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Semantic and Syntactic Pattern Differences between Native and Nonnative Speakers of English --- the Case of Compliments

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1. Introduction

One of the important tasks in learning a foreign language is learning the appropriate use of linguistic forms and structures in communicative situations. Therefore, for a number of years many foreign language researchers, pedagogues, and syllabus designers have placed great emphasis on ESL or EFL learning and instruction (Wilkins, 1976; Canale and Swain, 1980; Westney, 1981; Guntermann and Phillips, 1981; Brown, 1984; Allen, 1985; Politzer and McGroarty, 1985; Savignon, 1985; etc.), but relatively a few have identified and explained the specific components of communicative competence which the foreign language learners need to know to communicate effectively (Walters, 1980; Scarcella, 1980; Carrell and Korneker, 1981; Wolfson, 1981). If the learner's needs should be met, and if we wish to have a better understanding of the nature of communicative competence, speech acts which can represent the important aspect of communicative competence must be investigated.

In the current study we are primarily concerned with identifying and explaining semantic and syntactic pattern differences between native and nonnative speakers of English through a speech act --- compliment. We are

also concerned with semantic and syntactic feature differences between males and females regardless of native or nonnative English speakers.

2. Background

Most of the research that has been done in linguistics, psychology, sociology, and communication on compliments has been done first on language performance. Early work was done by Farson (1963), who discussed negative aspects of compliments as well as positive functions in social interactions. He called compliments a psychological piece of candy. In order to investigate the effect of verbal praise, Catano(1975) conducted an experiment to sixty undergraduate students. In this study he found that the use of verbal praise could improve performance when it was administered by a source of authority in an environment where a superior-subordinate relationship was recognized. Turner and Edgley (1974) described compliments in terms of reciprocity. In their study, they found that reciprocity was not a coercive, metaphysical force compelling people to act, but rather a meaningful behavior designed to establish and maintain social relationship. Pomerantz(1978) also made a comprehensive investigation about compliment responses. After he examined all his data, he proposed two systems of constraints on compliment responses: a system of recipients' agreements or disagreements with prior compliments and that of acceptance or rejection of prior compliments. The most comprehensive and systematic study of compliments from the linguistic point of view was done by Manes and Wolfson (1981). After analyzing a tremendous number of data which they collected in a natural setting, they proposed semantic and syntactic compliment formulas. In this study they further discussed the function of these formulas. Knapp, Hopper, and Bell(1985) discussed compliments in terms of a descriptive taxonomy. According to them, most of compliments focused on such content categories as performance, attire/appearance, personality, and possessions. They also classified compliments into four dimensions: direct/indirect, specific/general, comparison/no

comparison, and normal/amplified.

In EFL or ESL research, on the other hand, a beginning has been made in investigating compliments by researchers such as Wolfson (1981) and Araki and Barnlund (1981). Wolfson (1981) investigated compliments from the cross-cultural perspective. In this study, he found that compliments differed cross-culturally not only in the way they were realized, but also in their distribution, their frequency of occurrence and in the function they served. Araki and Barnlund (1981) discussed the manner and meaning of offering compliments in the United States and in Japan. In this study, they found that compliments by Americans were frequent, explicit, direct, and extreme while those by Japanese were rare, indirect, and modest.

Though these two studies in ESL or EFL seem to be significant, they have been done on the basis of relatively unsystematic production data. Therefore, it must be necessary to make a systematic investigation of compliments.

3. Method

Instrument and Implementation

The instrument that was used to collect the data for the current study was a questionnaire which consisted of eight different situations calling for a compliment. These eight situations were constructed on the basis of four different content categories: attire/appearance, performance, personality, and possessions. This categorization of compliments was based on the study of Knapp, Hopper, and Bell (1985). The eight situations were also designed with the following considerations. First, we took into account the fact that the distance of relationship between compliment givers and receivers could possibly have an effect on semantic and syntactic patterns of compliments. Therefore, the relationship was limited either between good friends or between family members. Second, considerations were also given to the fact

that semantic and syntactic compliment features might be different, according to whether compliments would address men or women(see Appendix for this). Finally, we set up some situations to elicit the intensity of compliments(see also Appendix for this).

The questionnaire was administered during October, 1985. Subjects were tested individually in their houses, at the graduate and undergraduate libraries, and at their or the researcher's study cubicles. On the average, the questionnaire took about twenty minutes to complete for native speakers of English but approximately thirty minutes for the nonnatives. The time differences, however, were not taken into account in the current study.

Most of the subjects were more willing to participate in the survey than I had expected.

Hypotheses

1. Semantic and syntactic compliment patterns between two groups of nonnative English speakers would be similar regardless of their first language backgrounds.
2. Noticeable differences in semantic and syntactic compliment features would be found between native English speakers and the nonnative ones.
3. There would be semantic and syntactic compliment distinctions between men and women irrespective of native or nonnative speakers of English.

Subjects

There were three different groups of subjects who participated in the current study. One group consisted of 72 native speakers of American English(34 males and 38 females). Most of them were undergraduate students attending the University of Texas at Austin in the fall of 1985 and their average age was 21.

The other two groups were composed of 77 Korean students(40 males and 37 females) and 73 Chinese students(40 males and 33 females).

Most of them were graduate students attending this university, but a few of them were undergraduate students. Both Korean and Chinese subjects were believed to have received almost the same amount of formal education of English in their countries before coming to the United States. That is to say, both of the nonnative groups had received formal English education for six years in junior and senior high schools, and for four years in universities prior to their arrival in the United States.

The average length of residence in this country was five years and one month for the Korean subjects and three years and seven months for the Chinese.

Data Analysis

The major aim of data analysis is to identify semantic and syntactic pattern differences between native and nonnative speakers of English. As said earlier, Manes and Wolfson's (1981) semantic and syntactic formulas which are characteristically associated with the speech act of compliments were used here to analyze all our data. However, we made some sorts of modifications of their formulas because all our data were collected from the eight fixed situations. Thus, nine semantic and ten syntactic patterns were used in this study (see Table 1 and 2 for a more discussion of semantic and syntactic formulas).

The frequency of use of a semantic or syntactic pattern by a group was calculated in the way that follows: total occurrences of a semantic or syntactic pattern within one group were divided by eight multiplied by the number of subjects in the group, and the product was finally multiplied by one hundred.

4. Results and Discussion

It will be recalled that the hypotheses suggested that notable differences in semantic and syntactic features would be found between native and nonnative English speakers, and also between males, and females

whereas similarities in these two patterns would occur between the two nonnative groups. Thus, the discussion that follows will be focused on semantic and syntactic structure similarities or differences used by these groups. We will first look at semantic features and then consider syntactic patterns.

In semantic formula, Manes and Wolfson(1981) state, "Since compliments are expression of positive evaluation, every compliment must include at least one term which carried positive semantic load." According to this statement, every semantic pattern must be characteristic of a semantically positive term. The main semantic patterns that were recognized in this study are: (1) semantically positive adjectives, (2) positive verbs, (3) positive adverbs or nouns, (4) the use of intensifiers, and (5) the use of second person pronouns and demonstratives.

(1) The use of semantically positive adjectives.

According to Table 1, the most striking tendency in adjectival compliments can be noticed in the use of the adjectives, 'good' and 'great'. Both Korean and Chinese subjects tended to use 'good' more frequently than 'great' in giving compliments (Korean: 11% for 'great' and 16% for 'good', Chinese: 10% for 'great' and 14% for 'good'), but the reverse was the case for the native speakers of English(17% for 'great' and 13% for 'good'). A possible explanation for the result may be that the two groups of nonnative English speakers seemed to be more exposed to such expression as "That's good" rather than to the pattern "That's great" in their countries before coming to the United States. As far as I am concerned, no foreign or second language researchers or pedagogues have ever given their attention to such differences between native and nonnative speakers of English. Therefore, the result suggests that the role of speech acts should be emphasized in ESL or EFL instruction. At any rate, the finding here seems to support the hypotheses of the current study.

Another interesting result can be found in the use of the same two adjectives mentioned earlier. Though it does not seem to be significantly

noticeable, the male subjects tended to make more use of 'good' than 'great', while the females preferred to use 'great' rather than 'good' regardless of the natives or the nonnatives. If we assume that 'great' may carry a much stronger semantic load in the Manes and Wolfson's sense, it is no wonder that women tended to use the emotionally strong expression in giving compliments.

One more noticeable tendency in adjectival compliments can be seen in the use of the other adjectives except the most commonly used ones (i.e., nice, good, and great). Both of the nonnative groups tended to make more use of adjectives which carried positive semantic load than their native counterpart (Koreans 32%, Chinese 33%, and Americans 28%). This result does not imply that the nonnatives used more different adjectives than the natives, but that both Korean and Chinese students used the same adjectives more frequently than the American ones. The result may be due to the fact that to use adjectival compliments could be easier than to give compliments in any other semantic patterns for the nonnative English speakers.

(2) The use of semantically positive verbs.

In comparison with the number of adjectives used in compliments, that of verbs which carried semantic positive load was relatively few. The only semantically positive verbs that appeared in our data are: like, enjoy, love, admire, and impress. As seen from Table 1, two tendencies seem to be noticeable in this type of compliments.

First, the frequency of use of this semantic formula by both groups of nonnative English speakers seemed to be very similar and yet the nonnatives tended to use the pattern less frequently than the natives (Koreans 12%, Chinese 10%, and Americans 17%). We suggest this may be that the nonnatives may not have been proficient enough in English compliments because the use of a verb carrying a semantic positive load in compliments seemed to be more difficult than that of adjectival patterns for them.

Second tendency, though it is slightly noticeable, is that women

Table 1. Frequency of Uses of Semantic Formula

Semantic Formula	Subject								
	Ameican(72)			Korean(77)			Chinese(73)		
	M(34)	F(38)	T	M(40)	F(37)	T	M(40)	F(33)	T
Nice	13	13	13	17	12	14	12	12	12
Good	15	12	13	19	13	16	17	10	14
Great	16	17	17	10	12	11	8	13	10
Other Adjectives	26	30	28	27	36	32	27	39	33
Positive Verbs	15	18	17	10	14	12	9	12	10
Positive Adverbs or Nouns	11	8	10	5	10	8	8	7	7
Intensifiers	20	23	22	13	18	16	10	15	13
Demonstratives	31	34	32	16	20	18	20	18	19
Second Person Pronouns	39	44	42	54	51	53	47	55	51

tended to use this semantic formula more often than men in the entire population. This result may be due to the fact that women were found to prefer to use such expressions as "I like your new hairstyle." or "I love your new coat."

(3) The use of semantically positive adverbs or nouns.

A very few adverbs or nouns which carried a semantic positive load occurred in our data. They existed in the expressions that follow: "You performed beautifully tonight.", "You are a genius.", and "You are really a hero." According to Table 1, we can not find any striking tendency in this type of compliments. However, a slightly notable tendency is that native English speakers tended to use this semantic pattern more frequently than their nonnative counterparts.

(4) The use of intensifiers.

The intensifier that was most frequently used by the subjects as a

whole was an adverb 'really'. The frequency of use of this semantic feature by the two groups of nonnative English speakers did not seem to be similar but the nonnatives tended to use this type of compliments less frequently than the natives (Koreans 16%, Chinese 13%, and Americans 22%). The result may be in the same line with those of other studies. In the study of apology, Cohen and Olshtain (1981) found that there were notable differences between native and nonnative speakers of English with respect to intensity of regret. Araki and Barnlund (1981) also found that the compliments by Americans tended to be extreme, while those by Japanese were more likely to be modest. Considering these previous studies, we suggest the result may be that both Korean and Chinese subjects tended not to express their favorable opinions more explicitly and with strong language. An alternative explanation for the result is possibly that both groups of nonnative English speakers might not be proficient enough in the use of intensifiers in appropriate compliment situations,

Another notable and interesting tendency in this semantic feature is that women tended to make far more use of intensifiers than men regardless of the native or nonnative speakers of English (Korean males 13% and Korean females 18%, Chinese males 10% and Chinese females 15%, and American males 20% and American females 23%). The result seems to be an expected one in the sense that women tend to show their emotion more easily than men to their good friends or to their family members. Thus, the result supports one of our hypotheses.

(5) The use of second person pronouns and demonstratives.

The second person pronouns and demonstratives that appeared in our data usually occurred in such expressions as "I enjoyed your beautiful performance." "I like that coat on you.", "This is really a nice car.", and "That's a great offer." In Table 1 we find the most notable differences between native and nonnative English speakers in this type of compliments. The frequency of use of demonstratives by both the nonnative groups seemed to be almost similar and yet the

nonnatives tended to use this semantic pattern much less frequently than their native counterpart (Koreans 18%, Chinese 19%, and Americans 32%). But, on the other hand, second person pronouns were more frequently used by the nonnatives than by the natives (Korean 53%, Chinese 51%, and Americans 42%). These conflicting results may be due to the fact that the nonnative English speakers tended to make frequent use of the expressions such as "You look nice today." or "You performed nicely.", whereas the natives preferred to use such compliments as "I like that coat on you." or "That's a nice car." This may imply that compliments by the natives tended to be specific about particular items or behavior while those by the nonnatives seemed to be general. Therefore, these significantly notable differences between native and nonnative speakers of English strongly support the hypothesis in the current study.

Let us now consider syntactic compliment patterns. As seen from Table 2, ten different syntactic patterns could account for almost 90 per cent of all our data. Consider the syntactic structure that follows.

Noun Phrase/Linking Verb/(Intensifier)/Adjective

This pattern includes such expressions as "Your performance was excellent." or "You look gorgeous." or "This car is really nice." Table 2 shows that the frequency of use of this type of compliments by both of the nonnative groups seemed to be similar but the native group tended to use the pattern more frequently than their nonnative counterparts. This result seems to be an unexpected one, because this type of syntactic pattern seems to be easy to be used by the nonnatives. A possible explanation for the result may be that ten syntactic patterns in Table 2 could be responsible for 97 per cent of all our data of the natives, but almost 89 per cent of the nonnatives' data.

Let us now consider another syntactic pattern.

I/(Intensifier)/like/Noun Phrase The expressions that follow are included in this pattern. "I like your new hairstyle." "I love your new car.", and "I really enjoyed this evening." In Table 2 we find that there were notable differences between the natives and the nonnatives in the

Table 2. Frequency of Uses of Syntactic Formula

Syntactic Formula	Subject								
	American (72)			Korean (77)			Chinese		
	M (34)	F (38)	T	M (40)	F (37)	T	M (40)	F (33)	T
NP/LV/(INT)/ADJ	43	42	43	34	44	39	32	44	38
I/(INT)/like/NP	13	18	15	8	13	10	9	10	9
PRO/be/(a)/(INT)/ADJ/NP	11	8	10	9	11	10	9	11	10
YOU/V/(a)/ADJ/NP	6	2	4	9	5	7	6	4	5
ADJ/(NP)	12	10	11	15	9	12	13	13	13
WHAT/(a)/ADJ/NP	1	1	1	7	6	7	4	6	4
I/have/(a)/ADJ/NP	3	4	4	2	3	2	1	2	1
YOU/V/(INT)/ADV	4	3	4	3	2	2	2	2	2
EMBEDDED CLAUSE	6	4	5	2	3	3	3	3	3

LV=linking verb

INT=Intensifier

use of this type of compliments (Koreans 10%, Chinese 9%, and Americans 15%). This pattern tended to be more frequently used by the females than by the males in the entire population. See the explanation for this result in the previous section (see page 73-74).

Another differences between the native and the nonnative speakers of English can be found in the use of the following syntactic pattern.

You/Verb/(a)/Adjective/Noun Phrase An expression like "You did a good job." is included in this pattern. This syntactic structure tended to be more frequently used by the nonnatives than the natives. Analysis of the data revealed that this syntactic pattern mainly occurred in situation 3 (see Appendix). The result may be that the compliment "You did a good job." might be possibly used as a memorized chunk by the nonnatives.

We also find in Table 2 that slightly notable differences existed

between the natives and the nonnatives in the use of the syntactic patterns.

Adjective/(Noun Phrase) This elliptical pattern includes such expressions as "A nice car," or "Great." Table 2 shows that both of the nonnative groups used this pattern more frequently than the natives. The result seems not to need any explanation.

Another notable differences between the natives and the nonnatives can be found in the syntactic pattern that follows.

What/(a)/Adjective/Noun Phrase(e.g., "What a nice car!"). As seen from Table 2, the nonnatives made far more use of this pattern than the natives. The more use of exclamatory sentences in compliments by the nonnatives may be due to the fact that they might employ a simple strategy which says that whenever you don't know how to give a compliment, use an exclamatory sentence.

Final differences, though they are slightly noticeable, can be found in the pattern that follows.

Embedded Clause(e.g., "I think you did a good job"). This syntactic structure tended to be more frequently used by the natives than by the nonnatives. The result suggests that nonnative speakers of English should pay some attention to such complex compliment structure.

As mentioned earlier, ten syntactic patterns in Table 2, can account for 97% of the data in the natives and almost 89% of the data in the nonnatives. This suggests that compliments used by native speakers of English appeared to be highly structured but this seemed not to be the case for the nonnatives. In other words, the nonnative English speakers in this study were not yet as proficient as their native counterparts in giving compliments.

5. Limitations and Implications

The findings of this study are limited to a certain extent because all the data were obtained from the eight fixed situations.

First, the question arises as to whether the semantic and syntactic

compliment patterns that were used by both native and nonnative English speakers will actually occur in a natural setting. Especially, we are not sure whether the frequency of use of these features by the nonnatives can really reflect the actual one.

Another question concerns the two groups of nonnative subjects. Though both groups have been exposed to English for several years in the United States, they had received formal education of English in their countries for about ten years. Therefore, we must be careful in applying the findings of this study to second or foreign language learning and teaching.

There are also certain limitations on the interpretation of the results. Differences between the natives and the nonnatives seem to be apparently significant in the use of second person pronouns and demonstratives. However, the other semantic and syntactic pattern differences between these two groups, though they are noticeable, may appear not to be significantly noticeable. Therefore, the results of this study must be carefully interpreted in second or foreign language learning and teaching.

Let us now consider the implications the results of this study may have for foreign or second language learning and teaching. As said earlier, the use of semantic and syntactic features were very similar between the two nonnative groups. This may provide strong evidence that foreign or second language learners tend to follow almost the same sequence in acquiring a target language regardless of their first language backgrounds.

The results of this study may also have some implications for ESL or EFL instruction. As discussed earlier, the frequency of use of certain semantic features by the nonnatives was significantly lower than that by the natives. Therefore, these semantic features should be given great teaching emphasis on.

Conclusion

Thus far, we have investigated semantic and syntactic compliment

patterns used by a group of native speakers of English and two groups of the nonnative ones. We found from the investigation that the frequency of use of these patterns, for the most part, seemed to be very similar between the two nonnative groups, but it sometimes differed significantly between native and nonnative speakers of English. Particularly, more notable differences between the natives and the nonnatives were found in the use of semantic features rather than syntactic patterns. Some of these findings in this study may seem to have some implications for EFL or ESL learning and instruction.

Further research should be needed in order that the findings of this study can be compared with. However, one of the strengths of this study may be its inclusion of both native and nonnative speakers' data.

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QUESTIONNAIR ON COMPLIMENTS

- I. 1. Sex: Male _____ Female _____ 2. Age: _____
 3. Job: _____ 4. What is your native language? _____
 5. How long have you been in America? _____ years. (If you are not an American.)
- II. Instructions: You will read eight different situations calling for a compliment (praise). Please respond as naturally as you would in an actual situation, and indicate whether each compliment would be given to male or female.
1. A good friend of yours is usually in shorts or jeans, but today he or she is wearing a new coat. In this case what would you say to him or her?
 (M,F), " _____."
2. When you first noticed that a good friend of yours changed his or her hairstyle. what would you say to him or her?
 (M,F), " _____."
3. You were in a piano concert in which your brother or sister performed extremely well. When the concert was over, you would come up to him or her and what would you say?
 (M,F), " _____."
4. When a good friend of yours said to you, "I've been offered a full scholarship at MIT", what would you say to him or her?
 (M,F), " _____."
5. When you first saw a new car your friend bought recently, what would you say to him or her?
 (M,F), " _____."

6. When your nephew or niece who is seven years old came back from school and said to you, "I got all A's on my report card", what would you say?

(M,F), " _____."

7. A friend of yours invited you to a dinner party in his or her house. You had really good food and a pleasant evening there. When you were leaving, what would you say to give a compliment to him or her?

(M,F), " _____."

8. You found out that a good friend of yours saved a boy this morning from a fire at the risk of his or her life. When you first met the friend on the afternoon of the incident, what would you say to him or her?

(M,F), " _____."

<국문초록>

미국 학생과 한국 및 대만 유학생에 있어서
의미적, 구조적 유형의 차이

— 칭찬을 중심으로 —

이 호 응
(한국해양대학)

본 연구는 미국의 대학생과 미국에 유학한 한국 및 대만 학생들이 영어로 칭찬을 할 때 어떠한 의미적, 구조적인 유형의 차이점이 있으며, 또한 남녀 사이에는 어떠한 차이점이 있는가를 실험연구를 통해서 밝혀 보고자 하였다.

본 연구의 실험에서는 오스틴 소재 텍사스 주립대학교에 재학중인 미국 학생 72명(남: 34, 여: 38)과 한국학생 77명(남: 40, 여: 37) 및 대만 학생 73명(남: 40, 여: 33)으로부터 설문지를 통해서 수집한 자료를 *Manes*와 *Wolfson*(1981)의 *Semantic and Syntactic Formulas*에 의거하여 분석하였다.

분석 결과 미국 학생들이 남을 칭찬할 때 사용하는 *Semantic and Syntactic Patterns*과 한국 및 대만 학생이 사용하는 유형 사이에는 큰 상이점이 발견되었으나 한국 학생과 대만 학생 사이에서는 많은 유사점이 있는 것으로 드러났다. 영어를 모국어로 사용하는 학생들과 영어를 외국어로 사용하는 학생들과의 상이점은 *Syntactic Patterns*에서보다 *Semantic Patterns*에서 훨씬 현저한 것으로 나타났다. 또한 같은 성의 피험자는 국적에 관계없이 상당히 유사한 *Syntactic and Semantic Patterns*을 사용하는 것으로 밝혀졌다.

본 실험 분석 결과는 외국어의 습득에 모국어가 큰 영향을 미치지 않는다는 것을 보여주어서 외국어 학습에 시사하는 바가 크다고 생각되어 앞으로 이 방면에 보다 많은 관심과 연구가 필요하다고 본다.