

Compliments: who gives them, and why?



I love your new hairstyle

That's a great shirt

Nice outfit!

If these phrases sound familiar to you, the chances are you're female.

Twenty or thirty years ago, researchers* found that most compliments were given by women to other women, as a way of being friendly and, often, to start up a conversation. Many female compliments were about appearance, especially when someone had taken some trouble to look good. So if your friend says to you *I love your eyes* they are likely to mean that they like the makeup you've used rather than the colour of your eyes or their shape.

[*for example, Janet Holmes (1995) *Women, Men and Politeness*. Harlow: Longman, chapter 4 ('What a lovely tie! Compliments and compliment responses'), pp.115-153.]

Thirty years on, women's lives and values have changed - or have they? Recent research finds that women still give the same kind of compliments to each other, just as often. So women are still unconsciously encouraging each other to spend time and trouble on their appearance.

Is this true of the people you know? You could investigate this by keeping track of their compliments over a week or so.

How to investigate?

Listen and note

You'll need a notebook, and will have to keep it with you. Every time you hear someone give a compliment to someone else, note down these things:

The exact words they used e.g. *I love your skirt*

The exact words you hear in reply e.g. *oh it's really old*

Who gave the compliment? Are they male or female, and roughly what age?

Who did they give the compliment to? Again, note down whether they are male or female, and roughly what age.

To keep things simple, focus on compliments between friends (your teachers may compliment you on your work, but those kinds of compliments would probably have a different function to the compliment that a friend gives you)

Try to gather at least 20 compliments altogether by this method of observation.

TIP:

You can also collect compliments that people give to you. You're especially likely to get compliments if people notice that you've changed your appearance. So you could wait until you want to have your hair cut, and then note down what people say to you when they see you for the first time with your new hairstyle.

Questions to answer

1. What linguistic form do the compliments have?

- > Researchers have found that many compliments have the form

Noun is Adjective

e.g. *your coat is great*

The adjective may have *really* or some other intensifier before it (*your coat is really great*)

> Researchers have also found that a very small number of adjectives occur over and over again in compliments: *lovely*, *great* and *nice* are very frequent.

How many different adjectives do you find in your collection of compliments? Which adjectives are the most frequent?

> Another frequent compliment form is

I love X or *I like X*, where X is the topic of the compliment, like *your shoes*, or *your hair*

Again, *really* or a similar word may be used before *love* or *like*.

Is this true for your collection of compliments?

Drawing a conclusion

Because the form of a compliment tends not to vary very much, researchers have argued that compliments are speech acts that have a semi-fixed formula, like other socially important speech acts such as greetings, thanking, or apologies.

Does your collection support this idea, or not?

2. What is the topic of the compliment?

Researchers have found that the most frequent topics are appearance, ability or performance, possessions and personality. Do your compliments fall into these categories, or not?

Drawing a conclusion

Obviously, for a compliment to work it has to be about something that everyone values. So the topic can be very revealing of the values of a

group of people. What do the topics of your compliments tell you about the values of the people you have been observing?

3. What is the reply to the compliment?

> Researchers have found that replies are usually of 3 types:

(i) the person who gets a compliment accepts it, perhaps by just saying *thanks*, or by returning the compliment

(ii) they deflect it, perhaps by downgrading e.g. *oh it was a really cheap hairdresser* or by asking for reassurance e.g. *do you really like it?*

(iii) they reject it e.g. by saying *oh I hate it* or *you don't mean that*

> Or, the compliment may start up a conversation. For instance, someone may say *I love your skirt* and then follow that up by asking *Where did you buy it?*

What kind of replies do you find in your collection of compliments?

Drawing a conclusion

Do the replies in your collection suggest that people are embarrassed when they get a compliment? If so, why do people give them?

Do the replies suggest that compliments are used to start up a conversation?

Can you suggest what the functions of compliments are amongst the people that you observed?

4. Who gives compliments and who receives them?

Can you say anything about the people who gave the compliments in your collection, and the people who received them?

Researchers have found that most compliments are given by women to women. Does your collection contain any evidence of this pattern?

Drawing a conclusion

Some researchers have suggested that compliments have a different function for women than for men. Women use them as a friendly

routine, and aren't necessarily sincere. Men are more likely to really mean it when they compliment someone, and so they use compliments more sparingly. Because compliments are not friendly routines for men, they use them less frequently. Does your collection provide any evidence of this?

You might like to suggest what speech acts men use for friendly routines. Some linguists think that men use friendly insults - this could be the topic of another linguistic investigation!

Suggested Reading:

Rees-Miller, Janie (2011). Compliments revisited: Contemporary compliments and gender. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43: 2673-2688.

(Click [here](#) for a summary of this paper).

