

Chinese ESL Learners' Pragmatic Competence in the Usage of Genuine Compliments, Ironic Compliments, and Ironic Insults

Jessica Sparr

Overview of Compliments in American English

Definition:

“A compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some “good” (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer” (Holmes, 1986, p. 485).

Overview of Compliments in American English

Compliments are formulaic (Manes & Wolfson, 1981 & 1983)

- Follow certain semantic patterns and syntactical patterns
- Limited range in topics

Functions of Compliments (Wolfson, 1983, p. 88-92):

build rapport, to show genuine admiration, substitute for other speech acts, to soften face-threatening acts, to encourage, to sustain conversation, and (when irony is used) to joke, insult, or reprimand

Overview of Compliments in American English

Compliment Responses (Herbert & Straight, 1990, p. 209):

- accepting
- deflating, deflecting, and rejecting
- questioning, ignoring, and reinterpreting

Gender and Status (Holmes, 1988, Herbert, 1990 & Wolfson, 1983):

There are differences in the complimenting behavior of women and men. Moreover, the majority of compliments occur between people of equal status and that are of the same age.

Overview of Compliments in Chinese

Indirect compliment strategies

Most common compliment topic is ability.

More limited range of functions: build rapport and substitute for other speech acts

(Yu, 2005)

Overview of Compliments in Chinese

Compliment Responses (Chen, 1993, p. 55-6):

- Disagreeing & Denigrating
- Expressing Embarrassment
- Explaining
- Thanking and Denigrating
- Thanking (only)

Status (Yu, 2005, p. 109-111)

Compliments occur between people of the same status.

Defining Ironic Compliments and Ironic Insults

4 Characteristics of Irony:

- indirect
- includes an evaluation, either positive or negative
- includes literal meaning and intended meaning
- there can be two different interpretations because of two meanings

Functions of Irony:

convey humor, convey hints of aggression or criticism, increase status of speaker, build rapport between interlocutors, control emotions of the listener

Defining Ironic Compliments and Ironic Insults

Definition of Genuine Compliment (GC):
praise framed positively (e.g., “Good job!”)

Definition of Ironic Compliment (IC):
praise framed negatively (e.g., “Lousy job!”), but has a positive intended meaning

Definition of Ironic Insult (II):
praise framed positively (e.g., saying “Good job” when it was lousy), but has a negative intended meaning and takes the form of a compliment

Research Questions

What impressions do Chinese ESL learners have of the three types of compliments: genuine compliments, ironic compliments, and ironic insults?

How do these impressions differ from that of Native Speakers (NS)?

Methodology

Subjects:

- 22 Chinese students from Iowa State
- 4 American students served as a control

Materials & Procedures:

- modified Discourse Completion Task (DCT) used
- demographic questions like gender, nationality, native language, length of time in the US, and current TOEFL score were also included

Methodology

12* In your opinion, how do you think Nick feels after hearing that comment? Check all that apply.

- Fearful
- Angry
- Sad
- Happy
- Disgusted
- Surprised
- Shameful
- Liked
- Upset

13* What do you think Nick would say in response to Jane's comment? Write a response:



A rich text editor interface with a toolbar at the top containing icons for text color, background color, bold (B), italic (I), bulleted list, numbered list, link, unlink, and image. Below the toolbar is a large empty text area for writing a response. At the bottom left of the text area, it says "Path: p".

Results

How insulted is the complimentee?

Genuine Compliment	Ironic Compliment	Ironic Insult
2.61	5.07	6.20

* 1 is not insulted, 10 is very insulted

What impact does the utterance have on the relationship?

Genuine Compliment	Ironic Compliment	Ironic Insult
8.70	5.63	4.62

* 1 is negative impact, 10 is positive impact

Results

What kind of emotional response does the complimentee have?

Genuine Compliment	Ironic Compliment	Ironic Insult
84.8%	46.0%	24.2%

* associated with a positive emotion

How does the complimentee respond?

Genuine Compliment	Ironic Compliment	Ironic Insult
84.5%	65%	65%

* acceptance of compliment according to Herbert & Straight's Compliment Response Categorization

Results

In comparison with American students:

- similar to the results of Chinese students
- Genuine Compliments:
 - not insulting
 - caused a positive impact on the relationship
 - positive emotions associated
- Ironic Compliments & Ironic Insults:
 - insulting
 - caused a slightly negative impact on the relationship
 - negative emotions associated
 - responses categorized as “other” used

Conclusion

Chinese students have positive impressions of GC and negative impressions of IC and II.

American students had similar impressions.

Both Chinese students and American students had difficulty comprehending Ironic Compliments.

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