested as well to lead positive elaboration response category except comment history and return. Concerning the gender-based differences, disagreement and request interpretation were common with the males treating the compliments as face-threatening acts. On the other hand, dealing with the compliments as positively affective speech acts women tended toward acceptance and questioning.

From another point of view, the young tried to develop social boundaries through reassignment and offering. Meanwhile, the older experienced age groups tended toward appreciation token and comment acceptance to certify their complimented skills or personality traits.

While the lowest educated people indicated high records of offering the complimented objects, no acknowledgement was the case with the students not knowledgeable enough in their recognition of the compliments. To achieve a simultaneous acceptance and avoiding self-praise, the graduated tended toward denial and negative elaboration categories.

Although through this study the attempt was made to select the participants and field workers from different parts of the country, the results can not be generalized to all the Persian speakers with certainty. Meanwhile, the unveiled complexities might help the speakers in selection of their compliment responses.

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