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# Speech act of compliment: A theoretical perspective

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**Abstract**
The expressive speech act of compliment has received a great deal of study by linguists and researchers since it reflects the psychological states of the speaker identified in the propositional contents. Each speaker may find himself /herself tending to express approval many times daily about hearer's presence, behavior, characteristic …etc. Thus, compliments are common features of everyday speeches due to their great number offered and received.
The present research aims at:
1. Scrutinizing the theoretical views embraced by linguists and researchers concerning definitions, types, strategies and classifications of compliments as speech acts.
2. The central properties that differentiate compliments acts from other similar acts.
3. The functions of compliment as a speech act.
4. The felicity conditions on the speech act of compliment as modified by the researcher.

**Keywords:** Speech act, compliment, expressive act, linguistic strategies, felicity conditions, theoretical perspective

## 1. Introduction
### 1.1 The Speech Act of Compliment
Compliment is a very common expressive speech act according to Searle (1975) [30] which can be used to anyone, every day and in many circumstances. In this case, compliment speech act explicitly or implicitly extends acknowledged to another person other than the speaker. As Holmes noted, "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 (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer" (Holmes, 1986: 485; 1988: 446; 1995: 117) [16-17]. This speech act is combined of two parts: how to make compliments and how to respond to compliments. This research deals with the former due to the limitation of the study.

According to Searle (1975:75) [30], compliment as speech acts can be used by anyone, every day and in different situations. In other words, compliments refer to polite verbal expressions of admiration or approval of other people and generally attribute the value "good" to the addressee. They represent one means whereby an individual or more significantly, society as a whole can inspire, through strengthening, certain preferred performances (Manes, 1983: 7) [24]. Following Holmes (1988) [16-17], compliments can be considered as expressive speech acts (Searle, 1969:15) [29] since their aim is to form a positive feeling for the hearer and reinforce their positive self-image. Consequently, Holmes perceives compliments as positively affective speech acts directed at the addressee, whose function is to increase or consolidate the solidarity between the speaker and the hearer (1986:486). Moreover, the speech act of compliment is fundamentally well-mannered and allows the speaker to make use of available opportunities to express an interest in the hearer (Olshtain and Cohen, 1991:158) [26]. They also (ibid: 145) add that this speech act is used to express intimacy between speaker and listener, and, to preserve social harmony.

In addition, there are different viewpoints have been provided towards the speech act of compliment. Manes (1983:97) [24] for example, defines it with reference to culture; Compliment acts are similar to a window through which a society as a whole or an individual in particular can view what is valued by a relevant culture. Cohen (1991:25) [8] and Smadi (1999:15) [35], use compliments to function as socializing devices. It is the most suitable way of communicating solidarity. Kasper and Schmidt (1996:446-448) [20] provide, however, the

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following definition concerning the particular relationship between the speaker and the hearer; Whether it explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to the person addressed for her/his good (characteristic, skill, possession, etc) is valued positively by the speaker and the hearer as a compliment speech act.

As Wolfson (1983: 89) [38] pointed out, compliments "grease the social wheels" and therefore function as "social lubricants". Furthermore, Holmes states that compliment as a speech act, involves complex skills in sociolinguistics. She also states that speech act of complimenting has "a darker side". That is to say, a compliment may be interpreted the opposite and considered as an aggressive utterance. Moreover, if the hearer feels that he must return a compliment back to the speaker, the compliment may be regarded as a face-threatening act (Holmes, 1995, 119) [18]. They can be both direct and indirect expressions communicating the speaker's positive judgment about the addressee's outward appearance, work, personal traits, belongings, and about third parties closely connected to the addressee (e.g. wives or children) (Jaworski 1995: 64) [19] and (Lubecka 2000: 196) [1].

The researcher embraces the following definition as offered by Searle and Vanderveken (1985:215) [33] since he finds it the most appropriate one in his analysis of the pragmatic aspects of this speech act in general and his formulation of the felicity conditions in particular. Compliments are used to "express approval of the hearer for something". Such acts "presuppose that the thing the hearer is complimented for is good, nevertheless they need not inevitably be good for him". As an example of this is to compliment the hearer on their heroic and self-sacrificing behavior.

## 2. The Pragmatic Classification of Compliment

Pragmatists and philosophers differ in their dealing concerning the speech act of compliment. They even differ at the class the act belongs to. Some consider it as a behabitive act and others view it as expressive, or even hybrid speech acts.

## 2.1 Compliments as Behabitive Acts

In Speech Act Theory, Austin (1962: 150-162) [3] categorizes illocutionary acts into five categories taking into consideration English verbs. These categories are listed as follows:

- **Verdictives:** They are characterized by giving a verdict by a jury.
- **Exercitives:** They are characterized by exercising powers, rights or influences.
- **Commissives:** They are characterized by assuming of an obligation or declaring of an intention.
- **Behabitives:** They are characterized by adopting of an attitude.
- **Expositives:** They are characterized by clarifying of reasons or arguments.

Compliments appear in Austin's classification under the class of "behabitives", together with other expressions of sympathy, such as deploration, condolence, congratulation, but he never discusses them nor gives any examples. He describes this class as "a reaction to other people's behaviour and fortunes and of attitudes and expression of attitudes to someone else's past conduct or imminent conduct" (ibid.: 159). More precisely, he views compliments as a means of

expressing sympathy along with greetings, comforts and congratulations. Examples of this category are: apologies, thanks, greetings, compliments, etc (ibid).

Although the definitions of expressive and behabitives differ, the two classes cover nearly the same area. Expressive have the illocutionary point of expressing some psychological states of the speaker (Searle 1976: 12) [31], while behabitives have to do with attitudes and social behavior. Indeed, they take account of the notion of reaction to other people's behaviour and fortunes (Austin 1975:152-160) [4]. In other words, both signify a reaction that the speaker feels he/she has to manifest in certain conditions either for social agreements or for personal enthusiasms (Sbisa, 1984:106) [28].

Nevertheless, later explanations in speech act theory follow the same line. Bach and Harnish, for instance, collect compliments as a subclass of congratulations along with condolences and felicitations (1979: 52) [5]. They therefore fall under their class of acknowledgements, which express some positive or negative attitude towards others. Even though Searle (1976) [31] does not mention compliments in his politeness in compliment responses categories of illocutionary acts, they would possibly be grouped under expressives, which communicate the speaker's attitude to a specific state of affairs.

Compliments and congratulations, according to Norrick (1980: 297) [25], may be discriminated because compliments reflect the speaker's personal judgment and refer to that of the addressee as well, while congratulations, like condolences, are a response to an objective reality. Furthermore, the success of a compliment remarkably depends upon the recipient's interpretation as such, while that of a congratulation does not to the same extent. In conclusion, compliments usually refer to personal qualities and possessions, whereas congratulations refer to good fortune and accomplishments, even though the border between the two is not at all clear cut.

## 2.2 Compliments as Expressive Speech Acts

Searle developed Austin's speech acts theory further, according to Searle (1976: 1-13) [31] and (1979: 12-15) [32], the five basic kinds of illocutionary acts are: declaratives, commissives, expressives, representatives or assertives, and directives. One of speech acts classification by Searle is expressive utterances. According to Searle (1976: 12) [31] expressives are the illocutionary point of this class is to express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content. In other words, it refers to a speech act in which the speaker expresses his/her feeling and attitude about something. However, Searle (1976: 12-13) [31], on the other hand, does not even mention compliments, but only congratulations, which he categorizes as expressives. He enhances the paradigms of expressive verbs such as thank, congratulate, apologize, regret, deplore, and welcome (ibid.).

Since the speaker expresses a psychological state conveyed by a state of affairs that encompasses the hearer, the performance of an expressive act creates an interpersonal relation between them. Consequently, Haverkate (1984:23) [14] considers expressive acts to be "speaker and hearer centered". Expressive acts have no direction. The speaker merely expresses a mental state about a state of affairs

represented in the propositional content. (Vanderveken, 1994: 106) [37].

Searle and Vanderveken (1985:19) [33] state that a compliment is an expressive force of the form. Moreover, Searle (1979: 15) [32] relates the convivial class to his class of expressive acts. Therefore, compliments, belong to the expressive category. Compliments are also related to the expressive acts. Therefore, they are categorized as polite formulaic speech acts (Al-Rassam, 1999: 6) [2].

Yule (1996: 53) [40], in line with Searle, elucidates that expressives are one kind of speech acts that show what the speaker feels or relate with psychological states. Expressive utterances are the expression of pleasure, compliment, pain, sorrow, dislikes, joy, or likes. For instance:

**That's a very beautiful dress**
It is a means of admiring or compliment that uttered by the speaker to someone.

Coulthard (2014: 24-25) [10] shows that expressives are much less well defined, there is no dynamic association between words and world and no primitive psychological verb instead the illocutionary point of this class into expressing the psychological state. As examples he offers thank, apologize and deplore. Cutting (2002: l7) [11] also states that the expressive group include acts which the words state what the speaker feels, such as praising, apologizing, regretting, deploring, and congratulating.

## 2.3 Compliments as Hybrid Speech Acts

The nature of compliments, as Alfonzetti (2013:555-556) [1] shows, can be better understood if they are treated as hybrid speech acts, combining expressive and behabitive characteristics with verdictive ones. In compliments the speaker displays admiration towards the hearer (expressive or behabitive constituent as earlier mentioned (Searle 1976: 12) [31], who is consequently positively assessed (verdictive constituent) for something such as personality, looks, ability, possessions, performance or someone like partner, parents, children, who is more or less closely associated with him/her. The clearest indicators of verdictive force in the action of complimenting are the following:

1. The use of evaluative words, which are the most common formal characteristic of compliments.
2. The psychological state stated in the sincerity condition is also belief; the point of a compliment is not only to show admiration towards the hearer because of the property point out in the propositional content, but also, like all assertives, to commit the speaker to the truth of the stated proposition.
3. The essential condition: accordingly, a compliment is counted as an expression of admiration but also of belief of what is indicated in the propositional content.
4. The content of a compliment may as a result be said to be true or false, as occurs when the addressee reacts by either agreeing or disagreeing with the prior complimentary assertion. Such responses are impossible with pure expressives, like condolences or thanks, where the accuracy of the expressed proposition is assumed and taken for granted.
5. Compliments include a form of power on the part of the speaker, if power is perceived in a broad sense, covering social and cultural constrictions on the performance of the speech act (Sbisa 1984: 105) [28]. This is the reason why the recipient's uptake of an utterance as a compliment fundamentally depends upon his/her evaluation of the speaker's taste, ability, or competence to judge the complimented object. For the same reason, unlike pure expressives, compliments are most often used between equivalents; or, when they arise in exchanges between speakers of unequal status, they are typically given downwards, for example, by a person in a higher position to a lesser at work, by teachers to students, by parents to children. In such circumstances, compliments come closer to verdictives or even to directives, in so far as they aim at influencing or strengthening a certain conduct on the part of the addressee (Alfonzetti, 2013:556) [1].

## 3. Compliment Strategies

Compliment conduct has become a fascinating topic in linguistics (Boyle, 2000: 26) [6] and its sub-branches since it happens with a high frequency in our everyday life (We all offer and receive compliments to a lesser or greater amount) and since it significantly affects our affairs with other people. Besides, a compliment can be genuine and flattering, effective and vague, appropriate and inappropriate, etc.

Gorelov and Sedov point out that in rhetoric there are quite a lot of requirements to compliments. In this respect, a compliment necessitates realized speech efforts from the speaker, it presumes imaginative and creative orientation in speech. It goes without saying that different language behaviours follow different speech tactics in producing a compliment, and the choice of these tactics is determined by the sorts of individual styles of the speakers. However, as the observations of every-day speech have shown in the choice of intra-genre strategies that the kind of the language personality of the speech receiver plays a great role. It is not by chance that the main rhetoric reference in this genre is the orientation on "loving attention to the addressee and polish" (2005:180-181) [12].

Indeed, compliment arises from the requirement to satisfy the speaker, and, to suggest positive feelings in a man, one must know his individual characteristics, including the idiosyncrasies of his language behaviour. That is why the main rhetorical prerequisite to a compliment is harmony (compliment is made differently to diverse people depending on their age, degree of intimacy with them of the speaker, etc.) and the accurate situation (in some cases the appearance can be complimented, in some other, the intelligence, etc.) Moreover, a compliment must be truthful and non-trivial, which parallels to the rules of cooperative communication (ibid).

Generally speaking, there are three types of compliment behavior: explicit, implicit and reported.

## 3.1 Explicit compliments

The first category of compliments to be mentioned is the explicit compliment. Boyle (2000: 18) [6] clarifies that a small set of conventional formulae is what makes the performance of explicit compliments effective. Compliments can be regarded explicit when they "are recognized as compliments outside of context, being realized by a small set of conventional formulae. Leaving aside other context-bound issues such as irony or sarcasm, any ordinary speaker would", in fact, recognizing the following expressions as compliments because of their linguistic realization, for instance:

I love your shirt

Or

What a lovely dress you're wearing today!

Explicit compliments are, therefore, linguistically realized by declarative sentences which, in turn, can be affirmative or exclamative. There is also a limited lexical choice of verbs (e.g., like, love) and adjectives (e.g., lovely, nice, beautiful). In other words, explicit compliments are formulaic and have a "fixed" linguistic construction, which means, they depend on grammatical and lexical properties (ibid.).

Additionally, this act of compliment can be performed by means of a direct or indirect speech act. The former is formulated either as a declarative or exclamative clause functioning as a statement or exclamation respectively; containing an illocutionary verb or a conventional formula (e.g. I compliment you on something or my compliments on something) For instance:

You look pretty good today.

While the latter is formulated by an interrogative positive sentence like;

Where would you get this good idea?

with primary performatives containing a semantically positive word, most often adjectives like intelligent, beautiful, elegant, but also adverbs like well, perfectly, nicely; and verbs such as like/love or infrequently nouns like genius, masterpiece, treasure …etc (Lyons, 1981: 173 and Thomas, 1995: 47) [23, 36].

## 3.2 Implicit Compliments

Following Holmes (1988)'s [16-17] definition, compliments can also be made implicitly by means of direct speech acts. In which the value judgment is presupposed and/or implicated by Gricean maxims and/or contextual information, for example:

Your husband is a very lucky man

(Herbert 1991: 383) [15].

Johnny's reading has improved dramatically since he has had you as a teacher

(Norrick 1980: 299) [25].

In other words, if the conversational contribution would not have been made such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, and by the accepted purpose of the exchange in which the participants are engaged, the status of the examples above being an implicit compliment would have changed (Grice, 1991:26) [13]. In conclusion, implicit compliments are formulated directly according to the structure of the sentence. That is to say, either being a declarative or exclamative; or functioning as statement or exclamation respectively. They are context-based strategies in which the hearer needs to infer the corresponding implicature for his/her interpretation from the previous discourse.

As Holmes appropriately comments (1988: 446-447) [16-17], compliments most characteristically attribute a positive quality to the recipient, even when the compliment seems to refer to a third party, Holmes elucidates this in the following instance:

**Speaker:** What a polite child!

**Hearer:** Thank you. We do our best.

The speaker's utterance is easily understood as a compliment because it appreciates the addressee for bringing up her children so well even when a compliment performs to a third person, it may be implicitly complimenting the addressee herself.

Boyle (2000: 28) [6] stats that implicit compliments, though, do not essentially have a fixed linguistic construction like explicit noes do, and listeners need to infer the corresponding implicature for their understanding. Boyle (ibid) provides the following examples to demonstrate implicit compliments in English:

I wish I could manage my work like you do.

Moreover, implicit compliments are also those carried out indirectly by means of figurative expressions, such as metaphor. For instance:

If only I had your hair which is like a torrent.

(Sifianou, 2001: 420) [34].

Or irony, which opposites a negative appraisal into a positive one. For example:

You should be ashamed of having checkmated Boris in seven moves.

(Norrick 1980: 300) [25].

Cordella *et al*. (1995: 235) [9], in addition, use the term implicit compliments to refer to expressions in which the interlocutors can infer an intended compliment even if it was not explicitly stated. For instance:

I wish I could play the piano like you do.

They (ibid) add that implicit compliments need the recipient to infer the positive assessment, and accordingly, they depend upon the shared knowledge of what is positive or necessary much more than explicit compliments do.

In view of the non-formulaic implicit compliments, Boyle (2000: 27) [6] points out that there are two ways in which people express implicit compliments; the first, on the one hand, includes comparing a person to someone that the speaker thinks the other person might admire. While the second, on the other hand, includes referring to something that a person has done and he/she is proud of (accomplishments of the addressee). Considering the first way, Boyle (ibid) shows that implicit compliments associated to this phenomenon are limited in all cases to be personal, comparing a person to someone admirable. In other words, the researcher would like to recall Boyle's (2000) [6] distinction between two major types, one that compares the recipient to someone he/she thinks highly of and another pivots around the recipient's achievements. In conclusion, implicit compliments (ibid.) are formulated indirectly in such a way to invite the hearer through an affirmative question to describe what is good about what they have done and worked well. For instance;

How did you manage to finish that task so quickly?

## 3.3 Reported Compliments

However, in addition to the types of compliments stated above, there is another type which is a reported compliment. Yuan (2001: 286) [39] points out that compliments can also be conveyed. The speaker does not make the compliment himself herself but quotes somebody else as saying something complimentary about the addressee. Yuan exemplifies this type in the following example:

Sun Ping said that the preserved vegetables you made were the most delicious!

In this case, Sun Ping, the original complimenter, was present when the speaker conveyed her compliment to the recipient of the compliment. Intuitively it seems that such embedded or reported compliments may be fairly frequent, but they do not seem to have been treated systematically in the relevant research literature.

In addition, reported compliments can also be explicit and implicit depending on their performative verbs. Moreover, as stated previously, both explicit and implicit ones can be formulated either direct or indirect respectively depending on their syntactic structure.

## 4. Felicity Conditions on Speech Act of Compliments

An important complement to Searle's analysis of felicity conditions (Henceforth FCs) is his claim that the linguistic devices we use in order to describe an utterance as having a certain illocutionary force are used appropriately only if the conditions for the performance of the corresponding illocutionary act are satisfied (1969: 62-64). This makes FCs become part of the codified meaning of illocutionary force indicating devices and strengthens the relationship between speech acts and the syntactic and semantic dimensions of natural languages (cf. also Searle [1975] 1979: 20-27) [30, 32].
Searle adds what he calls "direction of fit". This feature of the illocutionary act is related to its having a propositional content, which may fit or fail to fit the way the world is. But the direction in which such a fit is to be required and aimed at varies with illocutionary point. Illocutionary acts pointing out to direct the addressee's behaviour to have world to-world direction of fit; the world has to fit the propositional content of the illocutionary act. The latter asserting how things are have a word-to-world direction of fit; it is the words that have to fit the way the world is (Alfonzetti, 2013: 48-49) [1].
Searle (1969: 54-71) [29] suggests a set of FCs for performing the act of "promising" and claims that one can formulate their conditions for other types of speech acts. If any of these conditions are not attained, the speech act in question would be performed insincerely. In other words, Searle puts the foundation on which other researchers can build their conditions for other speech acts. They are briefly presented as follows:

- **Propositional Content Conditions:** What can be expressed in the proposition of a sentence?
- **Preparatory Conditions:** They specify contextual requirements.
- **Sincerity Conditions:** They specify the required beliefs, intentions …etc.
- **Essential Conditions:** These are the constitutive rules that determine the type of the illocutionary force indicating device (henceforth IFID).

Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1989:80) [21], on the other hand, presents a more elaborate account; she suggests that giving a compliment proposes a certain familiarity with the addressee which if not shared with his/ her results in "misfire" and a feeling of embarrassment. She also examines the illocutionary construction of praising and compliment in terms of a set of FCs (she calls FCs as illocutionary components) underlying both these acts:
a) There is a property "P" related to H.
b) S acts as if s/he evaluates "P" positively.
c) S expresses his/ her appreciation verbally directed to H in speech using formulaic semantic-structural patterns.
d) Teleological-to make H feel good in order to establish or maintain solidarity with H, optionally to ensure profit from H.
Moreover, Alfonzetti (2013: 556) [1] provides a comprehensible explanation of a set of indicators of verdictive force in the action of complimenting. She considers compliments as hybrid speech acts joining expressive and behabitive characteristics with verdictive

ones. The latter are related to the speakers who positively assess the addressee. These indicators include; (1) the use of evaluative words, (2) the speaker believes that there is some property related the listener, and (3) power plays an important part in issuing compliments as they are exchanged mostly between equals or giving downwards between speakers in interactions (See Sbisa, 1984:107) [28].
In conclusion, Searle (1969) [29] presents a general framework for all acts whether expressives or non-expressives. He does not use specific FCs for specific acts. Moreover, Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1989:) [21] Suggests particular conditions. She does not use the term FCs, but, "illocutionary components" to be followed in praising and complimenting. Her conditions are superficial and away from the detailed description of Searle's four FCs. Nevertheless, Alfonzetti (2013) [1] formulated an understandable version of compliments indicators as they are given in social exchanges.
Therefore, the researcher tries to be reliable in presenting these three models, Searle (1969) [29], Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1989) [21] and Alfonzetti (2013) [1]; and attempts to take them into consideration. He will adopt the main proposition and classification of these FCs but will modify them and suggest his own ones appropriately to compliments in particular and not any other speech act whether it is expressive or not. He believes that the following FCs are suitable to be applied to the successful performance of compliments, and, the breaching of one or more of the following conditions will make the performative utterance (in one way or another) unhappy or infelicitous.

- **The Propositional Content Conditions:** an act expresses a property "x" related to the hearer.
- **The Preparatory Conditions**
a) S feels that this property "x" has positively affected him/her. Hence;
b) S wishes H to believe that "x" is in the interest of S. The H knows that but might accept or reject S's compliment.
- **The Sincerity Conditions:** The S expresses admiration towards the H and commits himself to the truth of the expression.
- **The Essential Conditions:** The S reflexively wants the H, by counting S's utterance as an expression of evaluation, to recognize that the S is complimenting.

Searle (1969:62-63) [29] derives from his four suggested FCs, a set of semantic rules for determining IFID.

- **The Propositional Rules:** they focus upon "the textual circumstance".
- **The Preparatory Rules:** they focus upon "background circumstance".
- **The Sincerity Rules:** they focus upon "speaker's psychological state ".
- **The Essential Rules:** they focus upon "the illocutionary point of what is said".

As a conclusion to what is mentioned above, unlike Austin, Searle's FCs do not merely determine the ways in which an illocutionary act might go wrong, but when specified for a particular illocutionary act they form a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the performance of that act, and if the act has been successfully performed, all the conditions have been fulfilled.

## 6. Conclusion

The present study has arrived at the following main points:

1. Compliments are expressive speech acts that can be expressed either explicitly or implicitly depending on the existence∕non-existence of the performative verbs.
2. Compliments can be used either direct or indirect speech acts depending on their syntactic structure.
3. A set of FCs is provided for a successful performance of compliments as a speech act.
4. Compliment strategies are various and speakers use them differently.

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