

# Pragmatic Transfer in Compliment Responses by Chinese

## Learners of English

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### Abstract

This paper reports a study on the pragmatic transfer in compliment responses by Chinese Learners of English. It has three aims: (1) to discover similarities and differences in Compliment responses between the American English speakers(AES) and Chinese Learners of English(CLE), (2) to provide empirical evidence for or against existing theories of pragmatic transfer in compliment responses and (3) to reveal differences of social values between the two groups. The results of this study are compared with those of R. Chen who made a similar study in 1993. The changes in the past ten years are discussed at the end.

**Key words:** pragmatic transfer, compliment responses, pragmalinguistic transfer, sociopragmatic transfer, pragmarhetoric transfer

## 1. Introduction

Many people who communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries have experienced communication breakdowns with people from different first language (L1) backgrounds. Sociolinguists recognize that such intercultural miscommunication is partly due to different value systems underlying each speaker's L1 cultural group (Chick, 1996, p. 329). Different value systems are reflected in speech acts; thus, different interpretations of a certain speech act sometimes cause misunderstandings of the speaker's intention.

This phenomenon is referred to as **sociolinguistic transfer**, defined as "the use of the rules of speaking of one's own speech community or cultural group when interacting with members of another community or group" (Chick, 1996, p. 332). Chick (1996, p. 332) goes on to point out that sociolinguistic transfer can also take place when one or more of the interlocutors are using a second language.

Sociolinguistic transfer as a potential causal factor for pragmatic failure

has drawn attention from pragmaticists. Since the 1980's, a number of data-based studies have been conducted in different areas of speech acts (e.g., refusal, apology, request, etc.). Studies in contrastive pragmatics and interlanguage pragmatics have demonstrated the existence of pragmatic transfer (see Kasper, 1992; and Takahashi, 1996).

The concept of transfer was first used during the Contrastive Analysis period which was connected to behaviourist views of language learning and to structural linguistics. The amazing effect that the L1 had on the L2, mainly at the level of pronunciation, led researchers in the 1960s to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH). In those days, there were two widely held beliefs. Firstly, the native language strongly influenced the L2. Secondly, this influence was negative. Accordingly, contrastive analysts believed the L1 interfered with L2 learning. The CAH suggested that where two languages were different, there would be negative transfer or interference since learners would experience difficulty that would result in the production of errors; and that where two languages were similar, there would be positive transfer since learning would be facilitated and few errors would result.

Herbert (1986 and 1990) gave a three-category, twelve-type taxonomy of compliment response by speakers of American English upon which the present research is conducted.. The classification of the types of compliment responses is shown in table 1.

**Table 1. Herbert's taxonomy of compliment responses.**

Response Type	Example
A. Agreement	
I. Acceptances	
1. Appreciation Token	Thanks; thank you; [smile]
2. Comment Acceptance	Thanks, it's my favorite too.
3. Praise Upgrade	Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?
II. Comment History	I bought it for the trip to Arizona.
III. Transfers	
1. Reassignment	My brother gave it to me.
2. Return	So's yours.
B. Nonagreement	
I. Scale Down	It's really quite old.
II. Question	Do you really think so?

III. Nonacceptances	
1. Disagreement	I hate it.
2. Qualification	It's all right, but Len's is nicer.
IV. No Acknowledgement	[silence]
C. Other Interpretations	
I. Request	You wanna borrow this one too?

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(adopted from Herbert, 1986, p. 79)

Compliment responses have received attention from contrastive pragmaticists as one component of speech acts. Ever since Pomerantz (1978) shed light on compliment responses from a pragmatic perspective, empirical studies have been conducted and demonstrated that speakers of different languages and language varieties follow different patterns when responding to compliments. However, few data-based studies have ever focused on L1 transfer of compliment responses (e.g., Han, 1992 with Korean learners of English; and Chiang & Pochtrager, 1993 with Chinese learners of English). More research along this line is necessary to better understand the relationship between L1 transfer and compliment responses in second language use.

## 2. Methodological issues and major findings

### Research questions

1. How differently do Chinese and Americans respond to compliments? (L1 - L2 comparison)

**Hypothesis:** Chinese learners of English will disagree with compliments more frequently than the native English speakers (Americans).

2. To what extent do Chinese learners of English reflect their L1 behaviors when responding to compliments in English? (L1 - IL - L2 comparison)

**Hypothesis:** Chinese learners of English do transfer the compliment response patterns of their first language and it's with little influence by the learners' English level. That is, the pragmatic transfer won't disappear as the learners get a better command of the second language.

To answer these questions, it is necessary to (a) examine the patterns of compliment responses by Chinese and Americans; and (b) observe compliment responding behaviors by Chinese learners of English in both their L1 (Chinese) and L2 (American English).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

There are two groups of participants. One group consists of twenty full-time Chinese college students (ten males ten females), and the other group is made up of non-English majors. The results of the data analysis are compared with the previous studies.

### **Procedures**

In order to make the data authentic, the research is conducted among groups whose members know each other well. The research is conducted in the following two steps:

#### **First step**

- Hand out a piece of paper listed with all the names of the members in the group with room under each to write a compliment.
- Collect and classify the compliments for each person in both Chinese and English

#### **Second step**

- Return all the classified compliments for each one from others;
- One person then responds to all the compliments;
- They will respond in both Chinese and English respectively.

The data in the research are 630 verbal compliment responses, among which 220 are in Chinese and 410 in English; 240 are responded to by English major students and 170 by non-English major students.

To analyze the data, patterns of Chinese participants' responses based on Herbert's taxonomy and differences of Chinese participants' CRs between when they are using L1--Chinese and L2—English are studied and so are compliment responses by English major and non-English major students to see if the learners' English level influences their pragmatic transfer from L1 to L2.

The present result is also compared with Chen's made in the 1990s. The

findings are as follows:

### Differences in CRs between Chinese and American English

**Table 2** Chinese responses

Response Type	N	%
<b>A. Agreement</b>		
I. Acceptances		
1. Appreciation Token	23	10.41
2. Comment Acceptance	26	11.76
3. Praise Upgrade	1	0.45
subtotal	50	22.62
II. Comment History	7	3.17
III. Transfers		
1. Reassignment	13	5.88
2. Return	8	3.62
subtotal	21	9.50
subtotal	78	35.29
<b>B. Nonagreement</b>		
I. Scale Down	40	18.10
II. Question	11	4.98
III. Nonacceptances		
1. Disagreement	44	19.91
2. Qualification	24	10.86
subtotal	68	31.77
IV. Express embarrassment	2	0.90
Subtotal	121	54.75
<b>C. Other Interpretations</b>		
I. Joking (request)	22	9.96
<b>Total</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>100</b>

As shown in Table 2, 35.29 percent of the Chinese responses fall into the category “agreement”, among which 22.62 % are acceptances, 3.17% “comment history”, and 9.50% “transfers”. Non-agreement type makes up 54.75% of the total, which includes 18.10% “scale down”, 4.98 % “question”,

31.77% “non-acceptance” and 0.90% “express embarrassment”. When the categories “joking” and “request” are put together they make up 9.96% of the total, because the English major students and non-English major students use them differently, and in the joking, they actually consider the compliment as a request. Obviously each type does not carry equal weight. There is significant difference among the categories. The category that carries the most weight is the non-agreement type. So, the general tendency of the Chinese responses to compliments is “disagree”.

The difference in the distribution of compliment response patterns between Chinese and American English is shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Pattern distribution of Chinese CRs and American English CRs

		Chinese		American English	
Agreement	Appreciation token	10.41	35.29	29.51	78.47
	Comment acceptance	11.76		6.20	
	Praise-upgrade	0.45		3.83	
	Comment history	3.17		23.30	
	Reassignment	5.88		0	
	Return	3.62		15.63	
Nonagreement	Scale down	18.10	54.75	0	18.88
	Question	4.98		6.20	
	Nonacceptance	30.77		12.68	
	Express embarrassment	0.90		0	
Other interpretations		9.96	9.96	2.65	2.65

(Based on Chen’s data and the present study)

We can clearly see a difference in the distribution between Chinese and American English. The most significant difference is in the sub-categories “comment history”, “comment acceptance” and “appreciation token”. In Chinese compliment responses, we seldom accept the compliment by “thank you” for we don’t think it is enough to avoid self-praise. So firstly, as an acceptance, we thank the compliment giver, and then following it we give a comment like “but I don’t think it’s good enough” or “just so so” to show our modesty. This occurs in many cases. For instance (from the data):

1. ---- You have done a real good job!  
 ----Thank you, but I don’t think I’m good enough.
2. ----Your watch is really beautiful!

---It's very kind of you to say so, but it's not expensive and the quality is just so so.

The history of the compliment object is seldom commented, nor is when or where it is received. The Chinese tend to make a comment to show their modesty.

### **3. Discussion**

#### **Answers to the research questions**

RQ1. How differently do Chinese and Americans respond to compliments?

In the occurrences of different types of compliment responses, there are significant differences between Americans and Chinese. In the Chinese responses, only 35.29 percent of all the compliment responses fall into the category "Agreement", while 78.47 in the American English responses. In the sub-category, 10.41 percent of Chinese responses fall into "Appreciation Token", while 29.51 percent of American English responses belong to this category. The largest part of the Chinese responses in the category "Agreement" is the sub-category "Comment Acceptance". The comment in the Chinese responses to a compliment is always like "I will try to do it better", or "I will keep going" to show their modesty. When complimented by others, many Chinese accept it "reluctantly" with a comment "But I don't think it's enough.", showing that they are not yet satisfied with themselves and need to work harder. Most Americans accept compliments happily with, if they do, a comment like "I also think it's beautiful" or "you can say that again", showing their agreement with the compliment giver.

In the Chinese responses, 54.75 percent fall into the category "Nonagreement", while only 18.88 in the American English responses. When complimented by others, many Chinese show their disagreement directly or indirectly. They either scale down the compliments by saying "Just so so", or "Just a little", or question them. A large part of Chinese responses is their direct "Disagreement", which makes up 19.91 percent of the total, or even an occasional expression of embarrassment. This is very comparable with the "Modesty Maximum Principle" by Leech (1983). In the American English responses, only 12.68 percent fall into this category. So it might be safe to say that Chinese tend to much less agree with the compliments than the Americans do.

RQ2. To what extent do Chinese learners of English reflect their L1 behaviors when responding to compliments in English?

When responding to compliments in English, Chinese learners reflect their L1 behavior to some extent. The accurate extent is not possible to define, as we cannot quantify the difference of language use. The result is in accordance with the previous studies, that is, the second language learners do transfer their L1 behaviors to L2 and it can be both negative and positive. They also make a transfer from L2 to their L1, which has a certain influence on their use of mother tongue. This influence is significant in that no languages are isolated. World languages are influenced by one another and without this mutual influence languages would stop developing.

Kasper identified two types of pragmatic transfer: pragmalinguistic transfer and sociopragmatic transfer, the result from the present research is in accordance with his, that is, there do exist these two types of pragmatic transfer when the Chinese learners respond to a compliment in English. For example:

3. ----You are really helpful!

----That's what I should do.

----You should?

In Chinese, "That's what I should do" is just a polite and modest expression in accepting the compliment, but for the English native speakers, the subtext may be "Your compliment is too much for what I have done, it's just what I usually do and it's not worth complimenting at all". In this case, the Chinese speakers of English transfer the pragmatic meaning that is pragmatically appropriate in Chinese but inappropriate for the native English speakers.

4. ----You look so beautiful today!

----Are you kidding?

As a native English speaker, the compliment giver will be frustrated by the traditionally appropriate response in Chinese "Are you kidding?" as to them, the subtext may be "I don't look beautiful at all, and you may be trying to tease me by saying so".

Different cultures underlying different languages will have different perceptions of the same linguistic action, which will usually result in the sociolinguistic transfer in the use of a second language of the learners. For instance:

5. ----You have got a great achievement in your study.



----I still have a long way to go.

Subtext for the native English speakers: I am not doing well enough and your compliment is not true.

6 ---- You are really hard-working.

-----I'm not clever, so I have to work hard.

Subtext: Working hard is just a punishment for my not being clever, so it's nothing worth complimenting.

In addition to pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic transfer identified by Kasper I have found another type of transfer—pragmarhetoric transfer, which wasn't mentioned by previous studies.

This type of pragmatic transfer does not so frequently occur as the other two and is usually difficult to identify, but it does exist. For example:

7. --- Your smile is so sweet!

---Smile is the best medicine of our spirit. (Translation).

This response to the compliment may be somewhat confusing to the English speakers. What is the connection between the statement “Your smile is so sweet!” and the fact that smile is the best medicine of our spirit? In Chinese, a metaphor can be employed in responding to compliments. On one hand, it allows the addressee to avoid the possible embarrassment from the compliment, and on the other hand, by admitting the positive function of smile in our life, the addressee accept the compliment indirectly. So, the use of figures of speech will also lead to the pragmatic transfer from Chinese to English.

The research also reveals a pragmatic transfer from a second language to the native language. In the research, 10.41 percent of the compliment responses fall into the category “appreciation token”, which is a big change for traditional Chinese who knew little English who would rarely respond “thank you” to a compliment as it was considered inappropriate to accept a compliment so directly.

As discussed above, pragmatic transfer does exist in the use of a second language by the non-native learners, but there remains another question: Is there a connection between the pragmatic transfer and the learners' English level? Will the pragmatic transfer be reduced when the learners have better English? The answer is shown in table 4:

Table 4 Pattern distribution of English CRs by Chinese students

		English major(%)	Non-English major(%)

Agreement	Appreciation token	20.42	72.92	23.53	73.53
	Comment acceptance	35.42		19.41	
	Praise-upgrade	1.25		0.59	
	Comment history	1.25		2.94	
	Reassignment	9.58		4.71	
	Return	5.00		22.35	
Nonagreement	Scale down	9.17	26.25	7.64	19.41
	Question	6.67		9.41	
	Nonacceptance	10.41		2.36	
	Express embarrassment	0		0	
Other interpretations		0.83	0.83	7.06	7.06

As shown above the distribution of the CR patterns by English major and non-English major students, that is, the students with a higher English level and the ones with relatively low English level, is not significantly different. That is, the pragmatic transfer won't disappear with the learners with better English, but does it mean that there is completely no connection between the learners' English level and the pragmatic transfer they make? The result reveals that the students with lower English level make more pragmalinguistic transfer than the students with a relatively high English level. As the learners improving their English level, they still make negative pragmatic transfer, but the pragmalinguistic ones are significantly reduced. They make sociopragmatic transfers.

#### 4. The difference between the present results and Chen's

In an article by Chen Rong, he got a total of 292 responses from the Chinese subjects and these responses were categorized into five strategies: disagreeing and denigrating, expressing embarrassment, explaining, thanking and denigrating, thanking only. The following table shows the distribution of different strategies:

Table 5 Categorization and distribution of Chinese students' strategies

Response Type	N	%
Super strategy 1: rejecting		
1. Disagreeing and denigrating	148	50.70
2. Expressing embarrassment	76	26.10
3. Explaining	55	18.83
total	279	95.73
Super strategy 2. Thanking and denigrating		
4. Thanking and denigrating	10	3.41
Super strategy 3. Accepting		
5. Thanking only	3	1.03
Total	292	100.00

(adapted from Chen, 1993, P54)

We can see clearly that in ten years, great changes have taken place. In the 1990s, according to Chen's result, 95.73 percent of the responses to a compliment by Chinese students fell into the category "rejecting". Most Chinese would reject a compliment. However, as shown in table 5, over one third of the responses by Chinese students fall into the category "agreement". It seems today's students tend to agree with the compliments much more than the students in the 1990s.

Why, then, is there such a significant difference between the present research and Chen's in the 1990s? What has caused such a great change in the past ten years? Reasons may be various, but one thing is definite. Along with China's opening up more and more to the outside world, western cultures have been penetrating into this traditional piece of land. Language directly reflects this.

Ten years ago, if a kid said "cool" to his friends, most people would be at a loss. But nowadays, not only kids but also adults are saying "cool". Now we can hear "bye-bye" and "thank you" everywhere and actually we have a Chinese word "baibai" after the pronunciation of "bye-bye". What about ten years ago? We seldom said "baibai" or even "xiexie"(thank you). It is the same case with the way we respond to a compliment. We are learning to give and accept compliments.

## **5. Implications and limitation of the study**

Pragmatic transfer does exist in compliment responses by Chinese learners of English. Though most time it is negative, it is not necessarily negative.

Then what can teachers of English do to teach pragmatic knowledge and try to inhibit transfer? The necessary condition for pragmatic learning to take place is conscious attention to the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic information to be acquired. As a result, a direct approach to teaching the pragmatics of the L2 is in order. As Kasper & Schmidt (1996: 160) put it: "pragmatic knowledge should be teachable." The idea seems to be that if the non-native student is consciously aware of the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic similarities and differences between his/her native and target languages, then negative outcomes of transfer will most probably be inhibited.

Teachers have the responsibility of providing the student with the necessary tools to make the appropriate pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic decisions in the target language. One way in which teachers can help students become pragmatically aware and improve their pragmatic knowledge is by providing them with the sort of metapragmatic information such as the social value judgments of the western society, etc. Another way is through experience such as reading, listening, watching movies or interacting with native speakers.

As the comparisons are made possible by controlling other variables, this study limits its generality. Even if the results suggest that the Chinese show negative transfer in CR, we cannot conclude that all Chinese learners of English would show the same tendency. Even those same participants may perform differently if the target of the compliment is different. This tradeoff between testability (comparability) and generality is always a source of concern to SLA researchers, and studies in interlanguage pragmatics are no exception. By taking more variables into consideration, one makes the design of the study more complicated, thus difficult to conduct. Rather than solving, or even trying to solve this problem, I would like to limit the scope of the study as it is. I believe that an accumulation of future research like this will capture the whole picture of compliment response as a reflection of L2 learners' pragmatic transfer.

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## Appendix

### Sample Compliment Responses by Chinese students

1. Appreciation token (omitted)
2. Comment acceptance
  - I think so. Thank you!
  - Thank you! I hope I can make you happy.
  - Thank you! I will keep going.
  - Yes. I have a lot of friends, including you.
  - 谢谢! 我会更加努力的。
  - 谢谢! 没有人能够永远不犯错误的。
  - 别人也这么说我。
3. Praise upgrade
  - You see, nothing can make me unhappy.
  - 那是当然得了。
4. Comment history
  - I learnt it before.

I bought it in Switzerland.

因为我学过，还有勤练习。

我从小就喜欢画画。

5. Reassignment

I think everyone should be friendly.

Humor is very important in our life.

Helping others is to help ourselves.

是我朋友买给我的生日礼物。

6. Return

If you keep practicing, you also can do it.

You are lovely, too.

Your eyes are beautiful.

你的学习成绩也让我佩服。

既然你们那么信任我，我当然要让你们放心。

大家也都是我的典范。

7. Scale down

Just so so.

I really don't work hard enough.

Just a little.

I just know a little more than somebody.

但是还不太完美。

我只是兴趣比较多而已。

其实我做得不好，还需要努力。

8. Question

Me?

Is it true?

Really? I hope so.

Really?

真的吗？也许是我的个性吧？

不会吧？

我很刻苦吗？希望如此吧？

是吗？谢谢。

9. Disagreement

No. I just know a bit of something.

No. I am a foolish boy.

No. I don't think so.

I really don't like it.

有时候我并不自信的。

我浪费了很多时间。  
其实我并不漂亮啊！  
我觉得很惭愧，因为我学得并不好。

10. Qualification

I'm just an ordinary person.  
That is only copy.  
I think you are much cleverer than I.  
很多人做的比我更好。  
比有些人差远了。

11. Express embarrassment

你这么说我真的觉得不好意思。

12. Request (joking)

If you like, you can borrow it.  
If you like, I can give one to you on your birthday.  
I can give it to you if you want it. (非英语专业为主)  
我都要飘起来了！  
是可怜没人爱吧？  
口才好说不上，比较能吹牛皮而已！(英语专业)

**Sample American English Responses**

See detail in Chen, 1993, pp71-72.

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