

A Contrastive Analysis of Linguistic Features of Chinese and American Compliments

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Abstract: Compliments are an integral component of social etiquette and play a significant role in everyday interpersonal communication. This study examines the influence of distinct phonetic characteristics in Chinese and English on the moods and sentiments conveyed through compliments. Through an analysis of compliment strategies and their linguistic functions in common situations, this study compares the differences in vocabulary selection and expression methods between Chinese and American compliments. It also discusses the underlying reasons for these differences from the perspectives of cultural variations, social norms, and thinking patterns. Furthermore, the study analyzes and compares the similarities between Chinese and American compliments in terms of their purposes, topics, and stylistic changes. Overall, despite differences in phonetics, vocabulary selection, and expression methods, Chinese and American compliments exhibit convergence in their macroscopic purposes, themes, and styles due to the constraints imposed by specific conversational scenarios.

Keywords: Compliments; Intercultural communication; Phonetic features; Cultural difference

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1. Introduction

Holmes defines compliments as a complex socio-linguistic skill that aims at consolidating relationships between speakers ^[1]. Generally, compliments consist of complimentary utterances from compliment givers that carry positive appraisal toward the receivers. Compliments can be given in several methods that are thus categorized into two groups: explicit and implicit ^[2]. An explicit compliment usually contains affirmative lexical items. An implicit one, however, tends to convey the compliment giver's moods indirectly, which usually employs figures of speech like metaphor, simile, comparison, etc ^[3]. Factors like cultural differences can deeply influence the strategies people choose to express their compliments ^[4]. For example, America and South Africa, two English-speaking regions with different cultures, show some differences in complimenting/responding strategies ^[4]. Given the cultural differences between China and the US, there should exist remarkable differences in compliments of the two countries. An analysis of compliments in Chinese and American cultures can provide insight into the similarities and differences in politeness strategies between the two cultures.

Additionally, the complimenting and responding preferences might change with time ^[6]. Many compliments that were once commonly used are now considered old-fashioned and are no longer used. It was uncommon for Chinese people to respond with a simple “thank you” in the past ^[7,8]. Yet nowadays response with acceptance followed by a simple thanks gradually become popular ^[9]. As such, it is worthwhile to revisit compliments as a notable topic in linguistic research.

This article aims to analyze American and Chinese everyday compliments linguistically and identify their differences and similarities. Exploring these differences can facilitate intercultural communication.

2. Example-oriented analysis of strategies

2.1. Data collection

American and Chinese compliment samples are available on the Internet, in some popular literary compositions, movies and television works, etc. Commonly used like English Corpora: Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and Center of Chinese Linguistics (CCL) were utilized for data collection.

2.2. Examples of compliments

Examples of compliments in American English and Chinese are illustrated in separately in **Tables 1** and **2**.

Table 1. Examples of compliments in American English

(1)	Compliment	That color looks perfect on you.
	Occasion	A salesperson compliments the customer’s appearance when the customer is trying on a dress.
(2)	Compliment	You light up the room.
	Occasion	A guest good at enlivening the atmosphere was favored.
(3)	Compliment	You’re like a breath of fresh air.
	Occasion	Between a couple. The gentleman wrote a love letter and was reading it in front of the lady.
(4)	Compliment	You are so humorous that you make everyone laugh.
	Occasion	A humorous host was favored by a guest.
(5)	Compliment	Being around you is like a happy little vacation.
	Occasion	Two intimate friends were chatting.
(6)	Compliment	On a range from 1 to 10, you’ve got an 11.
	Occasion	A teacher applauded a diligent student.
(7)	Compliment	Your work speaks volumes about your dedication and hard work.
	Occasion	A leader spoke highly of the staff’s endeavor.
(8)	Compliment	My fiancée was very beautiful. She had the most magnificent eyes and skin like an angel. And for a time all I could see was her beauty.
	Occasion	Chet was expressing his admiration for his wife.
(9)	Compliment	I like your report. Thanks, I think its absolutely normal for ...
	Occasion	An employer favors the employee’s report.

Table 2. Examples of compliments in Chinese

	Compliment (Chinese)	你进步真快，马上要超过我了。 哪有，我比你还差得远呢！
(10)	Compliment (English)	You're making great progress and are about to surpass me. No, I am not. I am still far less qualified than you!
	Occasion	Between a master and an apprentice.
	Compliment (Chinese)	你的企劃報告真不錯，可以教教我你都是怎樣準備的嗎？ 多謝夸奖！我好樂意分享一些我準備報告的技巧。
(11)	Compliment (English)	You've given a very good presentation. Could you teach me how you prepare it? Thank you for your kind words! I'd be happy to share some tips on how I prepare for presentations.
	Occasion	An employee of a company gave a presentation on a project and was praised by his/her colleague for the excellent job.
	Compliment (Chinese)	你的鞋真漂亮，我也想买一双。
(12)	Compliment (English)	Your shoes look nice, and I want to buy a pair too.
	Occasion	A student compliments his friend's shoes
	Compliment (Chinese)	天下真有这样标致的人物，我今儿才算见了！况且这通身的气派，竟不像老祖宗的外孙女儿，竟是个嫡亲的孙女，怨不得老祖宗天天口头心头一时不忘。
(13)	Compliment (English)	I can't believe there are such good-looking people in the world! Besides, she doesn't have the aura of our ancestors' granddaughter, and she's even the kindred- granddaughter! No wonder our ancestors mention her incessantly day in and day out.
	Occasion	Hsi-feng encountered a destitute girl named Tai-yu, who was seeking assistance from the Chia family. This encounter took place in front of several family members, including a highly esteemed senior female member referred to by Hsi-feng as "the venerable ancestor."
	Compliment (Chinese)	這名外籍學生來臺灣蠻多年了，國語講的很溜！
(14)	Compliment (English)	This international student has been in Taiwan region for several years and speaks fluent Chinese!
	Occasion	A person introduced to someone an international student who came to Taiwan region for a degree, complimenting the student's fluent Chinese.
	Compliment (Chinese)	你啲廣東話真係好犀利啊！基本上可以溝通倒冇問題。
(15)	Compliment (English)	Your Cantonese is awesome! People can communicate well with you.
	Occasion	A multi-language learner who recently is learning Cantonese, a Chinese dialect, posted a video clip showing his Cantonese, and a person from the Cantonese-speaking area commented his Cantonese in the comment section.
	Compliment (Chinese)	非常的新鮮，非常的美味。
(16)	Compliment (English)	[The food is] Very fresh and delicious.
	Occasion	A gastronome complimented the food provided by the cook after tasting it.
	Compliment (Chinese)	太厲害啦！最近才發現你。你的影片讓人覺得學習之路可以走得更加堅定 XD，謝謝你！ 謝謝！我們一起加油。
(17)	Compliment (English)	Excellent! I just discovered you recently. Your videos make me feel more confident in my learning journey XD, Thank you! Thanks! Let's work hard together.
	Occasion	A vlogger was complimented for his studiousness.

3. Differences and similarities in linguistic features

3.1 Differences

3.1.1. Phonetic features

Mood is a formal element of the language ^[10]. In English, speech sounds are utilized to convey the moods of speakers. Phonetically, Chinese differs from English in several respects.

- (1) Chinese is a tonal language but English is not.
- (2) Chinese has many homophones because of limited phonemes.

In Chinese, tones can convey emotions. Although they do not carry specific meanings, Chinese modal particles such as *nē* (呢), *ā* (啊), and *yā* (呀) can be used to express the speaker's mood.

In English, in contrast, typical phonetic ways of expressing different moods are intonation and stress. English rhetorical questions are typically indicated by intonation and context. As demonstrated in **Table 1**, a rhetorical question is employed in example (4) to convey the speaker's admiration. Unlike English, rhetorical questions in Chinese usually end with a modal particle to convey a rhetorical meaning. Therefore, modal particles play an important role in expressing a sense of admiration in Chinese compliments, whereas English compliments rely on changes in vocal pitch to convey personal attitudes toward the addressees' recognizable items or their inner virtues.

Chinese has fewer phonemes than English, many Chinese characters share the same pronunciation but have different meanings, resulting in a phenomenon called *xié yīn*. Homophonic puns have become increasingly popular on the Chinese Internet. Sometimes, these puns are used to compliment. For example, *liù* and *liū* share the same pronunciation but have different tones. With the widespread availability of Internet access in China's mainland, it has become common for people to use the combination "666" to informally compliment someone.

3.1.2. Social norms

Due to social norms and cultural traditions, everyday Chinese compliments tend to be more conservative and euphemistic lexically when compared to American compliments. It is common for Chinese individuals to compliment others by downplaying themselves (e.g., example (10)), demonstrating modesty. Moreover, overly direct compliments are generally not well-received by Chinese people and may be perceived as impolite in certain situations.

In example (9), an "I like NP" structure is used to subjectively show the compliment addresser's preference. However, such a structure may seem strange to Chinese people, where compliments are less frequently given from the 1st person perspective ^[7]. Traditionally, a simple thank is less likely to be seen in Chinese compliment responses. Instead, it is more common for Chinese people to deflect or reject complimentary utterances and pay an equivalent compliment to the compliment addresser. However, things have changed in the Chinese online world where some norms are unnecessary and a simple thank has become acceptable due to the weakened function of compliments in the absence of face-to-face elements, as is demonstrated in example (17).

3.1.3. Thinking patterns

Requests are commonly used by Chinese people to compliment the addressees' performances (e.g., example (11)), while wants are often used to compliment the addressees' possessions (e.g., example (12)). This is consistent with findings from existing studies ^[11].

Some utterances that are not considered compliments by Americans serve as a form of everyday compliments in Asian communities, especially in Japan ^[5]. Similar ways of complimenting are also commonly seen in China ^[12]. Some examples are given in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Comparison between Chinese and English compliments

Compliments (Chinese)	Compliments (English)	Remarks
(18) 你买这么多东西真是辛苦了。	You must be exhausted after buying so many things.	The speaker meant it was so kind of the hearer to buy so many things.
(19) 你的这件衣服是真皮的吧？	This shirt of yours is made of pure leather, isn't it?	The speaker meant that the hearer's shirt was very precious and comfortable.

In Chinese culture, compliments are usually given implicitly. For most Americans, these utterances are no different from ordinary conversations, whereas for most Chinese, example (18) is seen as appreciation for someone's work and example (19) as admiration for someone's possessions. Such differences in thinking patterns are largely due to cultural differences. Chinese compliment examples above are periphrases commonly used in Chinese. Indirect compliments are favored by the Chinese because they sound more subtle, less vague, more sincere, and less likely to cause the hearers' discomfort.

3.2. Similarities

3.2.1. Purposes

Both Chinese and American compliments serve context-dependent purposes. In example (1), the compliment occurred in a clothing store, where the salesperson was complimenting the customer. The salesperson likely aimed to provide positive feedback to the customer, boosting her confidence in her choice and potentially persuading her to purchase the dress. Similarly, in example (11), an individual complimented a colleague who had just delivered a project presentation. The request within the compliment to learn how to give a perfect presentation may not necessarily reflect a genuine desire to learn but could be a polite gesture aimed at strengthening their relationship. The underlying intentions behind complimentary utterances should be assessed within the specific context of the discourse, regardless of the compliment strategies employed. However, the overall purposes of complimentary utterances remain largely the same: to fulfill basic interpersonal needs, enabling both parties in the discourse to engage in more complex interactions such as transactions in stores or collaborations in corporations^[13].

3.2.2. Topics

Appearance/possession and performance/competence are two common topics in both Chinese and American compliments. These topics are easily identifiable within specific contexts. Take example (14), where an international student had been residing in the Taiwan region for several years and spoke fluent Chinese. The student's proficiency in Chinese was highly recognizable and exceptional to others in the setting where the conversation occurred. Similarly, in examples (3) and (8), the compliments revolve around the girls' beauty, which is understandable given that the speakers are expressing admiration and affection towards them.

3.2.3. Complexity

Compliments can often be intricate, requiring the compliment givers to be sensitive to the feelings of those present at the occasion where the conversation occurs. In example (13), Hsi-feng not only complimented Tai-yü but also indirectly complimented all the worthy ancestor's granddaughters-in-law. This illustrates how a seemingly straightforward compliment can convey implicit meanings. Similarly, in example (1), the salesperson's intentions are not as straightforward as they may seem on the surface. In specific discourse

situations, individuals often utilize a combination of explicit and implicit strategies.

Furthermore, the style of compliments varies depending on the occasion. Compliment givers should be mindful of the appropriateness of word choice and sentence structure organization. Formal occasions typically necessitate the use of formal language and well-structured sentences ^[14]. However, these restrictions are relaxed in informal settings, such as entertainment websites, where language may be more casual, including abbreviations, slang, and disregarding grammar rules. Below are three examples taken from the comment section of a video lecture by a professor (**Table 4**). Example (20) abbreviates “professor” to “prof.” Example (21) uses a kaomoji to express gratitude, symbolizing a kiss. Example (22) consists of a simple combination of words and a kaomoji representing a smile, not even forming a complete sentence.

Table 4. Examples of compliments from a comment section of a video lecture

(20)	Thank you so much for clarifying in 10 minutes everything my prof. jumbled into a 3-hour lecture.
(21)	This video is so helpful. Thank you! <3
(22)	Clear, short, understandable :)

Similar shifts in language style can also be observed within online communities in China. For example, the use of the slang term “666” to compliment someone for their proficiency in a particular task, as is mentioned above. The arbitrary nature of language usage in online communication may present challenges to effective intercultural exchanges between Chinese and American individuals, particularly given the prevalence of such exchanges in online environments.

3.2.4. Appropriateness

Despite the freedom of expression often seen on the Internet, the appropriateness of compliments remains crucial both in China and the United States. While language forms such as puns and slang are prevalent in many online communities, individuals tend to exercise caution when using them in real-world interactions ^[15], especially on relatively formal occasions. The reason for this phenomenon is that the online world is usually characterized by the weaker need to maintain and consolidate relationships because of its virtual nature, in which people talk as if they were face-to-face but are actually quite distant from each other.

4. Conclusion

Compliments are a form of language used to strengthen relationships. Due to the complexity of real-world interpersonal situations, the content and goals of compliments can range from simple to complex, with strategies varying from direct to euphemistic and styles ranging from informal to formal.

This study analyzes the phonetic differences between Chinese and American compliments, which can impact the perception and interpretation of compliments. For example, in English, moods can be conveyed through changes in vocal pitch and stress, while in Chinese, modal particles are often used to convey moods such as rhetorical, exclamatory, optative, etc.

Cultural differences between China and America can also influence social norms and the acceptability of certain lexical items in compliments. For instance, some expressions that are considered appropriate in American English may be perceived as offensive within Chinese social norms. These cultural differences become particularly apparent when considering both compliments and responses to them.

Despite the aforementioned differences, there also exist similarities between Chinese and American

compliments. As noted by Holmes, the act of complimenting serves to consolidate relationships between individuals. Therefore, more complex interactions can be facilitated based on a sound relationship. Both Chinese and American compliments often focus on similar topics that are readily recognizable within a specific context, easily striking a chord among people involved in the scenario.

The online world is characterized by a relatively lesser need to maintain and consolidate interpersonal relationships and acts as a virtual environment that serves as both a bridge and a gap between people. Furthermore, compliments in the online world exhibit distinct features such as the use of kaomoji and emoji to compensate for missing elements in face-to-face discourse when compared to those in the real world. As such, they can be discussed separately, particularly considering the increasing accessibility of the online world. Additionally, slang and puns used in some online communities may have unintended consequences if misused or misinterpreted by others.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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