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COMPLIMENTS AND EVALUATIVE SPEECH ACTS: PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS

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ABOUT ARTICLE

Abstract: This article analyzes the pragmatic features of compliments and evaluative speech acts. In the process of speech, people achieve their communicative goals by strengthening relationships, expressing opinions in a way appropriate to the social situation, and giving positive or negative assessments. Compliments are manifested as a means of expressing a positive attitude to the interlocutor, creating a warm atmosphere, and strengthening friendly relations. Evaluative speech acts express a person's subjective opinion about a certain event, object, or person. This analysis highlights the pragmatic functions of these speech acts, their context-dependent nature, cross-cultural differences, and their significance in a social situation. The article reveals their linguopragmatic and communicative functions through examples.

Introduction

Language is the main means of communication between people, through which not only information is exchanged, but also social relationships are established, emotional states are expressed, and evaluative relations are formed. Any speech act, in particular, compliments and evaluative expressions, have an important communicative and pragmatic load in the process of

communication between people. With the help of compliments, a positive attitude towards the interlocutor is expressed, social closeness is created, and a friendly atmosphere is formed. Evaluative speech acts, on the other hand, express a person's subjective opinion, values, and attitude towards reality or other people.

Compliments and evaluative speech acts are not always limited to semantic content, but they also acquire different meanings in different contexts, and in many cases they also depend on speech etiquette and intercultural communication. Therefore, it is relevant to study them not only from a linguistic point of view, but also from a pragmatic one. This article analyzes the pragmatic functions of compliments and evaluative speech acts, their role in social contexts, and how they change under the influence of cultural factors. The results of this study provide a deeper understanding of the practical application of these types of expressions within the framework of speech act theory in linguistics.

Compliments and evaluative speech acts manifest themselves in unique forms in societies with different languages and cultures. Pragmatically, these speech acts adapt in the process of communication based on social status, gender, age, context, and even the relationship between the interlocutors. The analysis conducted during the study shows that compliments are used more as a means of providing positive evaluation, warmth, encouragement, and social closeness. For example, compliments such as "You look very beautiful today" not only express an aesthetic assessment, but also serve to smoothly continue the communication by expressing a positive attitude towards the interlocutor.

Evaluative speech acts are more comprehensive and are used to express a positive or negative assessment. Through them, people express their opinions, emotional state, and attitude. For example, expressions such as "This lecture was very useful" or "This movie was absolutely boring" express the author's subjective opinion and assessment. These speech acts are often used in conjunction with other communicative means – intonation, facial expressions, gestures, and this further enhances their pragmatic load.

The observations made showed that the use of compliments and evaluative speech acts in intercultural communication differs significantly. For example, while people who communicate in English tend to use compliments more often during a conversation, people who communicate in Uzbek use such speech acts cautiously, taking into account social status. This, in turn, is associated with the norms of communicative etiquette that exist in each culture.

The analysis also showed that both types of speech acts are important tools in communication, through which not only information is exchanged, but also social and

emotional ties between interlocutors are strengthened. Compliments are especially effective in establishing social closeness, sincerity and friendliness. Evaluative speech acts, on the other hand, play an important role in expressing the attitude towards the topic of communication, directing the conversation and creating dynamics in communication.

In general, the pragmatic analysis of compliments and evaluative speech acts helps to understand their real functions in the communicative process. This creates an important theoretical and practical basis for research in the fields of linguistics, communication, and intercultural dialogue.

The concept of the "speech act" was first introduced by J. L. Austin (1962) in his seminal work on performative utterances, where he laid out a framework distinguishing three levels of speech acts: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. According to Austin [2], speech acts are actions performed through language itself. These can be categorized as follows:

Locutionary acts — the literal act of producing a meaningful utterance;

Illocutionary acts — the speaker's intended function or force behind the utterance, seen as a socially recognized verbal action with a purpose;

Perlocutionary acts — the resulting effect or response triggered in the listener, such as persuading, convincing, or motivating action.

Speech acts always involve both illocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions. Each act is defined by its intended purpose and the type of social or psychological impact it aims to produce. While the illocutionary force reflects the speaker's communicative intention, the perlocutionary effect focuses on the outcome of the speech act in the hearer's reaction or behavior.

Austin [2] categorizes illocutionary acts into five main groups. Later, J. R. Searle [3] proposed a modified classification, including assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. Among these, expressives include speech acts like compliments, which are used to communicate personal emotions or evaluations.

Searle [3] describes compliments as common expressive acts through which people convey their feelings and attitudes. Holmes [4] emphasizes that compliments are positive, affective acts requiring social and linguistic skill. Compliments typically highlight positive traits of the addressee and, even when directed at a third party, can reflect positively on the listener.

Holmes [4] identifies three typical types of responses to compliments: accepting, rejecting, or deflecting/evading them. His research also reveals gender differences in these responses — men are more likely than women to ignore or subtly avoid compliments. He

further argues that compliments often serve as expressions of solidarity and are more prevalent in same-gender interactions. Men tend to reserve compliments for situations where politeness norms dictate them (such as thanking a host), whereas women use them more freely to foster rapport and emotional closeness.

Wolfson [5] outlines the main topics of compliments, grouping them into categories such as "appearance" and "possessions or abilities." According to her, the primary social function of compliments is to build or reinforce solidarity between speakers.

Lexicographic sources support this multifunctionality. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary [6] defines a compliment as a statement of praise or admiration, while also acknowledging idiomatic expressions like "backhanded compliment" that carry dual meanings. Similarly, Webster's Third New International Dictionary [7] defines compliments as expressions of esteem or respect, often used formally to convey good wishes or admiration.

As shown in the figure accompanying the original research, the main intentions behind compliments include praise, flattery, politeness, gratitude, respect, and congratulations — all centered around reinforcing positive social connections.

According to P. Brown and S. Levinson's politeness theory, compliments align with positive politeness strategies, aimed at affirming the listener's self-image and fostering social harmony. Compliments, with their inherently positive emotional tone, function as tools for enhancing interpersonal relationships and promoting solidarity among speakers.

In conclusion, within the scope of this research, a complimentary speech act can be defined as a multifunctional expressive utterance that conveys one person's favorable attitude toward another, primarily characterized by its positive emotional and social implications.

Researchers studying the concept of regional identity argue that geographic place can be examined as a component of social identity theory [1]. It is essential to recognize that people form their identities through family upbringing, social interaction, and group communication [7]. Identity aspects such as gender, age, social status, and region are all fundamental to individual self-conception [8]. N. Fligstein emphasizes that collective identities arise when a group of individuals recognizes shared characteristics, which creates a sense of solidarity, thereby establishing socially constructed collective identities [7].

When analyzing the concept of "regional identity," scholars generally distinguish between two approaches to identification. The first approach views "place identification" as a person's verbal expression of affiliation with a particular location. From this perspective, place is treated as a social category, functioning under the same principles as other aspects of social

identity theory. In this framework, identifying with a place can signify belonging to a specific group defined by geographic location, thus positioning place identification as a subset of broader social identity [1].

Conversely, H. M. Proshansky views "place identity" as distinct from social identity, suggesting that it arises through one's relationship with their physical environment. We support this perspective, recognizing that the connection between place and identity parallels the relationship between group belonging and personal identity [1].

Moreover, individuals often use geographical affiliation as a means of self-distinction. In this way, one of place's primary functions mirrors that of social identity—promoting positive self-image and distinctiveness [1]. Place attachment also supports a sense of self-continuity [1]. Typically, the farther someone is from their home, the more generalized their self-identification becomes. For example, while someone from London may identify as a "Londoner" within the UK, they might refer to themselves by nationality, such as "British," when abroad [1].

A. Paasi describes "regional identity" as a form of identification with a region, shaped by institutional discourses and symbolic representations [9–11]. Given the dynamic and multifaceted nature of identity [12], individuals tend to associate themselves with regions characterized by shared culture, morality, traditions, and social systems [9–13].

S. C. Santos proposes that collective regional identity is not static but rather a process, reflecting an aspirational self-concept rather than a fixed state [14]. A. K. Copus, addressing challenges facing stagnant regions within the EU, offers insight into how these identities evolve. J. Roose's research into European identity revealed that only a small portion—approximately five percent—of British citizens feel a strong connection to Europe.

G. C. Prieto explores regional identity from an institutional perspective, arguing that bureaucratic processes play a key role in uniting state actors and fostering collective regional identity. Modernization has led to the transformation of rural spaces, further influencing these identities. C. Ray and M. Kneafsey introduce a cultural economy model consisting of four modes, while E. Hegger examines how regional branding—defined as a tool for regional economic stimulation—relates to regional identity. A. Lagendijk combines structural and agent-based theories to explain the formation of regional identity.

J. Lee's introduction of the term "social capital" aligns with rural development studies. A. Brigevich finds that individuals with strong cultural regional identities often show limited support for European institutions, while those with pronounced political regional identities tend to be more supportive. G. A. Shusharina highlights that crises often prompt the need for

self-identification. F. Knaps and S. Herrmann link regional identity with spatial planning, analyzing cultural markers within a socio-cultural framework.

In summary, regional identity can be understood as an element of social identity that reflects an individual's affiliation with a specific geographic community. Linguistic expression is one of its most salient indicators, with regional dialects often revealing underlying regional identities.

A. Possible Explanations for the Informant's Pragmatic Behavior

It is quite discouraging that despite studying English for eight years, the learner still exhibits only a basic level of language proficiency and pragmatic competence, as shown by the data. Firstly, the data reveals numerous grammatical issues, including inappropriate word choices, flawed sentence structures, run-on sentences, and punctuation errors. This suggests that the learner has not developed a solid command of English, despite achieving a satisfactory entrance score.

Moreover, the limited variety in the use of compliments—particularly the overuse of Type 3 (which accounts for 75% of all responses)—demonstrates a lack of linguistic knowledge regarding how to appropriately express compliments. The responses are short and lack elaboration, which, according to Takahashi and Beebe (1993), is a common trait among second language learners who struggle with fluency and proficiency in the target language.

In addition, the informant appears to lack cultural awareness. Some responses deviate from typical compliment formulas, and others show minimal awareness of social distance and relationship (D, R) between speakers. Furthermore, the learner uses very few politeness strategies when complimenting, indicating limited understanding of pragmatic norms. [8; p, 539–552]

B. Suggested Pedagogical Implications

The analysis above highlights the need to enhance learners' communicative competence, particularly in the areas of grammatical, strategic, and sociolinguistic (pragmatic) competence, as proposed by Canale & Swain (1980).

Improving Grammatical Competence

EFL educators should reassess the objectives of English language instruction. Are students truly mastering the language content? The issues with current textbooks and teaching approaches suggest that course goals are not always being achieved.

Students should be provided with a range of input-focused activities, such as listening and reading, that can be accessed anytime and anywhere. Practical courses like speaking,

writing, and translation should be prioritized to reinforce active language use. Teaching materials should be authentic and up-to-date. While preparing students for exams is important, incorporating real-world content can help boost motivation. The traditional grammar-translation method should be replaced with communicative, task-based instruction. Teachers should shift their roles from instructors to facilitators, giving students more autonomy and encouraging active participation in the classroom. [9; p, 300–311]

Enhancing Strategic Competence

Strategic competence can be improved by increasing learners' exposure to English and intercultural communication. One major challenge in EFL settings, particularly in China, is the dominance of the native language, which limits meaningful interaction in English. Pragmatic failures often stem from negative L1 transfer. Raising cultural sensitivity is essential for developing strategic competence. Promoting cross-cultural experiences—such as interacting with native speakers—offers learners the chance to observe authentic pragmatic behavior and helps reduce misunderstandings in communication.

Developing Sociolinguistic (Pragmatic) Competence [10; p, 115–129]

To effectively use a second language in diverse social settings, learners must build pragmatic awareness. As Kasper (2001) argues, pragmatic competence can be taught explicitly. Therefore, instruction on Speech Act Theory and its practical application should be incorporated into the curriculum. Key theories—such as Leech's politeness principle, Brown and Levinson's theory of face, and Gu's politeness model—should be introduced to make learners aware of the cultural variations in speech acts like complimenting, requesting, and apologizing. These frameworks represent fundamental communication principles rooted in Anglo-Saxon culture. Once learners understand these cultural nuances, implicit instruction and repeated practice can help them gradually develop their pragmatic skills.

In conclusion, pragmatics should be a required component of EFL curricula, as "successful communication in a second language depends on reasonably well-developed pragmatic competence" (Kasper, 1997, p. 2).

C. Limitations of the Study

Use of DCT: The Discourse Completion Task (DCT) method has inherent limitations. It forces the informant to provide compliments in predetermined situations, whether they would naturally do so or not, which might compromise the authenticity of their responses.

Limited Scenarios: The study could benefit from a wider range of situations in the questionnaire to reflect a broader set of real-life contexts in which compliments occur in English-speaking cultures.

Small Sample Size: Drawing conclusions from a single participant severely limits the generalizability of the findings. A larger sample—ideally including hundreds of participants—would yield more reliable and representative data.

Linguistic Analysis of Compliments by British and American Regional Identity Representatives

To explore how compliments differ between individuals with urban and rural regional identities in Britain and the U.S., a corpus of compliments was collected from 20th–21st century British and American literary fiction. Selected examples highlight both linguistic choices and regional identity markers: [11; p, 929–936]

Example (10):

"Nice looking, innit—nice looking babies!"

Here, innit (short for isn't it) is London slang derived from a glottal stop typical of the Cockney dialect. This form is popular among young middle-class Londoners, emphasizing a London-based urban identity.

Example (11):

A dialogue filled with colloquial expressions like dope (marijuana), 'fraid so (shortened form of afraid so) illustrates regional speech patterns associated with urban Londoners.

Example (12):

The repeated endearment sweetie, used by a mother toward her daughter, reflects familial intimacy. The girl's reply 'Kay (shortened Okay) points to American regional speech, particularly that of a child from a suburban U.S. context.

Example (13):

The word blud (from bredrin, meaning brother or mate) is a Cockney slang term often used in urban British youth culture. The response includes non-standard constructions like tryna (trying to) and missing auxiliary verbs, which are characteristic of London urban dialects.

Example (14):

"Wee fella," used to address a baby, includes the Scottish word wee meaning "small," indicating the speaker's Scottish regional background.

Example (15):

Corrupted pronunciations like bootiful (beautiful), hupstairs (upstairs), and heven (even) graphically represent a strong regional English accent, reinforcing local identity through phonetic spelling.

Example (16):

The vocative cutie is a typical American compliment, derived from the word cute and formed using the diminutive suffix -ie. It is used informally to express attraction.

Example (17):

This exchange from The Catcher in the Rye includes slang terms like a buck (one dollar), kick out (expel), and folks (parents). Compliments such as "you're a goddam prince" blend admiration with slang and mild vulgarity, typical of American youth discourse. Phrases like lemme (let me), ya (you), and idioms like to horse around further reveal American regional language.

Example (18):

The expression "You're aces" uses the American slang term aces to mean excellent, again underscoring regional and generational language patterns.

Example (19):

An African-American character uses dialectal features in birthday congratulations: baby girl, fore (before), you instead of your, and grammar deviations such as "She laugh" instead of "She laughs." These linguistic traits mark both ethnicity and regional affiliation.

These examples clearly demonstrate how compliments are shaped by regional identity and expressed through localized vocabulary, syntax, pronunciation, and sociolinguistic norms. Language thus becomes a key tool in signaling one's geographic, cultural, and social belonging. [12; p, 62–72]

Although various theories address social identity, limited attention has been given to the role of geographic place in shaping identity—particularly how regional identity is expressed through the use of complimentary speech acts. The regional aspect plays a significant role in the pragmatic analysis of such speech acts.

The frequency of complimentary speech acts among speakers from British and American linguacultures, based on their affiliation with either urban or rural regional identities, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of Complimentary Speech Acts by Regional Identity

Linguacultures	Urban-related	Rural-related

British	95%	5%
American	84%	16%

This study focused on analyzing the features of compliments given by individuals from British and American backgrounds, taking into account their regional identity—whether urban or rural—and their use of British English, American English, Cockney, Estuary English, and African American Vernacular English (AAVE). [13; p, 351–370]

The findings confirm that regional identity manifests itself in language use. In particular, individuals tend to adopt dialects that signal their regional background, and this pattern is evident in the way compliments are expressed [8, 28].

Compliments from speakers with an urban identity frequently include national slang, culturally specific terms of address, and regionally marked vocabulary. In contrast, compliments from rural speakers—especially those with limited education—are less common and sometimes harder to interpret due to strong accents, non-standard pronunciation, substandard vocabulary, informal contractions, and grammatical errors. [14]

Urban youth often incorporate abbreviations and taboo words into their speech. American urban speakers, in particular, show a preference for using slang and informal vocatives.

In summary, compliments from speakers with urban-related identities differ significantly from those of rural counterparts, both in structure and language choice, reflecting broader linguistic and cultural variations tied to regional belonging.

Conclusion

This study has shed light on the critical role of pragmatic competence—particularly in the realm of complimenting—in effective cross-cultural communication among EFL learners. Despite years of formal English education, the informant demonstrated limited grammatical proficiency and a lack of pragmatic awareness, suggesting that language instruction focused primarily on form rather than function or cultural context. The repetitive and formulaic use of compliment types, combined with a noticeable absence of politeness strategies, reflects the informant's insufficient exposure to authentic communicative situations and underdeveloped sensitivity to social variables such as distance and relationship.

The analysis confirms that regional and cultural factors deeply influence how speech acts such as compliments are constructed and interpreted. Moreover, the findings underscore the need for a more comprehensive and communicative approach to language teaching—one that goes beyond grammar drills and test preparation to include explicit instruction in

pragmatics and cultural norms. Teaching strategies should focus on enhancing learners' grammatical, strategic, and sociolinguistic competences through authentic input, real-life interaction, and reflective practices.

Pedagogically, this study suggests that pragmatic awareness can and should be systematically cultivated in the EFL classroom. Incorporating pragmatic instruction—through Speech Act Theory, politeness frameworks, and exposure to diverse interactional contexts—can significantly improve learners' communicative effectiveness. As global communication increasingly demands intercultural sensitivity, pragmatic competence is not just desirable but essential for language learners.

However, limitations such as the small sample size and the constraints of DCT methodology point to the need for further empirical research. Future studies should involve larger, more diverse populations and more naturalistic data collection methods to better understand how EFL learners acquire and apply pragmatic norms in dynamic social settings.

In summary, this study reinforces the importance of integrating pragmatics as a core component of EFL instruction. Only by bridging linguistic knowledge with cultural competence can learners truly become effective communicators in the target language.

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