The Gender and Social Distance Effects on Compliment Responses: A case-study on Jordanian Arabic speakers (JAS)

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at determining the effects of gender and social distance on the social compliment responses of the Jordanian Arabic speakers (JAS). Therefore, the study adopted one research question which is "how does the gender and social distance affect the JAS's compliment responses?" A descriptive research design was adopted for this study based on a sample comprised ten Jordanian Arabic speakers; five males and five females. The instrument of this study adopted a discourse completion test (DCT) based on ten different situations. The DCT included three strategies of responses: agreement, non-agreement and other interpretation. The responses of the (DCT) were analyzed quantitatively - using percentages and frequencies. The findings proved that there was a slight difference between males and females in their responses towards the social situations. Males practiced agreement compliment responses more than females as (86%) of compliment responses were given by males whereas (70 %) were given by females. In addition, participants gave more agreement compliment strategy responses in non-social situation (86%) than social situations (68%). The qualitative analysis proved that the participants practiced all the three strategies of compliment in the different social situations. Furthermore, Males were more active and responsive than females in practicing the speech act of compliment in social context. To add, females were more inclined to give non-agreement and other interpretation responses in the given social situations. The study suggested doing further research on the effects of gender and social distance on Arabic Speakers' compliment responses in social situations.

Keywords*: Pragmatic transfer, Compliment responses, Gender, Social distance*

INTRODUCTION

The theory of speech act has evolved since its introduction by Austin in (1962) as he mentioned countless functions of utterances as part of interpersonal communication (Gibbs, 1999). Austin asserted that language could perform actions and do things rather than words (Thomas, 1983). Searle (1969) added that speech acts are essential parts of linguistic communication; including requesting, apologizing, thanking, complaining, complimenting and others. Therefore,

every language produces a group of patterns used regularly to perform various functions (Olshtain and Cohen, 1991).

As such, different communities vary in their production and interpretation of linguistic behavior (Bella, 2014; Ifantidou, 2014). Each culture comprises a set of patterned routinized utterances utilized by its speakers in conducting numerous speech functions. These functions are governed by sociolinguistic constrains that dictate what speakers should say, to whom and under what circumstance. Therefore, people coming from different cultural backgrounds will consciously and unconsciously present their culturally inherited sets of constraints during interaction in order to monitor and evaluate their speech and their interlocutors' speech as well (Timpe, 2012).

Additionally, gender and social distance have been viewed as critical factors in the language use as they highlight the pitfalls and strengths of gender language in social situations. They also determine the aspects of social interaction among interlocutors, and consequently find out the convenient strategies to enhance this interaction (Ishihara, 2010). Hence, this study tried to explore the gender and social distance effects on Jordanian Arabic Speakers' compliment responses in different social situations.

Objectives of the study and research questions

This study aims at determining the differences of gender and social distances' effects on the compliment responses of Jordanian Arabic Speakers (JAS). The research question of the study is how do the gender and the social distance between the interlocutors affect the participants' response to compliment made by Jordanian Arabic speakers (JAS)?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The linkage between sex and language is a primary issue in the sociolinguistics of speech. As proven, gender is a social variable impacting the usage of language in social setting. Meanwhile, as a group in the society, women are obviously distinct from men. Attempts have been made by sociolinguists in explaining the differences in language usage between males and females.

Farghal and Al-Khatib (2001) examined gender role in the formation of compliments responses through rejection or acceptance. A pilot study that the authors had conducted, explored the key characteristics of compliment response and the sociolinguistic and pragmatic conventions among the Jordanian students of Yarmouk University. The distribution of such responses by the speaker's gender was also assessed in this study. Based on the findings, the authors concluded that compliment response plays a crucial in the management of "face" in the context of Jordan. They also concluded that male complimentees were inclined to employ simpler response when complimented by males as opposed to being complimented by females. Also, males were more inclined to use purely non-verbal responses when complimented by females as opposed to when being complimented by males. Additionally, there is a clear-cut correlation between gender of both, the complimenter and the complimentee, and the type of the compliment response used.

Drbseh (2015) examined how Arabic students at Jordanian University utilize both English complement and complement responses. Written discourse completion tasks (DCT) comprising of four situational settings was used in this study for data collection purpose. A total of 25 respondents were selected as sample. In responding to compliments produced by situational settings, the author discovered that the group used a variation of strategies. Based on the outcomes, the author proposed that the L2 teachers assist their learners improve their competence through the proper usage of speech acts in the L2.

Nelson, Al- Batal and Echols (1996) examined the differences between Arabic and English compliment responses. In this study, those belonging to the American group were interviewed in English while those of Syrians were interviewed in Arabic. Three general categories were proposed in this study namely, acceptances, mitigations, and rejections. Then, as shown by the outcomes, half (50%) of the American compliment responses were coded as acceptances, 45% as mitigations, whereas 3% as rejections. As for the Syrian group, 67% of compliment responses were coded as acceptances, 33% as mitigations, and none were coded as rejections. Based on these outcomes, it can be said that both Syrians and Americans are more inclined to either accept or mitigate the compliment's force as opposed to rejecting it using some response types, such as, agreeing, ignoring, utterances, return compliment, or deflecting compliment; i.e. praised to impersonalize the complimentary force.

Ebadi and Salman (2015) studied the usage of compliment responses by Iraqi Learner of English. In particular, the authors examined these learners' English responses and Arabic responses and tried to group them. Discourse completion tasks (DCT) were distributed among 50 Iraqi male undergraduate students and 50 Iraqi female undergraduate students. Based on the outcomes, the authors stated that in terms of English responses, females employed more appreciation tokens and transferred the Arabic formulaic expressions more as opposed to the males. The female respondents were also more inclined to elicit the reassurance or repetition of the compliments through redirecting questions on the compliments that they receive. As for the Arabic responses produced by the respondents, the authors found no significant difference. It was concluded in this study that the respondents, as a sample of Iraqis, accepted compliments in English more as opposed to the compliments in Arabic.

Enssaif (2005) attempted to examine the compliment behavior in an Arab country as well as the capacity of female EFL students in giving compliments and responding to compliments based on the norms of the English native speakers in Saudi Arabia. A total of 50 Saudi female students at an English department participated in the study, and a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) and a Compliment Introspection Questionnaire (CIQ) were used to gather data. The findings showed three primary strategies of giving compliments namely: 1) admiration, 2) appreciation, and 3) feeling expressions. Then, there was a combined usage of these strategies. The author reached to a conclusion that students appropriately gave and responded to compliments as provided by the norms of native speakers of English. Also, first language interference was not found to cause pragmatic failure.

Response to compliment is measured as a kind of speech acts that is important to be studied since responses to compliments can offer diverse purposes of compliment (Herbert, 1990). On the one hand, unsuitable compliment responses lead to disappointment in the communication which disagreed with the functions of the compliment as the core function of compliments is to create harmony in the interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, the agreement between compliments and complement responses supports determine the success of a specific interaction. For instance: in the Jordanian culture, providing compliment on appearance from man to women may be measured as a fault. Therefore, whether a compliment is to be recognized as positive or negative speech act depend on on a number of issues such as cultural protocols, individual interpretation and context (Tang & Zhang, 2009).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design chosen for this study was a descriptive research design which is expected to produce tangible benefits for this study. The sample comprised ten Jordanian Arabic graduated students (five males and five females) which was referred in this study as JAS. They were Jordanian postgraduate students pursuing their higher study at The University of Jordan (JU), with diverse majors. The responses were in Arabic. Data was gathered through discourse completion test (DCT). DCT was used to determine the types of their responses, and the quantitative analysis - based on frequencies and percentage – was used to interpret the compliment responses.

In all situations of JAS, the participants answered in Arabic. Five of the participants were males and five were females. The responses were analyzed – quantitatively – based on gender first, then based on social distance. The social distance proved to be existent in situations 1, 3, 4, 9 and 10; but it was absent in the situations 2, 5, 6, 7 and 8. The analysis was based on three strategies of compliment: agreement, non-agreement and other interpretations.

FINDINGS

The following section presented the analysis of compliment responses of JAS based on gender and social distance. DCT was used to determine the types of their responses, and the quantitative analysis - based on frequencies and percentage – was used to interpret the compliment responses.

The analysis of responses based on gender

The quantitative analysis of JAS male responses

The table below shows the frequencies and percentages of compliment responses given by JAS five males towards ten situations.

Table 1 JAS Male Responses

Compliment Response strategy	Frequency	Valid Percent
Appreciation Token	10	20 %
Comment Acceptance	11	22 %
Praise	14	28 %
Reassignment	1	2 %
Return	7	14 %
Total agreement	**43**	**86 %**
Scale Down	1	2 %
Question	1	2 %
Qualification	2	4 %
Total non-agreement	**4**	**8 %**
Other interpretation	2	4 %
Request	1	2 %
Total Other interpretation	**3**	**6 %**
Cumulative responses	**50**	**100 %**

As shown in table 1, agreement was the majority response strategy given by the JAL males towards the situations (86 %) whereas only (8 %) of responses were non agreement, and (6%) were other interpretation. As for the total responses of situations, praise formed (14 %) of total responses, (11%) for comment acceptance, (10 %) for appreciation token; whereas transfers

for return formed (14%), and transfer for assignment formed (2%). Qualifications formed (2%) of total responses – as non-agreement expressions – as well as scale down and question (1%). Other interpretation formed (4 %) of total responses, and request formed (2%).

The quantitative analysis of JAS female responses

The table below shows the frequencies and percentages of compliment responses given by JAS five females towards ten situations.

Table 2 JAS Female Responses

Compliment Response strategy	Frequency	Valid Percent
Appreciation Token	9	18 %
Comment Acceptance	11	22 %
Praise	4	8 %
Reassignment	1	2 %
Return	10	20 %
Total agreement	**35**	**70 %**
Disagreement	1	2 %
Question	3	6 %
Qualification	1	2 %
Silence	2	4 %
Total non-agreement	**7**	**14 %**
Other interpretation	3	6 %
Request	5	10 %
Total Other interpretation	**8**	**16 %**
Cumulative responses	**50**	**100 %**

As shown in table 2, agreement was the majority response strategy given by the JAS females towards the situations (70 %) whereas only (14 %) of responses were non agreement, and (16%) were other interpretation. As for the total responses of situations, comment acceptance was the highest (22 %); followed by transfer return (20 %), appreciation token (18 %), request (10%) and praise (8 %). Other interpretation and question formed (6 %) from the total responses, and silence formed (4 %).

Difference of JAS responses based on gender

The following table shows the differences between JAS males and females' compliment responses towards 10 situations. The letter "m" represents males whereas the letter "f" represents females.

Table 3 Differences of Gender

Compliment Response strategy	Frequency		Valid Percent	
	m	f	M	f
Appreciation Token	10	9	20 %	18 %
Comment Acceptance	11	11	22 %	22 %
Praise	14	4	28 %	8 %
Reassignment	1	1	2 %	2 %
Return	7	10	14 %	20 %
Total agreement	**43**	**35**	**86 %**	**70 %**
Disagreement	0	1	0 %	2 %
Question	1	3	2 %	6 %
Qualification	2	1	4 %	2 %
Silence	0	2	0 %	4 %
Scale down	1	0	2 %	0 %
Total non-agreement	**4**	**7**	**8 %**	**14 %**
Other interpretation	2	3	4 %	6 %

Request	1	5	2 %	10 %
Total Other interpretation	**3**	**8**	**6 %**	**16 %**
Cumulative responses	**50**		**100 %**	

As shown in table 3, males practiced agreement compliment responses more than females as (86%) of compliment responses were given by males whereas (70 %) were given by females. On the other hand, females gave non-agreement compliment responses more than males. (14 %) of non-agreement responses were given by females whereas (8 %) were given by males. In addition, females gave other interpretations (8 %) more than males (3 %). As for compliment agreement strategy, the most strategy given by males was praise (28 %); followed by comment acceptance (22 %) and appreciation token (20 %). On the other hand, comment acceptance was the most given strategy by females (11 %); followed by return (14%) and appreciation token (18%). The least given strategy was reassignment for both genders equally (2%).

As for non-agreement strategy, qualification was the most given by males (4 %) whereas question was the most given by females (6%). Males didn't practice silence or disagreement responses at all (0 %) whereas females didn't give scale down response (0%).
As for other interpretation strategy, request was the most given response by females (10 %) whereas other interpretation response was the most given by males (4%).

The analysis of responses based on social distance

Analysis of responses based on existent social-distant situations

The table below shows the frequencies and percentages of compliment responses given by JAS in social-distant situations.

Table 4 JAS Responses in Existent Social Distance

Compliment Response strategy	Frequency	Valid Percent
Appreciation Token	9	24 %
Comment Acceptance	12	18 %
Praise	7	14 %
Return	6	12 %
Total agreement	**34**	**68 %**
Scale Down	1	2 %
Question	2	4 %
Qualification	2	4 %
Disagreement	1	2 %
Silence	2	4 %
Total non-agreement	**8**	**16 %**
Other interpretation	4	8 %
Request	4	8 %
Total Other interpretation	**8**	**16 %**
Cumulative responses	**50**	**100 %**

As shown in table 4, agreement compliment strategy was the most given responses in social-distant situations (68 %); followed by non-agreement and other interpretation strategies (16 %) foe each equally. As for agreement strategy, comment acceptance was the most given response in social-distant situations (24%); followed by appreciation token (18%), praise (14 %) and return (12%). As for non-agreement strategy, question, qualification and silence were the most given responses equally (4 %); followed by scale down and disagreement responses (2%). Regarding other interpretation strategy, participants gave the same percentage of request and other responses (8%).

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Analysis of responses based on nonsocial-distant situations

The table below shows the frequencies and percentages of compliment responses given by JAS in nonsocial-distant situations.

Table 5 JAS Responses in No Social Distance

Compliment Response strategy	Frequency	Valid Percent
Appreciation Token	12	18 %
Comment Acceptance	9	24 %
Praise	10	20 %
Return	10	20 %
Reassignment	2	4 %
Total agreement	**43**	**86 %**
Question	2	4 %
Qualification	1	2 %
Total non-agreement	**3**	**6 %**
Other interpretation	1	2 %
Request	3	6 %
Total Other interpretation	**4**	**8 %**
Cumulative responses	**50**	**100 %**

As shown in table 5, agreement strategy was the most given response in non-social distant situations (86 %); followed by other interpretation (8 %) and non-agreement (6%). As for agreement strategy, comment acceptance was the most given response (24%); followed by praise and return (20 %), appreciation token (18 %) and reassignment (4%). As for other interpretation strategy, request was the most given response (6%); followed by other responses (2%).
Regarding non-agreement strategy, question was the most given response (4%); followed by qualification (2%).

Difference of JAS responses based on social distance

The following table shows the differences between JAL's compliment responses based on the social distance. The abbreviation (soc) represents the social distance situations whereas the abbreviation (non) represents the nonsocial distance situations.

Table 6 Differences Based on Social Distance

Compliment Response strategy	Frequency		Valid Percent	
	soc	non	soc	non
Appreciation Token	9	12	18 %	24 %
Comment Acceptance	12	9	24 %	18 %
Praise	7	10	14 %	20 %
Reassignment	0	2	0 %	4 %
Return	6	10	12 %	20 %
Total agreement	**34**	**43**	**68 %**	**86 %**
Disagreement	1	0	2 %	0 %
Question	2	2	4 %	4 %
Qualification	2	1	4 %	2 %
Silence	2	0	4 %	0 %
Scale down	1	0	2 %	0 %
Total non-agreement	**8**	**3**	**16 %**	**6 %**
Other interpretation	4	1	8 %	2 %
Request	4	2	8 %	4 %
Total Other interpretation	**8**	**3**	**16 %**	**6 %**
Cumulative responses	**50**		**100 %**	

As shown in table 6, participants gave more agreement compliment strategy responses in non-social situation (86%) than social situations (68%). However, participants gave more non-agreement strategy responses in social situations (16%) than nonsocial situations (6%). Furthermore, participants gave more interpretation strategy response in social situations (16%) than nonsocial situations (6%). Comment acceptance was the most given agreement response in social situations (24%) whereas appreciation token was the most given agreement response in nonsocial situation (24%). Reassignment response wasn't given at all in social distance situations (0%). Qualification, question and silence were the most given non-agreement responses in social distance (4%) whereas question was the most given non-agreement response in nonsocial situation (4%). Participants in non-social situations didn't practice disagreement, silence or scale down responses at all (0%). Request was the most given other interpretation response in both situations (8%) and (4%) respectively.

Content analysis of the previous results

The previous results offer a range of qualitative findings that can be formed in the following themes: participants' active response, gender implications in social communication.

Participants active response

The responses in all situations showed that agreement strategy was higher than non-agreement and other interpretation strategies; regardless gender. It points out that JAS have moderate communication skills and care about social obligations. It illustrates also that they are reluctant to make other embarrassed and take care of others' feelings. However, the findings proved that JAS are somewhat felling shy to give positive interaction in nonsocial distant situations.

Gender implications

The findings of this study proved that gender played a role in determining the social interaction. The females' disagreement compliment responses were higher than males'. This result suggests that females cannot respond easily to social environment; especially when the situations occur with people they don't know well. On the other hand, males became more ready to set up positive social relationships with people they don't have warm relationship.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study showed that gender played a role in determining the JAS's compliment responses towards different social situations as   males practiced agreement compliment responses more than females as (86%) of compliment responses were given by males whereas (70 %) were given by females. On the other hand, females gave non-agreement compliment responses more than males. (14 %) of non-agreement responses were given by females whereas (8 %) were given by males. The findings also revealed that males were more active and responsive towards different social situations based on their agreement responses. However, the speech act of females proved to be enriched with abundant expressions and strong tone.

These findings corroborated with Enssaif (2005) and Drbseh (2015) in the sense that the participants in these studies practiced different strategies of compliment responses. For example Enssaif (205) practiced three strategies such as admiration, appreciation, and feeling expressions. Similarly, this study presented three strategies of compliment including agreement, non-agreement and other interpretations.

Moreover, the findings of this study corroborated with Nelson, Al- Batal and Echols (1996) in the sense that agreement was the most given response in both studies. (86 %) of compliment responses was acceptance in this study, and (50%) of compliment responses was acceptance in the study of Nelson, Al- Batal and Echols (1996).

Furthermore, the findings of this study were similar to Farghal and Al-Khatib (2001) in the context that both studies proved that gender and social distance played a role in determining the compliment response in social situations. However, this study opposed to Ebadi and Salman (2015) as the latter didn't prove any difference of gender in giving compliment answer in social situations.

CONCLUSION

The present study explored compliment responses of Jordanian Arabic speakers based on the differences of gender and social distance. The study suggested that females are more reluctant to give compliment agreement responses than males. The participants also tended to give compliment agreement responses in nonsocial distance situations more than social distance situations. The responses in all situations showed that agreement strategy was higher than non-agreement and other interpretation strategies; regardless gender. The findings of this study proved that gender and social distance played a role in determining the social interaction.

The study added to the area of speech act and pragmatics based on the significant findings. These findings may be used by other researchers or may be investigated by further research in the future. They also add to the theories of social interaction and studying socio-contextual theories in the field of pragmatics.

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