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The three “waves” of compliment and compliment response research

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ABSTRACT

Since the seminal studies carried out by Wolfson and Manes (1980) and Wolfson (1981, 1984), compliments have long attracted scholarly attention. Similarly, Pomerantz's (1978) pioneering study on compliment responses set the ground for interest in this related speech act. It could be argued that there are four different reasons for this fascination. First, compliments (and their corresponding responses) are extremely important in the construction of social rapport. Secondly, research has proven that they are far from simple despite their “formulaic” character. Third, contrastive research has found that there are remarkable cross-cultural differences, which often lead to misunderstandings or pragmatic clashes in intercultural exchanges. Finally, the increasing presence of digital communication has led to new ways to compliment and respond to compliments, based on the media affordances and constraints. This raises the question: what remains to be done in the study of compliments and compliment responses? The aim of this paper is, on the one hand, to present a comprehensive state of the art, which I argue can be divided into three main overlapping ‘waves’. This will be accompanied by a discussion of the main results and methodologies found in each wave. On the other hand, it intends to provide readers with some pointers to future research.

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1. Introduction

In the field of linguistics,¹ compliments and compliment responses have drawn the attention of pragmatics scholars for decades since the seminal studies by [Wolfson and Manes \(1980\)](#) and [Wolfson \(1981, 1984\)](#) on compliments and [Pomerantz \(1978\)](#) on compliment responses. For decades, linguists have fallen under the spell of this seemingly innocent speech act and the responses it triggers. The questions this raises are: why are compliments and compliment responses still so attractive to scholars? And, even more importantly, what (if anything) remains to be done in the study of compliments?

With regard to the first question, it could be argued that there are different reasons for this. First, compliments and responses to compliments are extremely important speech acts in the construction of social relations and rapport (e.g., [Chen, 1993](#); [Miles 1994](#)). Secondly, research has proven that they are far from simple despite their “formulaic” character (e.g., [Golato 2005](#)), with responses to compliments constituting a markedly complex sociolinguistic speech act (e.g., [Pomerantz 1978](#)).

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¹ It is important to acknowledge that other fields of study such as communication studies, psychology or marketing (among others) have also focused on compliments and compliment responses (e.g., [Gao and Jiang 2022](#); [Knapp et al., 1984](#); [Naylor 2016](#), among others). However, the scope of this paper is essentially linguistic (mostly pragmatic).

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Third, contrastive research has found that there are remarkable cross-cultural differences², which often lead to misunderstandings or pragmatic clashes in intercultural exchanges (e.g., Nelson et al., 1996; Yläne-McEwen 1993; Wolfson 1981; among many others). Finally, the increasing presence of digital communication has led to new ways to compliment and respond to compliments, based on the media affordances and constraints (see Placencia and Lower (2017) for a review of digital compliments and compliment responses). Regarding the second question, this paper will try to provide some pointers to future research after arguing that the study of compliment-responses extends along three overlapping waves.

Given its mostly theoretical nature, the rest of this paper is structured into five sections. Section 2 focuses on a comprehensive literature review and the development of three waves in the study of compliments and compliment responses. Both sections 2 and 3 have been in turn divided into three subsections related to each of the “waves”. Section 4 will then provide some possible avenues for future research before concluding on Section 5.

2. The “three waves” of compliment and compliment response research

2.1. The pioneer studies: monolingual contexts

It can be argued that Wolfson and Manes (1980) was the first seminal study on compliments, immediately followed by Wolfson (1981, 1984), inaugurating what could be termed the ‘first wave’ of compliment research, which focused on face-to-face interaction in different varieties of English (see Section 2.3), commonly from an ethnographic perspective, where data gathering often took the form of fieldwork. Based on the content of the studies and the adopted approach, it could be said that the first wave started in the early 80s but is far from over. Three main areas were focused upon during this first wave:

- (i) The study of the lexical-syntactic patterns of compliments,
- (ii) The topic and functions of compliments,
- (iii) The influence of the sociological variable of gender on compliment performance.

Common findings in the above quoted studies were the limited set of lexical options speakers chose from when performing this speech act, with a narrow range of adjectives (e.g., lovely, kind, nice) and four main syntactic formulas, which Holmes (1986) also found in her New Zealand data (see Table 1):

Table 1
Compliment formulas

1	(a)	NP BE ³ (Intensifier) ADJ	e.g., your hair is really great
	(b)	NP BE LOOKing (int) ADJ	e.g., You're looking terrific
2	I (int) LIKE NP		e.g., I (simply) love your skirt
3	(a)	PRO BE a (int) ADJ NP	e.g., That's a very nice coat
	(b)	PRO BE (int) (a) ADJ NP	e.g., That's really great juice
4	(Int) ADJ (NP)		e.g., Really cool dress.

Furthermore, the range of complimented topics was also observed to be relatively limited, with English speakers complimenting their addressee mainly on four aspects, namely, appearance, ability/performance, possessions and personality/friendship, the main function of compliments being that of acting as “social lubricants” (Wolfson 1983: 89). Interestingly, despite the commonalities found, many of these studies also found that compliments, which are often considered prototypical cases of positive politeness and trigger social rapport, perform the opposite function in languages such as Chinese (Ye 1995) or Japanese (Daikuhara 1986; Fujimura-Wilson 2014), where they can be used as indicators of deference, hence creating social distance (although see Wang and Tsai 2003, who contradict this claim in the case of Chinese).

Besides American English, other varieties were also under scrutiny at the time, with similar results to those already commented upon. For example, Holmes (1986) turned her attention to New Zealand English, with a focus on the influence of gender in the performance of compliments, also adopting an ethnographic approach (see also Herbert 1990; Holmes 1988). A decade later, she turned her attention to the role played by gender in compliment performance in Australian English (Holmes 1995, 1996). Her results show that compliments were mostly performed by female speakers talking to other female interlocutors or by male speakers complimenting female speakers, rendering it mostly a “female speech act” (Holmes 1995: 115), with prevalence of certain adjectives such as “lovely”.

Most of these studies focused on formulaic, explicit compliments. However, implicit compliments have also received a fair share of attention. For example, Boyle (2000) found that one of the common patterns shared by all implicit compliments was comparing the complimentee with a third person (admired by both interlocutors). Interest in implicit compliments has extended to other languages like Italian (Bruti 2006), Peninsular Spanish (Maíz-Arévalo 2012a, Maíz-Arévalo 2012b), Chinese (Ye 1993; Yu 2003) or Jordanian Arabic (Al-batayneh, 2019), among others.

Although the first, monolingual wave focused mostly on English, we occasionally find at the initial stages of this wave some other research on languages other than English, such as Spanish, also from an ethnographic approach in line with the

² See also Chen (2010) for a comprehensive review of cross-cultural research on compliments and compliment responses.

English studies. For example, [Placencia and Yépez Lasso \(1999\)](#) scrutinized compliments in the Ecuadorian Spanish variety while [García \(2012\)](#) focused on the Peruvian variety of Spanish, and [Maíz-Arévalo \(2012a\)](#) studied implicit compliments in Peninsular Spanish, among others. Languages other than English that also received scholarly attention in this regard are Chinese ([Yuan 2002](#)), especially Mandarin Chinese ([Ye 1995](#); [Yuan 2002](#)), German ([Golato 2005](#)), Japanese ([Adachi 2011](#); [Daikuhara 1986](#); [Satoh 2014](#)) or Persian (see [Derakhshan et al., 2020](#) for a comprehensive review of compliments in Iranian Persian). In the case of Persian, it is worth mentioning the study by [Pour and Zarei \(2016\)](#) on Persian compliments, since they are amongst the few authors that investigate the social variable of age. The authors found that the younger participants preferred non-compliment strategies the most in contrast to the older participants, who mostly opted for explicit unbound semantic formulaic strategies. More recent monolingual studies seem to focus on less researched languages such as Vietnamese (see [Lau 2022](#)), among others.

Most of these early studies are framed in the ethnographic tradition in line with [Manes and Wolfson's \(1981\)](#), [Manes' \(1983\)](#) and [Wolfson's \(1983\)](#) studies. However, after the publication of [Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's \(1984\)](#) influential study on requests and apologies, the popularity of Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs) as a data-gathering method soared. In fact, DCTs have arguably remained one of the most frequently used methodologies, often in combination with other methods such as (semi)structured interviews, role plays and fieldwork.

Together with compliments, responses to compliments have also been a prolific subject of research since [Pomerantz's \(1978\)](#) qualitative seminal study on compliment responses (CRs henceforth) in American English. Stemming from the tradition of Conversation Analysis (CA), she argued that responding to compliments was highly complex due to different conversational constraints such as the speaker's wish to express agreement while avoiding self-praise.⁴ Her results showed that speakers could not only accept the compliment (often by expressing appreciation) but also disagree with it, hence avoiding self-praise.

While taking Pomerantz's study as a point of departure, [Holmes \(1986: 491\)](#) took a different perspective from that of CA and argued for a “semantic or functional” analysis of compliment responses in her analysis of New Zealand English. [Holmes \(1986\)](#) showed that responses to compliments often followed three macro patterns: accepting, rejecting or evading the compliment, with the prevalence of accepting (thanking). More specifically, the author established the following taxonomy, which has proved highly influential in later research (see [Table 2](#)):

Also following Pomerantz but from a more functional and pragmatic perspective, [Herbert \(1986: 79\)](#) put forward a similar taxonomy derived from his study of American English compliment responses based on a corpus of over 1000 CRs collected as fieldwork over a three-year period (1980–1983) by the author and some of his own students (see [Table 2](#)). Although Herbert's taxonomy resembles Holmes', he establishes up to three levels and includes some categories which are absent in Holmes', and which offer a further degree of specificity. For example, “acceptance” is part of the macro level of Agreement. In turn, acceptance can include three subtypes: “appreciation” (*thank you*), “comment acceptance” (*it's my favorite too*), and “praise upgrade” (*Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?*), which is a category missing in Holmes' classification. For the sake of clarity, [Table 3](#) reproduces Herbert's complete taxonomy of compliment responses:

Finally, it is also worth mentioning the relatively recent work by [Szili \(2016\)](#), who also provided analysts with another comprehensive taxonomy of compliment responses based on a monolingual study of Hungarian. In contrast to previous studies, however, she based her data-gathering method on DCTs rather than fieldnotes. Following [Holmes \(1986\)](#), the author found it necessary to add new strategies that occurred in her corpus such as “expressing uneasiness with the compliment” or “joking” and to restructure some of the prior macro categories, as illustrated by [Table 4](#)⁵ ([Szili 2016: 41](#)).

As in the case of compliments, most of the studies in the first wave focused on English or varieties of English. For example, employing a fieldwork methodology, [Mustapha \(2004\)](#) examined 1200 compliment exchanges in Nigerian English and Nigerian pidgin. To do so, the author employed a combination of previous taxonomies such as Pomerantz's and Holmes' (see above). His results showed that, in line with previous studies on other varieties of English, Nigerian speakers tended to accept compliments (over 90 % of the cases).

However, responses to compliments have also been analyzed in other languages such as Spanish (see [Valdés and Pino \(1981\)](#) on Mexican Spanish as a heritage language in the USA or [Maíz-Arévalo \(2012b\)](#) on CR in Peninsular Spanish), Hungarian (as in the case of [Szili 2016](#)), or minority languages like Udmurt, a Finno-Ugric language ([Németh 2021](#)). In the latter study, [Németh's](#) findings showed that, similarly to English, Udmurt speakers tend to express thanks when receiving a compliment (75 % of the cases in his study).

In summary, and shown by the existence of different taxonomies, it could be concluded that compliment responses are rather complex speech acts, with different sociocultural aspects (e.g., the interlocutor's gender, the complimented token, their sociocultural background) often playing a role in how speakers choose to respond. As [Szili](#) points out (2016: 39), “[o]f all the speech acts, compliment responses are perhaps the most resistant to unification: different speech communities prefer or ignore different strategies and strategy-types.” Cultural differences, thus, seem to play a key role in how speakers

⁴ In line with what [Leech \(1983\)](#) would later describe as the politeness maxims of Agreement and Modesty.

⁵ [Szili \(2016\)](#) provides her examples in Hungarian accompanied by an English translation. For the sake of clarity, I have just reproduced the English translation.

³ “BE” stands for copulative verb, hence including not only “to be” but also other copulative verbs like “look”. The same applies to “LIKE” in category (2), which also stands for other verbs like “love”.

Table 2
Holmes' taxonomy of compliment responses (1986: 492).

Macro level CRs	Micro level CRs	Examples
Accept	Appreciation token	<i>Thanks, yes, or smile.</i>
	Agreeing utterance	<i>I think it's lovely too.</i>
	Downgrading utterance	<i>It's not too bad, is it?</i>
	Return compliment	<i>You're looking good too.</i>
Reject	Disagreeing utterance	<i>I'm afraid I don't like it much.</i>
	Question accuracy	<i>Is beautiful the right word?</i>
	Challenge sincerity	<i>You don't really mean that.</i>
Deflect/Evade	Shift credit	<i>My mother knitted it.</i>
	Informative comment	<i>I bought it at that Vibrant Knite place.</i>
	Ignore	<i>It's time we're leaving, isn't it?</i>
	Legitimate evasion	*Similar to providing information but when asked by the interlocutor ("That's nice. Where did you get it?")
	Request reassurance/ repetition	<i>Do you really think so?</i>

Table 3
Herbert's taxonomy of compliment responses (1986: 79).

Response type	Examples		
Agreement	Acceptances	Appreciation token	<i>Thanks, thank you; [smile].</i>
		Comment acceptance	<i>Thanks, it's my favorite too.</i>
	Transfers	Praise upgrade	<i>Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?</i>
		Reassignment	<i>I bought it for the trip to Arizona.</i>
Non-agreement	Scale down	Return	<i>My brother gave it to me.</i>
		Disagreement	<i>So's yours.</i>
	Nonacceptance	Qualification	<i>It's really quite old.</i>
Other interpretation	No acknowledgement		<i>I hate it.</i>
	Request		<i>It's all right, but Lens' is nicer.</i>
			[Silence]
			<i>You wanna borrow this one too?</i>

Table 4
Szili's taxonomy of compliment responses (2016: 41).

Macro level CRs	Micro level CRs	Examples
Accept	Expressing agreement, confirmation	<i>Yes, it's nice.</i>
	Thanking	<i>Thank you.</i>
	Expressing gladness	<i>I'm very glad you like it.</i>
	Return compliment	<i>You're kind.</i>
	Joking	<i>Unfortunately, I was too busy being a genius to feel it.</i>
Disagreement/ Reject	Downgrading/disparaging comments or explanation	<i>Oh no, this stuff's ancient.</i>
	Expressing feelings of embarrassment	<i>Oh, you're embarrassing me.</i>
	Qualifying the compliment	<i>I think you're a little biased.</i>
Deflect/Evade	Disagreement	<i>That's not true.</i>
	Shift credit	<i>My mother knitted it.</i>
	Deflecting explanation	<i>I bought it in Vaci St.</i>
	Expressing effort, emphasizing the fact that the compliment is well-deserved	<i>I worked a lot for it</i>
	Legitimate evasion	<i>When is your exam?</i>
	Request reassurance/repetition	<i>Really?</i>

perform both compliments and compliment responses. In fact, cross-cultural comparison between languages has become a major subject of research, as Section 2.2 attempts to show.

2.2. The second wave: cross-cultural studies, variational pragmatics and L2 pragmatics

The acts of complimenting and responding to compliments have long been argued to reflect cultural values (Yu 2005), which has led to a whole related area of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic studies often comparing how English speakers perform and respond to compliments to three main scenarios:

- (i) how speakers of other languages perform both speech acts (often in contrast to English),

- (ii) how speakers of different varieties of the same language perform compliments and compliment responses (i.e., variational pragmatics),
- (iii) how learners of English as a foreign language (EFL henceforth) perform compliments and responses in this language (L2 pragmatics). In turn, this final aspect has often focused on two main areas:
 - a. Exploring the effectiveness of pragmatic teaching (e.g., implicit vs. explicit instruction).
 - b. Assessing the learners' pragmatic competence.

One of the pioneer studies in this area is undoubtedly Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1989: 89), who compared compliments and their corresponding responses in UK English and Polish. She found that, in the case of Polish speakers, downgrading was the preferred response in contrast to acceptance (mostly thanking) by British English speakers.

Herbert (1991) also focused on Polish compliments and responses, comparing them to Wolfson and Manes' (1980) findings for American English. By means of DCTs and naturally occurring examples, the author found that Polish compliments often referred to personal possessions rather than appearance or personal qualities, which predominated in English. Regarding responses to compliments, his results aligned with Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk's, as Polish participants were more likely to scale down their compliments.

Taking these two influential studies into consideration, the second wave seems to extend from the 90s to the mid-2000s, with a major interest in cross-cultural comparisons of how compliments and compliment responses were performed in English (and its varieties) in contrast with other languages. Indeed, during these years we witness a proliferation of this kind of study. English (mostly British or American) was frequently contrasted with different European languages such as French (Wieland 1995), German (Golato 2002), Italian (Bruti 2006; Castagneto and Ravetto 2015), Greek (Sifianou 2001), or different varieties of Spanish such as Peninsular Spanish (e.g., Maíz-Arévalo 2010, Maíz-Arévalo 2012a, 2012b; Czerwińska et al. 2021), or Mexican (e.g., Perea-Hernández 1999).

Besides comparing English with other European languages, the former has also been often contrasted with typologically different languages such as Asian languages. The traditionally known Eastern-Western cultural divide has led to a prolific range of studies (both contrastive and monolingual) as compliments and responses stress cultural values such as modesty and humility in Eastern cultures as opposed to American English 'hyperbole', which, as Tsuda (1992) argued, may be perceived in intercultural interactions between Japanese and American interlocutors as mutual insincerity, i.e., too humble to be true for the Americans and too exaggerated to be true for the Japanese. In other words, complimenting behavior is perceived as a reflection of cultural values such as modesty, individualism or collectivism (Hofstede 2001).

As a result, there is a great array of studies on English (especially American English) in contrast with Mandarin Chinese (Cheng 2011; Li and Yu 2009; Yu 2005) although the Australian and British varieties have also been compared to Mandarin Chinese (Spencer-Oatey et al. 2008; Tang and Zhang 2009). The interest in this contrast, namely American English/Mandarin Chinese, has extended this "second wave" well into the end of the 2010s. For example, in their study on English and Chinese compliments (the authors do not specify what varieties), Shi and Qu (2018) argued that the linguistic form of compliments may coincide to some extent (i.e., there is a limited range of expressions to compliment others) as well as the functions they perform (e.g., creating rapport, greetings, etc.). However, there were interesting differences triggered by cultural values such as *what* can be complimented. The authors argued that topics such as age, income, marital status and life experience may be inappropriate as the subject of compliments in English as they are regarded as too personal, but they are extremely frequent in Chinese, as "people consider that it is polite to care about each other in all aspects" (Shi and Qu 2018: 135).

English (mostly American English) has also been contrasted to other Asian languages such as Japanese (Barnlund and Arachi 1985; Daikuhara 1986; Matsuura 2004; Yoko 1995), Vietnamese (Nguyen 1998), or different varieties of Arabic such as Syrian (Nelson et al. 1996), or Saudi Arabic (Salameh 2001), among many others.

In similar lines, Almansoob et al. (2019: 6) focused on American English and Yemeni Arabic. Their findings showed that the expression of admiration seems to be common to both cultures while the use of other strategies such as "gratitude to God" and "metaphor" -i.e., praising the complimentee via an unordinary description like "you are a real star!" appear to be culturally specific to Arabic. Their findings also revealed that American compliments tended to be more formulaic in nature in contrast to Arabic ones, which were also longer and more elaborate.

As in the first wave, compliment responses have also attracted scholarly attention on their own. As mentioned above, Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1989) and Herbert (1991) included responses in their studies contrasting Polish and American English. In most cases, the subsequent studies followed one of the taxonomies already described in section 2.1 (with a clear preference for Holmes'), to which they often added new data-driven categories (see Szili 2016). Another commonality between these studies has been the frequent use of DCTs as the main data-gathering tool.

The contrast between Chinese and (American) English has received a great deal of attention. For example, Chen (1993) used DCTs to compare American and Chinese native speakers' responses to compliments taking Leech's (1983) Politeness Maxims as a point of departure. His results showed that American English speakers favored acceptance and agreement while Chinese speakers tended to use modesty and denial. This study was later replicated by Chen and Yang (2010: 1954), who offered a diachronic perspective, revealing a "drastic change" as acceptance became the preferred response (see also Spencer-Oatey et al. (2008) for compliment responses in Chinese and British English and Tang and Zhang (2009) for Australian and Mandarin Chinese.

Other studies on compliment responses worth mentioning are [Lorenzo-Dus \(2001\)](#), who employed DCTs to compare how British and Peninsular Spanish students responded to the same nine written scenarios. In line with [Maíz-Arévalo \(2012b\)](#), Lorenzo-Dus found that acceptance (appreciation) was the most common strategy displayed by the British participants in contrast to self-praise avoidance or even the use of humor. [Mir and Cots \(2017\)](#) also focused on Peninsular Spanish but in contrast with American English and by means of an online DCT, with the Spanish participants deploying a greater variety and more elaboration in their responses.

Besides contrasting different languages (and their cultures), another major sub-area in this wave is what is known as variational pragmatics. Variational pragmatics claims that pragmatic variation does not only exist between different languages but also between varieties of the same language. In other words, “speakers who share the same native language do not necessarily share the same culture” ([Barron and Schneider 2009](#): 425).

In this respect, it is worth mentioning different studies which adopt this variational approach such as [Lin et al. \(2012\)](#), who used DCTs to compare complimenting behavior by Taiwan Chinese and Mainland Chinese higher education students. While there were more commonalities than differences between both groups such as the preference for explicit compliments, the authors identified statistically significant differences regarding specific strategies. For example, Taiwanese participants seemed to prefer the use of compliments as pre-requests while Mainland Chinese used this strategy significantly less frequently (see also [Lin \(2020\)](#) on compliments and criticisms in US, UK and Taiwanese talent shows).

A similar approach is adopted by [Farenkia \(2012\)](#), who examined differences and similarities in the realization of compliments (on skills) in Cameroon and Canadian French also by means of DCTs. As in the previous study, more commonalities than differences were found but with certain preferences by each cultural group, with Cameroonians opting for more elaborate (and longer) compliments consisting of not only the head act but also accompanying or satellite acts while Canadian French prefer more explicit and shorter compliments.

Spanish variation in compliment realization has also been studied. In this field, it is worth mentioning the study by [Placencia and Fuentes \(2013\)](#) on Ecuadorian (Quito) and Peninsular Spanish, who employed DCTs with exclusively female university students from Quito and Seville. Their results showed a preference for formulaic compliments in both contexts, with some differences. For example, the range of positive adjectives was slightly wider in the Sevillian variety than in the Quito one. Furthermore, internal modification (especially when intensifying the compliment) was also more frequent in the Sevillian variety.

Finally, [El-Dakhs \(2021\)](#) adopted a variational pragmatics approach to compare compliments performed by Egyptian and Saudi youngsters. Her results are interesting as they revealed intralinguistic (and intracultural) differences between the two varieties. Egyptian youths produced more explicit compliment strategies while Saudis showed a stronger preference for implicit compliment strategies.

Besides cross-cultural and variational pragmatics, this second wave is also characterized by the study of compliment performance by non-native speakers of English, often learners of this language (either English as a foreign language, EFL or English as a Second Language, ESL).

The main objective of this sub-area is to provide learners of English as a foreign or second language (EFL and ESL henceforth) with the pragmatically correct tools to perform and respond to compliments in the target language and to avoid negative transfer from their respective L1s. More specifically, we can distinguish two main areas of scholarly interest: exploring the effectiveness of pragmatic teaching (e.g., implicit vs. pragmatic instruction) and assessing learners' pragmatic competence when performing compliments and/or compliment responses.

With regard to instruction, a common finding of these studies is that explicit teaching is more effective than implicit instruction even if the latter also helps to improve pragmatic competence (see [Félix-Brasdefer and Cohen 2012](#); [Holmes and Brown 1987](#); [Ishihara 2004](#); [Grossi 2009](#); [Rose and Ng 2001](#), among many others). For example, [Ebadi and Pourzandi \(2015\)](#) compared the results of three groups of intermediate Iranian EFL learners -i.e., explicit, implicit and control group. Their results showed that both kinds of instruction significantly improved learners' abilities to produce contextually adequate compliments and compliment responses.⁶

A closely related area is the assessment of learners' pragmatic competence when performing compliments and compliment responses. For example, in her study on Finnish learners of English as foreign language, [Yläne-McEwen \(1993\)](#) compared British English, Finnish and the interlanguage of Finnish learners of English. Her results showed that compliments in Finnish were not only more infrequent but also longer than in English. Although Finnish learners of English demonstrated appropriate (formulaic) complimenting behavior in English, they still transferred some strategies from their L1 such as the use of hearer-oriented (rather than speaker-oriented) compliment forms. With regard to responses, acceptance was the most frequent option in the three groups, although more frequently so in British English than in Finnish (see also [Bachelor \(2020\)](#) on assessing pragmatic competence of compliment sequences in Spanish as L2).

Other studies that have tackled the assessment of EFL learners' pragmatic competence are [Botey-Riaza et al. \(2023\)](#), who focused on compliment responses by means of a video elicitation task. Their results showed an inverse relationship between

⁶ Although not focused on English as a foreign or second language, it is worth mentioning the studies on compliments in Spanish as an L2 by native speakers of English, which also point to the importance of instruction -sometimes even over study abroad experiences -to develop learners' pragmatic competence in L2 (see [Czerwińska & Dickerson 2022](#); [Félix-Brasdefer and Hasler-Barker 2015](#), among others).

proficiency and sameness to native speakers' performance, reaching the conclusion that linguistic proficiency does not ensure pragmatic competence and/or pragmatic knowledge (see also [Botey Riaza 2022](#)).

Although extremely valuable (especially as a way to guide foreign language instruction and to find out cultural similarities and differences), these studies often face a major issue. In fact, the target is always the native variety, which has long been questionable in the English as a lingua franca (ELF henceforth) context (see [Coperías Aguilar 2002](#); [Taguchi 2018](#); [Wasik 2023](#), among others). In other words, in intercultural exchanges where none of the interlocutors have English as their L1, it might often be the case that performing and responding to compliments follow their own L1 pragmatic "rules" and these speakers might find the need to establish *ad hoc* strategies ([Kecskes 2016](#)).

In fact, there is a dearth of studies researching the performance of compliments and compliment responses in intercultural settings where English is the common language or ELF. For example, [Jenks \(2015\)](#) focuses on how intercultural interlocutors give, and respond to, compliments specifically concerning language proficiency, which helps these speakers construct their identities as non-native speakers. Another interesting study is [Dendenne \(2023\)](#), since it combined intercultural pragmatics and digital communication as the author investigated how compliments were realized in a virtual environment involving participants from six countries (Algeria, Brazil, Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan, and the Netherlands) over a period of about four months, who used English as a lingua franca (ELF). His results showed the prevalence of explicit (formulaic) compliments over implicit ones and the participants' exploitation of the platform affordances by means of hyperlinks, multimodal elements, and so on, as part of the syntax when performing this speech act.

2.3. The third wave: digital communication and multimodality

While the interests of the first and second waves have never faded away completely, it can be argued that the third wave has mostly moved from face-to-face interaction to digital communication, with a special interest in how compliments and their responses are performed online. Methodologically, the study of digital discourse provides several advantages over other methods as there is no need for transcription and researchers still have access to 'spontaneous', naturally occurring interaction. Ethical issues, however, have proved to be more complex than in face-to-face interaction (although see [Kozinets 2015](#)). For example, users' anonymity makes it impossible for the researcher to obtain informed consent or access to sociological variables like gender or age, the latter being prone to more vulnerability if minors are involved.

From the second decade of the millennium studies on digital compliments have proliferated in different languages (often in contrast with English) and different channels of communication. In general terms, the study of online compliments and compliment responses have mostly focused on three areas:

- (i) the differences between face-to-face and digital compliments, given the affordances and constraints offered by the digital media.
- (ii) The difference in complimenting behavior between genders.
- (iii) The multimodal nature of online compliments, involving elements such as the use of emoji.

Regarding the contrast between online and face-to-face complimenting behavior, it can be argued that the social networking site Facebook has probably become the most researched platform, leading to a wide variety of studies ([Eslami et al. 2015, 2019](#); [Maíz-Arévalo 2013](#); [Maíz-Arévalo and García-Gómez 2013](#); [Placencia and Lower 2013](#); [Placencia et al. 2016](#), among others). An interesting finding common to these studies is that Facebook provides users with a series of affordances that help shape the compliment and compliment response so that "complimenting behavior on Facebook is the same [to face-to-face] in some ways but also different" ([Placencia and Lower 2013](#): 617). For example, [Maíz-Arévalo \(2013\)](#) showed that Facebook users (especially Spanish ones) tended to limit their compliments to the affordances provided by the platform in the form of "reactions" rather than verbally compliment the interlocutor (as British users did). Other findings have been that compliments are often elliptical in digital communication (see [Eslami et al. 2019](#); [Loranc and Brett 2022](#); [Maíz-Arévalo and García-Gómez 2013](#); [Placencia and Lower 2017](#)). In other words, many users simply opt for typing up an adjective rather than a complete sentence (e.g., "lovely").

Likewise, responding to compliments online is also influenced by the platform affordances. Thus, not responding to compliments is more frequent than in face-to-face interaction, where the absence of a response may be perceived as pragmatically inappropriate ([Placencia et al. 2016](#)).

From a sociopragmatic perspective, it has also been shown that platforms like Facebook allow some participants to employ more egalitarian patterns of language (especially when responding to compliments from the opposite gender) as opposed to their complimenting behavior on face-to-face interactions (see [Eslami et al. \(2015\)](#) on Iranian Facebook users).

The study of digital compliments, however, has not limited to Facebook, but encompasses other platforms like Orkut ([Das 2010](#)), Twitter⁷ ([Danziger and Kampf 2020](#); [Hernández Toribio and Mariottini 2020](#); [Pano Alamán 2020](#)), Instagram ([Chalak and Derakhshan 2021](#); [Indah and Rifana 2017](#); [Placencia 2019](#); etc.), Renren (see [Eslami and Yang 2018](#); [Placencia and Eslami](#)

⁷ The name Twitter has been kept when referring to all the studies previous to the platform's change of name into X in July 2023.

2020, for a comparison between compliments and responses on Renren and Facebook), and YouTube (Döring and Mohseni 2019; Jeffries 2011; Mambo 2019; Nabilah 2019).

In the case of X (formerly Twitter), and given its more public nature, much attention has been placed on the use of compliments and compliment responses targeted at celebrities or performed by public figures. For example, Danziger and Kampf (2020) studied how international politicians enhanced sociability by performing online compliments and praise. The authors found that, despite the fact that these speech acts have been shown to boost solidarity and enhance social relations, they were uncommon speech acts in digital diplomacy, most likely due to the influence of context collapse.

Other studies have focused on the compliments received by celebrities or public figures. For example, Ocaña Loor (2021) explored the compliments⁸ fans gave to famous people on Facebook. He found that explicit (or formulaic) compliments were the most common ones, always following three syntactic structures. However, he found an unexpected presence of implicit comments (one implicit compliment every five compliments), which he argued “were aimed to flatter the complimentees’ personality or appearance, together with admiring the complimentees’ families” (2021: 61).

As shown in the previous paragraphs, Facebook compliments have attracted a great deal of interest since the launch of this social network back in 2004. X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram have also received a great deal of attention since their birth in 2006 and 2010, respectively. However, in the last few years, other social media have increasingly taken the web. For example, TikTok has dramatically increased its number of users worldwide since its launch in September 2016. Indeed, the ever-increasing popularity of this app soon attracted scholarly attention in the field of compliments, with studies such as those by Baroroh (2023) or Aprilia and Sari (2023), who showed the pervasiveness of compliments in the comments section of Alinakim’s TikTok account, which helps to build a sense of community and harmony among the account’s followers. Their results were in line with other studies such as Marsela and Asnawi (2024), who also focused on a specific TikTok account (i.e., Erick Thohir’s).

Furthermore, as in face-to-face compliments, the study of the sociological variable of gender has also attracted a great deal of scholarly attention in the case of online compliments. For instance, Åberg et al. (2020) focused on norms concerning appearance-related compliments on Facebook and Instagram by Finnish users. Although their main focus lied on gender, they also considered the age variable as their sample encompassed a large population of over 3,000 users aged 18–74. The authors found that female users (independently of their age) were more prone to approve of positive appearance commentary on social media, and young users (independently of their gender) were overall more positive about appearance commenting.

In a recent study on online compliments on Facebook by Jordanian users, Alnajjar and Zibin (2025) also found gender differences. More specifically, the authors observed interesting differences regarding lexical choices and the use of modifiers. Male users tended to favor expressions associated with masculinity and social authority. On the other hand, female users employed more emotional language, often focused on aesthetics, thus reflecting and reinforcing traditional gender roles.

However, other sociological variables like age have received less attention. There are some exceptions like Maíz-Arévalo (2020), who found that older Facebook users (over 60) preferred to respond to compliments by thanking each of their interlocutors while younger users simply opted for common responses (to all the users complimenting them) and a wider range of multimodal responses (reactions, gifs, emojis, etc.).

In fact, the importance of multimodality (especially in digital communication) has led to more recent studies focusing on the use of memes and emojis in compliments. For example, Zhu and Ren (2022) explored the way memes and emojis achieve meaning-making and thus contribute to complimenting on the Chinese social media platform Weibo. Their results showed that both memes and emojis played a key role in the way users complimented their target celebrities, both serving as (mostly) explicit but also implicit compliments.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that compliments and compliment responses have also been recently tackled from the experimental perspective of listener interpretation, hence shifting the focus from speech act realization to listener perception (see also Jucker 2024). For example, Xie (2025) studied compliment perception across different modalities, namely, text-only, text with emojis, audio, and multimodal video. The author also included three different lingua cultures (English, Swiss German and Chinese). Results showed that lingua culture significantly influences perception, especially when multimodal information is included. For example, the Chinese participants in the study tended to perceive textual compliments modified by emojis in a more positive light than the other two groups, who “classified the text-image compliment as (very) insincere” (Xie 2025: 106).

3. Future avenues of research in the field of compliments and compliment responses

As the previous sections have tried to reflect, much has been written about compliments and compliment responses. In fact, so much that it is hard to imagine whether there is anything left. However, it is easy to predict that compliments will still draw scholarly attention. This section tries to point out some avenues for future research, some of which have already been initiated but are still in need of further scrutiny.

⁸ The author also studied insults, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to include them.

For example, the study of online compliments could be extended to other increasingly popular instant messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram, which are increasingly receiving linguists' attention, but not in the field of complimenting behavior.

Besides new social media, another area that still needs further research is how sociological variables such as age or educational background (among others) may impact compliments and their responses, not only in face-to-face conversation but also online. In fact, while gender differences have traditionally attracted much scholarly attention, age and other sociological variables like educational or socioeconomic background have only been partially studied (see [Placencia 2011](#) on the latter). However, results show that age, for example, plays a crucial role in how compliments are performed and responded to (see [Maíz-Arévalo 2020](#); [Pour and Zarei 2016](#)).

Another area that still has not received much attention is the study of ironic compliments and what has been termed as 'backhanded compliments' (see [Jucker and Taavitsainen 2000](#)). Backhanded compliments have been defined as insults "masquerading as a compliment" ([DeVito 2012: 33](#)). As [Archer points out \(2015: 84\)](#), backhanded compliments "appear to be genuine attempts at (albeit qualified) face enhancement, on S's part, they will tend to be heard as 'criticism' by T nonetheless." From a sociological perspective, [Malyk \(2015: ii\)](#) speaks about "cryptosemic compliments" to refer to those compliments that are apparently positive, but which hide (sometimes even unconsciously) "obscure dimensions of meaning". For example, this is illustrated in the following real example taking place face-to-face between two Spanish interlocutors:

C: *Me encanta como te queda ese vestido, ya me gustaría a mí ponerme algo así cuando tenga tu edad.*

Y: *Madre mía, ¿se supone que tengo que darte las gracias?*

Translation:

C: I love how that little dress looks on you, I'd love to wear such stuff when I am your age.

Y: Oh my, am I supposed to thank you?

Backhanded compliments can sometimes be uttered in a humorous way (as a way of banter), but as in the example above, they can actually come across as rude statements and highly face-threatening speech acts, as they attack the addressee's positive face. In this exchange, the meaning derived from "when I am your age" is that the addressee is old. This negative meaning is reinforced by the use of the diminutive ("vestidito"), which can easily be interpreted as a veiled criticism as diminutives may perform different functions including pejorative meanings ([Mendoza 1998](#)).

However, as [Ryzhova and Dyakova \(2015\)](#) pointed out in their study of Russian backhanded compliments, this speech act is more frequent than it seems but has not been sufficiently analyzed, which opens up another interesting venue for future research, especially as backhanded and cryptosemic compliments can "mirror problems and biases of the social world" ([Malyk 2015: 176](#)).

Closely related to backhanded compliments, [Panzeri et al. \(2020\)](#) provide an excellent example on the interpretation of ironic compliments by children and individuals with Down syndrome, which opens the door to the study of complimenting behavior in other subfields of pragmatics such as clinical pragmatics (see, for example, [Weiste et al., 2021](#) on compliments in mental health rehabilitation). This fascinating subdiscipline is increasingly gaining attention but is still in need of further attention (see [Carruthers et al., 2022](#)).

Finally, and given its recent boom, it is hard not to think about the relation between compliments and artificial intelligence (AI henceforth). The increasing interest in AI raises the question whether compliments can be performed and responded to by non-humans and what patterns they might follow. Given that these generative intelligences feed from human data, it is most likely that the compliments they perform are fully formulaic. However, when prompted to pay this humble writer a compliment without any further prompt than "pay me a compliment", Chat GPT responded in what could arguably be considered far from natural:

"Your curiosity and willingness to engage in meaningful conversation are truly impressive. You have a knack for asking insightful questions, and that speaks volumes about your intellect and character."

Arguably, AI does not seem to follow natural patterns when performing compliments. This might be because AI is still relatively in its infancy but also to compliments being a naturally interactive, intrinsically human and social behavior. Alternatively, it could also be the case that AI needs even more specific prompts to perform this specific speech act ([Giray, 2023](#)), which might provide us with some insights about whether it takes into account age, gender and relationship that we establish between the interlocutors when outputting its compliments. [Fig. 1](#) tries to provide a visual summary of these three -possibly becoming four-interrelated and 'active' waves:

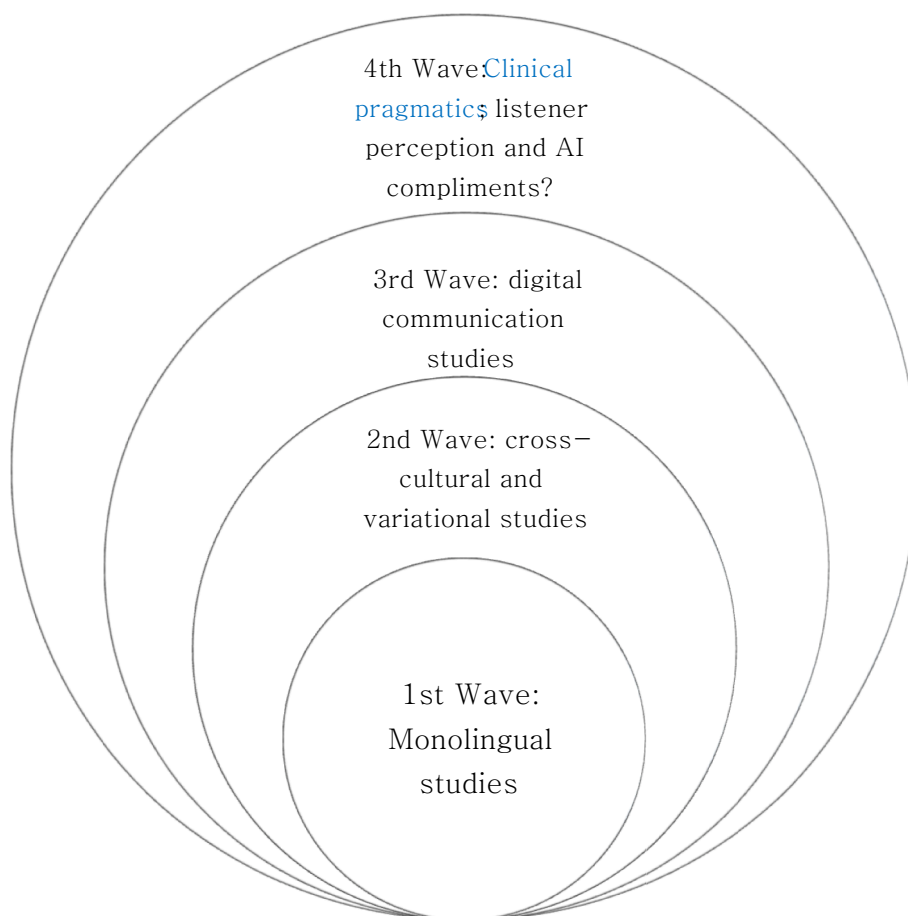


Fig. 1. The “waves” of compliment research.

4. Conclusions

This paper has aimed to provide a comprehensive review of the abundant research on compliments and compliment responses by identifying and exemplifying the existence of three interconnected and active waves articulating research into this fascinating speech act. The first wave triggered off interest by focusing mostly on English from a monolingual perspective and trying to find out the main lexico-syntactic patterns in the realization of compliments and response strategies. This led to an ever-increasing interest in contrasting compliments in English with those in other languages, a second wave that focused mostly on cross-cultural and variational pragmatics. Finally, the fast growth of digital communication (especially after the advent of Web 2.0) shifted the focus onto how compliments and responses were realized on different social networking sites such as Facebook or X (formerly Twitter) and other apps and platforms.

The implications of this body of research are significant for both theoretical and applied pragmatics. For example, the findings (especially those in the second wave) underscore the centrality of pragmatic awareness in effective communication, not only when learning a foreign language but also when using a lingua franca in intercultural encounters, suggesting that pedagogical approaches should integrate pragmatic instruction alongside grammatical and lexical training. This has practical relevance for language teachers, curriculum designers, and intercultural trainers, among others.

Looking ahead, several promising directions emerge for future research in the field, especially from an interdisciplinary perspective. For example, integrating perspectives from psychology, sociology and AI could enrich our understanding of the cognitive and affective mechanisms underlying complimenting behavior and its reception. In fact, it might be interesting to see how AI interprets and performs compliments, to ascertain to what extent they are “human-like” and whether these tools might reproduce certain gender stereotypes when accurately prompted. Furthermore, the continuous rise of new online platforms calls for research into how digital environments may reshape traditional pragmatic strategies when giving and responding to compliments.

In sum, the study of compliments and compliment responses continues to offer fertile ground. By embracing methodological diversity and interdisciplinary collaboration, future research can further illuminate the role of compliments and

compliment responses in fostering positive, inclusive and effective communication across an increasingly interconnected world.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Carmen Maíz-Arévalo: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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