Strategies Employed by the Vietnamese to Respond to Compliments and the Influence of Compliment Receivers' Perception of the Compliment on Their Responses

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Abstract

This research explores the strategies employed by the Vietnamese to respond to compliments and the influence of compliment receivers' perception of the compliment on their responses. Three hundred and sixty compliment/compliment response sequences were obtained from 120 extended interviews with 126 participants (6 interviewers and 120 interviewees). The conversations were tape-recorded. The interviewees' interpretation of their compliment responses was also recorded. The results show the Vietnamese have a high tendency to reject compliments because they want to be perceived as modest people by the compliment giver. The analysis of the compliment/compliment response sequences and of the participants' interpretation of their responses indicates that responding to compliments in Vietnamese is a complex speech act. Besides three major strategies used in compliment responses (i.e., acceptance, rejection and deflection), there are cases where the two opposite strategies acceptance and rejection appear in the same response. This reflects the Vietnamese tension between modesty/self-denying and self-appreciation. In other words, different principles involved in replying to compliments interact both *between* responses and *within* responses. The act of responding to compliments in Vietnamese is also complicated in that the receiver of the compliment can use the same strategy to convey different meanings. For example, in deflecting compliments the compliment receiver tends to shift the praised credit to other people, luck, fate or God to acknowledge their contribution. However, compliment receivers

also tend to use this strategy to show themselves to the complimenter as modest and tactful people, especially when they know that their credit shift does not influence the way the complimenter perceives the praised attribute.

Keywords: Vietnamese, Complimenting, Speech act, Strategies

1. Introduction

1.1 The Act of Complimenting and Responding to Compliments

Complimenting (Cs) is defined as "a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some "good" (possession, characteristic, skill, and so on) which is valued by the speaker and the hearer (Holmes, 1988a). In other words, compliments refer to polite verbal expressions of praise or approval of other people and normally attribute the value "good" to the addressee. It represents "one means whereby an individual or more importantly, society as a whole can encourage, through…reinforcement, certain desired behaviors" (Manes, 1983, p. 7). Based on Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness model, complimenting is largely a positive politeness strategy, since it signals the complimenter's noticing of and attending to the complimentee's interests and needs. For instance, a compliment on one's appearance can be seen as evidence that one is paid attention and even admired. Nevertheless, Cs as expressions of envy or admiration could threaten the addressee's negative face in the sense that addressees may have to say something that they do not really like to protect the object of the speaker's desire. In this case, Cs may imply the complimenter would like to have something belonging to the complimentee, and hence Cs can be regarded as face threatening acts (FTAs).

Compliment responses (CRs) are defined as verbal reactions that acknowledge that the interactant hears and responds to a compliment. In responding to a compliment, the addressee may feel constrained to downgrade the object of the compliment or to self-denigrate and hence, may damage his negative face. For instance, to avoid self-praise (Pomerantz, 1978) and/or to be considered humble (Chen, 1993), people may sometimes find it hard to accept a compliment on their personality. As a result, they may refuse it by self-deprecation regardless of the possibility that they may value themselves highly. As potential FTAs, Cs and CRs have been investigated in several contrastive and non-contrastive studies.

1.2 Research on the Act of Responding to Compliments

Wolfson (1981) suggests that speech act patterns are very different from one culture to another. Thus, the speech acts of compliment (Cs) and responding to compliments (CRs) are not an exception. Literature on the act of complimenting (e.g., Wolfson 1981; Manes, 1983; Knapp, Hopper & Bell, 1984; Barnlund &Araki, 1985; Holmes & Brown, 1987; Nelson, Bakery & Al-Batal, 1993; Garcia, 2012; Placencia & Lower, 2013; Evazzade & Katal, 2012; Goetzinger, Park, Widdows, 2006; Zarei, 2011) and responding to compliments (Holmes, 1988a, 1988b; Pomerantz, 1978; Hebert 1991; Hertbert & Straight, 1989; Chen, 1993; Nelson, Al-Batal & Echols, 1996, Lorenzo-Dus, 2001; and Farghal & Al-Khatib, 2001; Cheng, 2011; Sadeghi & Foutooh, 2012; Cai, 2012; Hauser, 2008; Chen & Yang, 2010) has supported Wolfson's statement. These studies have shed light on the linguistic forms, the sociolinguistic functions and the strategies of Cs and CRs. What these investigations have in common is that they all were reported with reference to Brown and Levinson's (1978) framework of politeness and their concept of face threatening acts (FTAs). Some of the research, especially that based on the English data confirms Brown and Levinson's model (e.g., Holmes, 1988a; 1988b), whereas this model is considered inappropriate to explain some

non-English data (e.g., Chen, 1993).

Pomerantz's (1978) work could be considered as the earliest account of CRs among native English speakers. She claims that compliment responses involve two conversational principles that are in potential conflict. Those principles are compliment acceptance and self-praise avoidance. Pomerantz explains that the former principle could in many cases make the receiver of the compliment want to agree with the compliment, whereas the latter tends to prevent the complimentee from doing so. Therefore, in her argument, self-praise avoidance accounts for the high frequency of disagreements and rejections in CRs. Nevertheless, as Nelson, Al-Batal and Echols (1996) note, although the work of Pomerantz (1978) is helpful in understanding how and why Americans compliment, it lacks a quantitative analysis of the type and the frequency of CRs. This shortfall was then supplied in Herbert's (1989) work.

Herbert (1989) could be regarded as the first researcher to provide information on the frequency of some particular NES compliment response types. In looking at compliment/compliment response interchanges between American university students and their counterparts in South Africa, Herbert labeled the response strategies as (a) Agreeing, (b) Nonagreeing, and (c) Requesting interpretation. He found that 66 percent of American students accepted compliments. This percentage is much higher in the South African data (88%). Holmes (1988a, 1988b) investigated Cs and CRs in New Zealand English with more specific categories of CRs consisting of accepting, rejecting and deflecting/evading and their subcategories. Her findings highlight Brown and Levinson' s (1978) model of politeness, especially their concept of FTAs. Her report shows that compliments may function as positively affective speech acts and as potential FTAs. Hence, it could be concluded from her argument that in order to maintain both interactants' face, the complimentee tends to agree with the compliment to various extents. This is supported by research involving English data (Henderson, 1996; Nelson, Al-Batal and Echols, 1996). Nelson, Al-Batal and Echols (1996) analyzed 87 compliment/compliment response sequences in American English and fifty-two in Syrian Arabic in three broad categories: acceptance, mitigations, and rejections. Their analysis reveals that both Syrians and Americans tend to either accept or mitigate Cs more frequently than to reject them. For instance, of the American CRs, 50% were coded as acceptances, 45% as mitigations and 5% as rejections and for the Syrians CRs, 67%, 33% and 0 respectively. Furthermore, both groups were also found to employ similar types of responses (e.g. agreeing utterance and compliment returns).

In contrast, Brown and Levinson's face preservation theory does not seem to work well for some Asian languages such as Korean (Han, 2001) and Chinese (Chen, 1993) whose compliment responding behavior has been investigated. Chen's (1993) results do not support Brown and Levinson's politeness model. In investigating politeness strategies used in CRs by American and Chinese speakers, he suggests that in responding to compliments American English speakers were largely motivated by Leech's (1983) Agreement Maxim, which encourages the conversational participants to minimize the expression of disagreement and maximize the expression of agreement between them. Thus, the strategies used aim at maximizing agreements between the self (the receiver of compliment) and others (giver of compliment) and minimizing disagreements between the self and others. This explanation

accounts for the high frequency of American compliment acceptance found in Chen's study. The strategies of responding to compliments employed by the Chinese, in contrast, were governed by Leech's Modesty Maxim, which encourages the conversational participants to minimize the expression of self praise and maximize the expression of self dispraise. This explained the categorization of ninety-six percent of Chinese compliment responses as Rejections in Chen's investigation. Chen then argues that this difference is related to the differences of social values between the two cultures, "particularly in their respective beliefs about what constitutes self-image" (p. 49). His findings also point out some inadequacies of Brown and Levinson's (1989) model of politeness, because their model has difficulties in explaining strategies used the Chinese subjects in Chen's study. Chen's argument is supported by the result of Han's (2001) research in which a much higher rate of rejection responses was found in Korean data than in American English data. A similar finding was also reported in a recent case study of Korean data (Yu, 2002), which suggests that rejection of compliments should be explained by cultural aspects, not by FTAs. To further this argument, it is worth investigating the differences in social perceptions of "face" between different cultural contexts. However, a closer look at the methodology of previous research, particularly that by Chen (1993) and Holmes (1988a), can show why this is not necessarily the case.

Chen (1993) and Holmes (1988a) differ in one essential subcategory in their analytical frameworks. Holmes identifies *downgrading* the object of compliment as *acceptance,* whereas this subcategory is absent in Chen's framework. Instead, Chen places a very similar subcategory *denigrating* the object of the compliment in the broader strategy of *rejection*. Despite Chen's justification of all subcategories in his framework, the reason for which *denigrating* in his study is classified as *rejection* instead of *acceptance* is not mentioned. Chen concludes from his findings that the Chinese data bear hardly any similarities either to Holmes' (1988a) distribution of strategies of CRs of New Zealand English speakers. This is mainly because Chen's Chinese data reveal a very high rate of rejections, whereas a high rate of acceptance was found in Holmes' (1988a) English data. Therefore, it is relevant to ask if the difference in the way subcategories are grouped influences the results of the research mentioned above.

Research on some Asian languages such as Korean and Chinese has also shown that compliments as emotional gifts are received in ways that are, to some extent, similar to the way gifts are given and received in these cultures. The Chinese (Chen, 1993) and the Koreans (Han, 2001; Yu, 2002) reject compliments and/or downgrade the content of the compliment and/or denigrate themselves in order to show themselves to the complimenter as modest and polite people. Similar indications of modesty can also be seen in some linguistic aspects associated with gift-giving and gift-receiving in Chinese culture (Hua, Wei & Yuan, 1998; 2000) and in Korean culture (Kim, 1977). First, the Koreans and the Chinese frequently downgrade the value of the gift they offer to other people. Gift givers tend to employ belittling expressions such as "small" or "a little" to describe their gift although they, in many cases, spend much money on it (Hua, Wei & Yuan, 2000). In the Chinese data, the offer is often made on behalf of someone else although that "someone else" does not necessarily have

a role in that offer. Typical examples are "My husband/mother/sister/ asked me to bring something for you". By doing this, gift offerers "downplay" their role in the act by transferring the responsibility (Hua, Wei & Yuan, 1998) and hence, the receiver's gratefulness to another person. A similar phenomenon can be observed in deflected compliments, where the complimentee shifts the praised credit to other people, God, luck, or fate. On receiving a gift, gift receivers tend initially to reject it before eventually accepting it. They can even decline a gift two or three times before the final acceptance. This rejection is similar to compliment rejection in that in both cases the receiver rejects compliments or gifts to express their modesty and hence, politeness in these cultures.

Lorenzo-Dus' (2001) contrastive study of compliment responses among Spanish and British students adds one new strategy of responding to compliments in the CR literature. The results reveal Spanish males tend to upgrade compliments ironically much more frequently than their female friends. This type of compliment responses, however, was absent in the British data. Lorenzo-Dus also indicates the different interpretation by the two societies of the weight and the value attached to negative or positive politeness strategies. For instance, the Spanish respondents consider their direct expressions for disagreement on compliments socially appropriate. For the British participants, however, verbalizing their disagreement on compliments is inappropriate and violates the communicative rule of attending to the complimentee's negative face wants.

In respect to research on Cs and CRs in Vietnamese, some attempts have also been made to contribute to the understanding of this speech act. Nevertheless, the focus of these studies is mainly on Cs and CRs in Vietnamese are not adequately examined. In terms of Cs, Suu (1990) noticed that Vietnamese tend to compliment personal features without fear that this could make the addressee embarrassed or could be interpreted as a signal of sexual interest. This is supported in Truc's (1996) contrastive study. Using very similar questionnaires to collect data, Truc found that the Vietnamese tend to refuse compliments completely or downgrade the object of compliment.

This literature review shows that although there is extensive research on CRs, it still lacks insights into why or for what motives such responses are employed. In addition, as mentioned earlier in this paper, most of the studies were conducted in English-speaking countries. The shortfall of non-English data in the CR literature does not allow us to have a deeper understanding of this speech act in non-Western cultures. The CR literature review also shows that the previous researchers obtained C/CR sequences mainly by questionnaires or/and by asking the participants to recall their latest Cs and CRs instead from spontaneous, authentic data. Moreover, as can be seen in the previous research design, it is still not clear how the strategies of CRs (e.g., accepting, rejecting or deflecting) are identified or labeled. Many utterances can be multifunctional, but as Holmes (1988a) argues, it is often possible to identify their primary function in a particular context. However, it is still hard to identify the main strategy in CRs whose different functions are sometimes of equal weight. That is to say, different strategies may be employed in the same CR and these strategies function equally in this CR. In the following C/CR sequence in Vietnamese A compliments B's husband:

A : Này, nhất ông xã chị đấy.

(Hey your husband is the best)

B: Còn lâu mới nhất! Nhưng cũng được cái thương và chiều vợ th ìnhất

(Far from that but the good thing is he loves and pleases his wife)

In such a response it is not clear if B accepted or rejected the compliment and which of these strategies (i.e., acceptance and rejection) is primary. That is to say, some complex CRs do not belong to only one category/class/label. The receiver of compliment, in fact, can possibly use more than one strategy to respond to a compliment. In other words, the distribution of strategies used in responding to compliments should be examined both *between* CRs and *within* CRs. In addition, different levels of denying or accepting a compliment can also be observed. For instance, a rejection such as "It is ugly" is stronger than "It is not beautiful" which in turn is clearly different from a milder rejection like "I don't really think it is beautiful". Nevertheless, it is not clear in the CR literature how this is addressed. Therefore, a proper investigation on the strength of rejecting and accepting in responding to Cs could fill this gap in the literature and bring about insightful perceptions about CRs.

As shown in previous review and in Nelson, Al-Batal and Echols' (1996) remark, there is much more research on Cs than on CRs, and the studies on the latter were mainly conducted in English-speaking countries. What is more, the data from the previous research were mainly obtained by questionnaires and/or extended interviews in which the participants recalled their latest compliments and compliment responses. That is to say, the data collected were not spontaneously-produced language. With consideration to all of the factors mentioned above, this research is aimed to fill the gap in the literature by exploring strategies employed in responding to compliments in the Vietnamese language, based on authentic data.

The present research is designed to contribute to the understanding about the speech act of responding to compliments in Vietnamese. It is valuable, in part, because it was conducted in a language whose compliment   ehavior has not been adequately investigated. The present study is also valid in that it uses spontaneously-produced language. In addition, it investigates CR strategies used by the Vietnamese with reference to the complimentees' interpretation of their CRs. Therefore, the data analysis is based both on C/CR sequences collected and on the subjects' justifications of their CRs. An attempt is also made to reveal different forms that are used to serve the same speech act (e.g., different level of rejection or acceptance).

1.3 Research Questions

This study is to answer the following questions:

1. What are strategies used by the Vietnamese to respond to compliments?

2. How does their perception of compliments influence their responses?

2. Research Methodology

The methodology of this research is both qualitative and quantitative. It is qualitative in the

sense that the interpretation of the data collected is based on the analysis of C/CR sequences collected and on the analysis of the subjects' interpretation of their CRs. The design is also quantitative in that the data is quantified in order to reveal possible frequencies and correlations of compliment response type. In addition, the corpus of three hundred and sixty C/CR sequences collected is relatively authentic, because they were spontaneously produced by the subjects in extended interviews. The way the interviews were organized in order to obtain authentic data is described in the following section.

2.1 Research Procedures

The research design comprises one hundred and twenty-six participants, one hundred and twenty of whom are interviewees and six are interviewers. Three of the interviewers were females and the other three were males. One male and one female interviewer were middle-aged. One male and one female interviewer were in their early twenties. The two others were in their late fifties. The interviewees were from the interviewers' social networks. Information about the interviewers and interviewees' age, status, gender, and the level of intimacy between them (i.e. the length and intensity of the relationship) was recorded. The interviewees (sixty males and sixty females) were informed that the purpose of the interview was for research on language in general before the extended conversations were carried out. The researcher worked as one of the interviewers. The five other interviewers were trained before they carried out extended interviews with other participants. For preparation, the researcher instructed them to give compliments in a natural way in conversations. After that, these interviewers were given chances to practice this act. Then the interviews were conducted as a normal extended conversation in which the interviewer tactfully complimented the interviewees on any suitable topics (three compliments at least and four compliments at most for each conversation). The interviews were then recorded to last from eight to fourteen minutes. They were all tape-recorded. Right after each conversation, the interviewees were allowed to listen to their conversation and were asked to give their interpretation of their CRs. The interviewees' interpretations were also recorded. To maintain the validity of the data, each participant as an interviewee took part in only one conversation in the process of data collection. Therefore, each interviewer worked with twenty interviewees. The transcription of all of the interviews resulted in a corpus of three hundred and sixty-one C/CR sequences. After the process of data collection was finished, the researcher asked the interviewees for their permission to use the transcriptions of their C/CR in the study. Only one C/CR sequence was not used at a participant's request. This leads to a total corpus of three hundred and sixty C/CR sequences analysed in the present research.

2.2 Theoretical Framework for Data Analysis

Each CR is identified according to the main strategies of relatively equal weight used in it. This is to acknowledge that a CR can sometimes involve more than one strategy and that different strategies in the same CR may serve more than one function, as shown in example 1. In addition, the sub-strategies are arranged in a special way that reflects the various level of strength of acceptance or refusal. This is because of the observation that in Vietnamese CRs there are different levels of acceptance and denial. Downgrading and Denigrating are not

used as a separate subcategory as they were in the previous research in the CR literature. This is because in the researcher's view using downgrading or denigrating as independent subcategories would oversimplify the Vietnamese data. More specifically, the different levels of these categories found in the present study function very differently. Therefore, downgrading and denigrating are employed according to the various meanings they convey. For instance, an utterance such as "It is fuel consuming" as a response to "You have a beautiful car" is considered as an implicit acceptance level seven (see below). In this instance, the complimentee downgrades the object of the compliment (i.e., the car) by expressing its negative aspect (i.e., fuel consuming). However, the complimentee does not downgrade the complimented attribute of the car (i.e., beautiful). Therefore, in this example, downgrading is regarded as weakly accepting the compliment. On the contrary, when the same compliment "You have a beautiful car" evokes a response like "It is ugly", downgrading is, in this context, coded as a strong rejection of the compliment at level three (see below). This is because the complimentee directly denies the praised attribute (i.e., beautiful) of the object (i.e., the car) by expressing its opposite, negative value (i.e., ugly). A similar situation can also be seen in the strategy of denigrating. In denigrating themselves, complimentees convey different messages in their responses to the same compliment. For example, "I am stupid" as a response to "You are intelligent" is identified as rejection at level three (see below), whereas "I am lazy" as a response to the same compliment above is coded as the complimentee's weak acceptance of the compliment. The justification of the categorization of CR strategies will become clear in the following section.

The strategies of Accepting Cs consist of:

1) Utterances upgrading compliments (e.g., "*Chắc chắn rồi, em lúc nào cũng tốt cả*" meaning "Sure, I am always kind") in which the complimentee confirms and emphasizes and/or gives more information which upgrades the value of the attribute of compliment.

2) Agreeing utterances (e.g., "*Em cũng thích lắm*" meaning "I like it too" or "*Ừ chúng nó xinh nhỉ*" meaning "Yes, they are lovely") in which complimentees explicitly express their agreement with the compliment.

3) Thanking (e.g., "*Cảm ơn*" meaning "Thanks") when the CR consists of only this appreciation token to express the complimentee's acceptance of the compliment.

4) Rhetorical questions (e.g, "*Trông được không?*" meaning "How does it look?") in which the complimentee expects a confirmation of the positive value of the attribute complimented or even waits for another compliment.

5) Compliment return, which uses an Agreement token such as "too", "also" and "as well" (e.g., "*Của chị cũng đẹp đấy thôi*" meaning "Yours is lovely too"). These utterances express the complimentee's implicit acceptance of the compliment and they also upgrade the positive value belonging to the complimenter.

6) Comments that express the complimentee's agreement with the compliment by qualifying the praised attribute at a lower level (e.g., "*Ừ, cũng chẳng tệ lắm*" meaning "Yes, it is not bad" as a response to "*Xe này xịn đấy*" meaning "This is a great

motorbike").

7) Utterances denigrating/downgrading aspects which are <u>not</u> being complimented (e.g., "*Nhưng em ẩu lắm*" meaning "But I am careless" as a response to "*Cậu thông minh thật đấy*" meaning"You are so intelligent"). With these utterances the complimentee implicitly accepts the complimented attribute. The implication of the CR in the example above is "Yes I am intelligent but I am careless".

8) *Appreciation tokens* such as "*Cảm ơn*" meaning "Thank you" are not counted as a separate strategy in CRs in Vietnamese when these appreciation tokens accompany a denial, an acceptance or a deflection. This is because of the researcher's observation that in the Vietnamese data, thanking can either precede or follow a denial, an acceptance, or a deflecting utterance as shown respectively in the following examples: "*Cảm ơn anh đã khen nhưng mũ này xấu lắm*" (Thank you for your comment but this hat is ugly), "*Cũng được, cảm ơn*" (Not bad, thank you), or "*Cảm ơn em, mũ này bán đầy*"(Thank you, this hat is sold everywhere).

The strategies for Rejecting Cs consist of:

1) Disagreeing utterances which reveal complimentees' perception of the complimenter's motive. Complimentees know that the complimenter wants something from them (e.g., "*Muốn gì đấy?*" meaning "What do you want?" Or "*Nói xem muốn gì nào*" meaning "Just say what you want"). These utterances represent the complimentee's extreme denials of compliments.

2) Disagreeing utterances which also reveal the compliment receiver's perception of the compliment giver's motive (e.g., "*Đừng nịnh anh nữa*" meaning "Don't flatter me" or "*Chỉ được cái nịnh*" meaning "You are flattering me"). However, this type of utterance does not represent such a strong denial as the first type in that the receiver of the compliment does not directly confront complimenters about their motives.

3) Disagreeing utterances in which the complimentee gives the opposite opinion about the attribute of compliment (e.g., "*Xấu chứ*" meaning "It is ugly" as a response to "*Nhà bác đẹp quá*" meaning "Your house is so nice").

4) Disagreeing utterances in which compliment receivers either ask the complimenter not to compliment them or directly downgrade the attribute of compliment (e.g., "*Đừng nói thế chứ*" meaning "Please, don't say so" or "*Chẳng đẹp tý nào cả*" meaning "It is not beautiful" as a response to "*Mũ này đẹp thật*" meaning "This is a beautiful hat").

5) Utterances that judge or qualify the compliment (e.g., "Anh *khen quá rồi*" meaning "You are overcomplimenting" or "*Cô nói đùa chứ*" meaning "You are joking"). These utterances express the compliment receiver's refusal of compliments although this refusal is not verbally as strong as the previous refusing types.

6) Mild disagreeing utterances (e.g., "*Em chẳng nghĩ thế đâu*" meaning "I don't really think so" or "*Đấy là anh nghĩ thế chứ*" meaning "Maybe that is what you think" or "*Nhưng ba mẹ cháu bảo cháu là lười suốt*" meaning "But my parents say I am lazy"). These

utterances often accompany some nonverbal expressions such as smiling to soften the refusal.

7) Compliment returns which use disagreement tokens such as "*Không*" meaning "No" and/or express complimentees' appreciate the complimenter's attribute more highly than theirs (e.g., "*Không, của cậu đẹp hơn*" meaning "No, yours is more beautiful").

The strategies of Deflecting Cs consist of:

1) Offering the complimenter the object of compliment (e.g., "*Cậu có muốn thử không?*" meaning "Do you want to try it too?"). The complimentee directly offers to lend or give the object of compliment to the complimenter. In some cases where the object of compliment is not available to offer (e.g., "*Bánh bác làm lần trước ngon quá*' meaning "The cakes you made last time were delicious") complimentees could express their willingness by promising an offer in the future (e.g., *"Lần sau bác lại làm cho nhể*" meaning "Next time I will make it again for you").

2) Informative comments (e.g., "*Chị mua ở Hà Nội đấy*" meaning "I bought it in Ha Noi") with which the receiver of the compliment simply gives more information related to the attribute (normally objects) of compliment. This is to deflect the compliment and the information provided is not aimed to upgrade the value of the attribute of compliment.

3) Credit shift (e.g., "*Vợ tôi quyết đấy*" meaning "My wife made the decision" or "*Gặp may thôi*" meaning "I am just lucky" or "*Cũng nhờ trời cả*" meaning "Thanks to heavenly spirits"). In this substrategy complimentees shift the credit to another person or luck/fate/God (normally referring to heavenly spirits). This helps them avoid confrontation with the compliment so they do not have to directly accept or reject the compliment.

4) Questioning the sincerity of the compliment (e.g., "*Mày thích thật đấy à?*" meaning "Do you really like it?" or "*Mày có chắc không đấy?*" meaning "Are you sure?"). The rising intonation at the end of these questions signals the complimentee's doubt about the sincerity of the compliment.

5) Ironic comments (e.g., "*Tối nay chả cần ăn nữa*" meaning "I don't have to eat tonight" to convey the message that "I am full because of your compliment", or "*Tiếc quá, tớ lại chẳng có đồng nào cả*" meaning " What a pity! I don't have a 200 dong [Vietnamese currency] note with me" with the implication that "I do not have any money to reward you for your compliment"). These comments do not necessarily mean the compliment receiver accepts or rejects the compliment. Their implication is that the compliment receiver does not take the compliment seriously.

6) Topic shift (e.g., "*Khi nào thì qua Úc lại đấy*" meaning "When will you be back to Australia?" as a response to "*Anh đúng là siêu về văn học Việt Nam hiện đại đấy*" meaning "You are an expert in Vietnamese modern literature"). In this strategy the compliment receiver ignores the compliment and shifts to a new topic.

7)

3. Findings and Interpretations

3.1 Patterns in Compliment Responses

Being fundamental in politeness, the act of responding to Cs in Vietnamese conforms strictly to the notion of "le". The notion of "le" reveals the close relationship between modesty and politeness in Vietnamese culture. In other words, for the Vietnamese it is polite to be modest or even self-deprecatory (Jamieson, 1993; Ellis, 1995; Pham, 2011). Receiving a compliment is similar to receiving an emotional gift or even having a debt that needs to be returned in ways, which both meet the complimenter's expectation and express the complimentee's perception of the compliment. The subjects' interpretation of their compliment responses in the present research shows that the Vietnamese find it acceptable for other people to appreciate and compliment them but they find it unacceptable and even impolite to verbally agree with compliments regardless of how they think of themselves. As can be seen in Table 1, 55.83 % of compliments are completely rejected. However, the inclusion of responses in which at least one rejection element is present raises the total percentage to 66.95 %. The number of rejected compliments observed in this study is significantly higher than that of accepted compliments (16.39%). This supports the findings in previous research on non-Western languages (Chen, 1993; Han, 2001 and Yu, 2002). The main reason for the high number of rejected compliments is not just because the receiver of the compliment wants to appear humble. The analysis of the participants' interpretation of their responses reveals that the reason for the Vietnamese rejection of compliments is more complicated. They reject compliments because they want to be perceived as being modest regardless of whether the compliment is perceived as sincere or not. If the compliment is sincere praise, the compliment rejection will satisfy the compliment receiver's need of appearing modest. However, if the compliment is not sincere, the compliment rejection will preserve complimentees' face by showing the complimenter that they are wise enough not to be fooled. Thus, the purpose of rejecting compliments is twofold. Compliment rejection keeps compliment receivers "safe", especially when they are not sure whether the compliment is sincere or not:

Table 1. Patterns of Vietnamese compliment responses

Patterns used in compliments	N	Percent (%)
Reject	201	55.83
Accept	59	16.39
Deflect	52	14.44
Reject +Deflect/ Deflect + Reject	6	1.67
Accept+ Deflect/ Deflect + Accept	8	2.22
Reject + Accept/ Accept + Reject	34	9.45
Total	360	100

The analysis of the Vietnamese data also reveals six patterns in compliments. They are: reject,

accept, deflect, reject/deflect (in either order), accept/deflect (in either order), and reject/accept (in either order). The rejection pattern is found in compliment responses in which the compliment is denied (e.g., " I am not young any more"). The acceptance pattern refers to responses that express the complimentee's agreement with the compliment at various levels. The reject/deflect pattern refers to compliments in which a deflection element either precedes or follows a reject element. Similarly, in the accept/deflect pattern, both an acceptance element and a deflection factors are found in a response. For example, T compliments Y on her new bookshelf:

T: Cái giá sách của chị vừa tiện lại vừa để chỗ quá đẹp.

   (*Your bookshelf is both nice and in nice place*)

Y: Cũng gặp may nhưng nó chiếm chỗ kha khá đấy.

   (*I am lucky. But it occupies much space*)

In the C/CR sequence above, by downgrading the aspect that is not praised (i.e., size) other than the praised aspects (i.e., nice and in nice place) Y implicitly accepts the compliment. Nevertheless, Y initially deflects the compliment by shifting the complimented credit to her luck (i.e., I am lucky). Therefore, in Y' s response, a deflection factor precedes a weak acceptance of the compliment.

The reject/accept pattern is seen in responses where both of these elements come together. The other three patterns: accept/deflect, reject/deflect, and reject/accept were not reported in any previous investigations on compliment responses. The presence of the deflection element found to precede or follow a reject or accept element in compliment responses could be explained in two ways. First, these patterns do not exist in languages whose compliment behaviour has been examined in the literature. This means that in those languages a compliment is simply just accepted or rejected or deflected. Therefore, the combination of any two of these strategies was absent in previous data. Second, the presence of the reject/deflect and accept/deflect pattern in this study is due to the fact that the present study involves a greater number of categories and hence, allows a more detailed analysis. As earlier argued in the present research, it is not necessarily true for a CR to employ just one strategy. Complex CRs can involve more than one strategy simultaneously. The present paper shows that the compliment receiver can sometimes deflect a compliment before or even after rejecting or accepting it.

One finding in CRs is the reject/accept pattern, in which opposite strategies are found to appear together.   The subjects' interpretation of their CRs shows that these strategies are deliberately used and have equal values. This can be seen in a typical example where A is complimenting B on her youthful appearance:

A.   Em không gặp chị một năm thôi mà nhìn chị dạo này trẻ hẳn ra.

   (*I haven't met you for just one year but you look much younger this time*).

B.   Đẹp gì nữa em chỉ là mấy đứa nhỏ nó cũng lớn cả rồi nên mình rảnh rang hơn, thì nhìn nó cũng đỡ hơn thôi.

(*I am not young any more but the children now have all grown up so I have more time for myself, and so look better*)

As can be seen clearly from the extract above, the first part of the response (i.e. I am not young any more) is to reject the compliment. Nevertheless, the rest of the response (i.e. but the children now have all grown up so I have more time for myself and so look better) expresses an implicit acceptance. B's interpretation of her response is that she finds it inappropriate to agree immediately with the compliment on her being younger. Therefore, she initially rejected the compliment. However, she did feel she looked better than one year before so she decided to implicitly accept the compliment by giving herself some credit afterward. In other words, the second part of B's response implies that she does acknowledge her being younger or at least looking better because she has more time for herself. We will argue that the current literature does not provide enough theoretical and empirical justification for the existence of this reject/accept pattern in CRs.

The CR literature has reflected three main strategies in CRs. They are: accepting, rejecting and deflecting. In Nelson, Al-Batal & Echols' (1996) report, the term "mitigate" was used in replacement for *deflecting,* which in their study, becomes a subcategory under "mitigate"). However, on the one hand, the subcategories under these three broad categories are rather different in different studies (e.g., Daikuhara, 1986; 1988; Herbert & Straight, 1989; Herbert, 1990; Chen, 1993; Nelson, Al-Batal & Echols, 1996; Farghal & Al-Khatib, 2001 and Lorenzo-Dus, 2001). One example can be seen in the comparison of Chen's (1993) and Holmes's (1988a) theoretical framework as shown earlier in the present paper. On the other hand, the data analysis in the current literature has indicated that a compliment can belong to only one subcategory, and hence one category (either rejection, acceptance, or deflection). This framework allows no exception and enables no further insightful interpretations of CRs. The finding of the present paper shows that this framework does not fit the Vietnamese data, in which the rejection/acceptance pattern is observed.

The appearance of the reject/accept pattern and its interpretation in the present paper requires a major refinement in the current analysis of CR literature. The literature on CRs also shows that people reject compliments to avoid self praise, as Pomerantz's (1978) Self-Praise Avoidance Principle suggests (Daikuhara, 1986; Herbert & Straight, 1989; Herbert, 1989 and Nelson, Al-Batal & Echols, 1996) or to appear humble (Gu, 1990; Chen, 1993 and Yu, 2002) when they are driven by Leech's (1983) Modesty Maxim. Complimentees who accept compliments are argued to follow Pomerantz's (1978) Principle of Agreeing with Others, Leech's (1983) Agreement Maxim or Herbert's (1989) Social Solidarity. The previous papers have indicated these principles interact *between* CRs and this interaction results in the high number of rejection strategies in some research (Herbert & Straight, 1989; Chen, 1993 and Han, 2001) and the high number of acceptance strategies in others (Holmes, 1988 and Nelson, Al-Batal & Echols, 1996). The present study shows that, contrary to the popular assumptions in the literature on CRs, these principles also interact *within* CRs where both the rejection and acceptance element are found. More specifically, the need of appearing modest makes the complimentee reject the compliment, but at the same time the force of self-respect /self-appreciation encourages the complimentee to verbally express their agreement with the

compliment. In other words, the tension between self-esteem and self-denying is indicated in responses where both rejection and acceptance factors are observed. A closer examination of this pattern reveals why this might be the case.

The two parts of the responses of this type are linked by contrast tokens such as "but" and "just that". Thirty-three out of thirty-four responses of this pattern have their rejection part come before the acceptance part in the reject-accept order. In the rejection part, thirty-two of the responses indicate strong denial at level 3 and or level 4 (see Table 2) in which the negative value opposed to the positive value of the compliment is mentioned (level 3) and the denial of the positive value (e.g., "not beautiful") is made. In the acceptance part, however, thirty-three out of thirty-four responses use a mild strategy of implicit acceptance at level 6 (see Table 3) in which the complimentee qualifies the compliment (e.g., "just look better"). Thus, it is relevant to ask if it is possible that the acceptance part would not necessarily be added if the negation part were not expressed in such strong terms. In other words, the acceptance part counter-balances the preceding strong rejection. In responses to very similar compliments when the employed rejection strategies are at a weaker level (level 6 or level 7), acceptance strategies are not present. That is to say, the levels of rejection or acceptance do play a role in CRs. The following section will examine the strength of negation in compliment rejection and various levels of accepting Cs.

3.2 Levels of Negation in Compliment Responses

In compliment rejection the data indicate seven relatively distinctive types of negation which express the strength of denials at different levels. This seven-level scale is based on the knowledge and perceptions of the researcher as a native speaker of Vietnamese, and its validity is confirmed by many other Vietnamese native speakers who are the researcher's colleagues and friends. The data reflect diverse rejection responses in which different patterns are used to deny compliments. Level 1 can be seen as the strongest denial in which the complimentee directly asks complimenters to reveal their motivation in giving compliments. Responses of this type are rare (only 0.91% of the total number of rejection strategies used) but they do exist. These responses express the compliment receiver's perception of the motives for paying compliments. Level 2 is also where the motives of complimenting are confronted. However, rejection at this level does not request a verbalization of motives from the compliment giver. In the total of two hundred and forty-one responses where at least one rejection element is found (201 completely rejected and 6 rejected/deflected (in either order), 34 rejected/accepted (in either order), the rejection strategies are present as many as 329 times. This means one response can employ more than one rejection strategy. The most frequently employed rejection strategy is denying the positive value of the compliment by a negative form (i.e. <u>not</u>) (level 4, 28.27 %) and expressing an opposite value to the positive value of the compliment (level 3, 23.70%). The semantic formula analysis of rejection responses indicates that the Vietnamese tend to give longer and more complex responses when they reject compliments.

Table 2. Levels of negation in rejecting compliments

Level	Strength of negation	N	Percent (%)
1	Request to reveal motivation (e.g., "What do you want?")	3	0.91
2	Motivation confronted (e.g., "You are flattering me")	18	5.47
3	Expression of opposite negative value (e.g., "It's ugly")	78	23.70
4	Denial of the value by negative form (e.g., "It's **not** nice")	93	28.27
5	Compliment judgement (e.g., "You are joking")	52	15.81
6	Expression of disagreement (e.g., "I **don't** think so")	33	10.03
7	Compliment return (e.g., "Yours is more beautiful")	52	15.81
Total rejection strategies employed		329	100

A closer examination of rejection patterns reflects an increasing level of denial in responses where two rejection strategies are present. The following C/CR sequence serves as a typical example of this type. The context is that C and D are close female friends. They are both in their forties. C compliments D on her obedient daughter:

C: Con gái chị lớn màngoan quá

  (*Your daughter is obedient although she is a full-grown adult*)

D: Ngoan gì cô. Nó hư lắm đấy.

    (*She is not obedient. She is very naughty*)

The response above can be coded as rejection at two levels. Initially, D denies the positive value complimented (she is not obedient) at level 4, which is followed by a stronger rejection in which D gives the opposite value to the value complimented ("naughty" to "obedient") (level 3). This means the strength of rejection responses where two rejection strategies are found tend to increase according to the order in which the two strategies are placed. Nevertheless, this is not the case for acceptance responses.

3.3 Strength of Acceptance in Compliment Responses

Table 3. Strength of acceptance strategies employed in compliment responses

Level	Strength of acceptance	N	Percent (%)
1	Compliment upgrading (e.g., "Yes, I am always kind")	5	4.76
2	Expression of agreement (e. g., "Yes, they are lovely")	7	6.67
3	Thanking (e.g., "Thank you")	3	2.86
4	Request for compliment reassurance (e.g., "Really?")	7	6.67
5	Compliment return with agreement tokens (e.g., "You **too**")	5	4.76
6	Compliment qualification (e.g., "It is not bad" to "It's great")	50	47.62
7	Downgrading aspects other than those of compliment (e.g., "But slow" to "Your motorbike is fashionable")	28	26.66
Total acceptance strategies employed		105	100

Unlike rejection responses, acceptance strategies are used only one hundred and five times in the total of one hundred and one responses where the acceptance element is observed. In addition, the semantic formula analysis indicates that the compliment receiver tends to give shorter and simpler responses when accepting a compliment. The data indicate seven degrees of accepting employed in acceptance responses. Compliment upgrading is found but at a low frequency. Thanking, perhaps is not used to signal an agreement with the compliment as often as has been found in previous papers (Holmes, 1988, Nelson, Al-Batal, Echols, 1996; Saito & Beecken, 1997; Li & Feng, 2000). On the contrary, the two lowest degrees (level 6 and level 7) were found to outnumber the other levels of accepting Cs (respectively 47.62% and 26.66 %). The data indicate that in accepting a compliment, the Vietnamese tend either to qualify the compliment by using expressions at a weaker level of appreciation compared with those in the original compliment (level 6). For instance, an utterance of "Yes I know a lot of words" was used to respond to "You are a Chinese dictionary". At the other less dominant level (level 7) the compliment receiver tends to give implicit acceptance by downgrading aspects that are not being complimented. This suggests that the Vietnamese prefer mild strategies when accepting Cs. However, a closer investigation of the use of acceptance strategies at level 7 offers more insights into why acceptance responses at this level are preferred.

The analysis of the compliment receivers' interpretation of their acceptance responses at level 7 indicates a strong reason for which they chose this strategy. When a woman compliments her male colleague of the same age on his new watch she says:" Your new watch is so beautiful". "Yes, perhaps it won't last long" he replies. The reason for the man's belief is that his watch bears a famous brand name. However, he feels uncomfortable to accept the compliment directly because of his fear that the complimentee does not like her own watch or that her watch is not as nice as his, or perhaps she even wants a watch like his. If any of these factors are true, according to the compliment receiver, his direct accepting the compliment may make the compliment giver feel uneasy. Therefore, by downgrading the quality of the watch instead of its physical appearance which is being praised (beautiful) the complimentee can lessen the gap between him and the complimenter and/or release the discomfort potentially created by the effect of his response. This suggests complimentees tend to accommodate in conversations by deliberately underestimating an aspect not specifically complimented but related to the attribute of compliment when they believe that the attribute of compliment is desired by the complimenter.

3.4 Strategies Employed to Deflect Compliments

Deflecting a compliment allows compliment receivers to avoid expressing their acceptance or rejection. In the Vietnamese data, six strategies are used to deflect compliments (see Table 4). They are: offering the attribute of the compliment; giving informative comments; credit shift; questioning sincerity; giving ironic comments, and topic shift.

As for offering strategy, when the complimented attribute is a specific object, complimentees find different ways to offer it to the compliment giver. For instance, they can give or lend the complimenter that object or to offer the complimenter a chance to try it. For example, K

comments on L's hair:

K: Bác dùng gìm àdạo này cháu thấy tóc bác f bạc hẳn.

(*What you are using, your hair is much less grey*)

L: Mày đem một fláhàthủ ôvề cho mẹ mày dùng thử xem.

(*You bring some of these herbal leaves for your mother to try and see*)

In deflecting compliments, offering the praised attribute is the least frequently found in the Vietnamese data. Similarly, questioning the sincerity of the compliment and giving ironic comments have a relatively low frequency of occurrence (7.94 % and 9.52 % respectively). Unlike the Spanish subjects in Lorenzo-Dus's (2001) research, the Vietnamese do not use comments to upgrade compliments ironically; rather ironic comments are employed to indicate simply that complimentees do not perceive the compliment seriously. In deflecting of this type, the Vietnamese often say "I don't have 200 dong notes with me now" to complimenters of equal or lower status. The response means "I don't have money to reward you for your compliment". The analysis of the subjects' interpretations reveals that with this response complimentees do not mean to judge the value of the compliment despite the fact that two hundred dongs is a very small amount of money (i.e., 0.03 AUD). The subjects use this strategy when they want to show the complimenter that they do not take the compliment seriously. This strategy allows complimentees to respond to the compliment ironically without saying whether they accept or reject it.

Table 4. Strategies employed in deflecting compliments

Strategies employed in deflecting Cs	N	Percent (%)
1. Offering (e.g., "I will cook it again for you")	4	6.35
2. Informative comment (e. g., "I bought it in Ha Noi)	11	17.46
3. Credit shift (e.g., "My wife made the decision")	29	46.03
4. Sincerity questioning (e.g., "Are you sure?")	5	7.94
5. Ironic comment (e.g., "I don't have any 200 notes with me now")	6	9.52
6. Topic shift (e.g., "Who is she?" to "You are great today")	8	12.70
Total deflection strategies employed	63	100

Credit shift, where complimentees shift the credit for which they are complimented to another person, luck, fate, or God (usually heavenly spirits) is the most common of the deflection strategies. Responses of this type enable compliment receivers to express their acknowledgement of other people's contribution for the attribute complimented. However, a more detailed examination of the subjects' interpretation of their responses indicates that shifting credit is most frequently employed when the complimentee finds it impossible either to accept or reject a compliment. This could be seen in the following example, where E is complimenting F on her house being situated on a good site:

E: Nhàchị ở chỗ này lý tưởng quá

(*Your house is in an ideal site*)

F: Cũng nhờ trời cả. May hơn khôn thôi.

   (*It is all thanks to God. Luck helps more than wisdom.*)

The subject's justification of her response reveals that shifting credit is not to simply recognize the speaker's indebtedness to heavenly spirits or to her luck. On the one hand, the subject says that she finds it inappropriate to accept the compliment. On the other hand, she is very pleased with her house being on a very good site, so it is not necessary for her to reject the compliment. In addition, in her belief, the compliment giver certainly knows that God and luck alone cannot help. Therefore, obviously no matter how she responds, the complimenter can still see her successfully possessing a house in a valuable place. By shifting the credit to God and luck she shows herself to the compliment giver as a modest and tactful person. In other words, the subject does not really mean to acknowledge God or luck, although he does express it in her response. That is to say, deflecting compliments of this type often occurs when complimentees believe that their responses have very little impact on the value that the complimenter gives to the praised attribute. In addition, when shifting credit complimetees are more concerned with how they will be thought of, than with how the value of the complimented attribute will be reconsidered by the complimenter as the result of their responses.

Informative comments and topic shift are found to appear less frequently than credit shift but more frequently than other deflection strategies. In terms of informative comments, the complimentee chooses to give more information *related* to the *subject* of the compliment not to the *complimented attribute* of that subject. In responding to "You have a very nice motorbike" complimentees choose not to discuss further the complimented attribute (i.e. nice) by saying how nice the motorbike is (i.e. acceptance) or how it is not nice (i.e. rejection); rather they add more information on the general subject of the compliment (i.e. the motorbike) by saying "I have had it for 2 months now". Deflecting of this type enables complimentees to show their acknowledgment and concern about the compliment without expressing their acceptance or rejection by maintaining the general topic with information which is new but not directly related to the complimented aspect. Topic shift, on the contrary, is where the general subject is not maintained in the complimentee's response. A detailed analysis of the subjects' justification of their responses shows that complimentees shift to a new topic when they do not feel comfortable to discuss the compliment further. Therefore, by introducing a new topic they change the direction of the conversation. However, an investigation on compliments which receive deflecting responses does not give enough information on which compliment types are more likely to evoke the topic shifting strategy.

4. Conclusion

The study shows both similarities and dissimilarities with other data in previous research on compliment responses. In responding to compliments the Vietnamese have a high frequency of rejection, as found in other non-Western data (Chen, 1993; Han, 2001 and Yu, 2002). However, unlike previous research where only three patterns of accepting, rejecting, and deflecting were identified, the present paper reveals six patterns of CRs. Specifically, it shows the existence of complex responses in which the compliment receiver does not simply

accept, reject or deflect a compliment. In responses of this type, contrary to the popular assumption in the current literature on CRs, in Vietnamese we also find the reject/accept pattern, where both opposite strategies, rejection and acceptance, are present in the same response. This pattern reflects the tension between the complimentee's self-esteem and modesty/self-denying in responding to compliments.

The present study also reveals different levels of the rejection and acceptance strategy, which reflect the strength of these strategies at various levels. The order in which these strategies appear in a response also plays a role in conveying its meaning. Additionally, the Vietnamese perceptions of the motives of complimenting are indicated in their responses. This perception is most clearly observed in their request to reveal compliment motivations (e.g., "What do you want?") and motivation confrontations (e.g., "You are flattering me"). This is to say, the way the Vietnamese respond to compliments reflects how they perceive compliments and how they want the compliment giver to perceive themselves by their responses. However, as Bilous & Krauss (1988) assert, interactions are socially situated, so in investigating any interaction, the relevant properties of the situation in which the interaction takes place should be taken into account. This means that only with a full awareness of who the speakers are, what they talk about, when, and why, and in which situation can we fully understand a single interaction. Therefore, in order to offer a better understanding of Vietnamese compliment behaviour, we now examine the *who* and the *what* involved in interaction. Specifically, in the scope of the present paper, we investigate the extent to which factors such as interlocutor's gender and conversational topics influence the act of responding to compliments in this language.

In general, the results of this research, on the one hand, have offered more insights into the act of responding to compliments in the Vietnamese language. On the other hand, it suggests the following major refinements in the literature with essential evidence from the Vietnamese data. First, there is a need to acknowledge that compliment acceptance and rejection are indicated in different levels. Although these levels may not necessarily appear in an order of strength in all languages, they do reflect different perceptions about compliments of the receiver of the compliment in those languages. Second, classifying any single compliment response as rejection, acceptance or deflection is oversimplifying this act. The Vietnamese data have indicated the possibility and complexity of the combination of these strategies in compliment responses. In addition, the order in which these strategies appear is also essential in the sense that it reflects the way compliment receivers perceive the compliment and the forces which influence the act of responding to it. This could be seen in the existence of the reject/accept pattern, where a strong rejection is followed by a mild acceptance. This pattern indicates the complimentee's tension between the need to appear modest and the force of self appreciation. In other words, the principles of modesty and self-appreciation interact not only *between* CRs but also *within* CRs. Finally, the findings that the Vietnamese find it *polite* to be *modest* and even *self denigrated*, which is illustrated in the high rejection to compliments in the present study, do not imply that *politeness* is *modesty*; but rather *modesty* should be considered as much as one of the indications of *politeness* in this culture regarding compliment responses. This is to say, the findings of the present research suggest changes

in the literature which can then offer greater chances for the act of responding to compliments to be investigated more adequately and effectively.

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