

Compliments and Gender in French Single-Sex Friendship Groups

Elsa Petit
Queen Mary, University of London

June 2006

Abstract

The paper analyses the nature and function of compliments found between French friends, recorded in single-sex friendship groups. It looks at who pays the most compliments and why, what exactly the speakers in my study complimented each other about, the conversational style they adopted while complimenting and how they responded to these compliments. It confirms the fact that compliments are definitely part of a gendered linguistic behaviour for the French friends recorded and stresses the importance of compliments in the construction of women's friendship. The paper also reveals that other factors than sex influence the use of compliments: the speakers' place and status within the friendship group for example or their age.

Keywords compliments, friendship, gender, single-sex; French

1 Gender, Compliments and Friendship

In this paper I hope to further our understanding of the role of talk in the construction of male and female friendship, by analysing the nature and function of the compliments found in some single-sex interactions between French friends.

According to Coates (1998: 145), 'a compliment conveys, explicitly or implicitly, positive appreciation of some thing or action for which the addressee may apparently be credited: appearance, achievements, possessions'. Often, compliments are perceived as positively polite speech acts which aim at making addressees 'feel good about themselves, their tastes or their skills or their general attractiveness' (Coates, 1998: 145). Research showed that for women in particular, compliments also help them feel liked by others, connected to them (Herbert, 1989; Wolfson, 1983) and serve 'to increase or consolidate the solidarity between speaker and addressee' (Holmes, 1988: 447). Female compliments are therefore more often offers of solidarity and/or tokens of good will.

This explicitly other-directed affective function is why compliments are generally addressed to their targets. One can praise but not compliment absent third parties. When absent third parties are being praised, then we should talk of complimentary remarks. These can fulfil the same role as compliments, i.e. positively evaluate or appraise the person or persons talked about, but they can also function as a group solidarity enhancement mechanism since the interactants can use these complimentary comments about absent third parties as a way to further bond together. In that sense, these complimentary comments function like gossip since they express solidarity and signify group membership. In this paper, I will only deal with compliments as such, not complimentary remarks.

Paying a compliment to someone 'may or may not function to increase solidarity between the interactants, to create or strengthen ties of liking or affection or affiliation' (Coates, 1998: 146). Indeed, it varies situationally since it all depends on whether the compliment is appropriate or not. The context might not be suited to an evaluative move of this type. Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1987: 15) describes a compliment as 'un cadeau verbal' and this characterisation of the compliment as a verbal gift implies that the addressee is, in a way, put in the complimenter's debt. This debt may in some cases be resented. Coates (1998: 146) explains why 'one reason a common response to a compliment is a return compliment is that complimentees are often much happier if they can repay immediately the debt they have incurred'.

Holmes (1988: 448) also showed that men can perceive compliments as a face-threatening act because 'they imply the complimenter envies the addressee in some way or would like something belonging to the addressee'.

In this paper I will look at who pays the most compliments and why, what exactly the speakers in my study complimented each other about, how they went on about it and how they responded to these compliments. It will be interesting to see whether any compliments were unwelcome in the conversations under examination and whether some conversation participants in Le Monteil study did feel obliged to return the compliment they received.

* I would like to thank Jenny Cheshire for organising the Queen Mary Linguistics Postgraduate Conference and for giving me the opportunity to take part in this event but also for her endless patience, great understanding, expert advice and overall support throughout my PhD work.

2 The Study

The topics of conversation that I analyse here come from conversations that I recorded in 2002 and 2003 in a small village called Le Monteil in the Ardèche (Southern France). I carried out a naturalistic study by recording an existing established group of friends. In fact, like other researchers before me, I actually chose to use my own circle of friends.

After carrying out both a qualitative and quantitative analysis of this friendship group, using two analytical concepts in conjunction with one another, namely Community of Practice and Social Network, and after having designed Group Culture Adherence Scores and Sociometric Diagrams, I was then able to distinguish two sub-groups (which I called G1 and G2), largely based on age but also on other factors such as whom each individual associated with, the lifestyle they had or the activities they were involved in. This multi-faceted dynamic social constructionist approach also allowed me to identify the core group members and to select as the object of the linguistic study the single-sex conversations they took part in.

I was left with a corpus of 8 conversations in total (which I called C1, C2 etc), between 3 participants each: 4 for each sub-group, 4 female only conversations (C1 to C4) and 4 male only (C5 to C8). Overall, the total corpus lasted 6 hours 35 minutes. The average conversation length was 45 minutes: 33 minutes on average for the conversations between the male participants and almost double, 65 minutes to be precise, for those of their female counterparts.

3 Findings

3.1 The female-only conversations

In Tables 1 and 2, compliments have been listed for all female conversations (Table 1 referring to the unisex conversations between G2 female speakers and Table 2 to the unisex conversations between G1 female speakers). The person who gives the compliment together with a precise account of the nature of the compliment and of the person it is directed at have all been indicated.

Table 1: Listing of compliments and of who first introduced them in the conversations between G2 female speakers

Compliment introduced by → Compliment regarding ↓	Lise	Zita	Francine
Compliments:			
- Zita: Zita's personality (open & enthusiastic)	1		1
Zita's T-shirt	1		1
- Francine's skills as a nurse	1		
Total	3	0	2

Table 2: Listing of compliments and of who first introduced them in the conversations between G1 female speakers ¹

Compliment introduced by → Compliment regarding ↓	Anick	Roberte	Lucienne	Dorine	Lise
Compliments:					
- Roberte: Roberte's hair style				1	
Roberte's ability to do her hair nicely			1		
Roberte's ability to make a nice cup of tea				1	
Roberte's ability to choose tasty biscuits	1				
Roberte's excellent skills in home decoration				3	
- Dorine: Dorine's quality of hair and hair style	1				
Dorine's table decoration skills			1		1
- Anick: Anick's skills as a hairdresser		1		1	2
Anick's talent as a painter				2	
- Lise's beautiful curtain arrangement		1			
Total	2	2	2	8	3

In the unisex conversations between G2 female speakers, the person who gives the most compliments is Lise with 3 in total, followed by Francine with 2 and Zita with 0. In the same sex conversations taking place between G1 female speakers, 3 speakers (Anick, Roberte and Lucienne) give 2 compliments each; Lise pays 3 compliments to Dorine and only Dorine seems to compliment people a lot more (8 times to be precise). It is interesting to note that one participant in the conversations between G2 female friends does not pay any compliment to anyone (namely Zita) and that one participant in the conversations between G1 female members seems to use quite a lot more compliments than her friends (namely Dorine). However, trying to better understand this unbalance in the number of compliments made is a NMMtricky matter. Cameron's following argument might help shed some light on the issue:

Attending to others' face and attending to one's own are not mutually exclusive. The 'egalitarian' norms of female friendship groups are, like all norms, to some degree coercive: the rewards and punishments precisely concern one's status within the group (among women, however, this status is called 'popularity' rather than 'dominance'). A woman may gain status by displaying the correct degree of concern for others, and lose status by displaying too little concern for others and too much for herself. (Cameron, 1997: 59)

So the reason why Dorine compliments her female friends a lot, more than the other participants anyway, may have something to do with Cameron's suggestion. Indeed, what this behaviour could reveal is in fact a certain eagerness to please, a strong desire to be accepted by her female friends, a need even to be highly considered and appreciated by the group at large. Her use of compliments may even reveal a deep fear of rejection from her peers, the origins of which could be varied. On the other hand, Zita being a fairly central G2 member, she might not feel she has to praise or 'stroke' her friends to gain status. Francine, however, does pay 2 compliments to Lise. This could be interpreted as an unconscious acknowledgement of Lise's

¹ I would like to explain why there are 5 names in Table 2 instead of 3. The reason is because in C3, Dorine was also present for the first 19 minutes of the conversation, together with Roberte, Anick and Lucienne. As for Lise, she appears in this table although she belongs to G2 because she was in charge of the recording. That is why she attended the older female friends' get together. However, her presence was not particularly startling or disturbing for the older female friends as she is Roberte's daughter and sometimes spends time with her mother and her friends. So they would have been used to her being around. Besides, she kept leaving the room under the pretense that she had to look after her dog.

superior status in the group due to Lise's centrality as a member. Indeed, 'compliments create and sustain not only affiliative social ties but also hierarchical distinctions' (Coates, 1998: 149).

If we now pay closer attention to the subject of these compliments, we can note straight away that some of them deal with appearance (5 to be precise: 3 in the conversations between the older female friends (see example 1) and 2 in C1 between the younger female friends (example 2)), some with abilities or skills (1 in C1 between G2 female friends and 14 in the conversations between G1 female friends, see examples 3 to 8) and some deal with personality (2 in C1 between the younger female friends, see example 9). In previous research, these topics have been found to cover the majority of compliments made by women to women (Manes, 1983; Holmes, 1986).

An appearance compliment is clearly an expression of solidarity, a positively affective speech act and as such, it seems very logical that we do find many of these in the female-only conversations in the Monteil study since they are a means of expressing rapport. Similarly, it is not surprising that we do not find any compliments on possessions in the female-only conversations recorded for these study since this type of compliment can be viewed as more face-threatening because it might in fact express the complimenter's envy or desire.

In the following excerpts, the compliments have been indicated by a C followed by an arrow in the left margin. I also wanted to bring to attention the complimentee's reaction so a R followed by an arrow has been added in the left margin. The different reactions to compliments will be discussed below.

(1) [in C3, Dorine starts by complimenting Roberte on her new hairstyle then carries on by praising Anick's skills as a hairdresser; Lucienne agrees]

C1 → **Dorine:** Roberte aussi / ça te rajeunit cette nuque comme ça toute effilée / <LAUGHTER> ah
Lucienne: <LAUGHTER>

C2 → **Dorine:** écoute / nous avons une magicienne au village /= <LAUGHTER>
Lucienne: =et oui / et oui oui / <LAUGHTER>
R → Anick: <LAUGHTER>

(2) [at one point in C1, Zita is telling her friends about her work experience in an hospital when Lise compliments her on her top and Francine joins in]

Zita: attends / c'matin-'fin c'matin / tous les matins quoi / on file le p'tit dèj aux patients=
C → Lise: <COMPLIMENTING ZITA ON HER TOP> =c'est

Lise: super mignon ça /=
C → Francine: =%ouais / j'aime bien /%
R → Zita: on file le p'tit dèj aux patients et [...]

(3) [in C1, Francine is talking about her work as a nurse and Lise compliments her on her nursing skills]

Francine: on te diminue au fur et à mesure / [on t'enlève au fur et à mesure c-c[-c'[qui fait
Lise: [ouais / [on est ()
Zita: [ouais /

Francine: que tu es toi quoi tu vois / et ça [j't'assure dans les services et quand-et selon les
Zita: ouais / [ouais /

Francine: pathologies par exemple sur les personnes âgées qui font des AVC / [qui sont un
Lise: [hm /

Francine: p'tit peu diminuées parce qu'y z'ont une hémiplégie / ba c'est sûr que y-y'a des

Francine: moments [où y vont être euh =voilà y vont avoir une dépendance / malgré
Lise: [ils ont une dépendance /=

Francine: tout tu peux quand même conserver une autonomie / et puis l'autonomie qu' y z'

Francine: ont au niveau d'leur esprit parce qu'y sont lucides [y sont conscients=
Lise: [bien sûr / =pas la peine

Francine: [mais tu les-tu les-voilà tu les infantilises pas / tu décides [pas pour eux /
Lise: de leur parler [comme des débiles /
Zita: [c'est clair /

Francine: tu-tu leur donnes toujours un-une-une variété de choix pour qu'y z'aient quand

Francine: même justement des actions euh [() et c'est ça en plus qui va les faire
Zita: [ouais ouais /

Francine: guérir quoi j'veux dire / tu vois outre le soin technique / tu-tu-tu penses qu'y a un

Francine: soin dans-dans tout c'qui est du contact avec les gens / mais qui est largement

Francine: plus [important / <LAUGHTER>

C → **Lise:** [moi je veux qu'ce soit Francine qui m'soigne / elle a l'air très bien comme

R → **Francine:** <LAUGHTER> mais moi j'base tout sur le
Lise: infirmière / je la prends / je l'embauche /

Francine: relationnel /

(4) [in the opening sequence of C3, Dorine starts complimenting Anick on her skills as a painter and the other friends join in]

C → **Dorine:** il est bien le [bleu là /= <TALKING ABOUT A PAINTING ON THE WALL> =ah oui / ...

Lucienne: [ouais / =ah oui hein /=

Lise: =c'est joli hein /=

R → **Anick:** <ANICK STARTS OPENING PACKETS OF BISCUITS> =ça fait gai hein /=

C → **Dorine:** super / ce tableau / ça fait mieux que le meuble hein /= [[ça c'

Lucienne: =ouais / <LAUGHTER>

Lise: [[(elle

Dorine: est du Viroitou hein /= <LAUGHTER> =ça c'est du Viroitou / <LAUGHTER>

Lucienne: =ah bon? / ah oui / ça oui /=

Lise: va faire un portrait) /=

R → Anick: <LAUGHTER>

Dorine: ça fait rien hein / (...)

R → Anick: mm / =c'est vieux / <LAUGHTER>

Roberte: ah / c'est super /=

(5) [in C3, Dorine starts complimenting Roberte on her skills in home decoration; the others join in but Roberte uses various techniques to take the attention away from her]

C → Dorine: cette pièce / elle est... [magnifique /= [magnifique /

Lucienne: ah oui / elle est jo[lie / =ah c'est [coquet hein /

Anick:

Dorine: <LAUGHING> [j'avais pas vu le rideau non [plus /

Lucienne: [ah oui oui / le rideau /=

Anick: après je sais pas / [() /

R + C → Roberte: =ah ça / c'est

Dorine: [super / =ah ben c'est bien /= [c'est

Roberte: l'[installation d'Lise /= =tout le monde participe / y'a des [gâ-

Dorine: bien / <TO THE DOG> c'est très bien / qu'est-

Roberte: -teaux par terre / ça va pas être perdu pour tout le monde /

Dorine: ce qui est à toi? / de toutes les peintures=

Lucienne: =tu vois / y fait bon maintenant dans la

Dorine: =et celui-là aussi /

Lucienne: maison /= =(le fait) qu'il a pas fait trop froid /=

Roberte: =ah oui /ah oui /=

Dorine: c'est le Viroitou hein? / <LAUGHTER>

Lucienne: ouais / celui-là / je l'aime /=

Anick: <LAUGHTER> =ouais /=

R → Roberte: =regarde /

Anick: <LAUGHTER>

Roberte: je l'ai même attaché avec une ficelle et pis j'avais pas d'ciseaux pour <LAUGHING>

Dorine: <LAUGHTER> ah ben / ça fait rien / ben on va savoir quoi t'offrir alors

Roberte: couper /

Lise: il est beau hein /

C → **Dorine:** hein / <LAUGHTER> ça fait bien / c'est superbe /=
Lucienne: =ouais / c'est très joli /=
Anick: <LAUGHTER> =ah / c'

Dorine: [ah / mais j'avais pas vu / ça / ça va avec [ça /= <LAUGHTER> =ah écoute /
Lucienne: =voilà / et oui / et oui /=
Anick: est [chaud /=
Roberte: =c'est chaud ouais / [c'est très chaud /

Dorine: magnifique /= quel art /= =c'est vrai / tout est art
Lucienne: =ouais /= =et oui / et oui /=
Anick: =quel art /
R → **Roberte:** <LAUGHTER>

Dorine: finalement /=
Anick: =on va finir heu artistes de=
R → **Roberte:** =en plus / quand j'regarde mes p'tits

Roberte: fauteuils / j'ai un heu un p'tit pincement parce que l'monsieur / il est décédé /

(6) [in C3, Dorine compliments Roberte on her ability to make a good cup of tea, Lucienne joins in]

C → **Dorine:** il était très bon le thé /= [Roberte? /
Lucienne: =oui / il était très bon et bien chaud / [moi je dis à chaque fois=

R → **Roberte:** =c'est le thé d'Champion / on trouve pas mieux /= <LAUGHTER> Lipton /=
Dorine: =et alors? / =ah

Dorine: oui /

(7) [in C3, Lucienne compliments Roberte on her ability to do her hair nicely]

C → **Lucienne:** tu arrives bien à te coiffer malgré tout toi Roberte / (...)

R → **Roberte:** sauf quand y a des trous /

Anick: <LAUGHTER> =elle avait plus de cheveux /=
Roberte: dans la dernière coupe / y avait des trous /=

Roberte: =y m'avait coupé plus court au dessus qu'en dessous /= =c'était bizarre
Anick: =ah la la /=

Roberte: comme truc /=

Dorine: =ouais / ah ouais /

(8) [in C3, Roberte starts complimenting Anick on her speed as a hairdresser; she is soon joined by Dorine and Lucienne agrees]

C → **Roberte:** en plus-en plus / tu es rapide hein pour les coupes / une demi-heure montre en

Roberte: main là tout le monde est [coiffé / =non mais dis / tu prends

R → **Anick:** [ah bon? / ... pas très rapide /=

Roberte: l'temps d'discuter avec ta cliente / <LAUGHTER>

R → **Anick:** [pour

Lise: <LAUGHTER> =tu fais des efforts /

Dorine: tu parles /= c'est [des

Anick: le salon /j'suis pas rentable /= [oui / mais di-disons que je-je suis longue à la

Dorine: coupes hein / =c'est des [coupes /

Anick: coupe mais je-je suis gagnante au brushing [parce que après y se placent/=

Dorine: [ben oui / =sûr /=

Lise: =[[voilà oui /

Lucienne: =[[oui / et oui /

(9) [in C1, Lise and Francine are talking about the interview needed to get into the nursing school Zita wants to apply to; Lise compares Zita to other candidates, paying her a compliment on her personality and lovely temperament at the same time; Francine joins in]

Lise: y donnent ces conseils-là pour des gens qui sont jamais [sortis de leur campagne /

Francine: [voilà

C → **Lise:** [donc toi-t'es-t'as voyagé et tout / t'es ouverte / tu v-tu vas pas rester comme ça

Francine: [ouais

Lise: d'avant-= =[[ouais, tu vois? / t'sais communiquer / pis tu vas-tu vas t'

C → **Francine:** =tu sais parler! /=[[j'veux dire / tu-tu-tu as des choses à dire /

Lise: enthousiasmer! / on va-tu vas sourire / on-on connaît ton caractère! / bon s'y z'ont des

Lise: personnes qui sont comme ça euh / c'est sûr tu les vois [pas dans ce métier! / [tu

Francine: [tout introvertis / qui [parlent

Francine: pas / qui disent rien / bon ben là c'est [clair que=

Lise: vois? / [donc là / il donnent quelques conseils /

Zita: =oui mais / j'ai des choses à dire /

Lise: [ah ben ouais /

Francine: =faut pas t'démonter en fait hein / tout c'que tu dis / même si à

Zita: [si y m' demandent euh=

Francine: un moment donné on te contre ou quoi / non! /

The overt complimenting illustrated in these excerpts is part of 'the routine support work that women do with each other as friends' (Coates, 1996: 234). But at the same time, it seems women are co-constructing a world which reflects their idea of what being feminine means. Coates (1996: 232) claims that 'the two most important things being accomplished in the talk of women friends are friendship and femininity'. Of course, the women in my study are being greatly influenced by the fact that they live in a Western society at the beginning of the twenty first century. However, it would seem that their version of femininity varies slightly with age. Indeed, for the older women in my recordings, looking nice is an important goal as the many compliments on physical appearance reveal; being creative is also considered a normal part of doing femininity (being creative by painting or arranging your home or flower arranging or even cooking). For the younger female friends in my study, femininity seems to be performed in relation to the opposite sex, i.e. men. The young women's talk seems to establish them as heterosexual feminine subjects. This behaviour corroborates Coates' findings:

Our talk about men does powerful work in our construction of ourselves as (certain kinds of) feminine subject. It is certainly noticeable that girls in their early teens start talking compulsively about boys, as part of the negotiation of identity involved in the transition between girlhood and womanhood. (Coates, 1996: 244)

Although the younger female friends are older than the teenage girls Coates mentions (since they are in their twenties and not early teens), they still relate to men quite a lot but the difference is that they mainly relate to real young men, not to 'male fantasy figures such as singers or film stars' (Coates, 1996: 244). I say 'mainly' since at one point in C2, Zita compares one of her boyfriends to Brad Pitt.

Femininity seems to be expressed not only through what is being talked about but also through the way women talk about things and indeed compliment each other. We can see that in most instances in the women-only conversations, one speaker starts complimenting another conversation participant to be soon joined by the third speaker; they then often carry on complimenting their friend together as examples 2, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 9 reveal. In the few cases when they do not join in, at least one speaker agrees with the complimenter as in example 1. This joint construction of the compliments fits perfectly with the general conversational style of the women in my study which is collaborative in nature and it does corroborate the results of previous research (see Coates, 1989a and 1996; Edelsky, 1981).

Sometimes, this joint complimenting really feels like over-complimenting as in examples 4 and 5. Once again, this has been found in other studies. Indeed, Coates (1998: 148) mentions that 'when making the other feel good is the main thing at stake, complimenters frequently misrepresent or at least overstate their actual evaluation, exaggerate the degree of positiveness'.

Another element which is worth examining is the way compliments are received. Some people do take them in their stride but others appear to not really know how to deal with them, whether to reject them or to try to minimise them in a way. Previous research revealed that, in same sex environment, men in general are much better at accepting compliments than women. Women, on the other hand, have often been shown to try and minimise compliments somehow, both in same sex and mixed environments. Of course, as always, individuals of the same gender can react differently since sex is not the only parameter to be taken into account here. Indeed, the conversational setting is crucial, i.e. whether the compliment happens in a unisex or mixed environment. The nature of the relation between the person complimenting and the person the compliment is directed to is also central since it seems logical that the degree of closeness between two individuals and the length of time they have known each other for will undoubtedly influence the way they accept each other's compliments. The age of

the individuals in question will probably have its effect too, together with their social, regional and cultural background.

In my recordings, the female participants in the unisex conversations seem to react to compliments in several main ways: sometimes their reaction is laughter on its own (see excerpt 1) or laughter and i) some kind of minimisation of the compliment (by either adding a comment which somehow limits its weight, by joking or by sharing the merit with someone else as in examples 4, 5 and 8) or laughter and ii) a partial or indirect acceptance of the compliment often with some kind of explanation (examples 3 and 6).

The fact that laughter is often used to cope with compliments may indicate that the person the compliment is directed to does not know how else to respond. It can also reveal that the person receiving the compliment is slightly uncomfortable or embarrassed at being the object of so much positive attention.

In example 3, Francine does laugh initially when Lise compliments her on her nursing skills but she immediately follows this initial reaction with a comment which in a way explains her good nursing skills, the fact that for her, the relational aspect is the most important of all in the nursing profession.

In example 4, Anick's initial reaction to Dorine's compliment *ça c'est du Viroton hein* is to laugh but then, when Dorine repeats her compliment, Anick says *mm*, as if she did not agree with the fact that this specific painting she did was nice, *joli* in Dorine's own words. Then she adds *c'est vieux*, unconsciously trying to take some of that painting's value away.

In example 5, we notice several strategies which have been used by Roberte as a response to compliments she received. The first one is to share with someone else, her daughter in this case, some of the merit regarding her home decoration: ah *ça / c'est l'installation d'Lise*. The second is to joke about the situation: when Dorine praises Roberte on her choice of painting to compliment her home decoration, Roberte points out jokingly how she fixed the painting to the wall, by a plain string which she did not even cut off properly, once again as if this piece of information was going to affect her friends' opinion. And finally, the last technique is to change the topic ever so slightly to diffuse the compliment in a way. Dorine and Anick are still going on about how tasteful and artistic Roberte's room decoration is when Roberte starts changing the topic slightly by talking about the upholsterer she dealt with and who died since.

A similar strategy is once more used by Roberte when she is being complimented on the quality of her tea (see example 6). Indeed, she first of all tells her friends that there is nothing special about this tea, thus not accepting the compliment and then she adds that she buys it in the local supermarket, therefore insisting on the fact that it is cheap and nothing special and then she jokingly adds that you cannot find anything better.

Similarly, in example 7, Roberte transfers Lucienne's compliment about her ability to do her hair nicely on someone else, namely Anick in this case, arguing that it is only possible for her to do her hair nicely because the cut Anick has given her is really good.

Finally, in example 8, we can see how Anick tries to reject Roberte's compliment on how fast she is as a hairdresser. She concentrates however on her technical abilities and admits that what she wastes in time, she makes up for in technique.

It is rare and unusual for the female friends in my recordings not to acknowledge the compliment they have been paid and to carry on as if it did not happen. We can only find one example of this in C1, a conversation between G2 female members. This instance has been laid out in example 2. Here, Zita seems more interested in carrying on with her story than to respond to the compliment her friends have just paid her. This reaction does not necessarily mean that she does not want to acknowledge the compliment but more likely that she is so involved in her narrative that she did not feel like interrupting the flow of her story. Besides, the compliment did come rather unexpectedly and maybe Zita was just taken by surprise.

In no cases in my corpus did any female speaker respond to a compliment by returning a compliment, which seems to show that they did not feel obliged to do so. It has been argued in

the past that a compliment leaves the complimentee with some kind of debt to repay but the women in my study certainly did not feel this way. This would indicate that the compliments paid in my recordings were entirely other-oriented and that the woman paying the compliment did not have any ulterior motive such as making the complimentee her debtor in any way or establishing some kind of power or hierarchy relationships between them. On the contrary, compliments seem to be seen by the female speakers in my recordings as ways of strengthening the relationship with their friends.

In my recordings, out of all the compliments the female speakers directed at each other, only twice did I find a not entirely spontaneous compliment, i.e. a compliment which had somehow been prompted by a particular speaker (these are indicated in the excerpts by C followed by an arrow in the left margin; the prompts are indicated by CP followed by an arrow): they came from the unisex conversations between the older female participants where a total of 17 compliments were directed at each other (see examples 10 and 11).

(10) [in C3, Dorine is describing the table runner she has made for the New Year's eve dinner]

Dorine: de toute façon / moi / j'vais monter avec Ivan pour monter le le le heu le
Lucienne: oui /

Dorine: chemin de table que j'ai fait tu [sais / voilà /= par contre
Lucienne: [ah oui / =ah oui /
Anick: <TALKING TO HER DOG> %mm / reste là / %

Dorine: alors / ma bombe de heu dor-d'argenté là / elle est vraiment grise hein /= [c'est
Roberte: =ah [oui? /

Dorine: moche hein / ouais / alors / je vais dire à Jacqueline de-d'apporter la sienne / j'ai

CP → **Dorine:** mis de-de la neige / tu s-[Lise? / =[[alors / soit on laisse comme ça /=
Lucienne: =[[mmm / =ah oui /
C → **Lise:** [c'est très joli /=

Dorine: =tu vois j'ai mis des boules argentées heu= [voilà / moi je
Lucienne: mm /=
Roberte: =ça suffit à mon a[vis /

Dorine: pense que [ça suffira / =ouais /= =j'ai mis une bougie bleue...
Lucienne: [ouais / =ouais /=
Roberte: [le blanc et les [boules heu /=

Dorine: et trois blanches / voilà / [mais une bleu marine / ça faisait moche /=
C → **Lise:** %c'est très [beau /% =ah oui? /=

Dorine: =c'était pas beau / alors je l'ai [remise dans le sac / ... un petit tour de perle et puis
Anick: <TALKING TO HER DOG> [reste là /

Dorine: j'ai fait quelques heu boucles avec le noeud / tu sais le ruban / mais y fait gris le

Dorine: ruban aussi /= =alors / j'ai mis du papier / j'avais du papier argent tu sais
Lise: =ah ouais /=

Dorine: mais heu comme un petit caléidoscope tu vois / alors j'ai fait des rubans avec et ça

Dorine: rend bien / [...] tiens / ça me donne une idée / j'aurais pu mettre un-quelques...

CP → **Dorine:** quelques noeuds avec de la gaze / ... =il est bien? /=
C → **Lise:** oh là / il est bien aussi /= =oui /

 We can see that Dorine is asking Lise twice for her direct opinion on the table runner and Lise answers with a compliment the first time (*c'est très joli*) and by saying *oui* and laughing the second time. Lise even adds extra compliments: *c'est très beau* and *oh là / il est bien aussi* / in order to reassure Dorine and to tell her that she should not change a thing.

Later on in the same conversation, Roberte asks her friends about the biscuits she has served with her tea and in a way, she forces a compliment, which her friends are more than happy to give her.

(11) [in C3, Lucienne is telling Dorine that sometimes simplicity is the key in home decoration when Roberte asks her friends about the biscuits she has served with her tea]

Lucienne: tu sais / des fois quand c'est trop chargé / [c'est pas beau hein / la simplicité des
Dorine: [oui oui oui /

Lucienne: fois et [puis des coups comme on dit heu je sais pas c'que tu as-j'sais pas c'que
CP → **Roberte:** [()= y
Anick: =ouais /

Lucienne: c'est mais là c'est joli / mais [on le fait-le fait dans la salle [du haut là-haut? /=
Roberte: sont bons hein? /=

C → **Anick:** [très bons /=
Dorine: =oui /

C → **Lise:** =mm / =très bons / [très fins /

3.2 The male-only conversations

For the single-sex conversations taking place between both G1 and G2 male friends, no compliments were made. Therefore, it is clear that in the Monteil study, compliments are only being used by women in unisex conversations.

The behaviour of both men and women in my recordings fits with the general tendencies which have been revealed by previous research on politeness in general and compliments in particular, namely that women seem to be more polite than men (see Brown, 1980 and Manes, 1983 among others) and that compliments are generally associated with women more than with men (Holmes, 1988; Wolfson, 1983; Herbert, 1990; Baptiste, 1990). As we have mentioned earlier, this has been explained by the fact that compliments are often considered as a way for speakers to pay solicitous attention to one another's face in order to seek connection or good social relations. In that respect, compliments can be considered as a form of positive

politeness since they belong to the set of techniques used to satisfy the positive face wants of others and women have been shown to prefer these positively polite strategies.

The behaviour of both men and women in the Monteil study regarding compliments in unisex conversations does in fact take the conclusions of previous research to a different level since it shows that only women compliment each other as no instance of a man paying a compliment to another man was found in my recordings.

4 Conclusions

Like most research on gender and conversational behaviour, this is a small-scale study and it is important, therefore, not to generalise beyond the limits of the data. The study suggests that compliments are definitely part of a gendered linguistic behaviour as previous research pointed out. Indeed, only the women in my recordings compliment each other; not once did I find a compliment in the male-only conversations. However, there seems to be a slight difference with age as more compliments were found in the conversations between the older female friends.

In the Monteil study, the number of compliments paid by female speakers in unisex conversations varies greatly from none at all for some women to quite a lot for others. This was linked to the speaker's status within the friendship group as it was established that paying a compliment may help gain status for the complimenter.

The subjects of the compliments found in the women-only conversations in my study correspond to what previous research revealed: they mainly deal with appearance, abilities or skills and aspects of personality. This was explained by the nature and function of compliments in women-only conversations: they are positively affective other-oriented speech acts which express rapport and solidarity and which are part of the regular and very common support work women do with each other as friends.

The use of compliments by the female friends in the Monteil study was also seen to contribute to the construction of their femininity and age seems to be an important factor in determining what these women's idea of femininity revolves around.

Compliments in the women-only conversations I looked at here were also found to be jointly constructed and deeply collaborative, which once more is consistent with the conclusions of previous research.

Several types of reactions to compliments in the women-only conversations in this study were identified and examined and they all fit with previous accounts of such reactions found in the literature, which describe some kind of minimisation of the compliment itself often combined with laughter.

It would be interesting to see how both the male and female speakers behave in mixed conversations and I hope to be able to do so at a later date. What the analysis of the single-sex interactions has given us so far is a glimpse into the role that is played by compliments in the construction and development of friendships. As Cheshire (2000: 260) pointed out, 'perhaps a glimpse into some of the complexities is the best that we can hope to achieve'.

To conclude, I'd like to point out that friendship is a relationship of equals, but like much social behaviour, it is also a gendered activity and women and men draw on differential modes of conversational organisation to 'do' same-sex friendship. We have seen that compliments are one of the most obvious aspect in which they do so. However, it is essential to remember that the similarities between the conversational practices of men and women are at least as important as the differences. This was in fact illustrated in my study by many other linguistic devices, such as laughter, minimal responses, latching, overlaps, interruptions, simultaneous talk, incomplete utterances and so on, for which the picture was not as clear as for

compliments since those linguistic devices were found in both the female-only conversations and the all-male talk.

I argue in my thesis that this is because men and women share the same pool of linguistic devices although they seem to differ in the qualitative and quantitative use of these (in terms of frequency and overall quantity). Indeed, the same linguistic devices can be used by men and women with a different function and can be part of different general communicative and conversational strategies. Similarly, men and women have access to both a one-at-a-time or single floor and a shared floor. So, it is quite clear that men and women share linguistic and interactional resources, but that they choose to draw on these differently: They do not always use them in the same way or in the same proportion. Their intentions might also sometimes be different but one thing is sure, overall, there are more similarities in their conversational styles than what was first reported in the literature.

References

- Baptiste, T. 1990. A contrastive study of male and female complimenting behaviour in British English. Unpublished BA dissertation, Roehampton Institute.
- Brown, P. 1980. How and why are women more polite: some evidence from a Mayan community. In McConnell-Ginet, S. et al, eds., *Women and language in literature and society*. New York, NY: Praeger.
- Cameron, D. 1997. Performing gender identity: young men's talk and the construction of heterosexual masculinity. In Johnson, S. and Meinhof, U. H., eds., *Language and masculinity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Cheshire, J. 2000. The telling or the tale? Narratives and gender in adolescent friendship networks. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* Vol. 4: 2.
- Coates, J. 1989a. Gossip revisited: language in all-female groups. In Cameron, D. and Coates, J., eds., *Women in their speech communities*. London: Longman.
- _____ 1996. *Women talk*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- _____ 1998. *Language and gender: a reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Edelsky, C. 1981. 'Who's got the floor?'. *Language in Society* 10.
- Herbert, R. K. 1989. The ethnography of English compliment and compliment responses: a contrastive sketch. In Olesky, W., ed., *Contrastive Pragmatics*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins.
- _____ 1990. Sex-based differences in compliment behaviour. *Language in Society* 19.
- Holmes, J. 1986. Functions of 'you know' in men's and women's speech. *Language and Society* 15.
- _____ 1988. Paying compliments: a sex-preferential politeness strategy. *Journal of Pragmatics* 12.
- Kerbrat-Orecchioni, C. 1987. La description des échanges en analyse conversationnelle: l'exemple du compliment. *DRLAV - Revue de Linguistique* 36-37.
- Manes, J. 1983. Compliments: a mirror of cultural values. In Wolfson, N. and Judd, E. eds., *Sociolinguistics and language acquisition*. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House.

Wolfson, N. 1983. An empirically-based analysis of complimenting in American English. In Wolfson, N. and Judd, E., eds., *Sociolinguistics and language Acquisition*. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House.

Transcription conventions

Sequencing

1) Simultaneous utterances Utterances starting up simultaneously are linked together with double left-hand brackets [[]].

2) Overlap **a) beginning of overlap** When utterances overlap but do not start up simultaneously, the point at which overlap begins is marked by a single left-hand bracket [.

b) end of overlap The point where overlapping utterances stop overlapping is marked with a single right-hand bracket]. Unfortunately, it has not always been possible to determine precisely such a point.

3) Latching or contiguous utterances When there is no interval between adjacent utterances produced by different speakers, this run-on is captured by placing an equals sign = at the end of one speaker's line and another one at the beginning of the subsequent speaker's turn. Latching can occur with more than one speaker, for instance if two speakers begin simultaneously and with no interval between their start and the end of the last speaker's talk. Similarly, latching can occur at the end of overlapped speech when two utterances end simultaneously and are latched onto by a next.

Intervals within and between utterances

1) Hesitations Hesitations are defined as brief pauses within turns, as opposed to those between turns. They are transcribed by three dots, as follows: ...

2) Pauses Significant pauses in the conversation are marked within parentheses as follows (...). For pauses exceeding 3 seconds in length, the length of pause is specified in seconds, for instance (4.0).

Characteristics of speech production

Where possible, I have used punctuation to capture information obtained through rhythm and intonation analysis using Halliday's system (see Halliday, 1994: chap. 8). Punctuation marks are not referring to grammatical units.

1) Forward slash These mark termination (whether grammatically complete or not), or certainty, which is usually realised by falling intonation. By implication, the absence of any turn-final punctuation indicates speaker incompleteness, either through interruption or trailing off.

2) Question marks These are used to indicate a rising intonation as in questions or to mark what I interpret as uncertainty.

3) Exclamation marks These mark what I interpret as the expression of counter-expectation (e.g. surprise, shock, amazement, etc.).

4) Words in capital letters Upper case is used conservatively to show emphatic syllables and/or increased volume.

5) Softness A percent sign, %, is used to show a passage of talk that has a noticeably lower volume than the surrounding talk.

6) False starts A false start occurs when a speaker 'rethinks' out loud and rephrases without hesitation what they were saying before completing the first version. This is shown with a hyphen.

7) Repetitions They are all shown in full.

8) Fillers Following established usage, the most commonly used fillers are represented orthographically as follows: *mm*, *ouais* (for *oui*), *ben* (for *bien*), *nan* (for *non*), *hein*. Other quasi-linguistic particles are represented quasi-phonemically, e.g. *ai!* (exclamation of pain).

Transcriber's doubts and comments:

1) Non-transcribable segments of talk These are indicated by empty parentheses (). The length of the parenthesised space gives an indication of the approximate length of the untranscribed talk. In the speaker designation column, the empty parentheses indicate inability to identify a speaker.

2) Uncertain transcription Other than the timings of intervals, items (words) within parentheses indicate the transcriber's guess. They are especially dubious hearings or speaker identifications.

3) Paralinguistic and non-verbal information Additional information about relevant non-verbal behaviour is given in English within angled brackets in capitals, for instance <LAUGHTER>. Such information is only included where it is judged important in making sense of the interaction. Inferred non-verbal behaviour (e.g. clues which the transcriber assumes happened in order for the situation to make sense) is shown with the addition of a question mark.

Presentation conventions:

1) Arrows When placed in the left-hand margin of the transcript, they are used to call the readers' attention to particular parts of the transcript. The researcher will inform the reader of the significance of the referent of the arrow by discussing it in the text.

2) Ellipses Horizontal ellipses indicate that an utterance is partially reported, that is, parts of the same speaker's utterance are omitted. They are represented by [...].