Compliments on Possessions in Australian English

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Abstract

This report explores compliments in Australian English, focusing on complimenting possessions. The author’s main interests were to analyse the components and characteristics of this type of compliment. Data collected analysed a scene from an Australian drama ‘Packed to the Rafters’. This situated data was further used as a basis for interviews conducted with 4 Australians. Compliments on possessions most often consist of the main head act without additional information in support of the compliments. The report suggests that compliments should be expressed with clearly positive adjectives for successful transmission and to avoid ambiguities. According to research data, when compliments are made on personal possessions, compliment-givers tend to be very reserved but extremely polite. Similarly, compliment-givers would pay a brief compliment on the possession regardless if they like the possession and irrespective of the power distance, and types of relationships between them and compliment-receivers. Overall, the report concludes that compliments on possessions are inherently polite speech acts consisting only the main head act in most cases.

1. Introduction

Giving and interpreting compliments may be as problematic as it is responding to them. Although it is shown that compliments, as speech acts, possess poor semantic and syntactic structure, and that they are mere formulas (Holmes, 1986; Wolfson, 1983), what is said in addition to that base formula often determines the success and appropriateness of compliments. Moreover, compliments often have additional implicit meanings that make their interpretation more difficult. As Taavitsainen & Jucker (2008:199) observe, we often cannot be sure whether the compliment-giver gave us a routine compliment or a sarcastic comment, since the “speaker’s illocutions may vary from sincere and honest to playful, ironic and sarcastic”.

Appearance is one of the most frequent complimenting areas and compliments on possessions belong to that category (Wolfson, 1983). Since people frequently compliment each other on their personal possessions, this report looks at the nature of compliments on possessions in Australian English order to analyse their components and characteristics.
Firstly, the report will present results of previous research on giving compliments, followed by the methodology used for data collection. The final section of the report is an analysis of data from which the conclusions are drawn. This report suggests that compliments on possessions consist of head acts alone and that they are inherently polite speech acts.

2. Literature Review

According to Holmes (1986:485), “a compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some ‘good’ (possession, characteristic, skill etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer”. In addition, a compliment is an expressive, interlocutor-centered and polite speech act, typically followed by the hearer’s response (Dumitrescu, 2006).

Mannes (1983) explains that compliments primarily serve the establishment or reinforcement of solidarity between the compliment-giver and -receiver. Moreover, Wolfson (1983:86) concurs with Mannes by stating that compliments are “social lubricants which create or maintain rapport”. Holmes (1986) agrees that the primary function of compliments is affective and social, stating that other functions are praise, encouragement and gratitude, to open a conversation or to enhance greeting, thanking and apologising.

According to Wolfson (1983), there are only three syntactic structures that occur consistently in complimenting speech acts (‘NP is/looks (really) ADJ’, ‘I (really) like/love NP’ and ‘PRO is (really) a ADJ NOUN’). The most frequent adjectives are ‘nice’, ‘good’, ‘lovely’, ‘beautiful’, ‘great’ and ‘neat’ and the most frequent verbs are ‘to look’ and ‘to be’. The findings were remarkably similar in American and New Zealand English data which confirm the formulaic nature of English compliments (Holmes, 1986).

3. Methodology

In order to collect data about compliments in Australian English, the following methods were used:

a. situated data analysis
b. semi-structured interviews

Firstly, an analysis of a scene from the Australian drama ‘Packed to the Rafters’ was conducted. The situated data was subsequently used as a reference for the semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with 4 Australians (2 females and 2 males). Prior to the interviews, all interviewees viewed the scene from ‘Packed to the
Rafters’ that showed 3 characters and, where a compliment speech act was present. The viewing was to enable the interviewees to interpret what constitute compliments more accurately. Since the compliment speech act in ‘Packed to the Rafters’ scene is rather problematic, the aim of the interviews was to investigate how Australians would interpret compliments and, more importantly, what they regard as appropriate or inappropriate when complimenting others on their personal possessions. The interviewees’ responses were analysed in terms of the essential and extra components of compliments. Also, the analysis investigated compliments on possessions in relation to politeness/impoliteness and relations between compliment-givers and compliment-receivers.

4. Data analysis

4.1. Situational data analysis

Given below is the conversation extracted from the scene in ‘Packed to the Rafters’ where it is possible to recognise the problematic complimenting speech act and its elements. The scene’s complimenting speech act is not a representative compliment, nevertheless, it provides a short analysis as a basis for the interviews and to draw conclusions about features of compliments upon its faults. (For the component analysis of the ‘Packed to the Rafters’ scene, refer to Table 1 in Appendix 1).

1 P1 (Julie): ...and the:n↑ we added this↑ bit on...about [.] well ten years [ago] =
2 P2(Trish): [mmh]
3 P1 (Julie): =with three↑ teenage kids we needed an extra room [.] and there was no way I was gonna pack up and move↑ again ha[hah] =
4 P2 (Trish): [ha]hha
5 P1 (Julie): = mind that I have to say that renovating did have its moments
6 P2 (Trish): ohh it looks lovely↑ (head act-direct compliment) [.] Tony and I started off in a tiny place like this (problematic extra information in support of the compliment) [.] it’s very cosy↑ (head act 2-direct compliment; ‘cosy’ is ambiguous)
7 P3 (Sammy): um mum don’t start it
8 P2 (Trish): I’m not↑ starting anything↑ I mean it [.] in fact↑ it’s a palace compared to what your father and I started out in (extra information in support of the compliment, problematic indirect compliment)
9 P1 (Julie): (0.5) ok well uh make↑ yourself at home [.] I just gotta get ready for work
4.2. Semi-structured interview analysis

As mentioned earlier in this section, complimenting on personal possessions was investigated through interviews with 4 Australians. The aim was to find common ways in which this speech act is conducted in Australian English. The findings of the interviews will be discussed in the following sections: (i) compliments - essential and extra components (ii) compliments and (im)politeness and (iii) compliments and relationships between compliment-givers and -receivers.

4.2.1. Compliments – essential and extra components

In order to determine which parts of compliments are essential, the interviewees were asked to identify them in the speech act from the ‘Packed to the Rafters’ scene.

All four interviewees agreed that the statement ‘it looks lovely’ is a compliment. According to Wolfson (1983), the most frequent syntactic structure of compliments is ‘NP is/looks (really) ADJ’. (‘It’ is a pronoun not a noun, however, we can subscribe the compliment ‘it looks lovely’ in this category because we know that ‘it’ refers to the house in this context). Moreover, Wolfson (1983) includes the adjective ‘lovely’ as the six most common complimenting adjectives. There is no surprise then that all interviewees acknowledged the statement ‘it looks lovely’ as a compliment and recognised its necessity in the communicative event. There is another compliment with the same syntactic structure in the scene – ‘it’s very cosy’. However, not all interviewees acknowledged that ‘it’s very cosy’ as a real compliment. This is what one of the female interviewees (aged 30) said:

“…uhm (.) very cosy:: (:.) it could be a compliment yeah… but† cosy can mean also very cluttered† I believe (0.5) it depends how you take it cosy can be warm as a compliment but cosy could:: also mean small like she’s saying that it’s small↑… which is not a compliment really…”

This signifies that compliments should be expressed with positive adjectives, since they are inherently positive and polite speech acts. Even then, compliments may be sarcastic, ironic or deceptive and their meanings would need to be clarified (Taavitsainen & Jucker, 2008). However, as we have also seen in the example ‘it’s very cosy’, if the meaning of a compliment adjective is ambiguous rather than positive, the compliment speech act becomes ambiguous and may not be considered a real compliment.

The parts the interviewees did not consider essential in this particular speech act, and any other compliment speech acts, are the parts where extra information is
added in support of the compliment. Below was a response from one of the male interviewees (aged 50):

“.... it would be↑ enough to say it’s lovely↑ (. ) you don’t have to give any reasons why↑ you think like that (. ) or to compare it to something else to prove ↑that it’s lovely↑...”

This suggests that use of grounders or softeners in real compliment speech acts are not essential. Male interviewees support this claim, however, female interviewees do not. One of the female interviewees (aged 45) observed:

“... well↑ in this case trish ruins the whole compliment but↑ (. ) if she said that↑ (. ) for example that her house is not so big or comfortable then the compliment could have been stronger↑...”

According to this data, men tend to give simpler compliments while women tend to add additional information in support of the compliment. However, this data is not sufficient to make any definite conclusions about the difference between the way men and women pay compliments.

Overall, all interviewees agree that statements like ‘it looks lovely’ represent the essential part of any Australian English compliment (head act in compliment speech act), while grounders, softeners or any information in support of compliments are not essential. The crucial elements of compliments on possessions could be seen as the target of the compliment (possession), a target to whom this possession is attributed (addressee) and a positive evaluation (Taavitsainen & Jucker, 2008).

Since the compliment made in the scene from ‘Packed to the Rafters’ is not a real compliment but a sarcastic comment, the interviewees did not notice that the compliment response is missing. Although analysis of compliment responses is not part of this research, when asked about responding to compliments about possessions, the interviewees said that ‘it is nice to say something in return’. This confirms the way compliment speech acts are usually carried out – first, a compliment is made (head act) and subsequently, an appropriate response to the compliment (Wolfson, 1983).

4.2.2. Compliments and (im)politeness

In relation to the concept of face, Spencer-Oatey (2008) points out that people always wish that others evaluate them positively and acknowledge their positive values. There are no better speech acts than compliments to serve this function; however, Brown & Levinson (1987) describe compliments as inherently face-threatening acts,
besides being face-enhancing speech acts. Compliments may be experienced as face-threatening when they are perceived as too personal, patronising, offensively flattering, sarcastic or used to express envy and desire for hearer’s possession (Holmes, 1995).

All interviewees thought that the compliment from the ‘Packed to the Rafters’ scene is not appropriate. Moreover, they do not perceive that it is a compliment at all. As one of the male interviewees (aged 28) said:

“no: no that’s not a compliment hahaha (. ) she’s just being bitchy ↑ yeah (. ) and sarcastic”

When asked why they do not consider P2’s comment (refer to the transcribed conversation lines 6 and 8 and Table 1 in Appendix 1) to be a compliment, the representative response came from one of the female interviewees (aged 45):

“well: she’s obviously putting her down saying that her house is tiny ↑ and yeah she’s boasting ↑ about herself like: maybe she’s suggesting that she had that kind of a house when she was younger but she later achieved something much better and bigger ↑ (. ) no that’s not complimenting”

As Holmes (1986:485-486) explains, “compliments normally attribute the valued ‘good’ to the addressee, and even when a compliment apparently refers to third person, it may well be indirectly complimenting the addressee”. In this regard (and with reference to the interviewee’s response above), it could be said that the appropriate compliment on the house is an indirect compliment to the addressee, since it indirectly attributes credit to her, for example, good taste or even an achievement to have her own house.

Thus, caution has to be practised when complimenting others’ personal possessions. When asked what is appropriate and polite to express in situations similar to the scene from ‘Packed to the Rafters’ yet avoiding offending the addressee, all interviewees said that it would be sufficient to say that the house (or whatever possession) looks lovely. Sarcastic comments as in lines 6 and 8 (refer to the transcribed conversation lines 6 and 8 and Table 1 in the Appendix) are neither polite nor appropriate.

Concerning politeness, the interviewees were asked what they would say if someone proudly shows them a personal possession but they personally do not like it. These are the answers of the male interviewee (aged 50) and the female interviewee (aged 30):

“... well: I would say it’s nice and probably: stop yeah I wouldn’t say anything else...”

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“…uhmm (...) I’d say something like oh↑ wow↑ it’s lovely↑, it’s so: beautiful... and stop there (...) but I guess if I really really don’t↑ like it I would react differently (...) I wouldn’t sound so enthusiastic and shocked… for example my friend painted her wall green I mean really green and I said oh, yeah, it’s very nice, it’s very you…”

From the interviewee-responses, it could be concluded that people are very careful when giving compliments on personal possessions in order not to offend the addressee. They would even provide a positive response even though they do not like the possession in question. Even if they like the possession, they would most often stop at the basic compliment head act.

Finally, to confirm the politeness of people when giving compliments, interviewees were asked whether they would engage in conversation about the possession if they felt that the addressee would like to continue talking and boasting about it. All interviewees answered positively that they would allow the person to continue. They would initiate questions, for example, “What do you like most about your new car?” or “Where did you find that green color? The following section will discuss whether these opinions change in relation to familiarity and relationship with the compliment-receiver.

4.2.3. Compliments and relationship between compliment-giver and compliment-receiver

According to Brown & Levinson (1987), power and distance of relationships are considerations when conveying speech acts. The interviewees were asked whether the power and distance differences between them and the addressees influence their way of giving compliments.

In the case of unequal role relations, all interviewees said they would always give a short compliment to someone with more power whether they like the possession or not. The interviewees would behave similarly in social settings. All interviewees stated they would give only very short compliments, usually without any non-essential parts.

Therefore, the interviewees would give compliments when they feel the addressee expects it, regardless if the addressee is an acquaintance or a friend or whether they like the possession. Based on these responses, it can be concluded that compliments on possessions are given with politeness in mind. Furthermore, the features of compliments on possessions do not change in relation to power distance and types of relationship.
5. Conclusion

In conclusion, compliments on possessions in Australian English are usually short and formulaic in nature. They consist of the compliment head act and are rarely followed by any other supporting information. The complimenting adjective should be positive and not ambiguous. Compliments often need interpretation in context, since sarcasm may be disguised within the compliment speech act. Compliment-givers are very careful to be polite when giving compliment, in order not to offend the compliment-receiver. The compliments on possessions may offend the compliment-receiver if the possessions reflect his/her taste. People would rather compliment the possession than admit not liking it, irrespective of the relationship between the compliment-giver and -receiver. This confirms that the function of compliments is to build or maintain rapport (Wolfson, 1983). However, given the small scale of my research data, these conclusions are not definite and further research on the nature of compliments on possessions would be of benefit.

*Author Notes

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References


Appendix 1: Component analysis

Table 1. Component analysis of ‘Packed to the Rafters’ scene

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose or Function</strong></td>
<td>Rapport building and self-boasting. P1 wants to make P2 (who is the first time in P1’s house) feel welcome by talking about the house. P2 is patronising and putting P1 down.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Setting</strong></td>
<td>P1’s living room, early morning. Women are standing while talking.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional tone</strong></td>
<td>P1 creates a friendly, sincere and polite emotional tone. After P2’s compliment in a sarcastic key, there is a confusion and unpleasantness in the air.</td>
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| **Participants**    | P1 (Julie): middle-class woman, pleasant and friendly, happily married with a big family  
|                     | P2 (Trish): high-class woman, full of herself, looks down at other people, divorced  
|                     | P3 (Sammy): Trish’s only daughter, middle-class woman, polite and considerate                                                                 |
| **Message content** | Description of house and sarcastic comment about its appearance and size.                                                                        |
| **Act sequence**    | 1 P1: explanation of an added bit of the house (providing the compliment base)  
|                     | 2 P2: expression of understanding  
|                     | 3 P1: giving reasons for renovating (fishing for the understanding of hearer)  
|                     | 4 P2: expression of understanding and amusement  
|                     | 5 P1: stating positive sides of renovating (desire not to cause the hearer’s pity)  
|                     | 6 P2: head act 1 (direct compliment on the house appearance) + extra information in support of the compliment (sarcastic and patronising comment) + head act 2 (another direct compliment, ambiguous)  
|                     | 7 P3: recognition of compliment wrongs and desire to prevent any further harm  
|                     | 8 P2: disagreement with accusation and confirmation of a compliment sincerity + broadening of extra information in support of the compliment, sarcasm continuation  
|                     | 9 P1: expression of confusion + hospitality offer + giving reason  

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Rules of interaction</th>
<th>A compliment should be a polite speech act that enhances the addressee's face and it usually requires a response from the addressee in the next turn.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Norms of interpretation</td>
<td>P2 is not necessarily being sincere, but rather sarcastic, self-oriented and tactless. ‘Cosy’ could mean comfortable but also small.</td>
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Appendix 2: Interview questions

1. Do you think that what P2 said is a compliment?

2. If so, why do you think that it is a compliment?

3. If not, why do you think that it is not a compliment?

4. How is politeness reflected in this communicative event?

5. What parts of this communicative event could be considered complimentary?

6. Which parts of P2 is statement, regardless of the actual meaning of her statement, are the necessary parts of every compliment? Which parts are not essential?

7. When would you use those non-essential parts?

8. If someone is showing you something personal and is obviously proud of it, what would you say?

9. How do you compliment other people on their possessions? Do you use non-essential parts?

10. Would you say that the possession is nice, because you know that the other person wants to hear that, regardless of your personal opinion?

11. Would you give a compliment even though you do not like the possession?

12. Would you ever admit you do not like it and to whom might you say that (to an acquaintance/a close friend)?

13. Would you ask for more information about the possession and in that way enable that person to brag about it? If yes, why? If not, why?