On Pragmatic “Borrowing Transfer”: Evidence from Chinese EFL Learner’s Compliment Response Behavior

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Abstract

This study was designed to explore the issue of “borrowing transfer” by examining transfer phenomena at the pragmatic level, with a focus on the speech act of compliment response. In the present study, 92 discourse completion task (DCT) questionnaires in Chinese were distributed to university English majors and non-English majors. Results showed that, in response to compliments, English majors were more likely to adopt acceptance strategies than non-English majors, whereas non-English majors were more inclined to adopt non-acceptance strategies than English majors. The influence of English norms on Chinese EFL learners’ compliment responses appeared to be more obvious if learners had a longer history of L2 learning and higher L2 proficiency. Accordingly, seen from Chinese EFL learners’ compliment response behavior, it seems that pragmatic “borrowing transfer” exists in the L2 learning process.

Key words: pragmatic “borrowing transfer”; compliment response behavior; Chinese EFL learners

1. Introduction

Language transfer has been a central issue in linguistic research. Transfer can occur at any level: strategic, linguistic, discoursal, and pragmatic. Some studies (e.g., Cenoz, 2003; Flege, 1987) indicate that transfer can take place bi-directionally (i.e., transfer from L1 to L2 and from L2 to L1). However, our knowledge of L2 influence on L1 is still very limited compared to our understanding of transfer from L1 to L2 in adult second language acquisition (Su, 2004). My study was designed to explore the issue of “borrowing transfer”
(i.e., transfer from L2 to L1) by looking at the transfer phenomenon at the pragmatic level, with a focus on the compliment response speech act. It is believed that a clearer picture about the nature of language transfer will be beneficial to our second language learning and teaching.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language Transfer

Language transfer has been a focus of attention in linguistic research. However, its importance in second language learning has been reevaluated several times in the past decades. In the 1950s, it was regarded as the most important factor influencing second language learning. In the 1960s, learners' errors were not seen as “evidence of language transfer but as that of a ‘creative construction process’” (Odlin, 1989: ix). Thus, the importance of language transfer was minimized. It was said that “some researchers virtually denied the existence of language transfer in their enthusiasm for universalist explanations” (Odlin, 1989: ix). In the 1980s, however, language transfer regained its prominence in second language acquisition research (Arranz, 2005).

2.1.1 Definition and Categories of Language Transfer

It is assumed that second language learners tend to rely on their native language knowledge during the learning process. Lado (1957: 2) expresses this point clearly:

> Individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture—both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practiced by natives. (cited in Gass & Selinker, 2001: 65)

According to Odlin (1989: 27), transfer is “the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (perhaps imperfectly) acquired.” With respect to its influence on SLA, transfer can be classified into “negative transfer” and “positive transfer”. In Gass and Selinker’s (2001: 457) definition, positive transfer refers to “the use of the first language (or other languages known) in a second language context when the resulting second language form is correct” and negative transfer “the use of the first language (or other languages known) in a second language context resulting in a non-target-like second language form”. Compared with positive transfer, negative transfer is often easier to identify as it involves “divergences from norms in the target language” (Odlin, 1989: 36).

Concerning the direction of linguistic influence, transfer can be categorized into “borrowing transfer”, the influence that a second language has on a previously acquired language, usually the first language, and “substratum transfer”, the influence of a source language, usually the first language, on the acquisition of the second language (Odlin, 1989). Substratum transfer is a common phenomenon in second language acquisition and is a much-discussed topic in SLA literature. Borrowing transfer is also a phenomenon
most of us have experienced. For example, we occasionally have a given concept on the tip of our tongue and it will only come out in our L2.

2.1.2 Pragmatic Transfer
Transfer can occur at any level: strategic, linguistic, discoursal, and pragmatic. Pragmatic transfer (or sociolinguistic transfer), defined by Kasper (1992: 207), refers to “the influence exerted by learners’ pragmatic knowledge of languages and cultures other than L2 on their comprehension, production, and acquisition of L2 pragmatic information” (cited in Liu, 2001: 1). Pragmatic transfer may have positive and negative outcomes. Positive transfer leads to successful communication, whereas negative transfer, due to learners’ assumption that L1 and L2 are similar where, in fact, they are not, may cause nonnative use of the second language (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). Examples of L1 influence are shown in the following cases. For example, an English learner may say “Pass me the salt, please” when having dinner with an English-speaking family rather than using a more appropriate expression such as “Could you...?” or “Would you mind...?” Another example is some Chinese learners’ use of the expression “Never mind” when responding to “Thanks a lot. That’s a great help” (He, 1988). In Chinese, people use “没关系” (Mei guan xi) or “不用谢” (Bu yong xie) in response to “Thank you.” Thus, some Chinese EFL learners fail to see the slight differences among the three English expressions: “Never mind”, “Not at all” and “You are welcome”, as in Chinese they could be all translated as “没关系” (Mei guan xi) (Liu, 2001).

Researchers in the field of pragmatic transfer have probed into how substratum transfer influences the language learners’ interaction with the target language speakers (e.g., Liu, 2001; Wolfson, 1989; Yu, 2004, 2005). Liu (2001) concludes that the researchers attempt to find the differences or deviations between the learners’ divergent forms and those of the target-language and whether these deviant forms are appropriate from the perspective of the target language speakers. Liu (2001) says that studying how non-native speakers understand and realize a speech act in the target language has spiraled into a tradition which is identified as the study of pragmatic universals.

Although most present studies on language transfer are mainly on the substratum transfer, i.e., the learners’ native language affecting their acquisition of the target language, some researchers have also noticed the influence of borrowing transfer. They investigate whether language learners’ L2 knowledge affects their L1 use at different levels such as phonology (Flege, 1987; Flege & Eeftig, 1987), lexical-semantics (Caskey-Sirmons & Hickson, 1977; Pavlenko & Jarvis, 2000), sentence processing (Cook et al., 2003; Su, 2001), and pragmatics (Cenoz, 2003; Valdes & Pino, 1981) (cited in Su, 2004). For instance, Valdes & Pino (1981) studied the compliment behavior of adult Mexican-American bilinguals and found the subjects merged the compliment styles of English and Spanish. Therefore these bilinguals’ compliment behavior in either of the languages is quite different from that of monolinguals. Flege’s (1987) research indicates that cross-linguistic influence occurs in both directions and demonstrates the existence of both substratum transfer and borrowing transfer. Su’s (2001) study shows language learners sometimes apply their second language strategies to first language processing. Cenoz (2003) investigated
the request behavior of fluent Spanish-English bilinguals. The result shows that these bilinguals make requests in their first language and second language essentially in the same way (cited in Su, 2004). Su (2004) points out that our knowledge of L2 influence on L1 is still very limited compared to our understanding of transfer from L1 to L2 in adult second language acquisition.

My study is designed to explore the issue of “borrowing transfer” by looking at the transfer phenomenon at the pragmatic level, with a focus on the compliment response speech act (cf. Li, 2005).

2.2 Compliment Response and Its Cultural Implicatures

Complimenting is a common speech act in people’s daily lives. According to Holmes (1988b), it is a speech act which expresses the speaker’s positive evaluation of the hearer (cited in Doohan & Manusov, 2004), and as it is an important device in interpersonal relationships, linguists have been greatly interested in complimenting and “the importance of compliments as speech acts worthy of study has been well documented in research” (Doohan & Manusov, 2004: 171).

When sociolinguists investigate the speech act, they find that it varies from one culture to another. Wolfson (1981: 117) emphasizes that “[l]anguages differ greatly from one another in their patterns and norms of interaction.” In order to catch the nature and characteristics of compliments, researchers have conducted cross-cultural contrastive studies (e.g., Chen, 1993; Golato, 2002; Herbert & Straight, 1989; Lorenzo-Dus, 2001; Wolfson, 1981; Yu, 2003, 2004, 2005). One salient tendency is the entering of compliment responses into the focus of these contrastive studies. Chen (1993) investigates the politeness strategies in compliment responding between American English and Mandarin Chinese speakers. Lorenzo-Dus (2001) examines over 1,000 compliment responses by British and Spanish male and female undergraduates. Golato (2002) compares German and American compliment responses given among families and friends. Yu (2003, 2004) studies Chinese and American English compliment responses.

The research to date reveals that compliment responses are inherently quite complex and differ from one culture to another. Because compliments are a kind of judgment by the speaker, the complimentees “may feel uneasy, defensive or even cynical” (Yu, 2003: 1687) and thus may have difficulties in responding appropriately. According to Pomerantz (1978), the complimentee may be caught in a dilemma which comes from “two presumably universal conversational principles: Principle I, Avoid self-praise; Principle II, Agree with others” (Pomerantz, 1978: 36, cited in Herbert & Straight, 1989). Pomerantz notes that if complimentees accept a compliment, they will be indirectly praising themselves and thus violating Principle I, while if they reject a compliment, they will be disagreeing with the complimenter and thus violating Principle II. Yu (2003) discusses six mutually exclusive strategies in responding to compliments: “acceptance”, “amendment”, “non-acceptance”, “face relationship related response”, “combination”, and “no acknowledgement”. He analyzes these response strategies using Brown and Levinson’s (1987) universal politeness framework. People may reject a compliment to avoid self-praise, not caring about “satisfying the complimenter’s face needs” (Yu, 2003: 1690).
Another example is the conversational implicatures of “comment” responses like “I got it from a friend”. This substrategy of “amendment” offers “a nice solution to the conflict between the speaker’s support of the prior compliment and his/her sensitivity to self-praise avoidance” (Yu, 2003: 1692). However, Yu (2003: 1703-1704) points out that, at the deep level, “the motivations for Chinese politeness behavior are in reality different from those purported by Brown and Levinson”. People’s compliment responses are obviously influenced by their culture. Yu compares the compliment responses of native Chinese speakers with those of native American English speakers. American culture emphasizes “agreement in discoursal activities” (Yu, 2003: 1705) and thus people usually respond to compliments with “acceptance forms”. Chinese society, however, values relative power and modesty and the complimentees will respond with “non-acceptance forms” (cf. Herbert & Straight, 1989). For example, when a Chinese hostess receives a compliment about her cooking, especially from people with higher social status, she would respond “Oh, no! I’m a lousy cook. The food was really no good at all. There was nothing to eat.” The Chinese people’s precedence given to the maxim of modesty well explains the reason why the Chinese are more inclined to respond to a compliment with non-acceptance than English speakers. Even when they accept a compliment the Chinese tend to enact amendment or combination strategies. Yu concludes that “norms and social factors may intervene in determining the distinctive patterns of compliment response behavior for a given speech community” (Yu, 2003: 1705). According to Yu’s (2003, 2004) categorization, there are several substrategies under the above-mentioned six strategies. Table 1 summarizes the main strategies, their substrategies and relevant examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>Appreciation Tokens</td>
<td>Utterances that recognize the status of a preceding remark as a compliment without being semantically fitted to the specifics of that praise. Generally, they are words showing gratitude. Appreciation tokens can also be responses like smiles or nods.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agreement</td>
<td>Utterances that agree with the complimentary force of the speaker by a remark semantically fitted to the compliment.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pleasure</td>
<td>Utterances that show the complimentee is pleased.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Association</td>
<td>Utterances that include more than one of the Acceptance substrategies above (e.g., Appreciation Token + Pleasure).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amendment</td>
<td>Returns</td>
<td>Utterances that reciprocate the act of complimenting by offering praise to the complimenter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Downgrades</td>
<td>Utterances that scale down the complimentary force of the praise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upgrades</td>
<td>Utterances that increase the force of the compliment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amendment</td>
<td>Questions Utterances that question the sincerity or appropriateness of the compliment.</td>
<td>Is that so? Do you really think that I played very well?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comments</td>
<td>Responses that, while accepting the force of a given compliment, do not accept credit for the accomplishment or attitude that is praised. Rather, the speaker impersonalizes the force of that compliment.</td>
<td>I put a lot of work into it last night.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfers</td>
<td>Utterances that switch the force or the focus of the compliment back to the complimenter.</td>
<td>Sir, if you think it is okay, please have some more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associations</td>
<td>Utterances that include two or more of the Amendment substrategies above (e.g., Downgrade + Return).</td>
<td>It’s only O.K. I think yours is pretty good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-acceptance</td>
<td>Disagreements Utterances that disagree with the assertion of the compliment, or responses showing that the compliment is undue or overdone.</td>
<td>No!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifications</td>
<td>Utterances that do not accept the full complimentary force of a given compliment by questioning the quality that is praised.</td>
<td>Well, actually I think it sort of dragged out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divergences</td>
<td>Utterances that question the force of the compliment by suggesting other intended acts.</td>
<td>Stop making fun of me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associations</td>
<td>Utterances that include more than one of the Nonacceptance substrategies above (e.g., Disagreement + Diverge).</td>
<td>I don’t think so. You’ve got to be joking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face Relationship</td>
<td>Related Response Utterances that do not appear to accept, amend, or reject the compliment given. In essence, this kind of metacommunicative response does not deal with the propositional content of the compliment; rather, it deals with the occurrence of the compliment within the interaction.</td>
<td>I’m embarrassed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination</td>
<td>The case in which the addressee’s responses combine two or more of the four main strategies described above (e.g., Acceptance [Appreciation Token] + Amendment [Question]).</td>
<td>Thank you! Did you really think it’s good?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Acknowledgment</td>
<td>The case in which the speaker chooses not to respond to the compliment bestowed upon himself or herself.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Compliment responses are rather understudied in the Chinese mainland. Yu (1999: 92) states that “cross-cultural studies have paid relatively little attention to native Chinese speakers’ speech act behavior”, but in his (2003, 2004, 2005) studies, the Chinese subjects were all Taiwanese. In the present study, I chose Mainland Chinese speakers as my participants and examined their compliment response behavior to test the existence of pragmatic “borrowing transfer” (cf. Li, 2005).
3. Research Questions

As mentioned above, my study was designed to explore the issue of “borrowing transfer” by looking at the transfer phenomenon at the pragmatic level, with a focus on the compliment response speech act (cf. Li, 2005). The study was based on Chen’s (1993) study, which shows that American English speakers tend to respond to compliments with acceptance whereas the Chinese are overwhelmingly likely to respond to compliments with non-acceptance. Presumably, if there is pragmatic “borrowing transfer”, Chinese EFL learners would apply English pragmatic strategies to their first language behaviors. This tendency should be more obvious with longer periods of English learning (Li, 2005) and higher English language proficiency. The present study examined whether the influence of English norms on Chinese EFL learners’ compliment responses appears to be more obvious if the learners have a longer history of English learning and higher English language proficiency. Specifically, the following research questions are formulated: Is there any difference between English majors’ (Chinese EFL learners with a longer period of English learning and higher English language proficiency) responses to compliments and those of non-English majors (Chinese EFL learners with a shorter span of English learning and lower English language proficiency)? If there is any, what does the difference look like?

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

I selected colleges and universities as the speech community where I conducted my research. One was Chinese Defense and Technology College (CDTC) in Sanhe city, Hebei Province. The other was Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) in Beijing.

The participants were Chinese Mainland college students, aged from 22 to 40. They were comparable in age and education background. Group One consisted of non-English majors in the fourth year in CDTC. Group Two consisted of English majors, first-year postgraduates of English major in BFSU.

In Mainland China, English is obligatory in high school (3 years in junior high, 3 years in senior high) and in the first year of college; thus, most participants in the present study had studied English for at least 7 years when the research was conducted. In order to reduce possible effects of English proficiency within each group, the participants of the non-English major group were students who had not passed the CET-6 (a national English proficiency test for non-English majors). Actually, in the non-English major group, only 13 had passed CET-4 (a national English proficiency test for non-English majors) and the scores in College Entrance Examination of these 13 students were all below 80 out of 100. In contrast, the participants in the English major group had all passed TEM-8 (a national English proficiency test for English majors).
4.2 Instruments and Procedures

4.2.1 DCT questionnaire

Golato (2002) reviewed five different tools and methods for collecting data: discourse completion tasks and questionnaires, recall protocols, role plays, field observation, and conversation and discourse analysis. Each method has its advantages and disadvantages and “allows the researchers to investigate different facets of the topic at hand (e.g., intuitions, frequency, distribution, sequential organization, etc.)” (Golato, 2002: 548). Yu (2004: 105) also mentions that the discourse completion task (DCT) questionnaires are “among the most frequent forms employed in interlanguage studies”. The present study used DCT questionnaires to collect the needed data.

Each item in the DCT questionnaire used in the present study consisted of a situational scenario with a space in which the participants were asked to write down their responses, imagining they were the speakers in the interactions. If they wanted to say nothing, they could choose Item B “You feel that you will say nothing” provided by the questionnaire. So the participants would not be forced to respond unrealistically. For instance,

**Situation One**: When your teacher distributed the homework, he said to you: “A good job!”

A. You will say: ________________________________.

B. You feel that you will say nothing. □

The compliment topics in this questionnaire only involved ability, such as achieving a good performance in a test, being skilled in ball playing, showing remarkable ability to get things done, etc. The reason is that, according to previous research findings (Yang, 1987; Ye, 1995; Yu, 2005), the Chinese tend to compliment more on ability (e.g., “A good job”, “What a wonderful meal”) than on appearance (e.g., “Your eyes are very beautiful”, “You are so slim”). This tendency can be accounted for by the fact that the Chinese traditionally value the virtues and ability of the individuals rather than appearance (Yang, 1987, cited in Yu, 2005).

I adopted the pattern of Yu’s (2004) questionnaire design. In fact, my questionnaire is Yu’s (2004) version with a little adaptation. One of the reasons is that I want to compare the compliment response behavior of Chinese mainlanders and that of Taiwanese. So my code scheme is also the same as Yu’s (2004) in principle. However, as the focus of this paper is on pragmatic transfer in Chinese mainland EFL learners, I do not discuss the differences in compliment response behavior between Chinese mainlanders and Taiwanese here. There were altogether eight situations in the DCT questionnaire (See Appendix I). In four of them, the addressee was higher in status than the addresser (Situations 1-4). In the other four situations, the interlocutors were equal in status (Situations 5-8). In order to control the gender effect, two parallel situations were designed for each condition in which the addressee was either male or female (e.g., Situation 1 & 3). Furthermore, Yu’s (1999, 2005) studies show that the Chinese usually offer compliments only to acquaintances, rather than intimates or total strangers. So the situations described in the DCT only involved mutually acquainted interlocutors.
The version distributed to the participants was in Chinese, as Appendix I shows. Non-English majors and English majors used the same Chinese version of the questionnaire. On the top of the questionnaire there were spaces in which the participants offered their gender, age and major. I asked the participants to offer their English College Entrance Examination scores, or their scores on CET-4 and CET-6, or TEM-4 and TEM-8.

I distributed 92 questionnaires, 41 to non-English majors in CDTC and 51 to English majors in BFSU. Of the 37 questionnaires returned from CDTC, 35 were valid, and of the 50 received from BFSU, 47 were valid. The rejected questionnaires were considered invalid because they were not completely filled out.

4.2.2 Data Analysis
I adopted Yu’s (2004) coding scheme to classify compliment response strategies. There were six mutually exclusive main strategies: Acceptance, Amendment, Non-acceptance, Face Relationship Related Response, Combination, and No Acknowledgment. Acceptance strategies refer to those “utterances that recognize the status of a preceding remark as a compliment” (Yu, 2004: 118). Under this main acceptance strategy, there are four substrategies: appreciation tokens, agreement, pleasure and association. For example, when being complimented for the good performance in the test, the speaker may respond with “Thank you.” I took these words as “appreciation tokens”. When being praised for the wonderful cooking, the speaker may say “I’m glad you liked it.” Under this circumstance, I took the response as “pleasure” strategy. If the speaker supplied “Thank you! I’m glad you liked it”, I put it into “association” strategy as more than one of the acceptance strategies were used. Furthermore, when “recognizing the status of a preceding remark as a compliment”, the speaker may try to “amend its complimentary force” (ibid), adopting amendment strategies. There are seven substrategies under the amendment strategies: return, downgrade, upgrade, question, comment, transfer, and association (See Table 1 for specific examples). As to the nonacceptance strategies, they are “[u]tterance that deny, question, or joke about the content of the compliment or avoid responding directly to the praise” (Yu, 2004: 119). Disagreement, qualification, diverge and association are the four substrategies under the nonacceptance main strategy. Table 1 in section 2.2 provides the description and examples for each strategy. Each response of the participants to a given DCT situation was categorized into only one specific category. The full scheme is provided in Appendix II.

After collecting the needed data and coding all of the compliment responses, I used a quantitative method to analyze my data and obtained the frequencies of responses within each of the six strategies for the two groups. After that, Chi-square tests were adopted to examine whether there was any significant between-group difference for certain types of strategies.

5. Results
The results indicated that there were some differences between English majors’ responses to compliments and those of non-English majors, although the two groups shared some similar patterns. Table 2 shows the overall distribution of the six compliment response
strategies across all situations for these two groups. As Table 2 indicates, the two groups possessed similar preferences in the selection of compliment response strategies, with Amendment on the top and Face Relationship Related Response on the bottom. For Amendment strategies, there is no significant difference between the two groups ($x^2 = 5.300, df = 1, p = 0.021>0.01$). As for Face Relationship Related Response strategies, no non-English major chose this type and only one English major chose it. Furthermore, the English majors were significantly more likely to respond to compliments with Acceptance and Combination strategies than the non-English majors (Acceptance: $x^2 = 8.948, df = 1, p = 0.003<0.01$; Combination: $x^2 = 12.033, df = 1, p = 0.001<0.01$). In addition, the Non-English majors tended to adopt Non-acceptance and No acknowledgment strategies more often than the English majors, although there was no significant difference (Non-acceptance: $x^2 = 0.926, df = 1, p = 0.336>0.01$; No acknowledgment: $x^2 = 2.882, df = 1, p = 0.090>0.01$). These statistics indicated that, when responding to compliments, the Chinese EFL learners with a longer period of English learning and higher English proficiency were more likely to adopt Acceptance and Combination strategies, while the Chinese EFL learners with a shorter period of English learning were more inclined to adopt Non-acceptance and No Acknowledgment strategies. This result is consistent with Li’s (2005: 93) report, which finds that Chinese EFL learners with a longer history of English learning are more likely to adopt Acceptance strategies.

**Table 2.** Percentages and Token Numbers of Compliment Response Strategies for Speaker Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compliment Response Strategies</th>
<th>Non-English Major Group</th>
<th>English Major Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>.2071 (.58)</td>
<td>.2527 (95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amendment</td>
<td>.4429 (.124)</td>
<td>.4335 (163)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-acceptance</td>
<td>.0572 (.16)</td>
<td>.0293 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face Relationship Related Response</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>.0026 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination</td>
<td>.1464 (.41)</td>
<td>.2101 (79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Acknowledgment</td>
<td>.1464 (.41)</td>
<td>.0718 (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1.00 (280)</td>
<td>1.00 (376)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Discussion

The previous studies on compliments and compliment responses show that the main function of complimenting is to “increase or consolidate the solidarity between the speaker and the addressee” (Holmes, 1984, 1988a, cited in Chen, 1993: 56). Thus compliments are
regarded as “social lubricants” (Holmes, 1988a, cited in Chen, 1993: 56) to establish or reinforce solidarity between the addressee (Manes, 1983). Accordingly, we can analyze complimenting and compliment responding in terms of politeness (Chen, 1993). Next, I will analyze the results of this study in light of Leech’s (1983) Politeness Principle (PP) theory and Brown & Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory.

There are six maxims in Leech’s Politeness Principle (PP): Tact, Generosity, Approximation, Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy (Leech, 1983: 132, cited in Chen, 1993). Leech suggests that different cultures give different emphasis to these maxims (cited in Yu, 2003). For example, Americans place special emphasis on agreement in discoursal activities (Yu, 2003). This in part explains why in the American English-speaking world “the maxim of agreement takes precedence over the maxim of modesty” (Yu, 2003: 1703) and people tend to respond to compliments with acceptance forms. In contrast, behaving modestly is highly valued by the Chinese as modesty is one of the most important “constituents of their self-image” (Yu, 2003: 1700). The norm of modesty, as well as a high value on relative power, often makes the Chinese “withhold expressions of delight or gratitude, even when they do feel pleased at receiving a compliment” (Yang, 1987, cited in Yu, 2003: 1700). Therefore, Chinese people are always ready to adopt Amendment and Combination strategies in responding to compliments. Actually, the results of the present study show that Amendment is on the top of the strategy list for both English majors and non-English majors. According to Leech, the strategies other than pure Acceptance and Non-acceptance may be seen, to different degrees, “as compromises between the needs to adhere to the maxim of modesty vs. that of agreement” (Yu, 2003: 1703). In a word, both groups’ compliment responses were influenced by Chinese culture.

Although the two groups in the present study possess similar preferences in the selection of compliment response strategies, with Amendment on the top, English majors are more likely to respond to compliments with Acceptance than non-English majors. Non-English majors tend to adopt Non-acceptance and No Acknowledgment strategies more often than English majors. As shown in Table 2, the percentage of Acceptance strategies used by the English majors is higher than that by the non-English majors (English major: 25%; non-English major: 21%). It seems this pattern can be explained naturally with the conception of pragmatic “borrowing transfer”. As discussed above, American people are more likely to adopt Acceptance strategies when responding to compliments as they attach greater value to agreement than Chinese people. If pragmatic “borrowing transfer” exists, it would be reasonably expected that Chinese EFL learners would tend to adopt Acceptance strategies. It suggests that the influence of English norms on Chinese EFL learners’ speech acts is more obvious if the learners have a longer history of L2 learning and higher L2 proficiency. In contrast, the finding that non-English majors use Non-acceptance and No Acknowledgment strategies more often than English majors can be taken as the more obvious impact of Chinese norms as modesty is more highly valued in Chinese culture than agreement. In other words, with a shorter length of English learning and lower English proficiency, learners’ compliment response speech acts appear not to have been influenced so greatly by the norms of the English-speaking communities. To sum up, the participants’ history of English learning and their English proficiency seem
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to have some influence on their compliment response speech acts in Chinese. This result can be seen as evidence for pragmatic “borrowing transfer”.

To summarize, Chinese EFL learners’ speech acts of compliment response in Chinese seem to be affected by their history of English learning and their English proficiency. Their speech acts of compliment response are also influenced by Chinese cultural norms. Their preferred strategies are Amendment, which can be seen as the compromise result of advocating modesty and accepting a compliment.

7. Conclusion

A comparison of the compliment response speech act behavior of Chinese non-English majors and English majors shows that these two groups possess similar preferences in the selection of compliment response strategies, with Amendment on the top and Face Relationship Related Response on the bottom. But a more detailed comparison reveals that there are some differences between these two groups’ strategies. First, English majors are more likely to respond to compliments with Acceptance than non-English majors. Second, non-English majors are more inclined to respond to compliments with Non-acceptance than English majors. Chen’s (1993) study indicates that American English speakers tend to respond to compliments with Acceptance while Chinese people are overwhelmingly inclined to respond to compliments with Non-acceptance. Accordingly, it seems that Chinese EFL learners with a longer period of English learning and higher English language proficiency are more similar to American English speakers with respect to compliment responses. This tendency can be explained reasonably by the assumption that there is pragmatic “borrowing transfer” in the second language learning process.

Given that the crux of this study lies in differences and similarities in compliment response strategies between Chinese non-English majors and English majors, the focus of the study was not on the influence of the speakers’ gender and status—even though these variables were embedded in the varying situations to which the participants had to respond. Differences in language use between women and men has long been an issue of interest in the field of language study. Therefore, one focus for future research may be analysis of gender differences in compliment response behavior among different speaker groups (Yu, 2004).

References

Caskey-Sirmons, L. & Hickson, N. 1977. Semantic shift and bilingualism: Variation in color terms


**Appendix I 问卷调查表**

请根据您的实际情况在下列相应的方框中划“√”。

您的性别：男□/女□

您的年龄：18-24岁□ / 24-30岁□ / 30-36岁□

您的专业：非英语专业文科□ /理科□ /工科□ /英语□

您的(请至少提供一项):

1）英语高考成绩：0%-30%□ / 30%-60%□ / 60%-80%□ / 80%-100%□

2）大学英语四级考试成绩：通过□ /未通过□ 六级成绩：通过□ /未通过□

3）英语专业四级考试成绩：通过□ /未通过□ 八级成绩：通过□ /未通过□

填写说明：请仔细阅读以下八个生活中的场景。如果您遇到此种情形，您会作何回应，请用中文写下您的真实回答。如果您觉得自己什么都不会说，请选择B项，并在后面的方框中划“√”。

场景1：当您的老师发作业时他对您说：“做的不错！”

A. 您会说：

B. 您觉得自己什么都不会说。□
On Pragmatic “Borrowing Transfer”: Evidence from Chinese EFL Learner’s Compliment Response Behavior

场景2：您的老师看到您在打球并注意到您打得很好，他对您说：“你打得挺不错的!”
A. 您会说：
B. 您觉得自己什么都不会说。□

场景3：一次考试您考得很好，下课后您老师（她）对您说：“考得不错！”
A. 您会说：
B. 您觉得自己什么都不会说。□
（请继续填写此页反面的场景，谢谢！）

场景4：聚餐时老师尝了您做的一道菜后，她对您说：“你的手艺挺不错的!”
A. 您会说：
B. 您觉得自己什么都不会说。□

场景5：您和朋友一起打球，他夸您说：“呵！真厉害！”
A. 您会说：
B. 您觉得自己什么都不会说。□

场景6：您和朋友去听一个学术讲座，之后他对您说：“我觉得你刚才提的问题提得很好！”
A. 您会说：
B. 您觉得自己什么都不会说。□

场景7：您和一位同学一起组织一次学校里的会议，她对您说：“你的工作能力真强！”
A. 您会说：
B. 您觉得自己什么都不会说。□

场景8：一位同学听了您上课时的小组总结发言后，她对您说：“你表现得真好！”
A. 您会说：
B. 您觉得自己什么都不会说。□

Appendix II

Coding Scheme for Compliment Response Strategies [Yu’s (2004) version with adaptations]

Acceptance Strategies: Utterances that recognize the status of a preceding remark as a compliment. Generally, the following substrategies are regarded as subsumed under the main Acceptance strategy:
1. Appreciation Tokens: Utterances that recognize the status of a preceding remark as a compliment without being semantically fitted to the specifics of that praise. Generally, they are words showing gratitude, such as “Thank you.” Appreciation tokens can also be responses like smiles or nods. For example:

 Chinese:  Xièxiè!
    thank, thank
   谢谢！(Thank you!)
    (S3: test)
2. Agreement: Utterances that agree with the complimentary force of the speaker by a remark semantically fitted to the compliment. For example:

Chinese: wǒ yě juéde bú cuò.

I too think not bad

我也觉得不错。 (Yeah, I think it went well, too.)

(S3: test)

3. Pleasure: Utterances that show the complimentee is pleased. For example:

Chinese: hěn gāoxìng nín xǐhuān.

very happy you like

很高兴您喜欢。 (I’m glad you liked it.)

(S4: cooking)

4. Association: Utterances that include more than one of the Acceptance substrategies above. For example:

Chinese: Xièxiè! hěn gāoxìng nín xǐhuān.

thank, thank very happy you like

谢谢！很高兴您喜欢。 (Thank you! I’m glad you liked it.)

(Appreciation Token + Pleasure)

(S6: cooking)

**Amendment Strategies:** In recognizing the status of a preceding remark as a compliment, the speaker tries to amend its complimentary force. Generally, the following substrategies are regarded as subsumed under the main Amendment strategy:

1. Returns: Utterances that reciprocate the act of complimenting by offering praise to the complimenter. For example:

Chinese: Nǐ yě dǎ de bú cuò

you too play (complex stative construction) not bad

你也打得不错。 (You play very well, too.)

(S5: basketball)

2. Downgrades: Utterances that scale down the complimentary force of the praise. For example:

Chinese: Hái guò de qù lā.

still pass (complex stative construction) go (expletive)

还过得去啦。 (Just so-so.)

(S1: essay)

3. Upgrades: Utterances that increase the force of the compliment. For example:

Chinese: zhī dào wǒ de lìhài le ba

know my strong points (phrase-final particle) (question mark)

知道我的厉害了吧。 (Yeah, I really killed you today, eh?)

(S5: basketball)

4. Questions: Utterances that question the sincerity or appropriateness of the compliment. For example:

Chinese: Shì ma? Nǐ zhēn de juéde wǒ dǎ de bú cuò?

is (question mark) you really think I play (complex stative construction) not bad

是吗？你真的觉得我打得不错？ (Is that so? Do you really think that I played very well?)

(S5: basketball)
5. **Comments:** Responses that, while accepting the force of a given compliment, do not accept credit for the accomplishment or attitude that is praised. Rather, the speaker impersonalizes the force of that compliment. For example:

Chinese: zuówèn zhǔnbèi le hěnjiǔ.

*yesterday evening prepare (phrase-final particle) long time*

昨晩準備了很久。(I put a lot of work into it last night.)

(S8: presentation)

6. **Transfers:** Utterances that switch the force or the focus of the compliment back to the complimenter. For example:

Chinese: Laoshī yàoshì juédé hǎi kěyì de huà, qǐng duō chī yīdiǎn.

*sir if think passably okay (nominalizer) speech please more eat a little*

老师要是觉得还可以的话，请多吃一点。(Sir, if you think it is okay, please have some more.)

(S4: cooking)

7. **Associations:** Utterances that include two or more of the Amendment substrategies above. For example:

Chinese: yībān bān la. wǒ juédé nǐ cái bùcuò

*so-so (phrase-final particle) I think you really not bad*

一般般啦! 我觉得你才不错。(It's only O.K. I think yours is pretty good.)

(Downgrade + Return)

(S8: presentation)

Chinese: Mǎmǎhū hū la! Shì nín bù xiānqì.

*so-so (phrase-final particle) is you no reject*

马马虎虎啦! 是您不嫌弃。(Just so-so! You’re being too kind!)

(Question + Comment)

(S4: cooking)

**Nonacceptance Strategies:** Utterances that deny, question, or joke about the content of the compliment or avoid responding directly to the praise. Generally, the following substrategies are regarded as subsumed under the main Nonacceptance strategy:

1. **Disagreements:** Utterances that disagree with the assertion of the compliment, or responses showing that the compliment is undue or overdone. For example:

Chinese: Méiyǒu la.

*nō (phrase-final particle)*

没有啦! (No!)

(S1: essay)

2. **Qualifications:** Utterances that do not accept the full complimentary force of a given compliment by questioning the quality that is praised. For example:

Chinese: wǒ juédé tuō de tài cháng le.

*I think last (complex stative construction) too long (phrase-final particle)*

我觉得拖得太长了。(Well, actually I think it sort of dragged out.)

(S8: presentation)
3. Divergences: Utterances that question the force of the compliment by suggesting other intended acts. For example:
Chinese: Bié nào le.
      stop make scene (phrase-final particle)
      别闹了。(Stop making fun of me.)
(S7: conference)

4. Associations: Utterances that include more than one of the Nonacceptance substrategies above. For example:
      I not think you are joking (question mark)
      我不觉得。你在开玩笑吧。(I don’t think so. You’ve got to be joking.)
      (Disagreement + Diverge)
      (S5: basketball)

Chinese: Nǎyǒu! Wǒ dōu de bù hǎo.
      where have I play (complex stative construction) not good.
      没有?我打得不好。(No! I don’t play well. It’s not as good as yours.)
      (Disagreement + Qualification)
      (S5: basketball)

**Face Relationship Related Response Strategies:** Utterances that do not appear to accept, amend, or reject the compliment given. In essence, this kind of metacommunicative response does not deal with the propositional content of the compliment; rather, it deals with the occurrence of the compliment within the interaction. For example:
Chinese: Bùhǎoyìsi.
      embarrassed
      不好意思。(I’m embarrassed.)
      (S2: basketball)

**Combination Strategies:** The case in which the addressee’s responses combine two or more of the four main strategies described above. For example:
Chinese: Xièxiè! Nǐ zhēndé juéde hǎo ma?
      thank, thank you really think good (question mark)
      谢谢！你真的觉得好吗？(Thank you! Did you really think it’s good?)
      (Acceptance [Appreciation Token] + Amendment [Question])
      (S8: presentation)

Chinese: Méiyǒu la.
      Wǒ xiǎng wǒ jīntiān yùnqì hǎo.
      no (phrase-final particle) I think I today luck good
      没有啦！我想我今天运气好。(No, I think I’m lucky today.)
      (Non-Acceptance [Disagreement] + Amendment [Transfer])
      (S2: basketball)
No Acknowledgment: The case in which the speaker chooses not to respond to the compliment bestowed upon himself or herself.

Note:
As defined, the Combination main strategy refers to the situation in which more than one main strategy, such as Acceptance, Amendment, Nonacceptance, Face Relationship Related Response, is adopted in a single compliment response sequence. That is to say, only an utterance that combines more than one main strategy is coded as Combination. In contrast, in situations in which two or more of the substrategies of a certain main strategy are employed at the same time in a given compliment response, the response, as defined above, is coded as the Association substrategy that belongs to that specific main strategy. For example, “Thank you! Do I really look that great?” (Acceptance [Appreciation Token] + Amendment [Question]) is coded as a Combination main strategy, whereas “Thank you! I’m glad you enjoyed it” (Acceptance [Appreciation Token + Pleasure]), as an Association substrategy that is subsumed under the Acceptance main strategy.

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