

## **Exploring Compliment Response Differences Across Gender**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of the present study was to explore the difference between the compliment responses used by male and female EFL speakers of District Sargodha. The target population was all master degree holders of Sargodha District in English Language and Literature. The sample population was selected conveniently from the students of M. Phil. of the Department of English, UOL, Sargodha Campus. Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was used as a tool for the collection of data. which contained compliments and the responses to those compliments in five different social situations. The responses to the compliments were designed following the taxonomies of Pomerantz (1978) and Holmes (1995). The findings reveal that there exists a gender-based difference with respect to complement response.

Keywords: Gender differences, Compliments, Compliment responses, EFL Pakistani speakers

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## Introduction

A compliment is an implicit or explicit speech act which assigns credit to some person through the agency of speaker. It may be the addressee or some other person referred to by the speaker. The purpose is to appreciate some quality or ability or skill which is considered good both by the hearer and the speaker. A compliment response is can be defined as “an utterance that people say after another person has praised them for ability, possession, appearance, or anything which are positively valued by participant”. The reason behind the compliments is the maintenance of interpersonal relations in a positive way. Holmes comments about compliments that these expressions are typical “social lubricants” which are used to generate or “maintain rapport” (1995: 118). Wolfson (2009) opines that in our daily life talk, the function performed by compliments is social interaction and Goffman (1967) believes that compliments can also be used for a host of other functions as well. Negotiation, sustenance or consolidation of social solidarity is the main purpose of the use of complements. In addition, Witherspoon (1980), opines that compliments perform multiple functions: exhibit sincere appreciation of positive qualities; play the role of greetings; help us to make apologies and assist us to say thanks. Consequently, compliments reduce the risk of face-threatening acts like scolding, reproach or entreaties. Holmes (1987) opines that basically compliments are used to perform effective as well as a social function. They are not used for referential or informative purposes. The channels for providing response to compliments vary from person to person and it is also viewed that like many other perspectives of gender differences, there exists dissimilarity in the use of responses to compliments among male and female speakers of a language. Holmes (1995) and Herbert (1990: 201) have conducted two important researches to show that there exists a difference between genders in the expression of responses to compliments. They informed that the lexical choices and syntactic patterns used by the two genders were different. Deducing from their findings, they made an assumption that the use of compliments by women serves the purpose of solidarity, while men generally perform certain face-threatening acts by using compliments. Their use of compliments is also marked by potential assertions of praise.

In order to check the compliment response behavior, many studies have been conducted on native speakers of different languages as Mustapha (2003) finds out “women’s more concern for positive politeness” but little attention has been paid to foreign speakers of these languages to check their compliment response behavior. The article aimed to study this phenomenon in order to fill this research gap by exploring the compliment responses of male and female speakers of Pakistani English. It is hoped that the present study will give a new direction to the existing knowledge on compliments and this field of discourse will get fresh perceptions through this study.

**Literature Review**

A lot of studies are there on compliment and compliment responses but there are very few researches studied the compliments between the different genders. Morales (2012), informed that male and female both have different opinions about compliment. Both have different perspectives on acceptance, rejection and evading compliments. Both groups focus on acceptance and exhibit little tendency to evade. Furko and Dudas (2012) collected data for a research on Hungarian undergraduate students and showed that Hungarian females respond acceptance to the compliments given by females, but males show no difference to female compliments. Urano (1998) did an influential research work on the compliment responses. He exhibited that South African and Arabic English speakers accept compliments while Asian language speakers reject the compliments. Chen (2003) did a study to explore the compliments. It was revealed by the findings of this study that majority of Chinese students do not accept and respond to compliments. Cedar (2006) conducted a study to make a comparison between the Thai speakers and native speakers of America. The study highlights that Thai speakers gave more negative response to compliments and reject while American native speakers accept the compliments and gave positive responses. Albert, Melissa. Xi Jinping (2013) did a research work on the Philippine English which revealed that a large number of responses of Philippines' people were accepted. It amounts to 60 percent of the collected compliment responses. Another study that Heidari (2003) did was between male and female teenage children. This study concludes that Iranian females avoid compliments whereas males show acceptance. Teenage females give implicit answers and avoid explicit responses. They also said that attitude also varies across gender. According to Herbert (1990), females more frequently use the speech act of complimenting. He also concluded that it is women who are more complimented by men. In her characteristic study on compliment responses, Pomerantz (1978) tried to direct our attention to the dilemma experienced by the people making compliments: on the one hand, the pressure to appear to be socially approved in society forces them to agree with the compliment; on the other hand, they also want to elude self-praise. It means contesting constraints are faced by the addressees of compliments: if maxim of agreement is upheld by them, they are in fear of breaching the maxim of modesty; yet if they try to follow the maxim of modesty, they are in fear of infringement of the maxim of agreement (Leech, 1983). So, the recipients of compliments are bound to look for strategies for resolving this integral conflict, and this constraint has led us to the identification of a vast array of compliment response strategies for the management of this conflict. Pomerantz (1978) and Holmes (1995) both argue that for English speakers, the stratagems for reacting to compliments can be categorized into three general categories for practical purposes: (a) acceptance, (b) rejection (c) evasion/self-praise avoidance. The stance of many researches done in the field is to check how individuals exploit these strategies and the preferred ratio of

different strategies used by different nationalities, age groups, professions, strata and genders.

### **Objective of the study**

Keeping in view the background mentioned above, the objective of the present study was to explore differences in compliment response behavior of male and female EFL Pakistani speakers.

### **Hypothesis of the study**

There is no significant difference between male and female students with respect to compliment response.

### **Research methodology**

It was a quantitative study and a questionnaire was used to get responses from the population in order to investigate the difference between the reactions to compliments used by male and female EFL speakers of District Sargodha. The target population was all master degree holders in English Language and Literature from Lahore University Sargodha campus. The sample of population was selected conveniently from the students of M. Phil. of the Department of English, UOL, Sargodha Campus. The sample size was ten male and ten female respondents. Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was used as a tool for the collection of data. A DCT (Discourse Completion Test) was developed by the researcher which followed the specimens of DCTs introduced by other researchers in the domain of pragmatics. The DCT used in the present study comprised compliments and the responses to these compliments in five different situations. All these scenarios incorporated a compliment on the performance/achievement of someone. Varying nature of relationships in terms of power and distance between the two participants of complimenting event (teacher-student, close friends, mother-son, strangers, unfamiliar peers) were focused by the researcher across the five scenarios. The purpose was to create multiple possibilities for responding to compliments. Following the taxonomies presented by Pomerantz (1978) and Holmes (1995), the researcher listed three different responses for each scenario: one acceptance- response, one rejection- response, and one evasion- response. The responses provided for each scenario were given a random order. The respondents were requested to select the response which they thought appropriate.

### **Data Analysis and Results**

The responses selected by the respondents were categorized following the taxonomies of Pomerantz (1978) and Holmes (1995). Responses related to different categories were counted and compared using percentage. The table presented below shows the number of different categories of responses selected by male and female respondents:

Table 1

*Showing the frequencies of different categories of responses of both genders:*

Respondents	Rejection	Evasion	Acceptance
Male	08	22	20
Female	05	19	26

Table 1 indicates that among all the male subjects 8 respondents opted for evasion, 22 respondents evasion, and 20 respondents acceptance. Among all the female subjects, 5 respondents opted for rejection, 19 respondents opted for evasion, and 26 respondents opted for acceptance.

Table 2

*Showing the percentage of responses:*

Respondents	Total Responses	Rejection	Evasion	Acceptance
Male	50	16%	44%	40%
Female	50	10%	38%	52%

Table 2 shows that a total 50 male and 50 female subjects participated in the study. Among all the male subjects 16% respondents opted for rejection, 44% respondents for evasion and 40% respondents for acceptance. Among all the female subjects 10% respondents opted for rejection, 38% respondents for evasion, and 52% respondents for acceptance.

Table 3

Gender-based comparison of speakers' discourse completion test (DCT)

Gender	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Level of significance
Male	50	167.64	63.13	3.03	0.04
Female	50	188.13	41.91		

Table 3 reflects that t value (3.03) was significant at  $p < 0.05$  for male and female respondents. It indicates that female students ( $M=188.13$ ,  $SD=41.91$ ) and male students ( $M=167.64$ ,  $SD=63.13$ ) are significantly different with respect to compliment response. So the null hypothesis "There is no significant difference in male and female students with respect to compliment response" is rejected. It can be concluded that female speakers give more response than male speakers to compliment responses.

## Findings and Discussion

The analysis exposed that the highest frequency of responses is that of agreement (40% of males and 52% of females) in the compliment responses. The findings also show that there exists dissimilarity between denial responses of male and female. The female subjects selected 10% rejection category while the male respondents selected 16% disagreement category. The same percentage of (06%) difference occurred in evasion responses of male and female respondents. The findings of this study indicate that in the process of responding to compliments, agreement category rises above other types of responses because of its highest frequency of occurrence (52%) in the compliment responses of female respondents while evasion responses are the most frequent (44%) in the responses of male respondents. Male respondents selected 40% agreement responses while female made up 38% evasion responses.

The male respondents (16%) exhibited very little tendency to rejection responses and female have the least (10%) inclination to rejection of compliments. This finding leads us to the inference that in Pakistani culture both male and female exhibit a disliking for rejection of compliments. This finding refutes the findings of Urano (1998) unveiled that South African and Arabic English speakers accept compliments while Asian language speakers rejected the compliments. Pomerantz (1978) holds that rejection of compliments generally indicates some psychological problems such as low self-esteem. The lower tendency of rejection responses informs us that Pakistani EFL speakers are not victim of low self-esteem and they have the ability to enjoy the status of being praised. It also expresses their normal and balanced behavior which does not emphasize the maxim of modesty too far. However, there is a little difference between the percentage of rejection responses of female and male respondents. The 6% difference highlights that female have comparatively little tendency to rejection of compliments which reveals their capacity to face-saving acts as Mustapha (2003) observes that women show more concern for positive politeness.

The highest tendency of acceptance (52%) responses selected by female unearth the fact that female are prone to flouting the maxim of modesty and upholding the maxim of agreement showing that they don't avoid self-praise. However, the slight difference (02%) of acceptance and rejection/evasion also establishes that they do have the capacity of evasion to compliments. Male respondents exhibited comparatively lower tendency to acceptance of compliments which exhibits their greater avoidance of self-praise and their tendency to observing the maxim of modesty. Male and female speakers exhibit a little difference (06%) in the selection of evasion responses which tells us that both genders have tendency to avoid self-praise and uphold the maxim of modesty. However, it is the male who leads the game by showing 44% evasion responses as compared to female who exhibit only 38% evasion responses. The findings verify the assumption that, however

slight there does occur difference between the compliment response behavior of male and female gender as Mills (2003: 221) proposes that men and women “do not always operate in globally different ways but that there may be patterns to the way that the genders behave according to context and the gender of the interactants.”

### Conclusion and recommendations

It is revealed from the findings of the present study that there exists a noticeable difference between the compliment response behavior of Pakistani male and female EFL speakers. The differences noted are slight and may have arisen out of variables other than gender. Socioeconomic status of respondents, their level of education as well as their age are some other variables that influence responses to compliments. Further research can be done on these variables to explore their role in comparison to gender in compliment response behavior. The findings refresh our understanding of the compliment response behavior of Pakistani EFL speakers but as this study is only limited to students of M. Phil. of the Department of English, UOL, Sargodha Campus, it does not take into account the cultural assumptions which inwardly work on the responses of the target population. The findings lead us to another assumption that difference in compliment response behavior is also embedded in cultural norms. However, we can't deny the fact that gender is also a variable, though not the only one, which triggers differences in compliment response behavior.

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