

# We Are All Upper Class in L2: Complimenting in L1 vs. L2

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## Abstract

The knowledge of how and to whom one may offer a compliment, as well as the ability to interpret the social meanings implicit in compliments, is one of the crucial issues to the development of communicative competence of learners of a second language (Holmes and Brown, 1987). Although Wolfson (1981), Manes (1983), Herbert (1990), Heidari, Eslami Rasekh & Rezazade (2009) and others have done a number of studies on disclosing this knowledge, little attention has been devoted to exploring it in the context of social issues like social class or social status. To this end, this study investigates the different patterns of expressing compliment used by the EFL learners of different social classes in Iran. 40 Iranian teenage EFL learners (20 from upper middle class and 20 from working class) who were all intermediate level students participated in the study.

One of the major findings of the study was that language learners' social class seems to be

neutralized in second language context; in other words, both working class and upper class learners make use of the same formulas in expressing compliment. Therefore, while first language mirrors the social class of the learners, the second language conceals it.

**Keywords:** Sociolinguistics, Pragmatics, Speech act, Compliment, Social class

## 1. Introduction

Languages differ in their patterns of interaction; in order to assist language learners in developing their communicative competence, researchers tried to investigate different speech acts in various contexts. Their findings revealed that speech acts may vary greatly across speech communities (Holmes, 1986; Herbert, 1990; Koester, 2002; Yu, 2005; Jiang, 2006). As a result, lack of enough knowledge of them may result in miscommunication.

The study of the speech acts and their realization in different languages and cultures has been mostly limited to the study of apologies, invitations, compliments, refusals, and the like without focusing on the social context. The fact that the social environment in which each person lives and the family background he/she comes from can affect speech act patterns is undeniable.

As Holmes and Brown (1987) noted sociopragmatic failure, which can be justified by inadequate knowledge of relevant cultural and social values, takes place when a speaker selects an inappropriate linguistic strategy to express a speech act in a particular context. “As a result, unless learners pay conscious attention to the social factors, they are likely to lapse automatically into the norms of their native language and culture and may cause unintended offense” (Holmes and Brown, 1987, p.535).

According to Holmes(1986), “a compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some “good” ( position, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer” (p.485).

On the other hand, in Hobbs’ words a compliment is “a speech act which explicitly or implicitly bestows credit upon the addressee for some possession, skill, characteristic, or the like, that is positively evaluated by the speaker and addressee” (2003, p.249).

Moreover, compliment is a way whereby an individual can encourage and reinforce certain desired behaviors because of its judgmental nature (approving or admiring another’s skill, ability, appearance, or personality).

Compliments are highly frequent in Persian conversations, as a symbol of politeness and not just an evaluation of a trait or possession or a praise of an achievement in interlocutors. Giving a compliment is associated with the Persian cultural schema of *adab*, which can roughly be translated as “politeness” (Sharifian, 2004).

There are various functions of complimenting behavior such as “create or maintain rapport” (Wolfson, 1983, p.86) or “increase the solidarity between the speaker and the addressee” (Holmes, 1986, p.486). But according to Holmes (1986), “this represents only the first layer of the analysis, compliments can express other functions too, for example teachers use compliments in order to provide encouraging feedback to their students, besides that it may be used as expressions of gratitude” (p.488).

Like all variations in linguistic behavior, variation in speech act behavior may be affected by socio-cultural parameters. Studies have shown that the function of compliment in one society

or culture can be very different from that of another one (Herbert, 1990). A number of factors such as gender of speaker and addressee, relationship of interlocutors, location, and presence of interactional bystanders can impact on expressing compliment as a speech act. In the current study, the social class of the language learners has been considered as the yardstick against which to compare the compliment patterns of the lower class and the higher class language learners.

As Bollen, Glanville, and Stecklov (2001) noted, “social class refers to the position of individuals, families, households, or other aggregates on one or more dimensions of stratification. These dimensions include income, education, prestige, wealth, or other aspects of standing that members of society deem salient.” (p. 157). In this study, it was decided upon based on learners’ parent’s profession, education, and place of living.

## **2. Purpose of the Study**

It seems that most of the previous studies on speech act have focused on cross cultural differences of various speech acts in Persian and English such as Apology (e.g. Eslami-Rasekh & Mardani 2010), and complaint (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2007), among which few have taken into consideration the social issues such as social distance or social class.

The present study aims to answer the following questions:

Q1: Are there any significant differences in expression of compliment in Persian between high class and working class language learners?

Q2: Are there any significant differences in expression of compliment in English between high class and working class language learners?

## **3. Methodology**

### *3.1 Participants*

The participants of the study were 40 teenage EFL learners, half of whom were from the working class of the society and the other half belonged to the high class. All the participants were female and students of two branches of the same language school in Tehran. One of the branches was located uptown while the other one was situated downtown. The participants were judged to be in the same range of proficiency level by applying an OPT test. Most of them had no or little learning experience in an English speaking country. In other words, they had little amount of exposure to the norms of the speech act of compliment of the target culture.

### *3.2 Data Collection*

The data used in this research were gathered by a DCT (discourse completion test) which is an elicitation method used for the collection of data on speech act realization. The students were to produce written responses as if they were spoken. Although DCT has been criticized as a research method (Cohen and Ishihara, 2005), it is used in this study because the researchers needed the demographic information of the participants to judge their social class; accessing this information was not possible through natural observation or other ways of data

collection. On the other hand, Holmes' (1986) and Manes' and Wolfson's (1980) studies of compliment behavior which were based on natural observation demonstrate that the vast majority of compliments refer to just a few broad topics namely, appearance, ability or skill, positions and personality or friendliness. Consequently, a DCT was prepared with ten situations regarding appearance, character, ability, and possession.

The ten scenarios in the DCT included a variety of situations and a number of roles with different social "distances". Particularly, the situations required students to give compliments to a family member, a teacher, and some friends.

The instrument was translated from English into Persian. For this purpose, first we translated the English version of the test into Persian. Then another translator was asked to translate it back into English, without having any knowledge of the first English version. Finally, the two versions were compared, and a final questionnaire was decided upon.

The participants were asked to write what they would say in interacting with native Persian speakers in Iran and native English speakers in America without paying attention to mechanics. For each situation, contextual variables such as relative age and status were described. In order to obtain a more robust data set, the learners were asked to fill in the questionnaires presented first in English, followed by a Persian translation at an interval of about two weeks.

### *3.3 Data Analysis*

In the current study, due to the categorical nature of the data, chi square is used to investigate whether the representation of compliment in Persian and English differs between the upper class language learners and the working class ones. A detailed inspection of the data was conducted thereafter.

## **4. Results**

The analysis showed that there is a significant association between the group and the choice, meaning that groups are different in their tendencies to express compliment in Persian. On the other hand, chi square results on the English data revealed no significant difference between the two groups in compliment expressions in English.

Having observed the differences between the expressions of compliment in English, a detailed analysis was carried out on each situation. In order to facilitate the comparisons, each group was assigned an alphabetic letter. UC refers to the upper class, while the working class is labeled as WC. E and P are used to refer to the English and Persian responses respectively. In the following, the most preferred patterns in different situations are explained in detail.

### *4.1 Situation 1*

You are in a birthday party. Your friend has changed her hair style. It goes with her. How do you praise her hair style?

In this section the most preferred pattern used by UCE is "*N is adj*". The second most frequent one is "*you look adj*". LCE showed the same inclination in this situation.

In Persian, UC used the patterns “*behet miad*” (it goes with you) and “*kheili adj shodi*” (you look very adjective) more frequently than the other patterns. The most significant difference between the groups was the WC groups’ inclination toward making use of the pattern “*koja arayeshgah rafti?*” (Which hair saloon did you go to?). The following table presents the details of the answers.

Table 4.1. The most frequently used patterns in situation 1

Situation	Group	1	2	3
1	UCE	Your hair is <i>adj</i>	You look <i>adj</i>	I like your hair style
1	WCE	Your hair is <i>adj</i>	You look <i>adj</i>	What a nice hair style
1	UCP	Behet miad (It suits you)	Kheili adj shodi (You look very <i>adj</i> )	Ghiafat avaz shode (You changed)
1	WCP	Koja araieshgah rafti (Which hair salon did you go to?)	Cheghadr adj shodi (How <i>adj</i> you look!)	Behet miad (It suits you)

#### 4.2 Situation 2

One of your classmates helps you with your math exam. You want to tell her how nice she is. What do you say to her?

The main observed difference in this section is the insistence of UCE on the use of “*I love/like you*”. In Persian, the UC used the pattern of “*betunam jobran konam*” (I hope I would requite your kindness).

Table 4.2. The most frequently used patterns in situation 2

Situation	Group	1	2	3
2	UCE	I love/like you	You are very <i>adj</i>	I am happy that you are my friend
2	WCE	You are <i>adj</i>	You +V+ADV	I like you
2	UCP	Betunam jobran konam (I hope to requite)	Kheili lotf kardi (It is kind of you)	Kheili adj hasti (You are very <i>adj</i> )
2	WCP	To adj hasti (you are very <i>adj</i> )	Kheli khub + N+ V (You teach very well)	Cheghadr mahi (How nice you are)

#### 4.3 Situation 3

You borrow your close friend's notebook. She has a nice handwriting. You are going to give back her notebook. How do you compliment her handwriting?

This situation did not reveal any significant differences among the groups in English but in Persian, just WC used more "*arezoo dashtam ke khate u ro dashtam*" (I wish I had your handwriting). This confirms the notion of cultural schema aroused by Sharifian (2008), according to which since human experience is to a large degree culturally constructed, it would be fair to mention that a large number of schemas are cultural schemas, so these schemas are a property of cultural groups' not individual minds. This may justify the similarities revealed among the participants' responses.

#### 4.4. Situation 4

In the street, you see your friend shopping. She has a new red bag that you like. What do you say about it?

WC showed more inclination to using "*where did you buy it? I want to buy one.*" The same pattern was more preferred in Persian by this group.

#### 4.5 Situation 5

You are invited to your teacher's house for dinner. The food is delicious and you enjoy it. How do you praise her very good cooking?

The most preferred English pattern in both groups was "the food was adj", while in Persian they showed different tendencies as WCP investigated the recipe more frequently.

In Persian, participants made use of literary devices like simile or hyperbole quite often. For example:

"*dastpokhteton be khubie dast pokhte madarame.*" (Your cooking is as good as my mother's)

Or "*nazdik bood angoshtamo bokhoram*". (It was so delicious that I was eating my fingers)

But in English no significant pattern was used. It could be because of the participants' lack of enough knowledge in English or their acquisition of L2 with its own culture and not transferring their L1 literary skill to their L2.

Table 4.3. The most frequently used patterns in situation 5

Situation	Group	1	2	3	4
5	UCE	The food was adj	Your cooking is adj	I enjoyed it	Others
5	WCE	Your food is adj	You are a(n) adj cook	I really enjoyed it	Others
5	UCP	Ghaza kheili adj bood (The food was so adj)	Ashpazitoon adj ast (Your cooking is adj)	Chetori dorostesh kardin (How did you cook it)	
5	WCP	Ghaza adj bood (The food was adj)	Dastpokhtetoon adj ast (your cooking is adj)	Mishe dastoresho b manam bedin (Give me its recipe)	

#### 4.6 Situation 6

One of your friends has bought a new cell phone. You like the model and the color. How do you praise it?

No significant difference was observed in the English patterns of both groups, but UCP showed more tendencies toward using structures similar to those of English, while the language of WCP mirrored their culture. e.g.:

“divooneie gooshitam.” (I’m crazy about your cellphone)

Table 4.4. The most frequently used patterns in situation 6

Situation	Group	1	2	3	4
6	UCE	It is adj	I like it	How adj your N is!	Others
6	WCE	It is adj	I like it	It has an adj color	Others
6	UCP	Adv adj hast (It is very adj)	Adv doostesh daram (I like it)	Others	Irrelevant
6	WCP	Adv adj hast (It is very adj)	Cheghadr N adj hast (How adj is your cellphone!)	Che saligheye adj dari (What an adj taste you have!)	In ghashangtarin N ee hast ke ta hala didam (This is the most beautiful cellphone I’ve ever seen)



#### 4.7 Situation 7

Your favorite teacher is chosen as the best teacher in school. You are excited and would like to congratulate her. What do you say?

As it can be observed UCE tended to identify themselves with L2 culture; for example in English they used “you deserved it” most frequently and in Persian they made use of “shoma liaghatesho dashtin” (you deserved it) which is the Persian translation of the same expression.

Table 4.5. The most frequently used patterns in situation 7

Situation	Group	1	2	3	4
7	UCE	You deserved it	You are in the right position	Others	
7	WCE	I knew you are adj	I am very happy to hear that	You deserved it	Others
7	UCP	Shoma liaghatesho dashtid (You deserved it)	Shoma adj hastid (You are adj)	Others	
7	WCP	Man motmaen boodam shoma entekhab mishin (I was sure you would be chosen)	Shoma laieghesh boodin (You deserved it)	Shoma adj hastid (you are adj)	Others

#### 4.8 Situation 8

You are watching a play in which your favorite actor performs. You like it and decide to go to him and praise his nice performance after the play is over. What are you going to say?

Both groups made use of a variety of patterns which were not that parallel and revealed no significance.

#### 4.9 Situation 9

Your new friend comes to class with a new jacket. It looks fashionable to you. How do you compliment it?

As it was expected, again WCP reflected their culture through their language in this informal situation e.g. “vay, che karde!” (Wow! What he has done!)

Table 4.6. The most frequently used patterns in situation 9

Situation	Group	1	2	3	4	
9	UCE	You look adv adj	It is adj	It suits you	What a(n) adj N you have	
9	WCE		It is adj	You are adj today	It suits you	Others
9	UCP	Adv barazandeie tost (It suits you)	Adv adj shodi (you look very adj)	Others	Irrelevant	
9	WCP	Adv behet miad (It suits you very much)	Keili kapshanet adj hast (Your jacket is very adj)	Adv adj shodi (you look very adj)	Others	

#### 4.10 Situation 10

Your friend invites you to her new house. The decoration seems nice to you and you like it. How do you praise it?

The same as other situations, the English patterns were close but those of Persian were not very similar.

Table 4.7. The most frequently used patterns in situation 10

Situation	Group	1	2	3	4
10	UCE	N is adj	How adj your N is!	Others	
10	WCE	N is adj	You are a(n) adj person	Others	Irrelevant
10	UCP	Adv adj ast (It is very adj)	Adv ba saligheie (You have a very good taste)	Afarin b saligheat (Bravo! Nice taste!)	Others
10	LMCF	Che adj hasti (You are adj)	N is adj	Adv adj chide shode (It is decorated adv adj)	Che saligheye (What a nice taste!)

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this research revealed that WMC in Persian, in the case of possession and appearance, tended to buy the same thing or have the same change on them. The source of this tendency may root in the existence of more competition (*cheshm o hamcheshmi*) in this group.

Compliments can be face threatening speech acts since the complimenter may like something belonging to the addressee. This is most obvious in cultures like Iranian's where an expression of admiration for an object imposes an obligation on the addressee to give it to the complimenter (*ta'rof*). This analysis revealed that complimenting is a complex sociolinguistic skill.

In both groups in English two formulas accounted for a great number of compliments that confirms Herbert's (1990) findings, that is *I like X* and *I love X*. On the other hand, in Persian they tended to reveal some differences in their compliments based on their social class.

Another outstanding difference was the UCP's use of the pattern "*betunam jobran konam*" (I hope to compensate) which discloses that this group is more grateful for the things others have done for them.

Finally, while in informal situations WC disclosed their culture, in formal situations especially when their interlocutor was of upper social status, tended to hide their class and speak formally. So in these situations their speech was more similar to that of the upper class, as it is shown in situations 5, 7 and 8. The following table illustrates the most frequent adjectives and adverbs used.

Table 5.1. The most frequently used adjectives and adverbs in English

Adjective UCE	Adjective WCE	Adjective UCP	Adjective WCP
Beautiful	Good	خوب	زیبا
Nice	Nice	قشنگ	خوب
Wonderful	Beautiful	عالی	قشنگ
Fantastic	Excellent	زیبا	فوق العاده
	Perfect	خوشگل	عالی
	The best	جذاب	شیک
	Wonderful		خوشگل
	Pretty		

## 6. Conclusion

Predictably, like most of the studies in the field of sociolinguistics, this study poses more questions than it answers. The analysis of the study confirms Holmes' (1986) "acceptability of a narrow range of high frequent items in compliment" (p. 491). So that in order to provide the students with the pragmatic information needed to compliment appropriately, an English teacher can make use of this limited range of patterns. Since the basis for the misunderstanding in communication lay in the culturally different attitudes, we can prevent it

by teaching the patterns of complimenting.

It is suggested to other researchers who are interested in working on speech acts, specifically compliment behavior, to record intonation as well as syntax and lexis through natural observation. Furthermore, more studies are needed to relate compliment topics to sex or solidarity relationships between participants. Age could also be considered as another factor by the analysis of children's behavior to know when they begin to produce compliment and acquire the appropriate social competence besides their linguistic competence.

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## **Appendix**

### Appendix 1. English questionnaire

Name: .....

Age: .....

Mother tongue: .....

Level: .....

Father's job: .....

Father's education: .....

Mother's job: .....

Mother's education: .....

Place of living: .....

### ***Situation 1***

You are in a birthday party. Your friend has changed her hair style. It goes with her. How do you praise her hair style?

.....  
.....

### ***Situation 2***

One of your classmates helps you with your math exam. You want to tell her how nice she is.

What do you say to her?

.....  
.....

***Situation 3***

You borrow your close friend's notebook. She has a nice handwriting. You are going to give back her notebook. How do you compliment her handwriting?

.....  
.....

***Situation 4***

In the street, you see your friend shopping. She has a new red bag that you like. What do you say about it?

.....  
.....

***Situation 5***

You are invited to your teacher's house for dinner. The food is delicious and you enjoy it. How do you praise her very good cooking?

You: .....

.....

***Situation 6***

One of your friends has bought a new cell phone. You like the model and the color. How do you praise it?

You: .....

.....

***Situation 7***

Your favorite teacher is chosen as the best teacher in school. You are excited and would like to congratulate her. What do you say?

You:.....

.....

**Situation 8**

You are watching a play in which your favorite actor performs. You like it and decide to go to him and praise his nice performance after the play is over. What are you going to say?

You:.....  
.....

**Situation 9**

Your new friend comes to class with a new jacket. It looks fashionable to you. How do you compliment it?

You:.....  
.....

**Situation 10**

Your friend invites you to her new house. The decoration seems nice to you and you like it. How do you praise it?

You: .....  
.....

**Appendix 2. Persian questionnaire**

..... نام و نام خوانوادگی:

..... سن:

..... سطح زبان:

..... شغل پدر:

..... میزان تحصیلات پدر:

..... شغل مادر:

..... میزان تحصیلات مادر:

..... محل زندگی:

**موقعیت اول**

شما در یک جشن تولد هستید. دوستانان مدل مویش را عوض کرده است. این مدل مو به او می آید. شما چطور از مدل

مویش تعریف می کنید؟

شما:.....  
.....  
.....

**موقعیت دوم**

یکی از همکلاسی هایتان برای امتحان ریاضی به شما کمک می کند. می خواهید به او بگویید که او چقدر خوب است. چه می گوئید؟

شما:.....  
.....  
.....

**موقعیت سوم**

شما دفتر دوست نزدیک خود را قرض می گیرید. او دست خط خوبی دارد. شما می خواهید دفترش را پس بدهید. چطور از دست خط او تعریف می کنید؟

شما:.....  
.....  
.....

**موقعیت چهارم**

در خیابان دوستان را در حال خرید کردن می بینید. او کیف قرمز جدیدی دارد که شما دوستش دارید. درباره آن چه می گوئید؟

شما:.....  
.....  
.....

**موقعیت پنجم**

شما برای شام به خانه معلمتان دعوت شده اید. غذا خوشمزه است و شما از آن لذت میبرید. چگونه از آشپزی خوبشان تعریف میکنید؟

شما:.....  
.....  
.....

**موقعیت ششم**



یکی از دوستانتان موبایل جدیدی خریده است. شما مدل و رنگش را دوست دارید. چطور از آن تعریف میکنید؟

شما:.....  
.....  
.....

**موقعیت هفتم**

معلم مورد علاقه تان به عنوان بهترین معلم مدرسه انتخاب شده است. شما به وجد می آید و میخواهید به او تبریک بگویید. چه میگویید؟

شما:.....  
.....  
.....

**موقعیت هشتم**

شما دارید تئاتری را که در آن بازیگر محبوبتان بازی میکند تماشا میکنید. کارش را دوست دارید و تصمیم میگیرید که پس از اتمام نمایش نزد او بروید و از بازی زیبایش تعریف کنید. به او چه خواهید گفت؟

شما:.....  
.....  
.....

**موقعیت نهم**

دوست جدیدتان با یک کاپشن نو به کلاس می آید. به نظر خیلی شیک می آید. چطور از آن تعریف میکنید؟

شما:.....  
.....  
.....

**موقعیت دهم**

دوستان شما را به خانه جدیدش دعوت میکند. دکوراسیون به نظر تان زیبا می آید و آن را دوست دارید. چگونه از آن تعریف میکنند؟

شما:.....  
.....  
.....