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The social dynamics of native and non-native variation in complimenting behavior

The social dynamics of native and non-native variation in complimenting behavior¹

Nessa Wolfson

This paper reviews much of the research that has been conducted by Wolfson and others on compliment/response behavior in English. Wolfson demonstrates support for the systematic patterning of speech behavior associated with complimenting, most especially support for *The Bulge Theory*, which addresses the qualitative difference between the speech behavior of intimates, status-unequals and strangers, and the speech behavior of non-intimates, co-workers and acquaintances. Wolfson goes on to report on recent evidence that non-native speakers of English are not acquiring such sociolinguistic patterns, which calls into question current ESL teaching materials, and points to the need for further research into sociolinguistic patterns that could be of immediate use to the language learner.

Over the past decade, sociolinguistics has come to have an increasing impact on the field of TESOL. To a great extent, this development has been due to the realization that second language acquisition is, in fact, the acquisition of what Dell Hymes has called communicative competence. That is, becoming an effective speaker of a new language not only involves learning new vocabulary in addition to rules of pronunciation and grammar, but must also include the ability to use these linguistic resources in ways that are socially appropriate among speakers of the target language.

What has not always been recognized is that lack of such sociolinguistic competence can have serious consequences for a learner residing in a community where the target language is spoken. Unaware of the rules and patterns that condition the behavior of native speakers, the learner does not know how to interpret or respond to the often subtle conversational openings which could lead to increased interaction and even friendships with members of the society. Inappropriate or inadequate responses may well result in negative assessments and reactions on the part of native speakers. Even more damaging to learners is that lack of critical sociolinguistic information frequently makes

it impossible for them to develop relationships with native speakers. This in turn prevents learners from gaining access to the very opportunities they need for input and practice in the target language. Thus, lack of sociolinguistic competence creates a vicious circle for learners, who, because they are unaware of the ways in which relationships are developed in the target society, have less opportunity to interact with its members and consequently less chance to learn the language and the sociolinguistic rules that are an integral part of it.

In order to best prepare students, members of the TESOL profession are therefore in critical need of empirically valid analyses upon which to base instruction in this area. To be truly valuable, these analyses must deal not only with linguistic forms, but with the variation in functions and social rules that condition their use; such analysis of social variation in speech behavior can only be provided by sociolinguistic research. The results of such sociolinguistic investigation can give teachers of English necessary insights into the variation in speech behavior both within and among the many communities in which English is spoken as a native language, thus making it possible for them to present the relevant facts to their students.

To begin with, each speech act or act sequence, whether it be apologizing, thanking, scolding, complimenting, inviting, refusing or greeting, is highly complex and variable, with important cultural information embedded in it. At the most superficial level, sociolinguistic data collected systematically and analyzed objectively can yield information as to what specific formulas and routines are in use in a particular speech community, as well their patterns of frequency and rules of appropriateness in different speech situations.

An example of the sort of information to be gained by an examination of the surface structure of a speech act is the result of research on compliments in American English (Manes and Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson and Manes, 1980). In analyzing data collected from a wide range of spontaneous interactions, it was discovered that compliments are characteristically formulaic both in terms of semantics and of syntax.

If we take the definition of a compliment to be that of an utterance containing a positive evaluation by the speaker of the addressee, we find that while the number of words that could be chosen to evaluate positively, or compliment, is almost infinite, the fact is that our corpus actually contains a very restricted set of lexical items which carry the favorable evaluation, and that the great majority of these are adjectives and verbs. Two-thirds of all compliments that make use of adjectives to carry the positive semantic load do so by means of only five adjectives: nice, good, beautiful, pretty and great. Because *nice* and *good* lack specificity, they are usable with almost any subject. In present-day American English, *beautiful* seems to be widening its privilege of occurrence so that it too is losing its original specificity. The fact that *pretty* is used more than *great* the more general adjective, reflects the much larger than equal number of compliments on appearance received by women.

In the 25% of compliments which make use of a verb rather than an adjective to carry the positive meaning, 90% make use of just two verbs: like and love. At the syntactic level the highly patterned nature of compliments is even more striking. In examining their syntax, we found that fully 50% of all compliments are characterized by the following formula:

1. NP (is/looks) (really) ADJ
Example: "Your house is really beautiful."

Two other syntactic patterns account for another 29% of the data:

2. I really (like/love) NP
Example: "I really like your shirt."
3. PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP
Example: "That was really a great paper."

What this means is that only three patterns are needed to represent approximately 80% of all the compliments in our corpus of compliments given and received by middle class speakers of American English. Furthermore, only nine syntactic patterns account for 95% of the well over twelve hundred examples of compliments that make up the corpus.

The compliment formulas found in this analysis sound very familiar and indeed, intuitively correct to native speakers. What was not obvious until the data was analyzed is that the way in which we give verbal expression to our approval and appreciation of one another's appearance and accomplishments is largely pre-patterned. Like so much of our speech behavior, these patterns are below the level of speakers' conscious awareness. Thus, the tendency among middle class Americans, interviewed about their perceptions of complimenting behavior, was to state the belief that if the speaker was sincere, the compliment would somehow be original, rather than pre-coded. The fact that compliments, like so many other speech acts, may be formulaic, multi-functional, and at the same time quite sincere, was difficult for native speakers to accept; yet another example of the inadequacy of native speaker intuitions about the speech patterns which constrain their own behavior and that of the communities of which they are members.

It should be mentioned that after the original analysis (Manes and Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson and Manes, 1980) which was based on a corpus of 636 examples, additional data was collected, doubling the size of the corpus. When this new data was analyzed separately, it was found that the patterns matched those already discovered. Although our data was collected through ethnographic methods by female investigators in the U.S. (mainly in Virginia and Pennsylvania) more recent analyses by other researchers, both male and female, working in New York and Texas, as well as in South Africa and New Zealand, have replicated our original findings (Herbert, 1986a, 1986b, 1987, and personal communication; Holmes, in press; Holmes and Brown, 1987; Knapp et al., 1984) regarding the frequency and distribution of the formulas. The fact that these researchers used a variety of different methods of data collection makes the high convergence in results all the more impressive. Thus, Knapp et al., in describing their collection of data through interviewing say: "...the syntactic and semantic similarities between our data and those obtained in natural observations by Wolfson (31) and Wolfson and Manes (32) suggest that any distortions may be minimal" (Knapp et al., 1984). Holmes (in press) supports these results, saying:

As Manes and Wolfson (1981) have demonstrated, compliments are remarkable formulaic speech acts in that a very small number of lexical items and syntactic patterns account for the great majority of the 636 compliments in their 1981 corpus. This finding was replicated in the corpus of 517 New Zealand compliments. (Holmes, in press)

The consistent replication of our syntactic and semantic analysis by so many researchers working in such widely separated geographic areas is striking. However, it is critical to recognize that the description of a speech act's linguistic structure is relatively superficial in comparison to the sociocultural information that underlies the speech behavior being studied.

Looking beneath the surface structures, we can, through systematic data collection and analysis, learn a great deal about the rights and obligations that members of a community have toward one another, information which is culture specific and not necessarily available to the intuitions of the native speaker. As we have already seen, the intuitions of native speakers may be very useful in interpreting the meaning of an interaction, but are by no means sufficient in the sense of providing conscious access to patterns of behavior.

Thus, insights into the variation inherent in speech behavior may be gained by investigating the way the social identities of interlocutors vis a vis one another conditions what is said. In this respect, speech acts and sequences of all types appear to be equally informative. Thus, if we are interested in analyzing what the rights, obligations and privileges of speakers are vis a vis one another, we can probably learn as much from studying greetings, partings and invitations as we can from analyzing thanks, apologies and compliments. And most interesting of all, if we look at the forms people use spontaneously with different interlocutors, we frequently find that the distribution, frequency and elaboration involved in a specific type of speech behavior corresponds not only to speakers' roles and expectations, but also to the manipulation of roles and the formation or re-affirmation of relationships.

A case in point is a consistent finding of mine that there is a qualitative difference between the speech behavior which middle class Americans use to intimates, status

unequals, and strangers on the one hand, and to non-intimates, status-equal friends, co-workers, and acquaintances on the other. I call this theory The Bulge, because of the way the frequencies of certain types of speech behavior plot out on a diagram with the minimum and maximum degrees of social distance showing very similar patterns as opposed to the middle section (consisting of status equals) which displays a characteristic bulge. That is, when we examine the ways in which different speech acts are realized in actual everyday speech, and when we compare these behaviors in terms of the social relationships of the interlocutors, we find again and again that the two extremes of social distance -- minimum and maximum -- seem to call forth very similar behavior, while relationships which are more toward the center show marked differences. This may, on the face of it, seem very strange and even counterintuitive. What do intimates, status unequals, and strangers have in common that non-intimates, status unequal friends, co-workers and acquaintances do not share? Very simply, it is the relative certainty of the first relationships in contrast with the instability of the second. Put in other terms, the more status and social distance are seen as fixed, the easier it is for speakers to know what to expect of one another. In a complex urban society in which speakers may belong to a variety of non-overlapping networks, relationships among speakers are often uncertain. These relationships are full of potential, dynamic, open to negotiation. There is freedom here but not security. And the dynamic nature of such relationships is manifested in speech behavior which is full of elaboration and negotiation.

For example, although compliments are exchanged between intimates and between total strangers, the great majority (The Bulge) occur in interactions between speakers who are neither. This is a question of frequencies and not of absolutes. Compliments do, of course, occur in interactions between speakers at both ends of the social distance continuum - the point is that they are relatively rare in such situations. For the purposes of this discussion, the important point is that of all compliments, no matter what their topic, the great majority occur between status equals who are, as has already been pointed out, potential friends.

Evidence for the validity of The Bulge Theory described here has recently emerged in the work of three separate investigators, all working independently on the speech behavior associated with compliments. In my own most recent work, I have been engaged in collecting and analyzing data not only on the speech act of complimenting, but on the speech sequence which includes the responses to compliments as well. During the fall of 1987, two of my classes at the University of Pennsylvania participated in some of the data collection and analysis, and examples from their data will be cited below.

While Manes (1983) has reported on some of our earliest findings regarding compliment responses, and our original work certainly included the collection of responses along with the components that initiated them, it is only since 1985 that I myself began to focus specifically on the entire complimenting sequence as a speech event which might yield new and important insights into the underlying motivation of this aspect of speech behavior. My findings, while as yet incomplete, clearly indicate that the compliment/response sequence is a negotiated one in which two or more participants are involved in an often elaborated exchange. In the earliest of our joint reports on compliments (Manes and Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson and Manes, 1980) we suggested that the function of the act was to create or reaffirm solidarity. My own most recent work as well as that of others (Herbert, 1986a, 1986b; Holmes and Brown, 1987) has verified this hypothesis and provided additional results which add considerable depth and breadth to it. In my own analysis, I have found that elaborated responses occur in the speech of both intimate and status-unequal females, but that the great majority of lengthy sequences are to be found in conversations among status-equal acquaintances. Since The Bulge Theory is my own, it might be expected that I would unconsciously find evidence to support it. For this reason, it is particularly noteworthy that researchers who had had no contact with me apart from their knowledge of my early published work on the compliment act itself, have reported findings which lend strong support to The Bulge Theory put forward here, both by converging and by diverging with my analysis of complimenting behavior among speakers of American English.

Evidence for The Bulge Theory is found on a number of levels in the various studies conducted by researchers working in a number of different English speaking communities. With respect to frequency and distribution, for example, the results of the research conducted in Texas contains the following report: "We found evidence that people generally compliment others who are of the same age, status, and to a lesser extent, gender" (Knapp et al., 1984).

With regard to compliment responses, Herbert (1986a, 1986b) reports on his analysis of a corpus of 1062 native speaker compliment responses, both spontaneous and experimental, collected at the State University of New York at Binghamton. Herbert's focus was on the frequency of occurrence with which compliments were and were not accepted by addressees. His findings are striking in that speakers were "almost twice as likely to respond with some response other than ACCEPTANCE" (Herbert, 1986a:30). As Herbert points out, this finding disagrees with the U.S. societal norm requiring that compliments be accepted with thanks. Herbert also raises the question as to whether native speakers of other varieties of English follow similar behavior patterns. In this connection, he says:

In a study similar to this one conducted among a comparable university population in South Africa, a sharply different distributional profile emerged (Herbert, in press). Briefly, ACCEPTANCES...accounted for fully seventy-six percent of the South African responses. (Herbert, 1986a:32)

In a later paper (Herber and Straight, in press) the authors posit an explanation for this phenomenon, pointing out that social stratification and inequality are intrinsic to South African ideology. Thus, the paucity of compliments given by South Africans in contrast to the frequency with which they occur in the speech of Americans, along with the fact that Americans tend to reject and the South Africans to accept compliments, has to do with the social systems in which the two groups interact. They support the hypothesis put forth in Wolfson and Manes (1980) that Americans give compliments frequently because they are attempting to establish solidarity in a social context in which their own status is uncertain. For the same reason, say the authors, Americans tend not to accept the compliments they receive, thus further working toward the building of solidarity by

stressing equality with their interlocutors. South Africans, in contrast, function in a society in which solidarity with status-equals is assumed, and have no need to make use of compliment negotiations to establish what they already have - certainty as to their relationships with one another. Thus, the analysis put forward by Herbert (1986a, 1986b) and by Herbert and Straight (in press) fits neatly within the framework of The Bulge Theory, supporting it through their evidence and their explanation of why Americans and South Africans differ so sharply in their behavior regarding compliment/response sequences.

In her report of compliment/response behavior in New Zealand, Holmes (in press) reports that "it is relatively rarely that New Zealanders overtly reject compliments". Holmes' ethnographic study, which includes a corpus of 484 New Zealand compliment/response sequences, yields many significant findings. Although she does not discuss the underlying ideology which may lead to this speech behavior from the same point of view as that addressed by Herbert (1986a, 1986b) or by Herbert and Straight (in press), it is very possible that New Zealand society, like that in the United States, is sufficiently lacking in stratification to cause speakers to behave in similar ways for similar reasons. Indeed, Holmes' findings are so highly convergent with my own on virtually every level, that it is difficult to know how else to account for her findings. With respect to the frequency of occurrence of compliments among speakers of different social positions, for example, Holmes says:

The New Zealand data used in this analysis consists predominantly of compliments between status-equals... It is clear that compliments between equals are by far the most frequent in the New Zealand community sampled (79%). This finding is supported by Wolfson's data. (Holmes, in press: 11)

From the point of view of the theory under consideration, the most significant point to be taken from Holmes' study is the clear finding that most New Zealand compliments occur within what I have called The Bulge, thus lending further independent support to this analysis.

It should be mentioned in passing that while I, along with my students at the University of Pennsylvania, have continued to investigate sex-related differences in compliment/response behavior, both Herbert (in press) and Holmes (in press) have conducted independent studies along the same lines. What is most impressive about the findings and the analyses reported to date is the high degree of convergence in all three studies. That is, it is clear from all three investigations that women not only give and receive more compliments than men do, but that their responses indicate that this speech activity functions differently among men and women, with women making far greater use of such compliment/response strategies to create and reaffirm solidarity. The fact that all three studies indicate similar patterns among women as opposed to men may well lead to some significant refinements of The Bulge Theory reflecting the status-related social strategies of women. This is an area which demands further attention since it goes to the heart of the entire issue, both reflecting and perpetuating patterns of speech behavior and social dynamics.

The fact that urban middle class Americans live in a complex and open society means that individuals are members not of a single network in which their own place is well defined, but rather belong to a number of networks, both overlapping and non-overlapping, in which they must continually negotiate their roles and relationships with one another. The importance of The Bulge Theory lies in what it tells us about how the very openness and potential for mobility of American middle class society is reflected in our everyday speech behavior. The fact that very similar findings have emerged in research on complimenting behavior in Texas (Knapp et al., 1974), New York (Herbert, 1986a, 1986b) and in New Zealand (Holmes and Brown, 1987 and Holmes, in press), as well as the report of very different behavior patterns among native speakers of South African English (Herbert and Straight, in press) provides additional evidence for the analysis presented here.

When we look at analyses of non-native speaker data in English, it is immediately apparent that the great majority of learners of English are not aware of the strong

tendency of status-equal Americans to negotiate their roles through opening speech sequences involving such behavior as complimenting, and that they therefore do not know how to interpret or respond to native speaker compliments in a way that would lead to the formation of closer relationships. Part of the problem is that learners tend to transfer their own sociolinguistic rules into the target language interaction. As Daikuhara (1986) has said in reporting on the findings of her study of compliment/response sequences in Japanese:

The analysis of a corpus of 115 examples of compliments has shown that there are both similarities and differences between Japanese and American compliments... This may result in serious communicative interference if the interlocutor interprets such conduct as an insult according to his/her own rules. (Daikuhara, 1986:128-29)

The problems encountered by non-native speakers in responding to compliments given by Americans may be illustrated by examples of numerous types. It should be mentioned here that the examples given throughout this paper come from two sets of data, both collected through observation and recording of naturally occurring speech in everyday interactions in a wide variety of situations. The first source of data is my own extensive corpus of well over a thousand examples, gathered over the past eight years. Included within it are compliments and responses given and responded to by both males and females of equal and unequal status. Speakers and addressees include both native and non-native English speakers who come from a great variety of occupational, educational, and ethnic backgrounds, interacting in a wide range of settings, both public and private, formal and informal. In addition, for the purposes of this paper, I have also made use of the ethnographic data collected through participant observation by members of my class in "Cross-cultural variation in speech behavior" given in the Fall of 1987.

From my own corpus and from the data collected by my class, many of whom are themselves international students from a variety of ethnolinguistic backgrounds, it is clear that sociolinguistic transfer accounts for only a portion of the miscommunication we find in the compliment/response behavior of non-native speakers. Learners do, of course, transfer their own native sociolinguistic rules inappropriately in interactions with

English speakers, especially when they have had little or no instruction in target language sociolinguistic behavior. The following two examples, collected by Yoshiko Okushi, demonstrate the way in which transfer from Japanese sociolinguistic rules contrasts with typical American responses to compliments:

Two female graduate students looking at photos. A is American, B is Japanese. The photos are of B's family.

A: Your brother is handsome.

B: Not so much.

Two American female graduate students:

A: Your son is great.

B: Yes, I'm proud of my son.

While it is true that American speakers frequently seek to minimize compliments through their responses, and sometimes even reject them completely, the means by which this downgrading is accomplished is very different from those used by non-native speakers who are transferring their own sociolinguistic rules into the American English setting. Typically, Americans respond to compliments by giving unfavorable information about the object (e.g., saying that it is old or cheap) or by transferring the credit for the accomplishment or the object complimented to someone or something for which they have no responsibility. An example of such an American response is the following:

Two female Americans meet and A says to B:

A: I like your sweater.

B: It's so old, my sister brought it to me from Italy a long time ago.

This is very different from the non-native speaker's attempt to demonstrate modesty by downgrading him or herself or by refusing to accept the compliment:

At a cocktail reception for foreign students, right after C has been introduced to A by her friend B. A and B are classmates, C is a friend of B's. A is an American male and C is an Oriental female. B is an Oriental male.

A: Do you know that he's the best student in the class?
B: No, no, no, that's not true.
A: It is true. You ask anyone in our class who the best student is, they'll say it's B.
C: Yeah. He studies all the time.
A: I study, but my results are poor.
C: That's not true.

A much more pressing problem, however, is that even when learners do receive instruction in sociolinguistic patterns, the information they are given may well be inaccurate and therefore counterproductive, since much of it is not based upon results of empirical studies of the type just described. Because the area of sociolinguistics is itself still very young, and because there are still relatively few systematic investigations into patterns of speech behavior within English speaking communities, materials writers and instructors are themselves hampered by the dearth of information available to them. Thus, the field of TESOL is still very much in the situation of needing to apply information that does not yet exist. The lack of scientifically valid findings has forced instructors to rely on intuitive and often inaccurate impressions of sociolinguistic rules. As we have pointed out, native speaker communicative competence includes intuitions that are very useful in interpreting empirical data, but this does not mean that native speakers have conscious awareness of these patterns, much less the ability to describe them with any degree of accuracy. What native speakers know how to describe is what they perceive as the norms of speech behavior. That is, we can all describe what we believe people in our speech communities should do, but without scientific analysis, we are not able to say what they (or we ourselves) actually do. We have conscious access to the norms, but not to the actuality of our speech behavior. Indeed, the sociolinguistic literature is replete with empirical evidence of the inadequacy of native speaker intuitions (e.g., Blum and Gumperz, 1972; Brouwer et al., 1979; Labov, 1966). Often incomplete or inaccurate information finds its way into the very textbooks we use, as Pica (1983) has so cogently pointed out with respect to the use of the definite and indefinite article in English.

An example of this problem, and one that goes to the heart of the issue we are dealing with here, is that language learners are usually taught that the appropriate response to a compliment in American English is to accept it with a simple "Thank you." While this may seem correct in terms of the perceived norms of the target society, it does not take into account the social variation which motivated the very different response types found in the actual spontaneous behavior of native speakers. It is true that a simple "Thank you" is nearly always appropriate as a compliment response in American English. Indeed, it may even be the only appropriate response in certain contexts. When lower-status females are complimented by upper-status males or by strangers, a "Thank you" response is entirely appropriate, as the following example from Yoshiko Okushi's (1987) data shows:

Male dentist in 40's to female hygienist in 20's, both American:

A: Your hair looks good.

B: Thank you.

What has not been explained to language learners, largely because the information has, until now, been unavailable, is that the use of "Thank you" is heavily conditioned by status and social distance. As we have seen, the compliment is often intended as an opening strategy to signal to the addressee that the speaker would like to engage in further conversation and, indeed, to create or enhance a relationship.

Taught to say "Thank you" in situations where a native speaker would take the compliment as an opening to negotiate a relationship with the speaker, the learner is misled into making responses which have exactly the opposite of the desired effect -- responses which create distance rather than solidarity between native and non-native speakers. The following examples, the first two from data collected by Kyung-Suk kim (1987), the third from that of Paul Calzada (1987), and the fourth from Yoshiko Okushi (1987), will demonstrate this point.

American female student to her Korean male classmate:

A: Your English is good.
B: (little hesitation) Thank you.

An American female to a Korean male at church function:

A: Your pronunciation is so nice.
B: [No response -- topic change.]

Two female students, one American, one Pakistani are sitting alone in a classroom together waiting for the other students and the professor to arrive:

A: Your English is fluent.
B: [No response]

Two women, a native speaker and a non-native speaker of English meet for the first time at a cocktail party. The American says:

A: You have such a lovely accent.
B: [No response]

In the above examples, the compliments about the addressee's English proficiency and/or pronunciation illustrate what may be regarded as almost a standard or formulaic conversation opener used by native to non-native speakers, and needs to be understood as such by non-native speakers. Rather than a modest "Thank you" or no response at all, behavior which effectively blocks attempts at further interaction on the part of Americans, language learners need to know how to respond in ways that help to support a continuation of talk.

As we have seen, compliments on belongings and appearance are very frequently used by speakers of American English as leads into longer conversational sequences. This too is often misunderstood by non-native speakers of English who, wishing to show modesty and having been taught that "Thank you" is the proper response to a compliment, will often inadvertently resist such attempts at conversational openings made by Americans, either by closing the exchange by thanking, or by not responding at all. As we

see from the following example, the American may make a second attempt, but when this also is seemingly rejected, the effort is abandoned:

American female student to her Chinese female classmate:

A: Your blouse is beautiful.
B: Thank you.
A: Did you bring it from China?
B: Yeah.

Other, similar attempts to open conversations, however superficial, are typically met with little or no response:

A young non-native speaking woman stops at a street corner to buy fruit from an American male black peddler who has a stand there. She has bought from him before and he greets her saying:

A: Good to see you again. I'm so glad -- because you're so pretty.
B: Thank you.

Even in situations which are ripe for the initiation of conversations which the American speaker clearly wishes to engage in, non-native speakers frequently fail to respond in a way which would allow for such interactions to take place. As the following examples illustrate, such openings, if responded to, could be of great benefit to the non-native as a means of forming friendly relationships with neighbors or other members of the host community, and thereby learning to interact with a variety of people and gaining the opportunity to practice using the target language:

A is a woman in her mid-seventies and the landlady of the house where B, a Korean male student, lives. B had just returned from church on a Sunday and met A in the hallway. She stopped to have a chat and opened the conversation by saying:

A: You look very dressy today.
B: I used to wear like this way in church. (B then turned away and went to his room, leaving the landlady to wonder why he was so unfriendly.)

An American male in his 30's to a Japanese female student in her 20's

A: That's a nice blouse.
B: Thank you.

In the last of these examples of unsuccessful attempts by Americans to open conversations by means of complimenting, the addressees, either because of lack of proficiency or a desire to show modesty, do not respond at all to the speaker's compliments, even though in both cases they are at social gatherings designed (by a church organization to which all belong) to facilitate friendships among American and international members, and are, in fact, co-workers in the organization:

At a crowded Thanksgiving dinner party for international students. A is an American male and B is a female Chinese student. Both work together for the religious organization which is hosting the party. A is in his mid-30's and B in her early 20's.

A: That's neat! (referring to a Chinese satin coat B is wearing)
B: [No response]

Two Americans, a male and a female, meet a Chinese female at a traditional American holiday dinner arranged for international students by a religious organization to which all three belong. All are in their mid-twenties and have met before. The American male attempts to begin a conversation with the Chinese woman by commenting on her jewelry:

A: What's that necklace you're wearing?
B: It's a Chinese fan with a pheonix on it.
A: Oh, that's neat.
B: [No response]

While it is possible that since the American speakers in the above examples were male while the non-native addressees were female, some constraints concerning behavior between the sexes might have had a conditioning effect on the above responses, no such argument can be made for the following examples:

At a noisy monthly international church lunch. A and B are both females in their mid-20's. Both are staff members of the church organization but B is also a student. A is American and B is Chinese. A is attempting to make friends but B has no idea how to help develop the relationship.

A: It's pretty. I like this sweater.
B: Thank you.

American female dancing teacher to Japanese female student of approximately the same age:

A: You're doing good.

B: Thank you.

A is an elderly American woman, neighbor of B who is a female Japanese student.

A: You talk good English.

B: Thank you.

A: You went to school to pick it up, right?

B: Uh-huh.

A: That's good.

B: [No response]

Two female graduate students, one American, one Japanese, meet in the cafeteria of International House. Both are in their late 20's.

A: This is a nice sweater. Nice color.

B: Oh, this? I brought it from Japan.

A: I like it. Nice color. Very nice.

B: Thank you.

In this connection, it is important for the learner to be aware that the use of the expression "Thank you" among speakers of American English is subject to great variation depending on the social distance of the interlocutors. Thus, "Thank you" is usually followed or substituted by a very different response pattern when the interlocutors are equal in status, and particularly when they are both female. It is among these interlocutors (those in The Bulge) that one finds responses that frequently lead to long and elaborated complimenting sequences which have the effect of establishing or reaffirming friendly relationships.

While many examples in the native speaker data concern performance and/or ability, the pattern of elaborated complimenting sequences is at least as typical of those which have to do with appearance or possessions. The next example will demonstrate the marked difference in both form and function, typical of those which regularly occur between status-equal Americans. A further point illustrated in this example is that such interactions may involve more than two participants. It should be noted that the length of the sequence is not at all unusual:

In this situation, A, B and C are all American females.

A: That's a nice sweater, B.

B: Thanks.

[a few minutes pass]

A: That really is a nice sweater.

C: It really is - very nice. Where'd you get it?

B: I got it at X in exchange for the red bag.

C: Oh, you got rid of the red bag!

B: Yeah, well what else could I do with it?

C: I think you did exactly the right thing with it. That sweater is great.

A: It really is.

B: I like it too. I mean, I needed a new black sweater. But what makes it so great?

A: The neckline is really good on you.

C: And the weave is unusual and very elegant.

A: It fits very well too.

C: Does it have shoulder pads? [feeling] Yes, but they look good.

A: They're not too big - they fit just right.

B: Well, that's what I thought. I plan to wear it with a lot of dresses and I think it'll be practical.

C: It will - it should be with most of your dresses.

B: That was the idea.

C: I'll have to look over at X's too. I could use something like that.

B: They've got a good selection.

Not only does this sequence demonstrate the way a compliment, when the response of the addressee permits, may open into an elaborated affirmation of approval and solidarity, it also shows that complimenting is far from being a simple two-turn act but may comprise multiple turns.

While the above example is not atypical with respect to length, it is important to recognize that depending upon the setting, compliment sequences may also be considerably shorter, and may be accepted or denied without losing their effect, as the following brief examples show:

A and B, female American colleagues pass each other in the hallway of the building where they both work. Both are in a hurry. A points to B's dress:

A: That's a beautiful color.

B: I love it too.

Two female Americans meet and A says to B:

A: I really like that dress.

B: I hate it. It looks like a bag.

Clearly, there is great variation in the rules and patterns which constrain both native and non-native speech behavior in English. It has been the intention of this paper to provide some insight into the complexity of this variation by focusing specifically on only one small aspect - that of complimenting behavior. That the analysis given here is representative of a much larger body of information, so far largely untapped, will, I hope, present a challenge to future research.

The research approach described here, as well as The Bulge Theory which derives from it, provides insights into American culture which could prove invaluable to language learners who are planning to live and/or work among U.S. English speakers. Once an overall picture of the dynamics of social interaction is gained, it will be much easier for non-native speakers of English to interact effectively with members of the target language community. Having seen the importance of negotiating personal relationships, both learners and native speakers will be able to avoid much of the miscommunication and frustration which so often results in dysfunctional interactions. The end result of gaining such insights into the way speakers of the new language behave is that learners will be able to interpret what is meant by what is said to them and, just as important, will gain control over the way in which they present themselves to others.

It is only through the dissemination of sociolinguistic findings regarding both the linguistic forms and the factors conditioning their use that we can hope to guide learners of English in their acquisition of the intricate variation involved in such speech behavior as that exemplified by the study of compliment/response sequences. The explanatory and predictive power of The Bulge Theory has been shown to apply to all speech acts/sequences so far investigated in the context of U.S. English communities (Wolfson, 1988a). Further, we have good reason to believe that the patterns it describes hold for many other English speaking communities around the world. It is at this level - both in

terms of concrete descriptions of sociolinguistic variation and of the more abstract sociocultural patterning which underlies it, that there is most hope of success in imparting the crucial facts which will enable language learners to achieve communicative competence in the target language.

From the point of view of native speakers, the insights to be gained from such analysis of the variation in their own speech behavior and the underlying sociocultural patterns it demonstrates, provides a view of the way in which their own society is structured which may open the way to a new and deeper appreciation of the way their social world operates. It is only by bringing these patterns to the conscious attention of community members, and by comparing them to the very different patterns to be found in the speech behavior of people from different cultural backgrounds, that we can hope to avoid misunderstandings at both the individual and the societal level. It is through efforts such as these that we may work to attain true intercultural communication.

¹To appear in Eisenstein, Miriam (ed.) Variation in Second Language Acquisition: Empirical Views.

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