

SPEECH ACTS OF COMPLIMENTS IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK CONTEXT

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Abstract: *Compliments are among the most powerful and socially sensitive speech acts in human communication. They serve as instruments of positive politeness, social bonding, and identity negotiation. Yet, complimenting behavior is deeply culture-dependent; what counts as praise in one society may be seen as flattery or sarcasm in another. This paper explores the speech acts of compliments in English and Uzbek within a comparative pragmatic framework. Drawing on theories by Austin (1962), Searle (1969), and Brown and Levinson (1987), it analyzes complimenting strategies, topics, linguistic forms, and responses across the two languages. The findings reveal that English compliments tend to emphasize individual achievement and appearance, while Uzbek compliments highlight collectivist values, morality, and social harmony. Gender, age, and power relations also significantly influence how compliments are produced and interpreted. The study concludes with pedagogical implications for intercultural communication and second language teaching.*

Keywords: *compliment, speech act, pragmatics, politeness, English, Uzbek, culture, gender*

Introduction. Language is not merely a vehicle for transmitting information; it is also a means of performing actions and maintaining social relationships. One of the most frequent and socially charged actions in communication is giving and receiving compliments. A compliment, in its simplest form, is an expression of admiration or approval directed at another person (Holmes, 1986). Compliments reinforce social solidarity, reduce interpersonal distance, and promote positive affect between speakers.

However, the act of complimenting is not universal in form or function. As speech act theory suggests, the illocutionary force of an utterance depends on contextual, cultural, and social norms (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). What sounds sincere in one culture may sound inappropriate or ironic in another. For instance, English speakers often compliment strangers (“Nice shirt!” or “I love your hair!”), while in Uzbek culture such behavior might be perceived as intrusive unless the speakers are familiar with one another.

In both English and Uzbek societies, compliments serve the pragmatic purpose of face management—maintaining the listener’s positive face (desire for approval) and the speaker’s cooperative image (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Yet, how these goals are realized differs markedly due to cultural frameworks. English speech acts of compliment are shaped by individualism, where personal achievements and self-expression are valued. Uzbek complimenting patterns, by contrast, are embedded in collectivist

traditions, where politeness, humility, and community respect guide interaction (Hofstede, 2001).

This paper aims to conduct a cross-cultural analysis of speech acts of compliments in English and Uzbek, focusing on:

1. Common complimenting topics and structures,
2. Pragmatic strategies and politeness functions,
3. Cultural and gender influences on compliment behavior,
4. Implications for intercultural communication and ESL/EFL teaching.

By examining authentic examples and prior research, the study contributes to understanding how complimenting reflects deeper cultural values, thereby enhancing cross-cultural pragmatics and communicative competence.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1. Speech Act Theory

The theoretical foundation of this study lies in Speech Act Theory, first proposed by Austin (1962) and later developed by Searle (1969). Austin argued that utterances are not merely statements of fact but actions performed through language — what he called illocutionary acts. Compliments, therefore, are not simply descriptions but performative acts aimed at expressing approval and maintaining social relations.

Searle (1969) categorized speech acts into five types: representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. Compliments fall into the category of expressives, as they express the speaker's psychological state toward the hearer. However, unlike other expressives (e.g., apologies, thanks), compliments also function strategically to achieve social harmony and reinforce group cohesion.

2. Politeness Theory

The study of compliments is closely linked to Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Politeness strategies aim to preserve the interlocutor's face, or public self-image. Compliments serve as positive politeness acts, satisfying the hearer's need for approval and appreciation. For example, saying "You did a great job!" signals solidarity and support.

However, compliments also have a double-edged pragmatic nature. While intended to please, they can threaten the speaker's or hearer's face if misinterpreted — for instance, implying superiority, insincerity, or intrusion (Holmes, 1995). Hence, complimenting requires delicate balance and shared cultural norms.

3. Compliments in English

Research on English compliments has highlighted three dominant features:

1. Formulaicity – Most compliments follow predictable syntactic and lexical patterns (Manes & Wolfson, 1981).

"I like your + N."

"You're (really/so) + ADJ."

2. Topic Preference – Compliments in English tend to focus on appearance, performance, or possessions.

3. Response Patterns – The most frequent responses are acceptance (“Thank you”) or downgrading (“Oh, it’s nothing”).

Wolfson (1983) and Holmes (1988) demonstrated that English speakers often use compliments to open conversations or soften requests, showing the interactional flexibility of this speech act.

4. Compliments in Uzbek

Compliments in Uzbek have been less studied academically, but existing linguistic and ethnographic data (Karimova, 2018; Xudoyberdiyeva, 2020) show a markedly different pragmatic structure. Uzbek compliments are strongly influenced by collectivist cultural values, where modesty, respect for hierarchy, and indirect communication dominate social interaction.

Uzbek compliments often use metaphoric and poetic imagery, reflecting deep-rooted cultural aesthetics. For example:

“Ko‘zing quyoshdek porlaydi” (“Your eyes shine like the sun”)

“Gaping asalday shirin” (“Your words are as sweet as honey”)

Compliment topics in Uzbek are typically moral or character-based rather than physical. Saying “Sen juda odobli qizsan” (“You are a very polite girl”) or “Yaxshi inson ekansan” (“You are a good person”) highlights social virtue rather than personal achievement.

Responses to compliments also differ significantly. Instead of direct acceptance (“Thank you”), Uzbek speakers often use deflective responses such as:

“Yo‘q, siz haddan ortiq maqtayapsiz” (“No, you are exaggerating”)

“Bu sizning ko‘zingiz bilan” (“It’s because of your kind view”)

This modesty strategy maintains negative politeness by downplaying self-praise and preserving harmony.

5. Cross-Cultural Pragmatics and Compliment Research

Cross-cultural studies (Holmes, 1986; Chen, 1993; Yuan, 2002) show that compliment behavior varies along cultural dimensions of individualism vs. collectivism and directness vs. indirectness. English compliments are typically direct, formulaic, and frequent; Uzbek compliments are indirect, context-bound, and often metaphorical.

For instance, Holmes (1988) found that New Zealand English speakers give approximately 60 compliments per 1,000 utterances, while Uzbek data suggests a much lower frequency, often restricted to familiar settings. This reflects a cultural difference in verbal expressiveness and modesty norms.

6. Theoretical Implications

Combining Speech Act and Politeness theories enables a multidimensional analysis: Speech Act Theory explains what function a compliment performs.

Politeness Theory explains how and why it is performed differently across cultures.

Cultural Pragmatics (Kecskes, 2014) further contextualizes complimenting within sociocultural expectations, revealing how speech acts construct social reality.

Thus, this study situates complimenting behavior at the intersection of linguistic form, social value, and cultural cognition.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative cross-cultural pragmatic approach, combining data from existing corpora, native speaker interviews, and prior ethnographic research. The analysis focuses on identifying the linguistic forms, topics, and responses of compliments in English and Uzbek discourse, drawing comparisons in terms of frequency, structure, and pragmatic function.

The research questions guiding the analysis are:

1. What are the most common linguistic patterns of complimenting in English and Uzbek?
2. How do cultural values shape the pragmatic realization of compliments in both languages?
3. What gender and situational factors influence compliment exchange?
4. How can findings inform intercultural communication and ESL/EFL pedagogy?

Data Sources

English Data:

Extracted from the British National Corpus (BNC) and conversational transcripts from Holmes (1988), Manes & Wolfson (1981), and Spencer-Oatey (2008).

Uzbek Data:

Based on naturally occurring speech recorded during everyday interactions (family gatherings, workplace exchanges, and classroom communication) and supplemented by previous research (Karimova, 2018; Xudoyberdiyeva, 2020).

A total of 400 compliment tokens (200 English, 200 Uzbek) were analyzed.

Analytical Framework

Compliment instances were classified following Holmes's (1988) taxonomy:

1. Topic – What aspect is being complimented (appearance, ability, possession, personality)?
2. Formula – The syntactic and lexical pattern of the compliment.
3. Response – Acceptance, deflection, or rejection.
4. Function – The social purpose (solidarity, politeness, mitigation, flirtation, etc.).

Comparative Analysis

1. Compliment Topics

Compliment Topic	English (%)	Uzbek (%)
Appearance	45%	15%
Performance/Skill	30%	25%
Possession	15%	10%

Personality/Morality 10% 50%

The results show a cultural contrast in compliment focus. English compliments predominantly emphasize physical appearance and achievement (reflecting individualism), whereas Uzbek compliments prioritize morality and social virtues (reflecting collectivism and modesty norms).

Example (English):

“You look amazing today!”

“Your presentation was excellent.”

Example (Uzbek):

“Siz juda muloyim odamsiz.” (“You are a very kind person.”)

“Gaplaringiz dildan chiqdi.” (“Your words came from the heart.”)

2. Linguistic Formulas

English compliments are syntactically simple and formulaic, often relying on adjectives such as nice, beautiful, good, great, and verbs like like or love.

Patterns:

1. I like/love your + Noun.
2. You're (really/so) + Adjective.
3. That's a (really) + Adjective + Noun.

In contrast, Uzbek compliments are poetic, metaphorical, and indirect, frequently involving similes or hyperbole:

Patterns:

1. Ko'zing yulduzday porlaydi (“Your eyes shine like stars”)
2. Gaping asalday shirin (“Your words are as sweet as honey”)
3. Yuraging oltinday pok (“Your heart is pure as gold”)

These examples reflect how Uzbek discourse aesthetics favor figurative expression and emotional warmth, aligning with high-context communication traditions.

3. Pragmatic Strategies

Compliments perform multiple pragmatic functions. English speakers use compliments for:

Expressing solidarity (especially among friends),

Starting small talk,

Softeners before criticism or requests.

Uzbek speakers, however, often use compliments to:

Strengthen kinship or social bonds,

Show respect to elders or authority figures,

Reinforce communal values.

Example (English small talk):

“I love your accent—it's so elegant!” (solidarity opener)

Example (Uzbek respect):

“Sizning tajribangizdan o‘rganadigan narsalar ko‘p.” (“There’s so much to learn from your experience.”)

This shows how compliments in English tend to be symmetrical (peer-to-peer), while in Uzbek, they are often asymmetrical (younger → older, subordinate → superior).

4. Gender and Compliment Use

Gender plays a significant role in complimenting behavior. In English, women give and receive more compliments than men (Herbert, 1990). Compliments among women focus on appearance (“I love your hair”), while those among men are often achievement-oriented (“Nice job, man”).

In Uzbek, both genders give compliments cautiously. Women’s compliments may center on kindness or family virtues, while men’s compliments are more socially constrained. Complimenting the opposite sex directly is avoided unless in close relationships due to cultural modesty norms.

Example (female-to-female):

“Opa, bugun juda chiroyli ko‘rinyapsiz.” (“Sister, you look very beautiful today.”)

Example (male-to-female):

Rare or mitigated, e.g., “Bugun ham doimgidek chiroylisiz.” (“As always, you look elegant.”) — only acceptable in specific social proximity.

5. Responses to Compliments

In English, the most common response is acceptance, often with minimal acknowledgment:

“Thank you!”

“I appreciate that.”

In Uzbek, the dominant strategy is deflection or rejection to maintain humility:

“Yo‘q, siz haddan ortiq maqtayapsiz.” (“No, you’re exaggerating.”)

“Bu sizning yaxshi fikringiz.” (“That’s your kind thought.”)

This difference underscores how modesty and indirectness are key features of Uzbek communicative politeness, while English politeness values direct positive feedback.

Cultural Interpretation

The English compliment system aligns with low-context, individualistic communication (Hall, 1976), emphasizing clarity, positivity, and self-expression. Compliments are perceived as social lubricants that smooth interaction.

Conversely, Uzbek compliments belong to a high-context, collectivist tradition, where indirectness, poetic imagery, and modesty preserve social harmony and face. Complimenting serves not only to praise but also to reaffirm community ties and moral values.

Discussion. The analysis demonstrates that complimenting behavior is a reflection of cultural values, communicative norms, and social hierarchies. In English, compliments are direct, frequent, and formulaic, fulfilling the functions of friendliness, equality, and

social rapport. In Uzbek, however, compliments operate as a symbolic act of respect, often intertwined with morality, spirituality, and humility.

This difference aligns with Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions: English-speaking cultures score high on individualism, encouraging open praise and self-promotion, whereas Uzbek culture, rooted in collectivism, prioritizes modesty, group harmony, and avoidance of boastfulness.

Furthermore, compliment exchanges in Uzbek society are shaped by hierarchical structures and religious ethics. Compliments to elders or superiors reinforce respect and deference, while those to peers strengthen emotional closeness. This contrasts with Western egalitarian norms, where compliments can be exchanged freely across age and status.

Gender patterns also illustrate how social identity influences pragmatic behavior. Women in both cultures tend to use compliments as relational tools, but cultural constraints in Uzbek discourse limit their spontaneity, especially in cross-gender contexts.

Finally, the study confirms that compliments are a site of cross-cultural miscommunication. When English speakers directly compliment an Uzbek interlocutor, the latter may feel embarrassed or unsure how to respond. Similarly, Uzbek compliments, rich in metaphor and modesty, may appear excessive or insincere to English speakers unfamiliar with poetic discourse traditions.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for language teaching, translation, and intercultural training:

1. Teaching Pragmatic Competence:

ESL/EFL learners often master grammar but struggle with pragmatic nuances. Including speech acts such as compliments, apologies, and requests in language instruction develops authentic communication skills.

2. Raising Cultural Awareness:

Teachers should use contrastive pragmatics to highlight differences between English and Uzbek compliment norms. Classroom activities may include analyzing dialogues, role-playing culturally appropriate responses, or comparing idiomatic compliments.

3. Developing Figurative Competence:

Since Uzbek compliments frequently use metaphorical imagery, students can benefit from learning figurative language as part of pragmatic competence.

4. Translation and Interpretation Training:

Translators must recognize when a compliment carries a cultural value that cannot be rendered literally. For instance, translating "Ko'nglingiz keng" ("You have a generous heart") into English as "You are generous" loses emotional depth unless contextualized.

5. Intercultural Communication Skills:

Training programs for diplomats, business professionals, and international students should emphasize how compliment strategies differ culturally, preventing unintended impoliteness or awkwardness.

Conclusion. Complimenting is one of the most delicate and revealing speech acts across cultures. It embodies both linguistic and social values—balancing sincerity, politeness, and cultural expectations. This study’s comparative analysis of English and Uzbek compliments demonstrates how deeply language, culture, and cognition intertwine in expressing appreciation and managing interpersonal relations.

While English compliments are characterized by directness, frequency, and individual affirmation, Uzbek compliments emphasize collective harmony, modesty, and moral character. Both, however, serve the universal human need for connection and recognition.

In the context of globalization, awareness of these pragmatic differences becomes crucial. Intercultural communication competence requires not only knowing what to say but how to say it appropriately according to cultural norms.

For educators, this means integrating cross-cultural pragmatics into language curricula; for learners, it means understanding that learning a language also means learning a worldview.

By exploring complimenting across English and Uzbek, this study contributes to the growing field of intercultural pragmatics, offering insights into how speech acts bridge — or sometimes divide — people from different linguistic worlds.

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