

“Ah, excuse me...I like your shirt”: An examination of compliment responses across gender by Australians

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Abstract

This paper examines compliment response across gender within Australia and also the likelihood of males perceiving a compliment as flirtatious. Compliment response was gathered by approaching strangers under the premise of needing directions and then concluding the exchanges with a compliment on appearance. Participants were soon re-approached by a second person who asked them to fill out a brief survey which included four 7-point Likert-type scales, one specifically pertaining to the ‘innocence’ or ‘flirtiness’ of the compliment. Australian speakers of English were found to use acceptance tokens in all cases when responding to the non-intimate compliment. The majority of men surveyed were also found to perceive the compliment as neither ‘flirtatious’ nor ‘innocent.’ However, this may indicate the men were simply reluctant to rate the compliment as ‘flirtatious’ given the negative connotations associated with the adjective in certain contexts.

1. Introduction

As Parisi and Wogan (2006) suggest, there is a growing field of research pertaining to compliment behaviour and its relation to both status and gender. Similarly, investigations regarding the male tendency to view situations in a more ‘sexualised’ manner than females (Abbey 1987) have also grown popular, most recently as an attempt to explain the motivations behind sexual harassment (Johnson, Stockdale and Saal 1991). This paper examines both issues, investigating compliment responses across gender within Australia, and also the likelihood of males perceiving a compliment as flirtatious.

Studying a corpus of 1,062 compliment responses collected over a three-year period at the State University of New York, Herbert (1986) argued that despite being socially conditioned to respond to a compliment by using ones’ manners and saying ‘thank you’, American speakers are almost twice as likely “to respond with some response other than agreement” (p.80). Although occasionally overgeneralising in his categorisation of compliment responses (into Acceptance or Non-agreement/non-acceptance), Herbert draws important attention to the ‘ethnography of speaking’ when contrasting his findings with similar studies conducted in other English-speaking countries. Finding in preliminary research that English and South African speakers are more likely to accept a compliment than their American counterparts, Herbert cites Sherzer’s (1977) basic concepts of ‘speech ethnography’ to explain this discrepancy stating, “[firstly,] that the patterned use of language is culturally variable and [secondly, that] these

patterns may be linked to such larger aspects of sociocultural organisation as religion, politics and ecology" (p. 82).

Holmes (1988) conducted a similar study using a New Zealand sample focusing specifically on the function of compliments across gender, be they positively affective speech acts or potentially face threatening acts. Using a corpus of 484 compliment exchanges recorded by linguistics students, Holmes (1988: 449) examined the frequency of compliments between genders, finding 23.1% of compliments occur from males to females in comparison to 16.5% from females to males. Her results also shows the most popular compliment topic is that of 'appearance' with female–female interactions complimenting on appearance 61% of the time, male–female 47%, female–male 40% and male–male, a surprising 36% (p.455). She draws from Wolfson's comments (1983) to note that such a high percentage amongst males would generally not occur amongst American men (Holmes 1988: 456). She furthers her study by categorising the compliments into syntactic patterns and investigating the influence of status on compliment behaviour and the motivations behind compliment response. According to Holmes (1988: 460), New Zealanders rarely overtly reject compliments; such a trend is evident in her results, which show 62% of females and 64% of males use an acceptance token.

Parisi and Wogan's (2006) study provides an updated look at compliment topics and gender in America. Again using linguistic students to record compliment exchanges, the corpus is analysed and a significantly higher proportion of compliments on appearance is found to occur from males to females (60.53%) than females to males (29.27%) (Parisi and Wogan 2006: 21). Where previous studies have focused primarily on corpus analysis and quantitative results (Herbert 1986; Holmes 1988), Parisi and Wogan (2006) incorporated interviews into their methodology to provide further contextual information and so gain insight into compliment motivation. Through such qualitative methods, they discovered a shared trait amongst the females: namely, that they feel uncomfortable complimenting males on appearance for fear of the compliment being misinterpreted as a 'come-on'. Like compliment behaviour itself, this ambiguity between genders as to what constitutes 'flirtation' has received attention (Abbey 1982, 1987; Johnson *et al.* 1991; Shotland and Craig 1988).

Hypothesising that men would misperceive a female's friendly behaviour as sexual interest, Abbey (1982) instructed cross-gender pairs to converse for five minutes while a hidden cross-gender pair observed the interaction. Both dyads were then asked to rate the interaction using 7-point Likert-type scales containing the key traits 'flirtatious', 'seductive' and 'promiscuous'. The results showed that male actors and observers rated the female actor as being more 'promiscuous' and 'seductive' than the female actors and observers rated the same female. Males were also found to be more attracted to the opposite sex actor than were females, and to view the male actor in a more sexualised fashion than did the

female observers. Such results led Abbey (1982: 836) to suggest that men perceive the world in more sexual terms than do women.

Shotland and Craig (1988) built on Abbey's study in an effort to investigate whether males or females can in fact differentiate between friendly and sexually-interested behaviour. Replicating Abbey's procedure, but this time instructing the role-players to intentionally act either 'sexually-interested' or 'friendly', the interactions were taped and then shown to a sample of psychology students. The students then rated the interactions using similar Likert-type scales and the 'sexually related adjectives': flirtatious, seductive and promiscuous. Shotland and Craig (1988: 71) conclude that both sexes can differentiate between sexually-interested and friendly behaviour, although males perceive other people and situations more sexually than do females. This conclusion is shared with a similar study conducted by Johnson *et al.* (1991), who investigated gender-based differences in the perception of sexual harassment in various scenarios.

Shotland and Craig (1988: 71) hypothesise that the difference in perception is caused by a difference between the thresholds of sexual-intent across gender. In other words, women will probably misjudge interested behaviour as friendly behaviour because they share a high threshold for sexual-intent; similarly, men will misjudge friendly behaviour as interested behaviour because they share a low threshold for sexual-intent. In light of such results it is no surprise then that the women in Parisi and Wogan's (2006: 23) study expressed such reservations in complimenting males on appearance. What is interesting is that each of their female participants could pinpoint the exact reason why they felt a level of 'guardedness' without reading any studies on males' misperceptions of friendly behaviour. Given the sparsity of appearance compliments from females to males in this study, however, how can we be certain males' misperceptions continue in such situations?

As Holmes' (1988) study shows, appearance compliments across gender in New Zealand occur at a much closer rate: male-female 47%, female-male 40% (p.455). Does this mean that male and female speakers of New Zealand English share similar thresholds for sexual-intent and are therefore less likely to misjudge interested and friendly behaviours? Or are speakers of New Zealand English simply less concerned than American speakers about the possibility of being misinterpreted?

Research into the field of compliment behaviour and the perceptions of 'sexual-intent' across gender indeed raises a number of questions. Previous studies have conceded that more needs to be done to expand the fields. For example, Herbert (1986: 81) questions whether compliment response in other English speaking countries behaves in a similar way to his American sample and if indeed a student sample can adequately represent the broader society. Similarly, studying compliments from informal interactions (between friends and intimates), Holmes (1988: 456) calls for the investigation of compliment behaviour in different settings to clarify the patterns found in her corpus. Abbey

(1987:193) encourages research into cross-gender perceptions of sexual-intent in an effort to educate men and women on what types of cues are most likely to be misperceived and in turn, how to send and receive cues with less ambiguity.

Building on previous research, this paper investigates non-intimate compliment response across gender amongst Australian English speakers, and the likelihood of males perceiving a compliment as flirtatious. Compliments were gathered in the public sphere (away from university) to better represent broader society.

2. Research hypotheses

As past research suggests (Herbert 1986; Holmes 1988; Shotland and Craig 1988), compliments and compliment response differ across cultures, including gender. Herbert (1986:82) suggests that the similar pattern of compliment response found within British and South African varieties of English could be explained through the traditional role of Standard British in South African English. Given Australia's colonisation at the hands of the British Empire, and also its proximity to New Zealand, it is hypothesised that Australian response traits will approximate those of the aforementioned English varieties. Hypothesis one is therefore:

1. In response to compliments, non-intimate Australians will use *acceptance tokens* with more frequency than other compliment responses

In light of research conducted on cross-gender perceptions of 'sexual-intent' (Abbey 1982, 1987; Johnson *et al.* 1991; Shotland and Craig 1988), it becomes apparent that males frequently view interactions in a more sexual manner than do females. Therefore, hypothesis two proposes that:

2. Males will perceive the compliment to be more *flirtatious* than *innocent*

3. Method

Information was gathered by two female linguistics students in an open-air public shopping mall over a period of ten hours. Both students were casually dressed and in their early twenties. 'Target' participants were chosen on three basic criteria: age, ethnicity and absence of bystanders. Specifically, participants needed to be between the ages of 18 and 30; born and raised in Australia (Caucasian appearance was therefore typically favoured) and finally, on their own.

In order to gather non-intimate compliment response, a strategy needed to be developed to enable a confederate to approach a stranger and compliment them without appearing unnatural or suspicious. A study on tactile contact and spontaneous help (Guéguen and Fischer-Lokou 2003) involved a similar public sample and therefore provided a useful process on which to base the current methodology.

In the study conducted by Guéguen and Fischer-Lokou (2003), a researcher approached people under the premise of needing directions; after the exchange of information, the researcher thanked the person and moved off in the direction indicated. An observer located not far from the interaction recorded the behaviour which followed.

Similarly, this study utilised two people; the first located a potential participant and approached them under the premise of needing directions to a particular area of the mall.¹ After the exchange, person one thanked the stranger, added a predetermined compliment regarding appearance (refer to Appendix 1) and moved off in the direction indicated. Person two (who had been observing the interaction from a distance) then quickly approached the same participant and briefly explained the research being conducted, asking politely if they would participate by filling out a brief survey. Person one stopped and wrote down the compliment response once out of range. As it is the male perception of 'sexual-intent' being investigated in this study, only male participants were asked to complete all four scales in the survey.

Many of the studies conducted to investigate gender differences in the perception of sexually interested behaviour have used methods which involve participants rating people or interactions using the adjectives 'flirtatious', 'seductive' and 'promiscuous' (Abbey 1982, 1987; Johnson *et al.* 1991; Shotland and Craig 1988). Such adjectives all share sexual connotations but the degree of sexual strength associated with such words depends, very likely, on the perspective of the individual. If an individual is to provide their most honest perception it would seem only fair to offer them the opportunity to rank the person or situation as being simply 'friendly' or indeed 'innocent.'

With this in mind, the survey used in this study (refer to Appendix 2) included four 7-point Likert-type scales of polar opposites, one specifically designed to elicit the 'sexual-intent' perceived by male participants by asking them to rate the compliment as either 'innocent' or 'flirtatious.' The other scales were designed to elicit whether the compliment had in fact been perceived as spontaneous.

4. Results

4.1 Compliment Response

A total of 20 strangers were approached, ten males and ten females. As hypothesised, acceptance tokens were the response of choice with a full 100% of participants using a variety of "thanks," "thank you" or "cheers." Such a result provides support for the suggestion that compliments between strangers are

¹ This initial question also proved beneficial in determining the ethnicity of the participant by providing a sample of the participant's speech, i.e., did they have an Australian accent?

perceived as offers of solidarity as they are frequently accepted by non-intimates, those who do not share solidarity (Herbert 1986: 82). This however contrasts with the suggestions made by Holmes (1988) pertaining to gender differences in compliment behaviour, issues that will be discussed below. What was surprising was that 40% of female participants offered the purchase history of the complimented article after their expression of thanks. Considering the only thing the first person had asked for was directions, it appears that, for some women, a compliment pertaining to an item of clothing and a request for information about the specified item have the same function. No males responded with similar explanations of purchase history.

As Holmes (1988) suggests, this difference across genders could be due to the more positive attitude women have towards compliments, viewing them as signals of solidarity and therefore nominating further information to establish rapport. Men in comparison are said to perceive compliments as face-threatening acts (FTA)², and therefore tend to view them as a less positive means for establishing solidarity (Holmes 1988). However, considering that 40% of the females immediately offered the purchase history, it is possible that they too could have perceived the compliment as an expression of desire. However, if that was the case, surely such explanations of history would not have been offered so freely or sincerely. Clearly more detailed research into the perlocutionary force of compliments across gender is needed to explain these occurrences.

4.2 Cross gender compliments: 'innocent' or 'flirtatious?'

Close inspection of the surveys revealed an interesting pattern in the distribution of marks on the Likert-type scales. Given the bi-polar traits used in all of the scales, it was decided that any mark to the left or right of 4 (halfway) would be considered an affirmative for the applicable adjective (refer to Table 1).

² For example, expressions of desire for the complimented article (see Brown and Levinson 1978).

TRAITS	TOTAL
Friendly	100%
Natural	90%
Sincere	90%
Neutral	60%
Flirtatious	20%
Friendly	20%
Suspicious	10%
Uncomfortable	10%
Threatening	0%

Table 1: Male perceptions of compliment

As Figure 1 below illustrates, the majority of participants mark consistently at the positive extremities of each scale except when asked about the ‘flirtatiousness’ of the compliment.

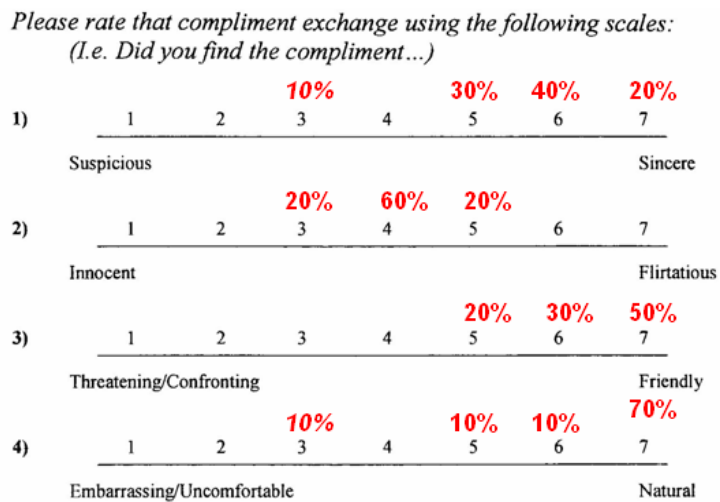


Figure 1 Distribution of marks across Likert-type scales

Scale 2, across all participants, showed a significant drop in marking the extremities on the scale and focused on the mid-point, 4. Sixty per cent of participants rated the compliment as lying between innocent and flirtatious on this scale, with 20% of participants rating the compliment as tending towards innocent and an equal 20% rating the compliment as tending towards flirtatious. Such an equal distribution on both sides of the scale makes interpretation of the data very difficult.

In literal terms, it appears that the compliment was in fact not viewed as particularly flirtatious but simply neutral. However, as neutral ratings of such magnitude do not appear in any of the other scales, an alternative interpretation may be that such a significant drop in rating could possibly be due to the self-conscious embarrassment of being surveyed on perceptions pertaining to sexual-intent. Given the negative connotations associated with the term 'flirtatious' in certain contexts, males may not want to be regarded as having perceived sexual-intent, and therefore reduce the extremity of their mark.

Such ambiguous results cannot offer concrete support for hypothesis two, but considering previous research conducted in the field suggesting that men view interactions in a more sexual manner than do females (Abbey 1982, 1987; Johnson *et al.* 1991; Shotland and Craig 1988), it would be hasty to disregard the hypothesis entirely.

Fortunately, as illustrated in Table 1, the majority of participants found the compliment both 'natural' and 'sincere', which is very important considering the compliments had to occur in a public sphere between non-intimates. These two criteria had not been tested before (to the knowledge of the author of this study at the time). No patterns regarding age or civil status were discovered in the analysis of the data.

5. Discussion

This study was designed to build on past research conducted in the fields of compliment behaviour and cross-gender misperception of sexual-intent. It specifically examined compliment response across gender within the Australian English speaking culture and the likelihood of men to perceive a compliment as flirtatious.

Appearance compliments between non-intimates were found to elicit acceptance tokens 100% of the time, with some women also offering further information about the complimented item without any provocation. These results suggest that when it comes to compliment response, Australian speakers of English are indeed more similar to their New Zealand neighbours and British and South African counterparts than to the American samples cited in past research. However, as past studies analysed compliments collected amongst friends and intimates, a true comparison between previous results and the results of this study cannot be made. The overwhelming acceptance of non-intimate compliments in these results, however, suggests that non-intimates perceive compliments to be offers of solidarity, although more further study of gender-specific perceptions of the illocutionary force of compliments across gender is required to validate such a conclusion.

With regards to cross-gender perceptions of sexual-intent, this study has provided evidence to suggest males perceive a compliment from a non-intimate woman as neither particularly flirtatious nor strictly friendly, but rather, neutral.

Such ambiguous results may suggest that outside forces (such as an individuals' embarrassment at being surveyed on perceptions pertaining to sexual-intent) may affect their ratings and therefore a method to reduce such anxiety should be encouraged to improve results.

Future research to explore the perceptions of men as the compliment grew more and more intimate and personal would be useful; for example, moving from a compliment of ones' shirt to the colour of ones' eyes. Similarly, would a man between the ages of 45 and 60 perceive the same level of flirtation as younger men (when complimented by a young woman), or would the age gap cause them to subconsciously dismiss the possibility of flirtation altogether?

As the person who approached the participants complimented the men strictly for research purposes, it is highly unlikely that any sexual cues were knowingly conveyed on her part. However, as she was unable to replicate the same body language or intonation for every interaction, it is possible that some non-verbal cues may have influenced the results. With this in mind, the use of audio and visual equipment to record the compliment exchange as it takes place would be beneficial in eliminating any occasions in which there is a discrepancy in non-verbal behaviour. Such attention to non-verbal cues could also reveal subtle signs in the participant to suggest they perceived the interaction as 'flirtatious.'

There was significant difficulty in gathering participants for this investigation as the interactions had to occur between non-intimates and appear as spontaneous as possible; no participants were then actually aware they were participants until person two approached them with the survey. This caused a number of difficulties; firstly, the participants assumed confederate one was simply after directions and so quite often directed person one while still moving which made it very difficult for the compliment to occur with time for the participant to correctly hear it and reply. Secondly, the stigma associated with public surveys also made the participants immediately wary as soon as they were approached by person two.

Most interestingly, the greatest problem associated with gathering the sample was not the lack of available 'targets' but the approachability of them. Within the Australian culture (as became evident), it is very rare to find young men (18–30 years) in public, by themselves, who are not talking on their mobile phones or listening to music through headphones. The ability of young men to utilise their surroundings and possessions to isolate themselves from the public and decrease their level of approachability is truly astounding. Although compliment responses and perceptions of sexual-intent were the focus of this research, it appears a great deal of research could be done with regards to this 'approachability phenomenon.'

6. Conclusion

Although the sample size of this study is small, trends, though tentative, can be deduced. The results of this study have supported the first hypothesis, but provided only limited data for the second. It appears that in response to compliments, non-intimate Australians do use acceptance tokens with more frequency than other compliment responses, but whether males perceive compliments to be more flirtatious than innocent remains uncertain. Future research is strongly encouraged to establish a methodology which reduces participant anxiety in order to eliminate the effect on opinions of potential embarrassment. The examination of a broader sample is also encouraged to establish more concrete trends and, in turn, to provide a more detailed study of which female cues are most likely to be misperceived by men in a cross-gender compliment exchange, and therefore reduce the ambiguity of 'sexually interested' and 'friendly' cues across genders.

* Author notes

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Appendix 1: Compliment Structure

In both Parisi and Wogan (2006) and Holmes (1988) studies, ‘appearance’ is the most common compliment topic. Appearance is also the most visible of the topics and for these reasons was chosen as the topic for compliment exchange in this investigation. However, as the compliment was to occur between strangers in a very brief exchange, choosing to compliment the participant’s hair or eyes would very possibly have led to suspicion, as such compliments are typically reserved for intimate exchanges. For this reason it was decided to use a possession compliment pertaining to an item of clothing which made up the total appearance of the participant. Obviously choosing to comment on the participants’ eyes or hair would have elicited a different response and should therefore be considered as an area of study in future investigations.

As explained in Holmes (1988), there exists a number of frequently occurring syntactic patterns within compliment behaviour. One such example is:

PRO BE a (INT) ADJ NP

E.g. That’s a very nice coat.

To reduce syntactic influence on the results, this pattern was used for all interactions throughout the collection of data. One alteration was made, and that was the addition of the ‘tag’, *by the way*, at the end of the compliment. The ‘tag’ was added to convey the compliment in the most spontaneous light as possible. The noun phrase of the compliment varied only slightly between genders, as can be seen below:

Males

That’s a great *shirt*, by the way.

Females

That’s a great *top/dress/skirt*, by the way.

Appendix 2: Survey

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In the previous interaction involving you and the girl who asked for directions, you received a compliment.

Please rate that compliment exchange using the following scales:
(I.e. Did you find the compliment...)

- 1)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Suspicious			Sincere			
- 2)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Innocent			Flirtatious			
- 3)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Threatening/Confronting			Friendly			
- 4)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Embarrassing/Uncomfortable			Natural			

Please place a tick in the appropriate boxes:

- Country of birth:** Australia Other (if other, please specify)

- Nationality:** Australian Other (if other, please specify)

- Gender:** Male Female
- Age:** 18-21 22-25 26-30
- Civil status:** Single Married Girl/Boy-Friend Other