

# English Compliment Response Strategies on Social Networks by Iranian EFL Learners

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**Abstract**—Development of technology including computers and the Internet has introduced a new channel of sharing ideas and beliefs in social networks all over the world. Despite a huge number of studies on compliment, this verbal behavior has not received sufficient attention in such contexts as online communication in social networks. This study aimed to investigate the realization of English compliment response strategies by Iranian English as Foreign Language (EFL) Learners on social networks. To this end, a sample of 30 Iranian EFL learners studying at Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan Branch (IAUKB) was selected from friend's list on social networks. Observing ethical issues, participants' compliments and compliment response strategies were recorded, classified, analyzed in terms of frequency and percentage, and then interpreted. The findings revealed that the most frequent response strategy to English compliments was acceptance strategies at macro level and appreciation token at micro level. The findings of this study may benefit teachers, linguists, language learners, and others interested in language learning and teaching.

**Index Terms**—compliment response strategy, social networks, Iranian EFL learners

## I. INTRODUCTION

Social networks have increasingly become popular means of communication all over the world. They have provided users a unique mean through which individuals communicate, interact, self present, and share their ideas or their personal life. Through social networks users interact via a medium in which both personal and mass communications are provided. These web-based sites have enabled individuals novel means of communicating as such a new medium of context for research in speech act was introduced.

Thanks to computer-mediated communication, social networks have provided users to interact beyond borders. Although in computer-mediated communications many clues such as voice, facial expressions, and non-verbal gestures are absent, these limitations have hardly limited individuals, instead they have been increasingly popular and more and more social networks are being created. As a result, computer-mediated communications have turned as one of the most popular means of communication in the world. Social networks enable members to create personal profiles in which they can share pictures, contact information, hobbies, hometown, academic status, affiliation, political view, religious beliefs, and relationship status, sexual preferences, and favorite music and books with other members. Although speech acts on social networks are linguistically natural, these sites offer a unique and public context in which speech and utterance are mostly different from face to face context. In the following some studies on social network sites will be come.

Social network sites are host of pictures of users in different situation profile pages. One could infer that posting such pictures may be an attempt to fish for compliments by other individuals and respond to these compliments to maintain relationships. By the popularity of internet and its world wide access, social networks are generally accessible through any device that can access to internet. It is believed that the population of social networks users will grow due to its popularity, furthermore, technology has expanded and become increasingly available all over the world.

Social networks are very popular for a variety of users for different proposes, for example, for adolescents and young adults the primary application of them is as means of entertainment beyond social interconnectedness. For middle-age individuals social networks are means of communicating or keeping in touch with friends, families and colleagues. It is also useful for elderly because it is a mean of viewing photographs and videos of their families in a convenient way.

Although studies on social networks abound, teaching English as a foreign language approach study on social networks has been ignored greatly in social networks. Previous studies on social networks were mostly psychologically important and speech acts including complimenting were not investigated sufficiently. Complimenting, on the other hand, has received enough attention in the literature both in Iran and in other countries, but this speech act has been ignored in Persian and on social networks. This study, however, is on the speech act of compliment on social networks among Iranian EFL learners. In the following a short review of related literature on speech act of compliment will be presented.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Compliment is a speech act which is frequently used in social interactions and communications. This speech act has motivated many researchers to conduct research studies based on topic, lexicon and structure, and function of compliments as well as variables like age, Social distance, and cultural schema of speakers which effect complimenting behavior. In addition to compliments, the second part of the compliment, the response, was also subject of many studies. Speech acts, however, is a context bond linguistic phenomenon and cannot be studied independent of culture. Social networks provide many people from all over the world to share their ideas, images, and latest events and are becoming host of complimenting behavior. Iranian EFL learners have showed great tendency toward using these social networks since they are one of the main means of self-expression for them and a computer mediated way of communication by which they can use and apply their second language. Social networks proved to be a good source of data collection where compliment and compliment responses were frequently uttered. This has motivated the researcher to find a great interest in naturally occurring data collection in social networking sites.

Holmes (1986) defines compliment as “a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than speaker, usually the person addressed, for some good (possessions, characteristic, accomplishment, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer” (p.485). She also maintained that compliments function as *social lubricants* which act as opener in conversations and sustain conversations occurring mainly in friendly small talk in which neutral topics can be introduced between unfamiliar interlocutors. Compliment and compliment responses have been investigated regarding different variables such as function and the purpose that a compliment serves, topic of compliment, the syntactic structure and lexicon which compliments carry, social distance and age, and the effect of gender on compliment (Manes, 1983; Holmes, 1986; Wolfson, 1983). It should be considered that the speech act of compliment is composed of two parts each of them have been the subject of investigations in different settings and cultures. Complimenting has been the subject of study for many years. There are many cross cultural studies on compliment and compliment responses regarding different variables. As cited in Abdul Karim (2011) study there have been many studies on this issue (Barnlund & Araki, 1985; Creese, 1991; Daikuhara, 1986; Farghal & Hagan, 2006; Han, 1992; Jaworski, 1995; Loronzodus, 2001; Nelson et al, 1996; Wieland, 1995; Yu, 2004).

To start reviewing empirical research on compliments, it is worthy to elaborate different variables in compliment research and different classification of compliment responses. The adjacency part of the compliment, the response, provided a ground for further investigation. Herbert (1989) defines compliment responses as “... anything that follows an identifiable compliment” (p. 38). In conversational mechanism compliments and compliment responses are considered as an adjacency pair and compliment responses have function of maintaining solidarity between interlocutors as well. Compliment responses were classified into different categories (Holmes 1986, 1988; Herbert, 1986; Pomerantz, 1987). In early studies on compliments, the second part of the adjacent pair of compliments, the response, was taken in to account. Herbert and Pomerantz classified compliment responses into different categories.

Karimnia and Afghari (2010) investigated the applicability of natural semantic metalanguage for EFL learners. They analyzed the compliment responses based on Pomerant`s (1978) classification. By analyzing the data from Persian and English programs on TV channels, they found that self-lowering and other-raising pattern is very common in Iranian compliment responses. On the other hand, English data proved that this strategy does not occur in English very often; instead the agreement strategy is used more often.

Yousefvand (2012) examined different range of strategies used in responding to compliment. Her findings revealed that the general tendency of the Persian speakers in responding to compliments was agreement. Furthermore, approximately one-third of the compliment exchanges were formulaic expressions in order to avoid self-praise and to express their modesty. Expressions needed to be understood in Persian language and culture context. Behnami and Amizadeh (2011) examined compliment and compliment response speech acts cross-culturally. They investigated the topic and the function of the compliments and the way interlocutors responded to the compliments in the Persian and American TV interviews. They found that in both English and Persian programs, compliments were used as a mean to perform different functions.

Tajeddin and Yazdanmehr (2012) investigated the structure and pragmatic functions of compliments that lie behind EFL learners' choice of specific wording. They investigated the structure and pragmatic functions of compliment responses based on relative status of addresser and addressee and the degree of formality. Motaghi-Tabari and Beuzeville (2012) in a contrastive study of compliment responses investigated the effect of exposure on Persian speakers on Australia. Mohajernia and solimani (2013) investigated different strategies of compliment responses used by Iranian EFL learners and those of Australian English speakers with regard to socio-cultural patterns. They found that Iranian EFL learners are less willing to accept compliment in comparison to Australian. Also EFL learners show more modesty and humanity rooted in Iranian cultures.

## III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Learning a language is learning the linguistic forms and functions of the language, in other word, one cannot grantee his or her language learning without pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge of the target language. Forms and functions of a language are highly interrelated so that learning of the language is not fulfilled without interaction of both.

EFL learners and language teachers are mostly concerned with the forms and structure of language and usually overlook the importance of pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic knowledge of language which usually results in lack of proper communication and interaction although being master of linguistic forms. To prevent this, more studies should be conducted on the effect and importance of pragmatic knowledge to assist language teachers, researchers, and EFL learners to prevent cultural transfer as much as possible and to improve learners' performance to an optimal level for communication across cultures.

#### IV. RESEARCH QUESTION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the most frequent compliment response strategy to English compliments uttered by Iranian EFL learners on social network sites. To achieve the objective of the study, following research questions was considered:

What is the most frequent compliment response strategy to English compliments on social networks uttered by Iranian EFL learners?

#### V. METHOD

This study enjoyed naturalistic, controlled observation, and recording of naturally occurring compliments and compliment response strategies among Iranian EFL learners on social networks. This descriptive qualitative study was process oriented where participants' response strategies to English compliments were analyzed. Compliment responses were recorded and classified in terms of frequency and percentage for investigation of the most frequent response strategy English compliments. In the following, information about the participants and instruments will be presented and procedures of data collection and analysis will be elaborated.

##### A. Participant

The participants of the present study were a group of 30 graduate and undergraduate Iranian EFL learners, studying English at Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan Branch. The participants were chosen from a pool of social networks users based on their field of study at university. The age range of the participants was from 23 to 43 with the average age of 25.8. All participants were native speakers of Persian and they were learners of English as foreign language (EFL). The main reason for selecting the participant was that they were studying English. The researcher was also familiar with all of them through her friend list. Table 3.1 summarizes the demographic background of the participants taking part in the study.

TABLE.1  
DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Number of Participants	30
Mother Tongue	Persian
Age	23-43
Level of Education	Graduate and undergraduate

##### B. Instruments

To answer the research questions, two different instruments were designed to collect the data. These instruments were applied to ensure the researcher for data collection and data analysis procedures. To observe ethical issues on data collection, friends were sent consent forms (see Appendix A) in which they were asked to express their agreement in sharing their comments they received on their photos. Moreover, to ensure confidentiality, they were informed that their names and other personal information would not be shared and published. To prevent any confusion or misunderstanding, the consent forms were in Persian. Participants were asked to fill out the forms completely and express their agreement by sending the forms back through personal messages or e-mails. All compliment responses were coded and classified according to Herbert's (1986) Compliment response strategy taxonomy. In this taxonomy response strategies were divided into three macro levels of agreement, non-agreement, and other interpretations. When the data were analyzed, it was observed that most strategies in non-agreement were not used at all by the participants; as a result, the taxonomy was modified and compliment response strategies were divided into two macro level of acceptance and non-acceptance strategies (see Appendix B). The data, then, were classified according to modified version of Herbert's taxonomy.

##### C. Data Collection and Data Analysis Procedures

The present study mainly focused on English naturally occurring compliments among Iranian EFL learners on social networks. In order to collect the desired data, the researcher used her social networks account and selected 50 social networks friends who were all Iranian EFL learners studying at Islamic Azad University of Isfahan, Khorasgan Branch. In order to observe ethical issues, all participants were sent consent forms by personal messages and they were required to express their agreement by sending back messages in following 10 days. From all 50 participants, 30 friends returned the messages and they were finally selected as participants of the study. To uncover any problem of proposed

procedures and methods, a pilot study was carried out before the main study. It was done to assess the feasibility and usefulness of data collection method and to revise any necessary changes. The result of pilot study proved the feasibility of data collection and method to finalize the method of the study.

Having received contest forms from the participants, their profiles were examined from March first to June first and any English compliments and compliments responses uttered by the participants on their profile pictures were recorded. Compliments pairs were classified at two levels. These two Levels were on the base of the language which participants responded to compliments; that is Level One comprised those pairs which the second parts, the responses, were in English. Level Two on the other hand, were those pairs which their first parts, the compliments, were uttered in English but responses were in Persian. For more clarification some examples were provided. Classification of responses is represented in following Tables.

TABLE2.  
COMPLIMENT RESPONSES CLASSIFICATION IN ENGLISH

Level One A. English Compliments B. Compliment Responses in English <i>a. You look so beautiful</i> <i>b. Thank you dear</i>
Level Two A. English Compliments B. Compliment Responses in Persian <i>b. Mamnoon Azizam</i> <i>a. So nice</i>

Having recorded and classified compliment responses, the data were categorized on the base of modified version of Herbert's (1986) taxonomy. The number of recorded compliment responses at Level One and Two was 65 and 67 respectively. Since the data was naturally occurring speech acts, it was no control over the number of responses or the distribution of utterances. The data were classified and the frequency and percentage of each strategy was measured. The data in both levels were first divided at macro-strategies of acceptance and non-acceptance and then were further divided into micro-strategies. Micro strategies in acceptance were strategies such as appreciation token, comment history, and praise upgrade and in non-acceptance were return, scale down, comment history, and reassignment. The data was classified on the base of the modified compliment responses taxonomy. The data, then, was coded and classified in terms of frequency and percentage to measure the most frequent response strategy in each Level.

The researcher was actively engaged in data collection procedure. The researcher was both an observer and a participant who frequently gave and received compliments both in Persian and English to stimulate the participants in complimenting as naturally as possible, and compliments were constantly checked and recorded by the researcher.

## VI. FINDINGS

Having recorded all compliments and compliment responses (132 compliment pairs) in the specified period of time; they were divided into two levels. Level One was those compliment responses which the compliment, the first part of compliment pair, was in English and the second part was in English as well that is the complimenting pairs was in English. Level Two comprises of those compliment pairs in which the responses were in Persian to English compliments. The participants' response strategies to English compliments were classified and coded into nominal categories and they were analyzed in terms of frequency and percentage. Categorization of response strategies was based on Herbert's (1986) taxonomy with some modification made by the researcher (See Appendix B).

### A. Level One: English Responses to English Compliments

As it is shown in Table 1, in Level One from the total number of 132 English compliments less than half of the compliment responses were in English and more than half of the compliment responses were uttered in Persian. This distribution suggests that in natural setting Iranian EFL learners are not biased in using their mother tongue or their second language in responding to the compliments.

TABLE 1.  
FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF RESPONSES TO ENGLISH COMPLIMENTS

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
English responses ( Level One)	65	49.25
Persian responses ( Level Two)	67	50.75

N=132

By analyzing the data it was revealed that participants applied acceptance strategy for responding to English compliments considerably. The data revealed that a great number of response strategies were appreciation token strategy while less than one fifth of responses were strategies other than acceptance. When compliment response strategies were analyzed at macro level, it was found that a good number of compliment responses were acceptance while less than one-fifth of response strategies were non-acceptance at macro-level. Furthermore analysis at micro-level

revealed that more than three fourth of English responses to English compliments were appreciation token. Detail explanation of response strategies are represented in Table .2.

TABLE .2  
FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF ENGLISH RESPONSE STRATEGIES AT MACRO AND MICRO LEVELS (LEVEL ONE)

English Response Strategies		
	Frequency	Percentage
Acceptance (Macro-Level)	56	86.15
Appreciation Token	50	77
Comment acceptance	4	6
Praise up grade	2	3
Non-acceptance (Macro-Level)	9	13.84
Comment History	1	1.5
Return	7	10
Reassignment	1	1.5
N.65		

### B. Level Two: Persian Responses to English Compliments

Nearly half of the responses to English compliments were uttered in Persian. Analysis of Persian compliment response strategies to English compliment showed that majority of response strategies are agreement and fall into the category of acceptance at macro level; that is, three fourth of all Persian strategies are acceptance strategy, while around a quarter fall into the category of non-acceptance response strategy. In this part, participant proved that their choice of language, English or Persian, to respond to the compliment does not influence the choice of compliments strategy that is in both cases participants used appreciation token strategy as the dominant compliment response strategy to English compliments at micro-level.

TABLE.3.  
FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF PERSIAN RESPONSE STRATEGIES AT MACRO AND MICRO LEVELS (LEVEL TWO)

Persian Response Strategies		
	Frequency	Percentage
Acceptance (Macro-Level)	48	71.63
Appreciation Token	33	49.25
Comment acceptance	6	8.95
Praise up grade	11	16.40
Non-acceptance (Macro-Level)	19	28.37
Comment History	3	4.47
Return	10	14.93
Scale down	4	6
Reassignment	0	0
N.67		

Analysis of the data at micro level (Table.3) suggested that the most frequent response strategy uttered in Persian to English compliments was appreciation token which is around half of the responses. Praise up grade and return strategies came next respectively. In this classification there were some responses which suggested scale down strategy which was absent in English responses, the percentage of scale down strategy is not high enough though. Reassignment strategy, however, did not occur in this classification.

## VII. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to answer the following question. The research question will be answered regarding the findings of the study and those of previous studies. The implications and limitations of the study will come next and this part will end with some suggestions for future remarks.

What is the most frequent response strategy to English compliments among Iranian EFL learners?

As for the English responses to English compliments, results revealed that Iranian EFL learners showed a great tendency to use agreement strategies while responding to English compliments. A great number of response strategies to English compliments at macro level were acceptance strategy which shows the agreement of the complimentee with compliment. Appreciation token was the most frequent strategy in responding to English compliments at micro level. Analysis of English and Persian responses to English compliments revealed that, participants mostly appreciate the complimenter. This finding is not different from previous studies conducted in Iran or on Persian speakers (Karimnia & Afghar, 2010; Mohajernia & Solimani, 2013; Tajedin & Yazdanmehr, 2012; Tabari & Beuzevil, 2012; Yousefvand, 2012). These findings, however, proved that there is a great tendency to use telegraphic conversation in English which restricted participants from using different types of response strategies. The frequency of appreciation token strategy was so high that other response strategy was not considerable in number but it was found that comment history and praise upgrade were used to show acceptance while return and scale down strategies were used as a non-acceptance strategy. As a result, the most frequent response strategy was appreciation token in both levels. It was found that in both way of responding, English or Persian, a great number of compliment response strategies were appreciation token.

However, participants showed that when they use English as the medium of complimenting they were more willing to use appreciation token in comparison to Persian. That is, although appreciation token was the most frequent response strategy at both levels, the number of its occurrence at level one was higher and participants used other different strategies for responding when they applied Persian as the medium of responding.

The findings suggested that EFL learners accepted the compliments in social networks therefore the most frequent response strategy in both levels was appreciation token. In other response strategies, at level two, when responses other than appreciation token strategy were analyzed, it was found that the participant used comment history, as well as scale down strategy to show their modesty and returned a compliment to show their politeness. These findings are in line with those of previous studies by Behnami and Amizzadeh (2011), Karamnia And Afghari (2010), Motaghi-Tabari and Beuzevil (2012), Tajedin and Yazdan Mehr (2012), and Yousefvand (2012) but in contrast with those by Mohajernia and Solimani (2013) which proved that the most frequent compliment response strategy is not agreement strategy. The findings of this study proved that Iranian EFL learner manifested different tendency when responding to English compliments. The data proved that the participants' choice of language for responding to English compliments do not influence the compliment strategy greatly. Iranian EFL learners showed great tendency toward appreciation token strategy as the dominate compliment response strategy to English compliments on social networking sites. In other words, the most frequent compliment response strategy to English compliments were appreciation token strategy which is highly related to politeness in Iranian culture.

In social networks some compliment response strategies did not used at all and expressing agreement to compliments is the most frequent compliment response strategy. It can be concluded that social networking sites are one of the main means of self expression by which individuals show their attachment to the modern world while still manifest and represent their Persian cultural schemas.

This study has some linguistic features as well as pedagogical ones which can be useful for the field of linguistic. This study dealt with a speech event in social networks, the results can be linguistically significant. Social networks have provided a common ground for communication and interaction for people regardless of time and space. The utterances on social networks are truly natural because no one has force users to join and leave comments. Although utterances are naturally occurred, they suffer from facial expression and voice features; therefore individuals try to overcome this shortcoming through their wordings and structure of sentence. The wording and structure of sentences are neither similar to natural wording in speech nor in writing. This uniqueness can be a good reason for more research on this area.

It is believed that by development of social networking sites more and more individuals are joining and producing a language which is both natural and different from speech out of cyber world. To conclude, it is highly recommended that researchers in the field of linguistic consider the changes and innovation in the speech events occurring on social networking sites.

Although the researcher tried to control all factors regarding validity and generalization, this study suffered from some limitations. Since social networking sites' users are great in number, it would be better if the participants were in a larger size. It is recommended to examine the complimenting behavior of more social networks' users to see how complimenting behavior can be generalized.

Another shortcoming is that, this study had no control group for Persian and English compliment responses, it would be better if there were two Persian and English native speakers groups for comparison of strategies across groups.

Another point might be that the period of data collection could be longer. Since the data was naturally occurred and there was no specific control over the data collection, it would be better if the researcher could collect more data and based the findings more confidently. The current study was done on compliment response strategies in English and Persian, further studies can be conducted on compliments and other speech acts like request or apology. It is also recommended to develop more studies on wording and structure of compliments since wording on social networking sites are used differently from face to face interactions. Some other status messages like congratulations and wishing happy birthday could have interesting results for further investigations on social networking sites.

#### APPENDIX A

دوست گرامی

این فرم جهت همکاری شما برای انجام پروژه تحقیقاتی ارسال گردیده است در صورت تمایل به همکاری فرم حاضر را تکمیل نموده و سپس از طریق پیام شخصی یا ایمیل بازگردانید. از همکاری شما سپاسگزارم

جنسیت زن ..... مرد.....

سن.....

زبان مادری.....

رشته تحصیلی..... مقطع رشته تحصیلی.....

رضایت دارم که اطلاعات موجود در پروفایل من جهت همکاری در پروژه تحقیقاتی مورد بررسی و استفاده قرار گیرد.

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#### APPENDIX B

1. Acceptance
a. Appreciation token
b. Comment acceptance
c. Praise upgrade
d. Comment history
2. Non-acceptance
a. Scale down
b. Reassignment
c. Return
3. Other
a. Request
b. Question
c. No acknowledgment

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