

Instagram Compliment Responses through Herbert's Taxonomy: A Cultural and Digital Linguistic Analysis

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Abstract

In the Malaysian context, there is a dearth of awareness regarding the use of compliments and compliment responses. This study provides a comprehensive analysis of compliment response strategies used in an Instagram post, emphasising the applicability of Herbert's (1986) taxonomy in contemporary digital communication. The investigation indicates that the Instagram user mostly employed Agreement techniques, including Comment Acceptance, Appreciation Tokens, and Praise Upgrade, in conjunction with Non-Agreement strategies such as scale Down and Non-Acceptance of qualification. These findings correspond with other studies by Dehkordi and Chalak (2015) and Indah and Rifana (2017), which emphasised the prevalent utilisation of gratitude and the acceptance of compliments. Furthermore, the study also assessed the participant's utilisation of code-switching from Malay to English in her responses, particularly in the context of expressing gratitude, while implementing Herbert's taxonomy. The participant's code-switching from Malay to English, exemplified by the use of terms such as "thanks," indicates an attempt to lessen Malay modesty norms and prevent the appearance of boastfulness, as seen by Azianura Hani Shaari and Lee (2010). This study highlights the impact of Malay cultural norms on online compliment exchanges and demonstrates how Non-Agreement methods frequently diminish praise, a trait of conventional Malay answers as noted by Thilagavathi (2003). The results necessitate additional investigation on language utilisation in social media, particularly as digital communication increases. Subsequent research ought to encompass bigger participant groups and investigate additional speech acts, including requests and apologies, to enhance comprehension of the influence of cultural values on social media interactions in Malaysia.

Keywords: Compliment Response Strategies, Instagram Communication, Agreement Strategies, Code-Switching And Malay Cultural Values.

Introduction

Complimenting is a universal linguistic phenomenon that is immensely practiced by many every day (Cai, 2012). Typically, a compliment involves two aspects of the response to compliment and the compliment itself. Both compliment and compliment responses are eminently governed by culture (Othman, 2011). This claim is supported by Bibi and Sartini (2023) in a recent cross-cultural study investigating compliment response tactics among university students in Indonesia and Pakistan which revealed significant distinctions in the ways individuals from both cultures react to praises. According to Holmes (1988), the act of complimenting performs as a significant communicative function in promoting and establishing interpersonal relationships amongst one another. This type of act is a normal phenomenon and considered to be habitual to some individuals. The act of complimenting has earned wide interest among pragmatics researchers in relation to face-to-face interaction, as claimed by (Chen, 2010).

In this modern era, social media platforms have opened new doors and spaces for the study of virtual compliment acts. Nowadays, a notable disparity exists between the digital landscape and the language phenomena examined by Vazquez (2022), with worldwide platforms such as X and Facebook garnering scholarly interest. In perceiving the acts of complimenting, there are many ways to discern them. As Placencia and Lower (2017), cited, pictures as suggested by Placencia and Lower (2013), serve as a kind of invitation (Schegloff, 1968) to respond in many ways, such as a 'like' or a comment which can be read as a compliment in that case.

Recent research indicate that the expansion of social media platforms led to novel types of interaction that feature appreciation (Rudolf von Rohr & Locher, 2020). Social media appreciation or better known as “digital complimenting” is the term used when referring to the acts of expressing praise, approval or admiration through digital communication platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X and other messaging applications or online forums. Digital compliments have a lot of forms and uniquely shaped features in accordance with the types of medium used. For communicating app such as Facebook and Instagram, users can express their digital compliments by “liking”, “sharing” and “commenting” a post by another user. In sum, digital complimenting

Examples of digital complimenting in different medium:

- X reaction: Clicking the “Love” button on someone’s post.
- Instagram comment: “Loooove this!”
- Direct message: Leaving “Reactions” or sending a supportive message in response to a post.

The interest in complementing acts from linguistic research can be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s, which built a platform for more future studies. To name a few pioneering pieces of research done are ethnographic research on compliment responses by Manes and Wolfson (1981), conversation analytic work by Pomerantz (1978) on compliment responses, and the theories of politeness by Brown and Levinson (1987). As mentioned by Placencia and Lower (2017), Locher and Watts (2005), have influenced various research on complimenting behaviour in online mediums. Herbert (1997), argued that the information on socio-cultural values can be accumulated from the compliment events, compliments, and compliment

responses. Online communication has become a worldwide sensation, hence, the study of compliment responses on social media platforms is appropriate to be conducted in diverse conditions.

Although there has been a progressing growth in the number of studies done in examining compliment strategies and responses via data analysis from social media, not much of studies are done in exploring the strategies and responses in Malaysian settings. By centralizing this study around the Malaysian context, these occurrences may be beneficial to understand the disposition of Malaysians in embracing compliments through various strategies in different circumstances. Thus, this research was conducted to examine the compliment response strategies used on the social media platform in Malaysia.

This study is made based on this question:

1. What are the most frequently used compliment response strategies used in the Instagram post?

Significance difference between face-to-face and online communication are the nonverbal cues utilised during online communication in which the speaker would have to rely on the hearer's understanding of the cues to make meaning of the communication. According to Lee et al. (2011), it is hypothesized that the usage of the internet for informal contact will enhance the quality of life for internet users, as can face-to-face contact in daily life.

It is important to be aware of the effect of the unique interactions as the internet is used for communication, development, and preservation of relationships, education, and as psychological support (Snow, 2007). Therefore, this study would project a better understanding of Malaysians' way of responding to compliments through online communication. Easier and borderless communication that rapidly grows in popularity calls for a wider spectrum of pragmatic analysis to be done in decoding meanings. With that, this study would open the road for researchers to explore unexplored areas within the pragmatics contexts.

Literature Review

A compliment is classified as one type of speech act subsumed under the category of positive politeness. Brown and Levinson (1987, as cited in Choironi, 2013) shared that this speech act conveys agreement, approval, and a sense that the *complimenter* and *complimentee* may share similar views. Hence, one of the major functions of complimenting according to Wolfson (1983, as cited in Han, 1992) is to maintain solidarity among interlocutors shown through admiration or approval. The topic of compliments generally falls under three categories of appearance, abilities, and possessions (Holmes, 1986).

Indah and Rifana (2017) conducted a study that analysed the pattern of compliments and their responses on the topic of skill or ability on Instagram. The study also aimed to identify any disparities between male and female participants with regard to the apology strategies they employed. The researchers employed Manes and Wolfson's (1983), theory to investigate compliments. The theory posits that compliments are generally formulaic in their meaning and forms, and that they are characterised by specific verbs, syntactic forms, and adjectives. The results indicated that Instagram users' compliments regarding their skills and abilities are typically brief, characterised by the predominant use of adjectives rather than

verbs and the use of restricted syntactic patterns. It was also revealed that most Instagram users showed acceptance techniques by adding tokens of gratitude and approval of the comments.

Dehkordi and Chalak (2015), examined the most frequently used compliment response strategy to English compliments in order to investigate the implementation of English compliment response methods by Iranian English as Foreign Language (EFL) students on social networks. This descriptive qualitative study adapted Herbert's (1986) Compliment response strategy taxonomy to analyse the participants' response strategies to English compliments. Herbert's (1986) taxonomy was then used to categorize the compliment responses and data were coded and classified in terms of frequency and percentage to measure the most frequent response strategy for each level. Participants of this study were 30 graduate and undergraduate Iranian EFL learners of Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan Branch. The result displayed the most frequent response strategy used to English compliments was acceptance strategies at a macro-level and appreciation token at a micro-level. In exploring the pragmatics used in virtual communication from online platforms, this study attempts to examine the strategies of compliment response used in one chosen post from Instagram.

Methodology

One participant was chosen based on the number of followers and comments received on her Instagram. The chosen participant was a social media influencer with more than 50 thousand followers. This study serves as a representative case study of Malaysian digital interactions on social media. The high engagements such as "Likes", "Comments" and "Shares" obtained make this case highly valuable and the responses given reflect the broader trends among active social media users and their engagement with their followers.

Data collection of this study was done by accumulating the comments received by the participant in one of her Instagram posts and her replies towards the comments. The comments consisting of only emojis were excluded from the analysis as this research focuses on the compliment response strategies which require textual data to be analysed according to Herbert's (1986) taxonomy as it was designed to classify verbal compliment responses rather than non-verbal cues.

Data analysis was done with reference to Herbert's (1986) Taxonomy of compliment responses strategies of:

A. Agreement

I. Acceptance

1. Appreciation Token
2. Comment Acceptance
3. Praise Upgrade

B. Non-agreement

I. Scale down

II. Question

III. Non-acceptances

1. Disagreement qualification
2. Qualification

IV. No acknowledgment

C. Other interpretations

I. Request

Data were analysed, coded, and classified using Herbert's (1986) Taxonomy of Compliment responses according to the three (3) macro levels of agreement, non-agreement, and other interpretations as mentioned in 3.2.

Data collection and analysis procedure was done as follows:

- The participant was sent a consent letter form by personal message through the social media platform, Instagram.
- The participant was required to express their agreement by sending a signed form.
- Participant's Instagram profile was examined, and compliments and compliment responses were extracted and categorized into tables.
- Compliments that were in Malay were translated into the English language to synchronise with the rest of the data extracted.

The data collection and data analysis were based on the surface of compliment and compliment responses in which only includes one compliment and one compliment response per exchange.

This research has its foundation in theory, and the existing data set facilitates a significant application of Herbert's (1986) taxonomy. The aim is to examine the applicability of this taxonomy to digital compliments within a Malaysian setting, and the available data offers significant opportunities to illustrate essential techniques (e.g., Comment Acceptance, Appreciation Token, Praise Upgrade). This research was not aimed to quantify the frequency of strategies used but to demonstrate the applicability of Herbert's approach in the current digital context.

Findings

In answering the research question of "what are the most frequently used compliment response strategies used in the Instagram post?", an analysis of the comment exchanges in an Instagram post was conducted. The skill observed from this data analysis is the styling skill where the participant created a video content of ways to style a white top shirt. The duration of the video post is about one minute. After sorting out the comments with emoji use only and without any response from the participant, a total of nine exchanges were presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Compliment and Compliment Response from the Comment Section

| | Compliment | Compliment Response |
|-----------|--|---|
| C1 | <i>"Omggg loveee this kind of video! please do more !!!"</i> | <i>"Okayyy!!!" (R1)</i> |
| C2 | <i>"You guys are too cute! More plishh"</i> | <i>"Cuter if you were with us too" (R2)</i> |
| C3 | <i>"Such a good content eika!!"</i> | <i>"Thanks eza!!!" (R3)</i> |
| C4 | <i>"Do more like this pls! Good contents"</i> | <i>"I will!" (R4)</i> |
| C5 | <i>"Yall too pretty I can't"</i> | <i>"Hey you are way prettier!" (R5)</i> |
| C6 | <i>"Both of you are so cute"</i> | <i>"Cute, right?" (R6)</i> |
| C7 | <i>"Beautiful tqsm. Look forward for next content. Btw Eika you look really tall. What's your height?"</i> | <i>"Thanks! I'm only 170cm" (R7)</i> |
| C8 | <i>"Is the white top from H&M? Why haven't I seen this see-through one though"</i> | <i>"Yesss, goodluck!" (R8)</i> |
| C9 | <i>"Love this babe"</i> | <i>"Let's do this with our products" (R9)</i> |

The participant's compliment response strategies were then classified, and the frequency and percentages were analysed. Categorization of response strategies was employed from Herbert's (1986) taxonomy of compliment responses as presented in Table 2.

| Response Type | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| A. AGREEMENT | | |
| I. Acceptance | | |
| - Appreciation Token | 2 (R3, R7) | 20.0 |
| - Comment acceptance | 3 (R1, R4, R8) | 30.0 |
| - Praise upgrade | 1 (R6) | 10.0 |
| B. NONAGREEMENT | | |
| I. Scale Down | 1 (R7) | 10.0 |
| II. Question | - | |
| III. Non-acceptances | | |
| - Disagreement | - | |
| - Qualification | 2 (R2, R5) | 20.0 |
| IV. No Acknowledgement | - | |
| C. OTHER INTERPRETATIONS | | |
| I. Request | 1 (R9) | 10.0 |

From Table 2, it was revealed that the participants frequently practiced the response strategy of Comment Acceptance with three occurrences (30.0%) out of all nine responses. Following this, the participant was also noted to apply the Appreciation Token when she was responding to two complimenting comments with the word *"thanks"*. The Non-Acceptance strategy of Qualification was also used twice in which the participant returned the compliments received by stating that the commenters are cuter or prettier than her. Moreover, the Acceptance strategy of Praise Upgrade was also used in response to a compliment of her being cute. In addition, the participant also responded to a compliment by using the Scale Down strategy, where one person asked on her height for, she looked very tall, and she replied that she is *"only 170cm"*. The choice of inserting *"only"* implied her attempt to humbly respond to the compliment. It is also worth noting that the participant also used the strategy of Other Interpretation in which she responded to compliment (C9) with a request to make similar video with the same content by using the products that she previously collaborated with.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to answer the research question, "What are the most frequently used compliment response strategies used in the Instagram post?". From the analysis conducted, it was found that the Instagram user was inclined to use Agreement strategies in responding to compliments received in the comment section of Instagram post. These strategies include Comment Acceptance, Appreciation Token, and Praise Upgrade, as described in Tables 1 and 2. As for other strategies, this Instagram user also employed the macro level of Non-Agreement of Scale Down and Non-Acceptance of Qualification strategies to respond to compliments.

These findings are in line with the studies conducted by Dehkordi and Chalak (2015) and Indah and Rifana (2017), in which the majority of their participants showed tokens of gratitude and approval of the compliments. This study concluded that the response strategies of Agreement are frequently practiced by the participant for these strategies to help in establishing positive exchanges of speech acts. Although these acts of accepting compliments given in an obvious manner such as thanking gestures are rare occurrences in traditional Malay culture, the participant code-switched to English responses of “thanks” which would portray contrasting connotations from the Malay culture of showing modesty. To avoid being viewed as snobbish, code-switching into English is deemed to be advantageous in conveying the receivers’ feelings and real intention (Azianura Hani Shaari and Lee, 2010).

The use of Non-Agreement strategies also reflects the Asian cultural values influence the way the participant responded to the compliments, for traditionally, the Malay people “do not favour compliments given on a beauty of a person, or for work well done. Therefore, to brush aside a compliment or a praise, the Malays may adopt the use of a contradictory technique that has the effect of distancing the recipient from the compliments (Thilagavathi, 2003:137). This research demonstrated the cultural importance of the study and illustrated Malaysian linguistic and cultural norms, particularly in the application of code-switching, which is essential for comprehending the combination of traditional cultural values and contemporary digital communication, regardless of the limited data set.

The study was able to achieve a more profound comprehension of the manner in which digital compliments are navigated within the context of Malaysian cultural norms by utilising Herbert's taxonomy to categorise the Instagram user's compliment responses into distinct and structured strategies. The taxonomy facilitated the visualisation of the combination of nuanced deflection techniques and verbal acceptance that preserve humility and politeness, which are essential cultural characteristics in the Malaysian context.

The rapid progression of social networks accentuates the need for more linguistic research to be done, as more people are joining the bandwagon of long-distance communication due to the need to relate to everyone around the world. Regarding the limitations of this study, the small corpus of data gathered could not strongly represent the immensely large number of Instagram users. For that, it is suggested to include more participants to accumulate more data of their complimenting responses to be observed. Further recommendation for future studies is in terms of analysing other types of speech acts such as requesting or apologising in Malaysian context and in relation to how cultural values would impact the choice of speech acts in social media usage.

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