

## Negative Pragmatic Transfer in Compliment Responses by Japanese Learners of English: A Research Proposal<sup>1</sup>

日本人英語学習者の誉め言葉に対する返答中に見られる

社会言語学的転移

sociolinguistics / pragmatic transfer / compliment response

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### I. Introduction

Many people who communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries have experienced communication breakdowns with interlocutors who are from different first language (L1) backgrounds or who speak different varieties of a language. Sociolinguists recognize that such intercultural miscommunication is partly due to different value systems that underlie each speaker's L1 cultural group (Chick, 1996, p. 329). Different value systems are reflected in speech acts; thus, different interpretations of a certain speech act sometimes cause misunderstanding of the speaker's intention.

This phenomenon referred to as sociolinguistic transfer describes relying on one's L1 sociolinguistic conventions. *Sociolinguistic transfer* is defined as "the use of the rules of speaking of one's own speech community or cultural group when interacting with members of another community or group" (Chick, 1996, p. 332). Chick (1996, p. 332) goes on to point out that sociolinguistic transfer can also take place when one or more of the interlocutors are using a second language.

Sociolinguistic transfer as a potential causal factor for pragmatic failure has drawn attention from pragmaticists. Since the 1980s, a number of data-based studies have been conducted in different areas of speech acts (e.g., refusal, apology, request, etc.). Studies in contrastive pragmatics and interlanguage pragmatics have demonstrated the existence of pragmatic transfer (for a review, see Kasper, 1992; and Takahashi, 1996).

Compliment response has received attention by contrastive pragmaticists as one component of speech acts. Ever since Pomerantz (1978) shed light on compliment responses from a pragmatic perspective, empirical studies have been conducted and demonstrated that speakers of different languages and language varieties follow different patterns when responding to compliments (Daikuhara, 1986 in American English and Japanese; Holmes, 1988 in New Zealand English and Malay; Herbert, 1986, 1989, 1990, and Herbert & Straight, 1989 in American English and South African English; Chen, 1993 in American English and Chinese; Gajaseni, 1994 in American English and Thai; Nelson, Al-Batal, & Echols, 1996 in American English and Arabic). However, few data-based

studies have ever focused on L1 transfer of compliment responses (e.g., Han, 1992 with Korean learners of English; and Chiang & Pochtrager, 1993 with Chinese learners of English). More research along this line is necessary to better understand the relationship between L1 transfer and compliment responses in second language use.

The purpose of this study is to examine pragmatic transfer in compliment responses by Japanese learners of English. This will be accomplished by the following steps. First, studies in compliment responses will be reviewed. Second, empirical studies of compliment responses will be reviewed and then the methodological issues will be discussed. Lastly, a research design will be proposed based on the literature review and critique.

## II. Compliment Response

Compliment response (CR) was selected for this study for the following reasons. First, although pragmatic transfer in other speech acts is well established by now, little empirical research, if any, has been conducted that addresses pragmatic transfer in compliment responses (for a review of research in pragmatic transfer, see Kasper, 1992). The second reason is that there seems to be only one study (Daikuhara, 1986) that investigated compliment responses by Japanese speakers. Furthermore, there is no one data-based study of pragmatic transfer that analyzed compliment responses by Japanese learners of English as a second or foreign language.

Pomerantz (1978) was the first researcher who discussed compliment responses from a pragmatic perspective. She claimed that in American English the recipient of a compliment faces two conflicting conditions that pose a dilemma when responding to it: (A) AGREE WITH THE SPEAKER and (B) AVOID SELF-PRAISE (pp. 81-82). When, for example, the recipient agrees with the speaker by accepting the compliment (Condition A), it violates Condition B in that the response goes against the speaker's sociolinguistic expectations. On the other hand, when the recipient does not accept the compliment in order to follow Condition B, the response can be considered face-threatening since it violates Condition A. Recipients of compliments use various solutions to mediate this conflict, categorized by Pomerantz as (1) Acceptance, (2) Rejection, and (3) Self-praise Avoidance.

Herbert (1986 and 1990) conducted a large scale analysis of compliment responses by speakers of American English. He revised the Pomerantz's taxonomy and ended up with a three-category, twelve-type taxonomy (Table 1).

Herbert collected more than a thousand samples of compliment responses through a three-year period project. Interestingly, only 36.35%, or 386 out of 1062 compliment responses, were accounted for by Acceptance, which is *the* appropriate response that

"etiquette books" unanimously encourage to use (1986, p. 80). Based on these findings, Herbert claims that "Clearly, language performance in this realm is quite different from language prescription" (p. 80).

Table 1. Herbert's taxonomy of compliment responses.

<i>Response Type</i>	<i>Example</i>
A. Agreement	
I. Acceptances	
1. Appreciation Token	Thanks; thank you; [smile]
2. Comment Acceptance	Thanks, it's my favorite too.
3. Praise Upgrade	Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?
II. Comment History	I bought it for the trip to Arizona.
III. Transfers	
1. Reassignment	My brother gave it to me.
2. Return	So's yours.
B. Nonagreement	
I. Scale Down	It's really quite old.
II. Question	Do you really think so?
III. Nonacceptances	
1. Disagreement	I hate it.
2. Qualification	It's all right, but Len's is nicer.
IV. No Acknowledgement	[silence]
C. Other Interpretations	
I. Request	You wanna borrow this one too?

(From Herbert, 1986, p. 79)

Since then, contrastive studies have been conducted comparing compliment responses in different languages and language varieties with (mostly American) English. Table 2 summarizes the participants, methods, and main findings of those studies.

These studies illustrate a clear contrast among different languages. On the one hand, Arabic and South African English are more likely to prefer acceptance of compliments and less likely to reject them than American English (Herbert, 1989; Herbert & Straight, 1989; Nelson, Al-Batal, & Echols, 1996). On the other hand, speakers of Asian languages (Chinese, Japanese, Malay, and Thai) tend to avoid accepting compliments but rather reject them compared to English (Daikuhara, 1986; Holmes, 1988; Chen, 1993; Gajaseni, 1994).

Though their findings are of benefit in understanding a potential cause of intercultural miscommunication, these studies are not without methodological weaknesses. I will point out two issues: (1) data elicitation, and (2) the use of statistical testing.

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**Table 2.** Contrastive studies of compliment responses

Study	Participants	Languages compared	Number of CRs	Data	Results <sup>a</sup>	Statistics
Daikuhara (1986)	About 50 Japanese	L1 Japanese L1 American English <sup>b</sup>	115 686	Observation	Only 5% of all CRs in Japanese fell into acceptance.	none (% only) <sup>c</sup>
Holmes (1988)	New Zealanders Malaysians <sup>d</sup>	L1 New Zealand English L1 Malay	478 60	Observation	New Zealand English preferred acceptances (61.1%) more than Malay (39.9%).	none (% only)
Herbert (1989); Herbert & Straight (1989)	Americans South Africans	L1 American English L1 South African English	1062 492	Observation	While 36.0% of all the CRs in American data were acceptance, in South African English larger proportion of CRs (76.1%) were categorized as acceptance.	none (% only)
Chen (1993)	50 Americans 50 Chinese	L1 American English L1 Chinese	339 292	Written DCT	95.73% of all CRs in Chinese were "rejecting." Only 4.44% were acceptance.	$\chi^2$ test
Gajaseni (1994)	40 Americans 40 Thai	L1 American English L1 Thai	? <sup>e</sup> ? <sup>e</sup>	Oral DCT	Americans used acceptance type responses significantly more often than Thai.	ANOVA <sup>f</sup>
Nelson, Al-Batal, & Echols (1996)	87 Americans 52 Syrians	L1 American English L1 Arabic	87 52	Interview, Observation	Arabic preferred acceptance (67%) more than American English (50%).	none (% only)

**Note:** CR = compliment response; DCT = discourse completion tasks (tests).

<sup>a</sup> Major findings related to compliment responses.

<sup>b</sup> She compared her data of compliment responses in Japanese with American data presented in Manes & Wolfson (1981).

<sup>c</sup> She did not present the raw score of all the CRs. She only presented some of the data in percentage.

<sup>d</sup> Holmes compared his own data of New Zealand English with those of Malaysians presented in an unpublished paper (Azman, 1986).

<sup>e</sup> Exact number was not specified.

<sup>f</sup> Gajaseni computed an analysis of variance to mean frequency of different response types (Acceptance, Rejection, & Indirection).

### *Data elicitation*

As Herbert (1986 and 1990) clearly demonstrated, speakers do not necessarily respond to compliments in the same way as prescriptive norms of their culture expect them to. Taking this issue into consideration, it is possible that data elicited by artificial procedures, such as written discourse completion tasks or questionnaires, do not represent the participants' actual responses to compliments in real life. However, observational data of naturally occurring interaction can also be problematic in that it is difficult to rule out other factors that may influence compliment responses, e.g., social distance between the complimenter and the recipient, target of compliment, context under which the interaction takes place, etc. This issue will be further discussed in the methods section.

### *Statistical testing*

As shown in Table 2, the majority of the studies only presented the data with raw frequencies and percentages. In the discussion of methodological issues in studies of pragmatic transfer, Kasper (1992) cautioned us concerning the lack of statistical testing:

If we accept that frequency counts of pragmatic categories and linguistic forms can tell us something meaningful about pragmatic transfer (not about the phenomenon in its entirety, but a relevant subset thereof), we should employ procedures which allow us to make claims with reasonable confidence (p. 223).

The same argument can be made for contrastive studies of compliment responses. Percentage does not tell us with confidence the tendency behind the data. Statistical testing should be employed whenever available to find out if or not the distribution of the given data can happen by chance alone.

### III. Studies of Pragmatic Transfer in Compliment Responses

Provided that these contrastive studies solved the methodological problems addressed above, they can not more than just assume the existence of pragmatic transfer in compliment responses. To quote Kasper (1995):

... transfer in interlanguage pragmatics cannot be entirely predicted or explained by a contrastive analysis of L1 and L2 pragmatics, although such relationships (on the assumption they are equivalent to learners' cognitive representations) factor in the occurrence or absence of pragmatic transfer (pp. 7-8).

In other words, such studies are necessary that investigate L2 learners' use of compliment responses in the target language. There have been only two studies available along this

line: Chiang & Pochtrager (1993), and Han (1992). I will review these studies below.

Both Chiang & Pochtrager (1993) and Han (1992) are similar in that they investigated the use of compliment responses in American English as a second language. They are different in other aspects, e.g., the language compared with the interlanguage (IL) data, data elicitation procedures, etc. A brief description of these studies is presented in Table 3.

First of all, the same criticism to contrastive studies can be applied to these two studies. The data presented in Chiang & Pochtrager (1993) may have been influenced by the particular data elicitation method they employed, i.e., written discourse completion task. Also, lack of statistical testing weakens their arguments based on the collected data<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, comparing learners' interlanguage data with another data set is not sufficient to determine the existence of pragmatic transfer. As Kasper (1992, pp. 223-224) proposes, three parallel data sets need to be compared: (1) the learners' L1 data (L1), (2) the same learners' interlanguage data (IL), and (3) the data by native speakers of the target language (L2). Similarity<sup>3</sup> of IL data to both L1 and L2 data can be regarded as positive transfer. If one finds a significant difference between IL and L2, but not between IL and L1, this can be interpreted as negative transfer, a potential causal factor of intercultural miscommunication. In this respect, neither one of the two studies have provided sufficient information to demonstrate pragmatic transfer.

Nevertheless, the results of these studies are of great interest. Comparing the findings of Chiang and Pochtrager (1993) with those of contrastive studies reviewed earlier in this paper, it seems that Chinese learners of English *do* transfer the compliment response patterns of their first language. On the other hand, Han's (1992) study suggests that Korean learners of English change their CR patterns from their L1 to L2. In other words, the subjects did not show negative transfer in compliment responses. Do L2 learners transfer their L1 pragmatic behavior of compliment responses or not?

#### IV. Research Questions

As I mentioned earlier in this paper, the purpose of this study is to examine pragmatic transfer in compliment responses by Japanese learners of English. Two related research questions emerged from the literature:

- A. How differently do Japanese and Americans respond to compliments? (L1 - L2 comparison)
- B. To what extent do Japanese learners of English reflect their L1 behaviors when responding to compliments in English? (L1 - IL - L2 comparison)

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**Table 3.** Studies on pragmatic transfer of compliment responses

Study	Participants	Languages compared	Number of CRs	Data	Results <sup>a</sup>	Statistics
Chiang & Pochtrager (1993)	15 American females 15 Chinese females	L1 American English L2 (American) English	270 270	Written DCT	In American English, the majority (93%) of all CRs were either accepted or positively elaborated. On the other hand, the Chinese learners of English either rejected or negatively elaborated 69% of compliments addressed to them.	none (% only)
Han (1992)	10 Korean females	L1 Korean <sup>b</sup> L2 (American) English <sup>b</sup>	20 20	Interview, Observation	The subjects responded to compliments differently when speaking in Korean (L1) and in English (L2). In Korean, they rejected 45% of compliments, whereas they accepted 75% of compliments when they used English.	none (% only)

**Note:** CR = compliment response; DCT = discourse completion tasks (tests).

<sup>a</sup> Major findings related to compliment responses.

<sup>b</sup> L1 Korean data and L2 (interlanguage) English data were collected from the same subjects.

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to (a) examine the patterns of compliment responses by Japanese and Americans; and (b) observe compliment responding behaviors by Japanese learners of English in both their L1 (Japanese) and L2 (American English).

## V. Method

### A. Participants

In order to answer these research questions, it is necessary to compare CRs by Japanese learners of English with those produced by native speakers of English. The Japanese group will consist of twenty Japanese students (ten male and ten female) enrolled in the undergraduate or graduate programs at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. Prior to the study, the potential participants will be screened with TOEFL scores and lengths of stay in English-speaking countries in order to control unwanted variables, e.g., proficiency in English and prior exposure to English. With regard to English proficiency, only those who hold a TOEFL score of 550 or above will participate in the research. Also, the participants will have stayed in English-speaking countries for one year to two years.

The American group will also be formed with ten male and ten female students at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa.

### B. Procedures

Individual interviews with the participants will be conducted to elicit CRs. It is important to note that CR is *not* the topic of the interview. The participants will not be informed of the exact purpose of the study. Instead, the interviewer and the interviewee will discuss some other issues of sociolinguistics, e.g., attitudes toward Hawai'i Creole English. During each interview, the interviewer will casually compliment the interviewee. All the responses to the compliment will be audiotaped and then later analyzed. This procedure was chosen for the following reasons. First, as I mentioned earlier, data elicitation procedures that raise participants' metacognitive awareness are problematic. For example, discourse completion tasks (DCTs) will elicit the participants' CRs that have already been filtered through their conscious knowledge about how they are supposed to respond to compliments. On the other hand, observation of naturally occurring CRs has some limitations, too. While one can collect CRs in natural settings through observation, it is difficult to control for other factors that may affect CR types (i.e., the L2 proficiency, length of stay in English-speaking countries, target of compliment, social distance between the complimenter and the recipient, etc.). Thus comparison among different groups becomes impossible because the CRs are collected under incomparable conditions.

Interview procedures will solve this problem by controlling those variables. Though the CR elicitation becomes somewhat artificial (the interview itself is different from daily conversation), it is still acceptable since the participants do not know that their CRs will be analyzed.

The first interview session (Session A) will be conducted with the Japanese group. I will interview the participants individually using their L1 (Japanese). A male American will interview the participants in the American group (Session B) with English as a means of communication. A similar interview session will be given to the participants in the Japanese group again, but this time the male American will interview then using the English language (Session C). The interview sessions are summarized in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Interview sessions.

Session	Interviewer	Participants	Language
Session A	A (a male Japanese, the author)	Japanese	Japanese
Session B	B (a male American)	Americans	English
Session C	B	Japanese	English

### C. Analyses

One CR will be collected from each interview session, totaling twenty CRs from each session. All the CRs will be coded using Herbert's (1986) taxonomy (p. 79; or p. 33 of this paper). At least two raters, including the author, will code the CRs to increase the reliability of coding (an inter-rater reliability will be computed following Chaudron, Crookes, & Long, 1988).

In order to answer the first research question, Sessions A & B will be compared. A chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test will be computed. If the distribution of CRs in each category is statistically significant between Sessions A & B, a residual analysis will detect where the difference lies (Tanaka & Yamagiwa, 1989).

Two more comparisons that are similar to the one described above will be conducted in order to examine negative pragmatic transfer. Sessions A & C will be compared to show if the Japanese participants respond to compliments differently when using different languages, i.e., Japanese and English. If the chi-square test shows that the patterns of CRs differ significantly, Sessions B & C will be compared to find the extent to which the Japanese participants' CRs are similar to those produced by the native speakers of English. The overall significance level is set at  $\alpha < .05$ . Since three chi-square tests will be computed, the individual  $\alpha$  level is  $.017$  ( $\alpha (.05) / 3 = .017$ ).

## VI. Expected Outcomes

### *RQ 1. How differently do Japanese and Americans respond to compliments?*

This question was derived from the previous studies in contrastive pragmatics (see Table 2). As the literature suggests, I expect a significant difference in CR patterns between Japanese and American English. Precisely speaking, the Japanese participants will disagree with compliments more frequently than the American participants.

### *RQ 2. To what extent do Japanese learners of English reflect their L1 behaviors when responding to compliments in English?*

As reviewed earlier, the two studies that investigated the transfer in CR showed the opposite results, thus making it difficult to have a clear expectation. My hypothesis, therefore, will be non-directional.

## VII. Limitations of the Study

As the research design shows, the comparisons are made possible by controlling other variables. In so doing, this study limits its generalizability. Even if the results suggest that the Japanese participants show negative transfer in CR, one cannot conclude that all Japanese learners of English would show the same tendency. Even those same participants may perform differently if the target of the compliment was different, for example. This tradeoff between testability (comparability) and generalizability is always a source of concern to SLA researchers, and studies in interlanguage pragmatics are no exception. By taking more variables into consideration, one makes the design of the study more complicated, thus making it less practical to conduct.

Rather than solving, or even trying to solve, this problem, I would like to limit the scope of the study as it is. Instead, I would encourage further studies with different populations, different types of compliments, different amounts of prior exposure to English, etc. An accumulation of future research like this will, I believe, capture the whole picture of compliment response as a reflection of L2 learners' pragmatic transfer.

### Notes:

1. This paper was submitted as a term paper to ESL 660 (Sociolinguistics & ESL) at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa.
2. However, I performed chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) tests to the raw frequencies of compliment responses, and found that the distribution of CR types in the both studies were significantly different across languages ( $\chi^2(2) = 12.791, p = .002$  for Han, 1992; and  $\chi^2(4) = 344.375, p = .000$ , for Chiang & Pochtrager, 1993).
3. Technically, "similarity" can be operationally defined as "lack of statistically significant

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differences in the frequencies of a pragmatic feature" (Kasper, 1992, p. 223).

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