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A Study of Compliments from a Cross-Cultural Perspective: Japanese vs. American English

A STUDY OF COMPLIMENTS FROM A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE:

Japanese vs. American English

Midori Daikuhara

Introduction

Much has been studied recently about the speech behavior associated with compliment/response interaction in American English. We are aware of many of the specific rules of speaking concerning this particular speech act, and how or what kind of cultural values and norms are expressed through compliments in American English (Manes and Wolfson 1981; Wolfson 1981, etc.). However, as Wolfson says, "There has been very little systematic comparison from the point of view of speech acts and rules of speaking" (Wolfson 1981: 117); in other words, we do not know very much about the ways in which the patterns and norms of interaction concerning compliments vary from one speech community or culture to another. Such systematic comparison is greatly needed in order to understand the sources of communicative interference which may occur among interlocutors from different cultures. Japanese speakers' negative remarks on the excessive number of insincere or embarrassing compliments given them by Americans seem to exemplify such misunderstandings.

In this paper, compliment/response interaction in Japanese will be

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analyzed and compared with the work of Manes and Wolfson 1981) on compliments in American English. Several perspectives will be considered, including those proposed by Wolfson, as follows:

Speech acts differ cross-culturally not only in the way they are realized but also in their distribution, their frequency of occurrence, and in the functions they serve (Wolfson 1981: 123). (emphasis supplied)

In addition, cultural assumptions reflected in Japanese compliments will be discussed and contrasted with American values discussed by Manes (1983), who calls compliments "a mirror of cultural values".

Method

Subjects

About 50 upper-middle class Japanese subjects (male and female) living in the University of Pennsylvania area participated in this study. About half of them are graduate students and the other half are their spouses. Their ages range from 24 to 35 and the length of their stays in the United States from two months to a year and a half. Judging from personal observation, complimenting behavior among members of this group of native speakers of Japanese appears not to be affected greatly by American norms, although their behavior may change when they interact with Americans. In particular, the spouses (all female) have little contact with Americans and are unlikely to have been affected by American norms.¹

Data collection procedure

The analysis is based on a corpus of 115 examples of compliments given and received by the subjects described above, in naturally-occurring speech situations which I observed or in which I participated. Careful records were kept about the interlocutors' age, sex, and relationships; about the situations in which compliments were given; and about non-verbal cues or what Hymes calls "key" (Hymes 1972). This procedure was relatively easy for me, since I am a native speaker of Japanese and a member of this particular speech community (c.f. Schneider 1968).

An ethnographic approach was used to study the subjects' communicative behavior. Other methods, such as interviews or questionnaires, which look into native speakers' intuitions, were rejected because of their often-noted limitations (c.f. Wolfson 1976). Native-speaker intuition is said to be an inaccurate measure of speech behavior, because speech behavior often operates below the level of conscious awareness. For instance, it is commonly believed that the Japanese do not give many compliments, while Americans do so excessively. One of my Japanese friends who had found out about my research said sympathetically, "You must have a lot of trouble gathering data because Japanese people don't give compliments as much as Americans do." This belief was found to be false. To my surprise, I noticed that the Japanese people in my data also exchanged compliments frequently.²

Limitations of this study

There are several limitations to this study. One problem involves the process of translation. It is very hard and sometimes almost impossible to find the exact word in English to correspond to a Japanese utterance. As a result, some Japanese words require an explanation in English to show their nuances of meaning.

Secondly, due to the limited number of examples, the limited range of speakers and speech situations, and the relationships of the interlocutors, we cannot claim that the results of this study show the whole picture of compliment/response interaction in Japanese. For example, there was no subject who was a total stranger and most of the subjects shared equal status. Thus, the results are confined to this particular speech community, and no generalizations can be made from them; nor should the results be compared with American behavior in complimenting found across a broad range of speakers and speech situations. However, it is hoped that this pilot study will reveal some of the rules of speaking unique to Japanese or, at the very least, different from those in American English.

Linguistic Patterning

In examining compliments in my data for linguistic patterning, I found, to my surprise, that 80% of them featured an adjective to express a positive evaluation, just as Manes and Wolfson (1981) found in their data in American English. In addition, the most frequently used adjectives in both Japanese and American English happened to be

semantically similar, Japanese being ii (25% of all adjectives used in my data) which can be translated as either "nice" or "good" depending on the object being modified. Examples are as follows:

1. Okusan mo sensu ii desuyo. (You have good taste, too.)
2. Sono burausu ii wa. (Your blouse is nice.)

This may not be a surprising result considering the weak or general semantic load these words have in both languages.

Sugoi is the second most frequently used adjective (23% of all adjectives), and may be translated as "great" in English in some cases. However, in many cases sugoi contains the meaning of "surprising", "beyond my imagination", "unbelievable" or "extraordinary" and expresses the speaker's respect or reverence toward the person being complimented. For example:

3. A: (playing the piano)
B: Sugoi!
(A and B are acquaintances, both male in late twenties.)

Although sugoi in some examples, when stated with a normal tone of voice, means nothing more than "nice" or "good", most often the tone of voice shows the speaker's surprise or pleasure. Frequent use of such an adjective in a superlative sense may be unique to complimenting behavior in Japanese, when compared with the less frequent use of "great" (6.2%) in the data in English. Thus, the remarks made by the Japanese about exaggerated ways of giving compliments in English may reveal that they are not aware of their own speech behavior. In fact, the subjects under study make use of such exaggerated expressions in compliments more often than native speakers of English. ³

Such frequent use of this adjective, sugoi, in complimenting is significant when we consider the vague or unfixed meaning it carries. While the adjective "nice" carries an explicitly positive meaning in American English, at least on the surface, sugoi does not always carry the positive evaluation of other adjectives such as ii ("nice" or "good"). Sugoi can be used for both positive and negative evaluation, meaning either "surprisingly good" or "surprisingly bad". Thus, whether the remark using this adjective is a compliment or not depends on the context. Sometimes it is not clear even to the person who hears it, as the following example shows:

4. A: Koko ni kite karei raisu ni kai hodo tsukurimashitayo.
(I have cooked curry and rice twice since I came here.)
B: Sugoi! (with surprised expression)
C: Nee, imano 'sugoi' wa nani o hometeru koto ni naruno?
Performance? Soretomo ability? (Well, what did you
compliment with 'sugoi', her performance or ability?"
(A & B knew I (C) was studying the way people give compliments,
so I asked this question to see if my understanding was right.)
B: E? Boku hometatsumori naikedo. (laughter)
Nikai shika tsukuttakoto naino? Tte tsumori
dattakedo. (What? I didn't mean it to be a compliment.
(laughter) I meant 'Only twice?')
(A is a female student, 24 years old, living by herself. She has been
here for more than a year. B is a male student, 28, and C is myself.
A and C are friends and B is C's husband.)

Considering the fact that other adjectives used in the compliments in my data are clearly used as positive evaluations, the frequent use of sugoi, which can be used both positively or negatively, is quite remarkable.

Other adjectives which appeared frequently enough to be noted here are kirei ("beautiful" or "clean", 12%) and kawaii ("pretty" or "cute", 8.6%). Two of these words, "beautiful" and "pretty", were also counted

as frequently used in the English data.

5. Kono kuruma kirei desune. (This car is beautiful.)

6. Kawaii! ("Cute!", pointing to a bag)
(This was said by a female to her friend, both age 24).

Lexical Distribution in Adjectival Compliments

<u>Japanese</u>		<u>American English</u>	
	80%*		80%
<u>ii</u> (nice/good)	25%**	nice	23%
		good	20%
<u>sugoi</u> (great, etc.)	23%		
<u>kirei</u> (beautiful/clean)	12%	pretty	9.7%
<u>kawaii</u> (pretty/cute)	8.6%	beautiful	9.2%
<u>oishii</u> (good/delicious)	7.6%	great	6.2%
<u>erai</u> (great or diligent used only for animate nouns)	6.5%		

*80% of the total data.

(Japanese/115, American English/686 compliments)

**The number indicates the % of the total adjectival compliments.

***Note that the frequently-used adjectives are the same in the two languages.

As for the syntax used in compliments, not much can be concluded here because of the small number of examples collected. However, many of the compliments which made use of an adjective consisted of an adjective by itself, especially sugoi. In part, this may be due to the nature of Japanese syntax, in which subjects are often omitted when they are known to the interlocutors. However, because of the omission of the subject, in the case of "Sugoi!", it can be interpreted as "You are sugoi!" or "That which you have done (or are doing) is sugoi!" (compliments on ability or on performance). In any event, the fact that many compliments are short, consisting of one adjective, and thus not perceptually salient, could be one possible explanation for the misconception that the Japanese do not use many compliments.

Japanese speakers in my study also employed adverbs to carry a positive semantic load in compliments (11%), albeit to a lesser degree than adjectives. Yoku ("well", 75% of all adverbs used) was the most frequently used, just as in English.

7. Yoku dekiteru janai. (You did very well.)
(This was said by a male student, age 28, to a female student, age 24. He was helping her with her paper on a subject in his area of expertise.)

Nouns were also used in my data (7%). Among them, the pattern mitai (=N: (S) be/look like---) was often used to compare a person (or object) to someone (or something) having the characteristic or ability being complimented.

8. Puro no gorufah mitai! (You are like a professional golfer!)

9. Sono nekkuresu Tifanii no mitai. (Your necklace looks like one from Tiffany's.)

One of the most remarkable differences between patterns of complimenting in American English and those in Japanese is found in the use of the "I like/love NP" pattern. This pattern never appeared in my data. Several verbs such as niau ("suit"), as in Kosuchuumu ga oniai desune (That costume suits you well) were used sometimes (2%), but the equivalents of "like" or "love" were never used. The word "love" in Japanese, aishiteru or daisuki, sounds too strong to be used in compliments or even in other situations in everyday conversation; this may lead Japanese people to feel that the frequent use of the "I love NP" structure in compliments in American English sounds exaggerated.

Finally, considering the fact that the majority of compliments in my data made use of a very small, restricted set of adjectives, we may be able to conclude that compliments in Japanese show a lack of originality or are formulaic, at least in terms of semantics. Manes and Wolfson (1981) drew the same conclusion about compliments in Standard American English.

Topic

Praised attributes

What can be said about compliments in Japanese with regard to topic? What attributes are regarded as positive in compliments given by Japanese speakers, and how do these attributes relate to the cultural assumptions of the speakers? Are the praised attributes in

Japanese compliments different from those in American English? Wolfson writes, "What counts as a compliment may differ very much from one society to another" (Wolfson 1981: 117).

As noted by Wolfson, compliments in American English fall into two major categories: 1) those having to do with appearance (apparel, hair-do, homes, furniture, automobiles, and other possessions); and 2) those which comment on ability in general and those which refer to a specific act well done (Wolfson 1980: 90). In analyzing compliments in my data, I came to the conclusion that there is a great similarity between compliments in American English and those in Japanese with regard to the attributes praised.

10. Iiwane. ("Nice", looking at a little ceramic pot)
11. Kawaii! Konna no hajimete mita wa. ("Cute! I have never seen one like that.", looking at the hat the listener was wearing)
12. Ii desune, sore. ("That's nice", pointing to the sweat-shirt the listener was wearing)
13. Ii wayo. ("Nice", looking at the hair-do of a person who has just come back from the barber)
14. Oishii! ("Good!", eating a cream puff the listener had made)
15. Eigo ga dekiru kara bacchiri daijoobu desho.
(You must be doing fine because you are good at English.)
16. Naisu! ("Nice (shot)!", referring to a golf shot a listener had made)

However, some examples may not be considered to be complimentary by native speakers of English:

17. A: Okusan wa daigaku wa dochira desuka? (Where did you do your undergraduate study?)
B: XX Daigaku desu. (At XX College.)
C: E?! Sugoi desunee. XX Daigaku desuka. ("Really?",

showing surprise. "That's/you are sugoi. XX College.")

A: Sugoi, ojosan! (That's/you are sugoi.)

(You are) a well-bred lady!)

(XX College is often said to be a famous private women's college for students from rich families.)

B: Sonna. Yoku yuu...ZZ Daigaku no hoo ga sugoi desho?

(No. That's not true...I hear that ZZ College is more sugoi.)

(B knows C graduated from ZZ College and said she heard that many rich, well-bred girls went to ZZ College.)

C: Sonna koto nai! (No, that's not true!)

(This conversation took place at a party among A (a male, age 29), C (his wife, age 26 or 27) and B (a female, age 24). A and C were new to B.)

Complimenting someone so explicitly on his/her graduation from a certain school and on being well-bred may sound funny to a speaker of American English. However, compliments such as the one above do not seem to be unusual in Japanese and, in fact, there were several more examples in my data of complimenting on one's being well-bred.

Complimenting a person's ability or his/her character as shown below was also common:

18. A: Nihon Ginko kara kiteiru XX desu. (My name is XX, from the Bank of Japan.)

B: Ooi Sugoi. (Oh! You are sugoi.— meaning you must be an elite person to work for such a major bank.)

(A is a student at Wharton, age 29, sent by the central bank of Japan. He is introducing himself. B is also a student, about the same age, sent by his company. They are new acquaintances.)

19. Harvard Law School dato yuu to keibetsu sarenai desho?

(Girls will not despise you if you tell them you are a student at Harvard Law School, right?)

(This was said by a male, age 28, a student at Wharton, to his friend from Harvard Law School, a male, age 29. Judging from his manner, he was half teasing his friend, but half serious also.)

20. A: Shufu yattereba betsu ni hatarakanaku temo ii monne.

(I don't have to go to work as long as I work as a housewife.)

B: Soone. Goshujin kasegi ii monne. (That's right. Your husband earns a lot of money.)

A: Sonna koto naiwayo. (No. That's not true.)

(A: female, age 24; B: female, age 24)

21. A: Fudan wa nani nasatterun desuka? (What do you do every day?)
B: Ee, daigakuin ni itterun desu. (Well, I go to graduate school.)
A: E? Sugoi! (Really? Sugoi!--exclaiming with surprise, meaning "That's beyond my imagination" or "You must be very clever.")
B: Iie. Sugokunanka naindesu yo. (No, not at all.)
A: Jaa eigo odekini narunda. (So, you can speak English very well.)
B: Sonna koto naidesu yo. (That's not true.)
A: Watashi towa hanashi no reveru ga chigaunda. (You are at quite a different level.)
B: Sonna koto naidesu yo. (That's not true.)

(A is a female, age 26 or 27, who has been in Philadelphia for a few months. Her husband goes to school there. B is a female, age 24, who has been in Philadelphia for more than a year. They recently became acquaintances because both of their husbands go to the same school.

These examples indicate that native speakers of Japanese tend to judge others on such formal attributes as whether they go to famous schools, are from well-bred families, have money, and so on, and they compliment one another on these attributes very explicitly and openly. Such a tendency in Japanese compliments shows the strong cultural value attached to formal attributes found in modern Japanese society. I am not saying that speakers of American English do not make the same value judgements, but I doubt they express them quite so openly in compliments. As a result of such differences, when they hear these remarks produced by native speakers of Japanese who intend to give compliments, Americans may be puzzled, or they may misunderstand the speakers' intention.

In terms of cultural values, some interesting comments can be made in reference to example 22 in which one married woman, age 26 or 27, compliments another married woman, age 24, on her graduate studies. This clearly shows that it is very rare for married Japanese women to

continue their education, especially abroad. Thus, the fact that this woman was pursuing graduate studies surprised the other woman, which, as a result, caused her to give such a strong compliment. Another illustration concerning the value attached to women in Japanese society is example 21. Saying that a woman does not have to work if her husband earns enough money seems to reflect the negative attitude people have in Japanese society in general toward married women who work. I remember one Japanese woman complaining, "I want to go out to work, but my husband and his mother won't let me. They say, 'If you work, people will think your husband doesn't earn enough'".

Another difference found between these two cultures is that the Japanese very seldom compliment their spouses, parents or children in front of a third party. As a result of this, they are frequently shocked when American people praise their own families in public. The Japanese tend to perceive such conduct as self-praise, because they consider children, spouses or parents as "possessions" or a part of themselves. In fact, they often say negative things about their families in public so as to downgrade themselves and to thus appear modest.

As has been shown in the examples above, a great similarity can be found between American and Japanese compliments in the attributes that are praised. At the same time, however, some examples show that there are differences which may cause communicative interference between speakers of Japanese and American English. From these examples, we can infer the different cultural assumptions or values of these two

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societies.

Order of frequency

Differences between complimenting behavior in the two cultures may be more apparent in the frequency order of each topic or attribute. Wolfson notes that where status is equal or where the speaker is of lower status than the addressee, the topic of the compliment in American English is most likely to fall into the appearance/possession category, such as appearance compliments dealing with apparel (Wolfson 1983: 90). It is interesting to note that in my data the number of compliments that fell into that category accounts for only 29% of the total. (As noted above, most of the compliments in my data were gathered from interlocutors who shared the same status.) A more striking difference is that among those compliments, only 7 (6% of the total) dealt with apparel. In addition, an analysis of these seven examples revealed that only one of them was a genuine compliment, others being given to tease the addressee, to obtain information, or to compliment apparel in a situation in which such a compliment was expected. Examples are:

22. A: Ii desune, sore. ("That's nice", pointing to the red sweatshirt B was wearing)

B: Soo? Gakko no desuyo. (You think so? I bought it at the Bookstore.)

A: Ii wa. Watashi mo hoshiindake do takaidesho?
(Nice. I always wanted one, but it's expensive, right?)

(A is a housewife, about age 30. B is a female, age 24, a student. They are acquaintances sharing the same status. It seems that A complimented B's sweatshirt because she herself always wanted to find out its price.)

23. Kore ga uwasano? Ii ja nai. (This is what you were talking about, right? Nice.)

(This was said by a female, age 24, to her friend, a female, also

age 24, upon seeing her dress. She knew her friend would wear her favorite dress, the one she had been talking about earlier that day, so she complimented her on the dress when they met again that night.)

24. Wa! Sugoi. Oniaidesu ne. (Oh! Sugoi. That costume suits you.) (laughter)
(This was said by a female, age 24, to her acquaintance, male, age about 29, who dressed up as Dracula for Halloween. She was teasing him.)

The only genuine example in which one complimented another's apparel was:

25. Wa! Kawaii! ("Oh! Cute!", looking at the addressee's dress)
(This was said by a female, age 24, to her friend, a female, age 28. They hadn't seen each other for some months. It was said when the speaker met the addressee at a party.)

On the other hand, there were more than ten situations involving native speakers of Japanese in which I observed no compliment concerning someone's appearance; in these situations I would have expected a compliment if the speaker or the addressee had been a native speaker of American English. For example, I did not give a compliment to somebody even when I found his/her apparel nice; instead, I sometimes kept that opinion to myself when the addressee was Japanese. I automatically gave compliments when the addressee was an American sharing the same status. There were also several occasions in which I was not complimented on my dress by a Japanese speaker, but was complimented by an American on the same dress in the same situation.

My data show that Japanese speakers commented more indirectly that others looked nice, as the following examples show:

26. Ah. Odekake desuka? (Ah. Are you going out?) (with smile).
(This was said by a female, about age 26, to her acquaintance, a

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female, age 24, when they met in the elevator in the apartment building where they both lived. The speaker realized from the way she was dressed that the addressee was going out for something special. She did not, however, give a compliment like, "You look nice" or "That's a pretty dress" in Japanese.)

27. Maa. Omekashishite. (Oh. You're really dressed up!)
(This was said by a male, age 28, to his friend's wife, age 24.)

This analysis indicates that Japanese people do not give many compliments concerning appearance, at least in my data. However, it does not mean that they never give compliments of that type. For example, in a very special situation, such as a formal party, native speakers of Japanese, especially women, will frequently compliment each other's clothing; that is, they will compliment another's (usually another woman's) appearance if they find it very nice.⁴ Considering the fact that most women in Japan usually dress nicely, it seems reasonable that they give compliments to each other only when they really dress up.

In American society, on the other hand, the strong value placed on personal appearance for women encourages them to compliment each other's appearance. This value is strongly reinforced by these compliments, which are themselves highly valued. Such an excess of compliments on appearance in English seems to lead the Japanese to believe that American people give many more compliments than the Japanese. This, as a result, seems to trigger the remark made by the Japanese, "American people give an excessive number of compliments in an exaggerated way, like 'Oh! You look fantastic today!' even when I don't think I am wearing anything special. I feel so embarrassed." This is an example of Wolfson's finding that "approval (by the

'complimenter') of something not held in particular esteem by their own native speech communities" can be perceived by the recipients as insincerity (Wolfson 1983: 82). Such compliments may cause misunderstanding of the speaker's intention: people understand the words but not the rules for interpreting them.

In concluding the discussion of "topic", I would like to add that while only 29% of my data fell into the appearance/possession category, 73% fell into the ability/performance category. Among the examples of the latter category, 33% concerned academic standing or hard work in one's studies. This result seems to reflect the values of this particular speech community, which is very academically oriented.

Responses

More vivid cross-cultural differences in my study were found between compliment responses in American English and in Japanese. The analysis of compliment responses shows that 95% of all reactions to praise fell into what Pomerantz (1965) calls "the self-praise avoidance" category, while only 5% shows what she calls "appreciation" (acceptance of a compliment, i.e. "Thank you"). Most of the examples which fell into the latter category were restricted to the compliment/response interaction between rather close friends. Moreover, laughter following a response shows that most of the responses may be regarded as a friendly joke. For example:

28. A: Kirei desune. (It is tidy (or clean), entering B's new apartment.)

B: Oo, kirei daro. (Yeah, isn't it?) (laughter)
(A is a male, age 28, a student. B is a male, age 29, also

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a student. They are close friends.)

Such a restricted or infrequent use of "appreciation" as a response is very unusual when we consider the fact that a simple "thank you" is given more frequently among speakers of American English than any other response. Yet, more interesting or unusual characteristics may be found when we take a close look at the various strategies Japanese people use to avoid self-praise. The most frequent responses to a compliment were, Ie, ie (No, no.) or Sonna koto nai (That's not true), which account for 35% of the first category, self-praise avoidance, or more than one-third of the total. The second most frequent response was a smile or no response at all (27% of the first category). The third was, Soo? (You think so?) (13%). These three responses constitute 75% of the first category, self-praise avoidance, and 72% of the total responses.⁵ These strategies do not seem to be employed as frequently in American English. In particular, the very frequent use of "No, no" as a response is unique to native speakers of Japanese, as the quality being complimented is rarely denied by speakers of American English. Among Americans, such disagreement, when it occurs, is usually restricted to interaction between intimates (Wolfson 1983).⁶

While the responses reported above are rather unusual, those that constitute the rest of the data are more similar to those found in American English. These responses are: to downgrade the value/object being complimented, to say credit belongs elsewhere, or to give information or explanation about what is being complimented without

explicitly accepting the compliment. Examples are:

29. A: Ii ja nai. ("Nice", looking at B's dress)
B: Yaa, demo shiwa darake ni nacchatte. (Well, but it's got a lot of wrinkles.)
(A and B are females, both aged 24, and students.)
30. A: Sugoi. Kore tsukuraretan desuka? ("Sugoi", looking at a piece of cake which was offered by B. "Did you make it?")
B: Ee. Demo kantan desuyo. Hon mite sono mama. (Yes. But it's easy. I just followed the recipe.)
(A is a female, age 26 or 27. B is a female, age 24. They are acquaintances.)
31. A: Academikku desune. ("You are an academically oriented person," hearing that B is taking many classes at school.)
B: Moo taihen desu kedo. (I have to work very hard, though.)
(A is a male student, age 32. B is a female student, age 24.
B downgraded the compliment by claiming that his achievement is due to hard work, not talent.)
32. A: Kawaii! ("Cute!", looking at the shoes B was wearing)
B: Kore nihon de kattan desuyone. (I bought them in Japan.)
(A is a female, age 24. B is a female, age 26. They are acquaintances.)
33. A: Kyoo ichinichiju zutto benkyoyo. (I've been studying all day today.)
B: Erai wane. (You are diligent.)
A: Iyaa, hora, bureikuake ni tesuto dakara (Well, you know, it's because I have a test after the break.)
(A is a female student, age 24. B is a female student, 24. They are friends.)

Going back to the discussion of the uniqueness of the use of "No, no" or "That's not true", we may want to look into this most frequent response to compliments more closely. Almost 80% of the compliments responded to with "No, no" or "That's not true" fell into the ability/-performance category, and the rest into the appearance/possession category. This seems reasonable when we consider that compliments on the latter attributes can be more easily accepted without appearing boastful. If we take a closer look at the way these responses were

given, it becomes apparent that there are two functions of "No, no" or "That's not true"; it is quite hard to distinguish the two. One function is to disagree with the interlocutor or deny the quality being complimented. This is very clear from what is said, and it is often spoken in a little louder voice. The other function, however, is not to show explicit disagreement, but simply to avoid self-praise more indirectly. That is, the latter use of "No, no" seems to mean nothing; it is actually a way to appear modest. Thus, "No, no" appears almost automatically when one receives a compliment, just as "Thank you" does in American English. One example of this usage is:

34. A: Dr. XX wa sugoku ii hito desune. Rooka de attemo 'Hi!
How're you doing?' nante itte kure te yoku oboeteruno.
(Dr. XX is a very nice person. When he sees me in the hall, he says, "Hi! How're you doing?" He remembers me from his class.)
- B: Yoppodo yushuu na seito dattanja naino? (You must have been a very good student, right?)
- A: Iya iya. Tada 100 ten totta no wa Mr. ZZ
to boku dake datta rashiikedo. ("No, no", in a soft voice.
"But I hear that Mr. ZZ and I were the only ones who got 100 points on his test.")

(Both A and B are male students, in their late 20's. They are friends. A responded to the compliment saying, "No, no", but judging from what he said after "No, no", he didn't seem to deny the fact that he was a good student.)

Such usage of "No, no" to show modesty without meaning to deny the quality being complimented, is very frequent; it seems to be the basis of many claims that the Japanese cannot accept compliments. As the following conversation between native speakers of Japanese and American English on a television program shows, such a response from a Japanese speaker often embarrasses an American who does not realize its underlying meaning.

35. A: (after discussing what B has been doing in the U.S.) That's fabulous!
B: No, no, (in a soft voice).
(He is transferring his Japanese rule here.)
Audience: (laughter)
A: (rather embarrassed, repeats the compliment.)
(B is a native speaker of Japanese, about age 60. He is visiting the U.S on a business trip. A is a host of the television show, a native speaker of American English, about age 30).

As has been noted above, compliment responses which express disagreement with the speaker are usually restricted to interactions between intimates in American English. Thus, it seems that a simple "Thank you" sounds more appropriate in this situation. That is the reason why the audience could not help laughing here, and why Speaker A seemed embarrassed by the unexpected response to his compliment.

Why do Japanese speakers in my study respond so frequently to compliments with "No, no"? More than one-third of the total examples in my data were "No, no" or "That's not true". Is it just because they are so modest? More detailed analysis is required. However, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn about the functions of certain compliments and compliment responses.

Many of the compliments collected seem to have the function of showing the speaker's deference to the addressee (especially to those who are acquaintances). In other words, showing one's deference to someone by giving compliments seems to be a communicative strategy of politeness. For example, the use of sugoi in compliments, expressing "You are beyond my imagination" certainly shows one's deference to the recipient of the compliment and creates distance between the interlocutors by putting the recipient above the speaker.

Another way of showing deference would be by downgrading oneself or comparing oneself negatively to the interlocutor in order to maximize the effect of the compliment on the recipient, as Example 22 and the example below show. Such a way of giving compliments also creates distance.

36. A: Kochira wa sugoku odekini naru kedo--- (She (B) was a very good student, but---)
B: Sonna koto nai wayo. (That's not true.)
A: Majime ni benkyo saretete---. Watashi wa zenzen dame de. (She studied very hard---And I was such a bad student.)
B: (protesting) Sonna koto nai wayo! Sochira no hoo koso--- (That's not true! You were the one who was a good student.)

(The husbands of both A and B go to school at Penn. They are about age 26 and are friends. They are talking about the English program they were in last summer. A talks about B to C who is a female, age 24. C has recently met A and B.)

Although the comparison is not always made as explicitly as in the examples above, there is still in some cases a comparison or deference being expressed implicitly by the use of the particle wa after the subject. For instance, in example 37, the first statement by A does not show the comparison between A and B explicitly. This appears in the second statement by A to heighten the effect of this compliment. However, the use of wa in the first line after kochira (polite form of "this person", or "she" in this case) tends to emphasize the subject like "It is she who---", and it implies "She but not I". (It is known that both A and B were students in the same school in this case.) Another example of this kind is:

37. A: Yoshuu no riidingu wa dekiru dake shita hoo ga ii desuyo. (It's better to do the assigned reading as much as possible before the class.)
B: A san wa eigo ga odeki ni naru kara--- (You are good at

English, so you do not have much trouble doing that much reading.)

A: Ie ie sonna koto wa arimasen kedo---(No, no. That's not true, but---)

(A and B are 2nd year students at Wharton. They are now giving advice to 1st year students who are just about to start school. B's compliment on A's being good at English seems to imply with the use of wa that B himself is not as good.)

In examining these examples in my data, I would conclude that showing deference or respect--which seems to create a distance between the interlocutors--is a common way of giving compliments or of being polite.⁷ This may be what Brown and Levinson (1978) call a strategy of "negative politeness".

Returning to the question of the use of "No, no" as a response, I posit one hypothesis, as follows, as to why the Japanese deny compliments. Such a response is triggered by the sort of compliments discussed above. In other words, the distance created by the person who compliments his/her interlocutor has to be denied by the recipient in order to return politeness to the giver; this denial of the compliments serves to sustain harmony between the parties and to emphasize their commonality.⁸ This seems to have a somewhat similar function to the strategy of downgrading the compliment by returning the compliment or by praising the same referent as the first person has. Notice the comparison of these two strategies, one common in Japanese and the other common in American English (though it can be found in Japanese, too):

- (1) A: B san wa eigo ga odeki ni naru kara---(You are good at English, so---) (implying that A himself is not.)
B: Iie sonna koto arimasen kedo---(No, no. That's not true, but---.) (in a soft voice)

(2) A: Y'r' looking good.

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B: Great. So'r' you. (from Pomerantz corpus)

Example (1) from my data shows that A's compliment to B implies deference or creates a distance; this is denied by B, implying that B's ability is no better than A's. Example (2) in the Pomerantz corpus shows that by returning the compliment, B says that A looks as good as B does. In both cases, the interlocutors try to keep harmony and emphasize the commonality they share.

As has been described above, responses made by the Japanese in my data show both similarities and differences to those by native speakers of American English. Yet, the differences--especially the use of "No, no"--are found more frequently than the similarities. Consequently, they often become the basis of cross-cultural misunderstanding. It is important for a speaker of American English to know that the common fashion of responding to a compliment (i.e., "No, no") by a speaker of Japanese is not only different from the way s/he may expect in that context, but that the use of "No, no" does not necessarily mean to show disagreement with the speaker. For a speaker of Japanese, it is important to realize that showing disagreement with the speaker (although s/he does not mean to disagree) is less frequent and usually restricted to interaction between intimates, and that a simple "Thank you" is virtually always appreciated in American English (Wolfson 1983: 81).

Function

Wolfson and Manes (1981) argue that the main function of

complimenting in American English is to create and maintain what Brown and Gilman (1960) have termed "solidarity". This may be the reason why the great majority of compliments occur between status equals who are potential friends, or whom Wolfson (1985) calls the people in "the Bulge". Complimenting in Japanese seems to have the same function. For instance, a flow of compliments was exchanged between a woman who has been in the U.S. for more than a year and her new acquaintances--two women who have recently arrived and who are already friends--when they visited her apartment for the first time. This seems to indicate that complimenting one another serves to create harmony or solidarity and serves an important interactional function. In sharp contrast to the way native speakers of American English affirm their common ground, the way of complimenting displayed by these Japanese speakers showed deference toward the recipient and created social distance; nevertheless, harmony and solidarity were maintained by the recipient's denial of the compliment.

The fact that compliments are expected under certain circumstances also reveals that people need them as an expression of approval from others. The following example shows such an expectation:

38. A: Oishii. (Good or delicious.)

B: Soo? Sukoshi furuku natte nai? (You think so?
Doesn't it taste a bit old?)

C: Mada aisukuriim shika tabete nai yo. (laugh)
(She has only tasted the ice cream so far.)

(A and B, age 24, are females. C, age 28, is B's husband. A and B are friends. A is at B and C's apartment and is offered a piece of pie, which B made some days ago, with a scoop of ice cream. Now, A has had the first bite, which B did not see. However, B automatically thinks that A has tasted the pie when she says, "Good", as B was expecting a compliment.)

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Compliments in Japanese in my data function in many of the same ways as compliments in American English, as described by Wolfson and Manes (1981). For example, they serve as required expressions of approval (see example 39), as thanks, as greetings, or as introductions to conversations:

39. Konoaida no shuukuriim sugoku oishikatta.
(The cream puff you made the other day was very good.)

40. Arigato. Oishikattawa. (Thanks. It (the cake you made) was good.)

(In this case, the compliment forms part of a thanking routine which is not infrequent in American English, as noted by Wolfson and Manes 1981).

41. A! Kawaii! ("Oh! Cute!", pointing to the bag her friend held)
(This was said as an opening of interaction, instead of a greeting, and it led to a conversation.)

As far as I have noticed, the functions served by the compliment in Japanese are very similar to those in American English. Yet, a more detailed analysis with more data may reveal unique functions of complimenting in Japanese.

Conclusion

The analysis of a corpus of 115 examples of compliments has shown that there are both similarities and differences between Japanese and American compliments. As Wolfson says, such differences may result in more serious misunderstanding because of the fact that there is much similarity which leads speakers to assume that the use of this speech act is identical in the two societies. The great differences along the dimensions of praised attributes, frequency of occurrence of each topic, and responses may well cause the speaker to behave

inappropriately in intercultural communication if s/he does not know the rules of speaking that his/her interlocutor follows. This may result in serious communicative interference if the interlocutor interprets such conduct as an insult according to his/her own rules.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, I will refrain from making claims for the validity of the results of this study for all native speakers of Japanese, or even, for all Japanese speakers in their 20's and 30's in the upper-middle class. However, I believe the results discussed above give the reader some idea of the ways in which the Japanese give and receive compliments. And I hope this will be one step toward more extensive cross-cultural comparisons of rules of speaking which will help to minimize intercultural miscommunication.

1. There are several reasons for their not having been affected: 1) most of them interact among themselves more often than they do with native speakers of English; 2) the length of their stays in the U.S. is not long enough for them to have been affected greatly, especially considering their age at arrival and cultural established background; 3) most of them will return to Japan after two years and thus do not have a very strong motivation to adopt American cultural norms.

2. The results of my study contradict the results reported by Barnlund and Araki in their study of compliments in Japanese and English (1985). That is, they report that expressions of praise (compliments) appear to occur with far greater frequency in American culture than

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Japanese culture. I assume that such a result is due to the data collection method they used, which was a series of interviews with Japanese (both those in Japan and in the U.S.) and American university students.

3. Barnlund and Araki (1985) report that "Americans tended to employ a wider variety of adjectives and many superlatives ("beautiful", "great", "brilliant", "superb", "fantastic"); Japanese employed a more limited vocabulary and the terms used were less extreme ("nice", "good", "well", "intelligent", "all right"). This result is very different from mine, and I assume, again, that it is because of their method which relies on the intuition of the native speakers of the language.

4. Of course, such a generalization may be premature because of the limited range of subjects in my study. It may be revealed that Japanese women compliment very frequently on appearance if we look into the behavior of older women or interlocutors who are more intimate.

5. Some responses were a combination of the above reactions and those which will appear below.

6. Note that most of the subjects in my data are people sharing the same status, and are acquaintances or friends rather than intimates (such as members of the same family).

7. Of course, I cannot generalize for all kinds of relationships that interlocutors may have.

8. See example 22, A's second statement. It cannot be translated into "That's great", which a native speaker of American English might say. This is because "That's great" shows that the speaker shares the same value, in this case, "Going to graduate school is a great thing", while sugoi in this example shows deference toward the recipient; this deference creates social distance. That is why B would be able to say "Thank you" in response to "That's great", but not to sugoi.

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