

# **Patterns and Strategies of Responses to Compliments: A Case Study on Post-graduate Students of One State University in Indonesia**

**Sri Handayani**

Department of English Literature  
Universitas Kebangsaan

## **Abstract**

*This study investigated responses to compliments of male and female Indonesian second semester post-graduate students in Indonesian cultural setting. The study focussed on patterns and strategies of responses commonly used by the post-graduate students in informal situation speech acts. The graduate students of English Department from three classes who participated in this study were randomly selected and given compliments in natural settings. The data were analyzed by using patterns and strategies of responses to the compliments proposed by Farghal and Al-Khatib (2001). The patterns of responses were classified into some terms: (1) simple responses vs. complex responses; (2) macro-functions vs. micro-illocutions; and (3) intrinsically-complex responses vs. extrinsically-complex responses. Meanwhile, the strategies of responses were categorized into terms like accepting/agreeing and down grading or rejecting/disagreeing. The formula of compliments used to collect data was directed to address some good possessions which were positively valued by the students and considered to be the most common formula in Indonesia. The results of study showed that: (1) male tended to be more frequent to use simple responses than that of female who tended to use complex compliments in responding to the compliments; (2) male tended to reject the compliments by doubting and denying strategies, meanwhile, female tended to accept the compliments by confirming and tagging strategies; and (3) male tended to reject compliments, however, accept some compliments by using simple and non-verbal responses.*

*Key words:* Compliments, Patterns, Strategies

## **INTRODUCTION**

Complimenting behavior is a linguistic phenomenon happening in a daily life. This behavior is recognized as an important speech act in a socio-cultural context serving a significant communication function for an interpersonal relationship. The main function of the complimenting behavior is to serve a positive threatening to create harmonious relationship. Holmes (1988) in Cai (2012) states that “a proper complimenting behavior can make people closer and more harmonious”. In accordance with this view, complimenting behavior refers to a positive oral behavior which needs

response strategies to the compliments in order to manage a good interpersonal relationship.

The responses to compliments may vary based on some factors such as cultural custom, communicative topic, social power (Cai, 2012) and ways to respond to compliments and gender (Kachru and Smith, 2008). It is stated that “it is not clear that all cultures have speech acts that conform to what is known as ‘thanking’ and ‘complimenting’ in the Inner Circle Englishes” (Kachru and Smith, 2008). In addition, Yousefvand (2012) explains that “there are some differences existing in the compliment realizations of in

different cultures". For example, the differences of compliment strategies influenced by social and cognitive factors (Furko and Dudas (2012). These differences cause the variations of fields in the compliment study, e.g. field of pragmatics, socio-linguistics, contrastive study, and compliment response strategies (Cai, 2012).

According to the field of compliment study, this study was focused on patterns and strategies of responses to compliments viewed from pragmatic and socio-linguistic point of views. Therefore, the main aim of this study was to find out the patterns and strategies of responses related to gender.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Compliment and Its Responses**

The study of compliment and its implicature have been one of the most fascinating topics in linguistics. According to Holmes (1988, p. 462) in Heidari et al. (2009) compliments are "positively affective speech acts, the most obvious function they serve is to oil the social wheels, paying attention to positive face wants and thus increasing or consolidating solidarity between people". In addition, Liu, (1995) in Doohan & Manusov, 2004) explain that compliment is a speech act which expresses the speaker's positive evaluation of the hearer. Meanwhile, Hobbs (2003, p. 249) in Heidari et al. (2009) defines compliment as "a speech act which explicitly or implicitly bestows credit upon the addressee for some possession, skill, character, or the like, that is positively evaluated by the speaker and addressee." In line with the definitions of the compliment above, the compliment relates to the positive speech acts coming from the speakers to the hearers to address the speakers' possessions, skills, characters, or the like. The compliment then can also be considered a face-threatening act (FTA) where witchcraft exists as a sanction

(Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 247). Therefore, the aim of complimenting activity is to give respect to something praiseworthy to the addressee so that they feel to be liked or appreciated. Herbert (1989) in Farghal and Al-Khatib (2001) notes that compliments must contain an expression of admiration on the part of the speaker and concern a possession, accomplishment, or personal quality of the addressee as well.

Since compliment is uttered by the speaker to the hearer, a response to the compliment (CR) is needed in order to make the conversation successfully occurred. In term of categorization of CR, Pomerantz (1978) in Yousefvand (2012), categorizes CR into: acceptance, rejection, and self-praise avoidance. Holmes (1988) in Furko and Dudas (2012) classifies CR into three classifications, namely, accept, reject, deflect or evade. Cheng (2011) in Furko and Dudas (2012) identifies three macro-level of CRs as acceptance, evasion, and a combination of these two and micro CRs such as appreciation, downgrading, credit-shifting, and ignoring. Meanwhile, Herbert (1989) proposes three macro CRs: agreement, non-agreement and request interpretation and twelve micro CRs: appreciation token, comment acceptance, praise upgrade, comment history, reassignment, return, scale down, question, disagreement, qualification, and no acknowledgement. The other category comes from Farghal and Al-Khatib (2001) who summarize three categories in response to compliments: (1) simple responses vs. complex responses; (2) macro-functions vs. micro-illocutions; and (3) intrinsically-complex vs. extrinsically-complex responses. Meanwhile, the other study of compliment responses gives more challenging issue in gender-based difference in complimenting. In addition, Herbert (1989) in Furko and Dudas (2012) conducted a study about the types of compliments used by

Americans differed from the sexes. The result showed that both sexes in America tended to include in macro compliment responses in responding to the compliment. However, compared with the man, the American women tended to disagree and experienced more pressure to acknowledge a compliment than those of men. In addition, the men were more likely to avoid the CRs such as ignoring the compliment or changing the subject.

### **Responses to Compliments and Their Cultural Implications**

Many contrastive studies have been done in order to catch the nature and characteristic of compliment since seeing from the patterns and forms, “languages differ greatly from one another in their patterns and norms of interaction” Wolfson (1981, p. 117). According to some studies, the tendencies of responses to compliments emphasized different focuses on politeness strategy used by people in different genders (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001), politeness strategy used by people in different cultures (Chen, 1993), and politeness strategy used by people in different relationship such as family and friend (Yu, 2003).

In line with its implicature relation, Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that compliment refers to positive politeness strategies which are used to approve the hearer’s appearance, personality, possession and need and also to treat the desires as a member of group rather than as a single individual. Cai (2012) finds that the different tendencies are used in responding to the compliments between male and female students in China college viewed from the aspect of social power. The result of his study shows that female students have greater tendency to use explicit acceptance strategy than those of male students, whereas, the male students prefer to use deflection and rejection strategies.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study was focused on patterns and strategies of responses to compliments. The data of the study were administrated based on the responses to the compliments randomly addressed to 25 second semester post-graduate students of the English Education Department. Every participant was addressed by one compliment for some good possessions positively valued by the speaker such as *bagus* (Indonesian word for good) and *lucu* (Sundanese word for good) that were considered to be the most common formula in the setting of students’ communication. The compliments given to the students happened in the natural situation and the conversation is usually used between friends. The data were then recorded, transcribed, categorized and analyzed to see the patterns used by the students. The data were analyzed based on the classification of strategies of responses proposed by Farghal and Al-Khatib (2001). In addition, some tables were presented to show different patterns of responses to compliments used by the male and female students.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The responses to compliments in this study are categorized into three patterns and strategies proposed by Farghal and Al-Khatib (2001): (1) patterns of responses based on categories of simple vs. complex responses; (2) macro-functions vs. micro illocutions, and (3) intrinsically-complex responses vs. extrinsically-complex responses.

### **Patterns of Responses to Compliments**

The discussion of patterns of responses to compliments of the respondents was analyzed based on both simple response and complex response (Farghal and Al Khatib, 2001). The simple responses to compliments were featuring one illocution and responses that were exclusively non-verbal.

Meanwhile, complex responses consisted of two or more illocutions. The patterns of responses to the compliments of male

and female students are figured out in percentages shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1  
*Simple Vs Complex Responses*

No.	Type	Male (%)	Female (%)
1	Simple	55.6	43.75
2	Complex	22.2	56.25
3	Non-verbal	22.2	0
<b>Total</b>		<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1 presented the same patterns of responses to the given compliments made by male and female students. The data showed that simple and complex responses were used by both sexes of the students. Although male and female students used the same patterns of responses, there were different tendencies in the ways they responded the compliments. The male students tended to use simple patterns in responding the compliment. It was shown by 55.6% of the male students who responded in simple patterns and 22.2% in non-verbal responses. Furthermore, there were only 22.2% of the male students gave responses in complex patterns. Meanwhile, 56.25% of the female students responded the

compliment using complex patterns and 43.75% responded the compliment in simple ways. From these comparisons, it showed that male students employed simple responses to compliments more frequently than that of complex responses. It means that male students tended to respond to the compliment in simple ways and female students tended to give responses in complex ways. The male students usually responded the compliments by using words like *makasih, ngga ah, ma enya, masa sih, and alhamdulillah*. These responses could be categorized into simple responses since the students tended to answer in simple patterns as represented in the following conversation between Researcher (R) and Student (S)-3.

- [1] R *Jaketnya bagus, beda dua sisi.*  
S-3 *Makasih*

According to [1], S-3 only showed simple response since he responded the compliment with a simple response, *makasih* (thank you). *Makasih* is the slank word in Indonesian for *terima*

*kasih*. In contrast, female students showed more complex patterns of their responses. They tended to respond the compliments in long pattern as expressed in the following conversation.

- [2] R *'Hei, kerudungnya bagus warnanya, aku juga punya lho yang warna itu.'*  
S-18 *'Lucu ya, aku suka warnanya, ada biru dan ungu-ungu seperti gimana gitu, sama seperti tasku'*

In the case of [2], the compliment got a longer response from S-18 since

she added some information in her compliment. The response consisted of

two speech acts ‘*lucu ya aku suka warnanya*’ and ‘*ada biru dan ungu-ungu seperti gimana gitu sama seperti tasku*’. In this case, S-18 wanted to show that she liked the veil which had the same color with her bag. In this conversation, it was classified into a closed conversation since there was not any reluctant feeling between them. It means that both of them had the same power as friends.

### Strategies Used by Students in Response to Compliments

The discussion of the strategies, the responses to compliments used by the students are classified into two categories: macro-function vs micro function response strategies and intrinsically complex response vs extrinsically complex response strategies (Farghal and Al Khatib, 2001) which

include the terms ‘accepting’ consisting of thanking, returning, offering, invocation, confirmation and tagging and ‘down grading’ consisting of doubting, denying, questioning considered to be the types of macro-function and micro-function strategies.

### Macro-function and Micro-function Responses

The discussion of the macro-function and micro-function responses was categorized into three categories: accepting, down grading, and nonverbal. The data showed that there were differences of strategies used by male and female students in responding to the compliments both in macro and micro function responses. The differences of the strategies are presented in the following table.

Table 2  
*Macro-function and Micro-function of Responses*

No.	Responses	Male (%)	Female (%)
<i>Accepting</i>			
1	Thanking	11.1	25
2	Returning	0	0
3	Offering	0	0
4	Invocation	11.1	6.25
5	Confirmation	0	37.5
6	Tagging	0	31.25
<i>Down grading</i>			
7	Doubting	33.33	12.5
8	Denying	22.2	0
9	Questioning	0	0
<i>Non-verbal</i>		22.2	0

The Table 2 indicated that female students most frequently accepted the compliments (25%) and tended to add some information through giving additional confirmation (37.5%) and tagging (31.25%) and they seldom responded to compliments through ‘non-verbal’ responses which were shown in the 0%. It means that there were no

female students who responded the compliments using non-verbal responses.

In accepting macro-function, confirmation included responses to confirm the compliments. The confirmation responses were usually used to show the agreement of the revealed compliments. The example of

confirmation strategy was represented in the following conversation.

- [3] R *Pakai baju merah hari ini, bagus.*  
S-22 *Makasih. Saya matching hari ini.*

According to [3], confirmation was used by S-22 to respond to the compliment given to her. In this case, S-22 agreed with the compliment uttered and tried to strengthen the compliment. Different from the confirmation strategy, tagging

strategies were used by female to give additional information related to the topic of conversation. Tagging strategies were described by S-18 in [2] and S-23 in the following conversation.

- [4] R *Seger, pakai hijau hari ini.*  
S-23 *Apa? He,he, seger. Dah lama ga dipakai. Pakai baju eta-eta wae.*

In accordance with S-18 and S-23, longer responses were used to accept the given compliments. Some additional opinions were uttered to reveal that they agreed with the compliments.

In addition, thanking was the category chosen by S-3 and S-25 to appreciate the uttered compliments. The following conversations illustrated the thanking strategies used by the respondents using simple responses.

- [5] R *Jaketnya bagus, beda dua sisi.*  
S-3 *Makasih*

- [6] R *Softcase-nya bagus*  
S-25 *Makasih*

According to the conversations [5] and [6], the respondents only revealed the short and direct responses by saying 'makasih' (thank you). In this case, both S-3 and S-25 have chosen short and direct responses to create and keep the harmony between the speakers and their interlocutors.

Micro-illocution category in accepting was also found in invocation.

- [7] R *Hebat iih, dapat beasiswa ke Inggris*  
S-14 *Alhamdulillah*

The last finding was that there was nobody who responded the compliments using the other three micro-illocutions, they were returning by giving the compliments back to the interlocutor, offering the complimented things, and tagging by seeking the reassurance of the one saying the compliment.

The data showed that the invocation response found in this data was regarded as one of the culture-specific response. *Alhamdulillah*, the expression of thank you in Arabic, was applied by S-14 to respect their friend when her friend knew that she got a scholarship to continue her study in Britain. The response was described in the following short conversation.

In addition, downgrading was also used by female students to respect the compliments. However, this strategy was not as mostly used as the others. The categories of doubting were considered to be mostly used by female in response to the compliments. The two examples below show the differences.

- [8] R *Aku suka gelang-gelangnya ibu...*  
 S-6 *Ah masa sih? Ini gelang-gelang mainan ko.*
- [9] R *Kerudungnya bagus*  
 S-15 *Engga ah biasa aja ko.*

According to [8] and [9], S-6 doubted using an expression ‘*Ah masa sih? Ini gelang-gelang mainan ko*’ and S-15 doubted the compliment directly through an expression ‘*Engga ah biasa aja ko*’. The responses uttered by S-6 and S-15 indicated that they disagreed with the compliments directed to them by using different expressions.

On the contrary, the male students tended to be down grading as

- [10] R *Rambutnya beda, nampak bagus hari ini.*  
 S-1 *Ah, iya gitu? Sama aja.*

According to [10], S-1 tended to deny the compliment directed to him. ‘*Ah iya gitu? Sama aja*’ was used to respect the compliment since he doubted the utterance.

- [11] R *Ganteng hari ini.*  
 S-2 *Smiling, lifting collars and shrugging shoulders*
- [12] R *Kemejanya bagus.*  
 S-5 *Smiling and changing the conversation topic.*

In the case of [11] and [12], S-2 and S-5 did not mean to ignore the interlocutor but he showed his hesitancy. Therefore, they did not continue the conversation since they wanted to keep the harmony between the speaker and interlocutor. The reason of face threatening also became the reason of making their response acts.

***Intrinsically-complex Response vs. Extrinsic-complex Response***

The data analysis on this discussion was based on the Intrinsically Complex Responses (ICR) and

the choice of expressing their respect to the compliments. Table 2 indicated that down grading was more dominant than accepting. It was shown by 33.33% of male who used doubting and 22.2% who chose denying to the uttered responses. They even tended to use non-verbal expressions to save their opposite speakers (22.25%). The following example illustrates this strategy.

Furthermore, male used non-verbal responses to respond to the compliments to keep the harmony between the speaker and his opposite speaker. This situation was shown by S-2 and S-5.

Extrinsically Complex Responses (ECR): ICR-*Accepting* and ICR-*Downgrading*. The data showed that giving responses through accepting in intrinsically complex response (ICR-A) was the most preferred ones for both male and female. In this category, the respondents tended to build up the communication to respect to their interlocutors by adding the compliments using longer additional information in different categories. However, male did not rely on ECR in giving the compliments as indicated in the following conversation.

- [13] R *Warna tasmu bagus ya, anggun.*  
 S-24 *He, he, seseorang telah memberiku ini. Iya, warnanya anggun.*

According to [13], ICR-A was used by S-24 to appreciate the compliment. The illocutionary acts used were *tagging* (*He, he, seseorang telah memberiku ini*) and confirmation (*Iya, warnanya anggun*). The illocutionary acts were used to give longer response to show agreement with

- [14] R *Sepatunya bagus*  
 S-15 *Ah, masa? Biasa aja ko*

The S-15's conversation showed that doubting and denying were used to respond to the compliment. Both doubting and denying were categorized into down-grading macro-function since the illocutionary acts belong to the same macro function. This strategy was chosen by the interlocutor in order to

- [15] R *Gelangnya lucu*  
 S-11 *Makasih, tapi ini murah ko beli di Gasibu*

The two illocutionary acts found in that response represented the ECR belonging to two micro-illucutionary acts, thanking and denying. '*Makasih*' in this conversation was belonging to accepting macro-function (thanking) and '*tapi ini murah ko beli di Gasibu*' was categorized into the down-grading macro-function (denying). Therefore, that response was the result of a combination between accepting and down-grading macro-functions.

In contrast, significant differences could also be seen in the male responses in the form of ECR. There were not any males who gave the extrinsically complex response. It means that males tended to be simpler than those of females in responding to the compliments. It was also shown in Table 1 indicating that the males tended to use

the statement revealed by interlocutor. However, it was not in contrast with the same thing happened oppositely. The response was revealed strongly by showing a strong disagreement in ICR-D as shown in [14] below.

weaken the respondent's possession value.

Another type of complex response found in this study was extrinsically complex response (ECR). The example of the combination of two illocutionary acts from different macro-functions could be seen in the following conversation.

simple patterns in response to the compliments. It was shown by 55.6% of the males who responded the compliments in simple patterns.

## CONCLUSION

The study was to see the responses to compliments used by male and female students in one state university in Indonesia by knowing the common patterns and strategies of their responses. The results of study showed that: (1) male tended to be more frequent to use simple responses than that of female who tended to use complex compliments in responding to the compliments; (2) male tended to reject the compliments by doubting and denying strategies, meanwhile, female tended to accept the



compliments by confirming and tagging strategies; and (3) male tended to reject compliments, however, accept some compliments by using simple and non-verbal responses. However, several micro-illocutionaries such as returning, offering, tagging, and questioning did not appear in the responses uttered by the respondents. Therefore, it can be concluded that although male and female have different patterns and strategies in responding to the compliments, accepting tends to be the most common response used by them. In addition, compared with the research proposed by Chen (1993) indicating that one of the responses commonly uttered by native American English is acceptance. Post-graduate students of one state university in Indonesia also give the same responses to the compliments.

## REFERENCES

- Cai, Y. (2012). A study on compliment responses strategies by Chinese college students. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 3 (3), 543-549.
- Brown, P. & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chen, R. (1993). Responding to compliments: A contrastive study of politeness strategies between American English and Chinese speakers. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 20, 49-75.
- Cheng, D. (2011). New insights on compliment responses: A comparison between native English speakers and Chinese L2 speakers. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43, 2204-2214.
- Doohan, M. & Manusov, V. (2004). The communication of compliments in romantic relationships: An investigation of relational satisfaction and sex differences and similarities in compliment behavior. *Journal of Communication*, 68,170-194.
- Farghal, M., & Al-Khatib, M.A. (2001). Jordanian college students responses to compliments: A pilot study. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 33,1485-1502.
- Furko, B.P. & E. Dudas, (2012). Gender differences in complimenting strategies with special reference to the compliment response patters of Hungarian undergraduate students. *Argumentum*, 8, 136-157.
- Herbert, R. (1989). The ethnography of English compliments and compliment responses: A contrastive sketch. In W. Oleksy (Ed.), *Contrastive Pragmatics*, pp. 3-35. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Hobbs, P. (2003). The medium is the message: Politeness strategies in men's and women's voicemail messages. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 35 (2), 243-262.
- Holmes, J. (1988). Paying compliments: A sex-preferential politeness strategy. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 12, 445-465.
- Heidari, M.A., Rezazadeh, M., & Rasekh, A.E. (2009). A contrastive study of compliment responses among male and female Iranian teenage EFL learners. *The International Journal of Language Society and Culture*, 29, 8-31.
- Kachru, Y & L. E. Smith. (2008). *Cultures, contexts, and world Englishes*. New York: Routledge.
- Liu, D. (1995). Sociocultural transfer and its effect on second language speakers' communication. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 19 (2), 253-265.
- Lorenzo-Dus, N. (2001). Compliment responses among British and Spanish University students: A

- contrastive study. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 33,107-127.
- Pomerantz, A. (1978). Compliment responses: Notes on the cooperation of multiple constrains. In Yousefvand, Z. (2012). 'A sociolinguistic perspective: Compliment response patterns in Persian'. *The Internet Journal of Language*, 34, 68-77.
- Wolfson, N. (1981). Compliments in Cross-Cultural Perspective. *TESOL Quarterly*, 15, 117-124.
- Yousefvand, Z. (2012). A sociolinguistic perspective: Compliment response patterns in Persian. *The Internet Journal of Language*, 34, 68-77.
- Yu, M. C. (2003). On universality of face: Evidence from Chinese compliment response. *Behavior Journal of Pragmatics*, 35, 1679-1710.