

## **Compliments: A Relevance-Theoretic Approach**

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In much of the existing literature on compliments it is assumed that the hearer interprets an utterance as a compliment either because he recognises a formula that is conventionalised to a certain extent or because he recognises that a conversational maxim has been violated. The aim of this paper will be to offer an alternative approach to the interpretation of compliments in the light of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995). It will be argued that compliments are utterances used *interpretively* and, more exactly, that they can be *echoic* utterances that convey an attitude of acceptance or endorsement.

### **An overview of compliments**

According to Searle (1976), compliments are *expressive* speech acts because their propositional content specifies a reaction of the speaker to a situation in which the hearer takes an active or passive part. The majority of authors who have dealt with compliments have underlined that their function is to establish, increase or consolidate solidarity bonds between interlocutors (Chen 1993; Herbert 1989, 1990; Jaworski 1995; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 1989; Manes and Wolfson 1981; Wolfson and Manes 1980; Wolfson 1983). Thus, Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk states that “They are typically performed to make the addressee feel good by saying something nice to him/her, in this way possibly satisfying the addressee’s expectations rather than expressing a position judgement for a referential or informative reason [...]” (1989: 75). They are social lubricants that create or maintain rapport because they normally refer to something positively valued by participants and attributed to the hearer (Holmes and Brown 1987; Wolfson

1981). Their topics tend to be general and relate to things such as appearance, abilities, skills, possessions, personality or friendship (Herbert 1991; Holmes and Brown 1987). Nevertheless, there is cross-cultural variation as far as topic is concerned and topics-selection depends on the different underlying set of values of sociocultural groups (Herbert 1991; Manes 1983).

However, there has also been much confusion in the literature on compliments. Thus, Pomerantz (1978: 107) used terms such as *compliments*, *praise* or *credit* to name them. Herbert (1991: 383), Jaworski (1995: 73-74) and Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1989: 79) note that individuals have difficulty when distinguishing between a compliment and a praise, so they suggest considering praises as a wider category within which compliments should be included. In a similar vein, Norrick (1980: 297) also mentioned that compliments can be confused with congratulations, so he proposed that the difference between these two acts is that compliments reflect a personal and subjective judgement, whereas congratulation show a more objective judgement that can be shared by more than one person.

The structure of a compliment speech act is that of an adjacency pair in which there is a first turn of initiation, the *compliment*, and a second turn that responds to it, the *compliment response*. Manes and Wolfson have shown in several works (e.g. Manes and Wolfson 1981; Wolfson 1981, 1983; Wolfson and Manes 1980) that most compliments are realised by means of a limited set of very predictable semantic-syntactic structures. This led these authors to conclude that compliments can be considered formulae whose interpretation would be relatively straightforward and would not involve much difficulty or effort for hearers. As Herbert puts it, “The noncreativity of the compliment act is a striking fact: these are speech formulae. It is tempting to speculate that such noncreativity is directly tied to a need for easily recognizable formulae in status- and solidarity-negotiating gambits in speech. That is, in making a social move

of this kind, the use of a formula decreases the likelihood that the move might be misinterpreted or unnoticed by an addressee” (1991: 390).

According to Manes and Wolfson, there are three very commonly used semantic-syntactic structures for the realisation of compliments (1-3), although other six minor patterns can also be appreciated (4-9)<sup>1</sup>:

- (1) NP [is/looks] (really) ADJ: That blouse is really nice!
- (2) I (really) [like/love] NP: I love your cakes!
- (3) PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP: This was a great dinner!
- (4) You V (a) ADJ NP: You did a great job.
- (5) You V NP (really) ADV: You sang that song really well.
- (6) You have (a) (really) ADJ NP: You have a beautiful leaving room.
- (7) What (a) ADJ NP: What a pretty skirt!
- (8) ADJ NP: Good shot!
- (9) Isn't NP ADJ! : Isn't that ring pretty!

These patterns can be considered, in Herbert (1991: 383) or Jaworski's (1995: 64) terms, *direct* or *explicit* realisations of compliments. In addition to them, Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1989: 81) has also illustrated that there are other direct formulae for compliments that can be said to have been conventionalised. These formulae resort to stylistic figures, such as metonymy (10), similes and metaphors (11), synecdoche (12), rhetorical questions (13), litote (14), hyperbole (15) or humour (16):

- (10) You've got some brains, haven't you?
- (11) You are a Paul Newman.
- (12) All the angels are demons.
- (13) Isn't she pretty?
- (14) She's got something, some charm.
- (15) Wonderful, marvellous, magnificent!
- (16) For your age, you still look like a boy.

As with other speech acts, it must be pointed out that the realisation of compliments is also subject to cross-cultural variation. Thus, Herbert (1991: 391) observes that there are remarkable

differences between English and Polish speakers in the *focus of the compliment*, i.e. the basic semantic-syntactic structure, so it is necessary to differentiate compliments with focus on the first person, on the second person or on the third person. Nelson, El Bakary and Al Batal (1996: 114) have also shown that Arabic speakers use in some cases very conventionalised metaphors and similes, whereas in others these are very innovative and elaborated. In a similar way, these authors have mentioned that these speakers quite frequently use proverbs as compliments or enlarge their compliments by adding or repeating adjectives to express their feelings, so that “[...] the more the repetition, the better the compliment” (Nelson et al. 1996: 123).

Apart from these conventionalised formulae, Herbert (1991: 381), Jaworski (1995: 64) or Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1989: 77) have explained that it should be convenient to consider other realisations of compliments by means of semantic-syntactic structures that are not so conventional or predictable, which can increase the feeling of spontaneity and sincerity of the compliment. These realisations are *indirect*, for “[...] [their] value is implied rather than stated directly in the utterance [...]” (Jaworski 1995: 64), and involve a greater degree of indirectness and ambiguity, which results in an increase of hearer’s processing effort, since he will have to carry out more inferences to recover the message the speaker intended to convey (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 1989: 77).

On the one hand, Boyle (2000: 35) suggests that there are two main types of indirect or implicit compliments: those in which the speaker mentions an achievement of the hearer (17) and those in which the speaker compares the hearer to another person (18):

(17) You’ve worked with Elisabeth Taylor! (Boyle 2000: 36)

(18) There’s something *Karen Carpenterish* about your voice on this album. (Boyle 2000: 41)

On the other hand, Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1989: 83-84) distinguishes the following indirect realisations of compliments, in which the compliment is realised by other speech act:

a) By means of a complaint:

(19) It's a pity so few people watched your performance.

b) Quoting an opinion different from the speaker's:

(20) The reviews are more than favourable. (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 1989: 83)

c) By means of supposition:

(21) You must be a brain box!

d) Violating conventional expectations, increasing, thus, hearer's surprise about some undetermined aspect:

(22) I thought that your house was big, but it is bigger.

e) Using indefinite phrases:

(23) Who's playing that relaxing music?

f) Asking the speaker's opinion or advice:

(24) I would really appreciate your opinion – how does it taste?

g) Comparing the speaker with the hearer:

(25) Gee, I'd never have done it!

h) Setting contrasts between hearer and other individuals:

(26) I've never seen anybody with such a nice haircut!

i) Asking a question that presupposes something favourable for the hearer:

(27) That sweater, did you knit it yourself? (Conveyed message: I know you can knit and that sweater looks extremely good! Either you bought it at a very expensive shop or you are really gifted. I am sure the latter is true). (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 1989: 84)

j) Setting contrast with the past:

(28) Well, now it's so different! Thank God, things have changed!

k) Reducing the amount of verbal stimuli because of the occurrence of enough contextual and paralinguistic elements in the situation:

- (29) a. Your hair!  
b. Wow!  
c. The jumper!

One of the problems of the current studies in pragmatics mentioned so far about compliments is that they do not offer any accurate explanation of how and why a hearer interpret an utterance as a compliment. According to their authors, hearers would interpret a specific utterance as a compliment because they recognise the formula used. These studies rely heavily on the classifications that have been established for compliment behaviour, which reflect the regularities observed in the realisations of this speech act. This would imply that those classifications should be revised and reformulated every time a new regularity is perceived. Furthermore, some of these studies propose that hearers interpret an utterance as a compliment as a result of their understanding that a conversational maxim has been violated, an explanation that has been traditionally given since Grice (1975) proposed his *Co-operative Principle*.

The aim of this paper is to give an account of compliments in the light of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995). According to this theory, no classification is needed and no maxim violation is postulated, but a single general principle grounded on a description of human cognition. Therefore, in what follows, I am going to introduce very briefly some of the basic postulates of this theory, paying special attention to its distinction between *descriptive* and *interpretive* dimensions of language use. When dealing with the case of interpretive utterances, I will focus on the case of *echoic* utterances, which will be fundamental for the understanding of

the proposal outlined in this paper. Finally, I will suggest how both direct and indirect compliments can be interpreted.

## **Relevance Theory**

### **Basic postulates of Relevance Theory**

Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995) is based on a definition of *relevance* and two general principles. On the one hand there is a *cognitive principle of relevance*, which states that human cognition is geared to the maximisation of relevance. On the other hand, a *communicative principle of relevance*, according to which every utterance communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance, i.e. it creates expectations of relevance.

Relevance is treated as a property of utterances and is defined in terms of *contextual effects* and *processing effort*. Contextual effects result from the processing of new information in a *context* of assumptions selected from the whole set thereof. They can be of three types: *strengthening* of previously held assumptions; *contradiction* of assumptions, which can result into the deletion of possessed information; or *contextual implications*, which is the new information derived only from the union of old and newly received information. The processing of new information requires some mental effort. This effort comes from the construction or selection of a context of assumptions in which to process information or from the psychological complexity of utterances. Other things being equal, the more contextual effects the processing of an utterance produces, the more relevant it will be; and the more cognitive effort required to process it, the less relevant it will be. Therefore, the optimal relevance of an utterance lies on an adequate balance between processing effort and contextual effects.

Every utterance attracts the addressee's attention towards a set of assumptions the speaker wants to make manifest, some of which are essential for a correct understanding of her utterance.

Those assumptions can be communicated either explicitly or implicitly. In some circumstances the addressee can determine the set of implicit assumptions in a very exact way because the speaker has made *strongly* manifest that she expects him to use them to process her utterance. However, in others the addressee has to run the risk of determining it, since some of those assumptions are only *weakly* manifest<sup>2</sup>. This might lead him to use assumptions the speaker might not have intended him to use, so that the responsibility of understanding an utterance in a particular way lies heavily on the addressee's selection of a context for interpretation.

### ***Descriptive and interpretive dimensions of language use***

Within the framework of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995) a very important distinction is that between *descriptive* and *interpretive* dimensions of language use. In appropriate conditions, any natural or artificial phenomenon in the world can be used as a representation of some other phenomenon that it resembles in some respects. Utterances can be used as representations, not in virtue of resembling some phenomenon, but in virtue of having a propositional form that is true of some actual or conceivable state of affairs. Since utterances are also phenomena, they can be used to represent something they resemble. In this case, Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995: 228) argue that the representation is a *description*, or that it is used *descriptively*.

In addition to this, utterances can represent some other representation that has also a propositional form in virtue of a resemblance between the two propositional forms. In this second case, Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995: 228) state that the first representation is an *interpretation* of the second one, or that it is used *interpretively*. Moreover, Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995: 230) suggest that there is a more essential interpretive use of utterances, since every utterance can be used to represent a thought of the speaker's. One of the assumptions a speaker intends to make



manifest to the hearer is that she is entertaining some thought with some particular attitude, and on this ground the hearer may be led to entertain a similar thought with a similar attitude.

Therefore, verbal communication involves a speaker producing an utterance as a public interpretation of one of her thoughts and a hearer constructing a mental interpretation of her utterance, and hence of the original thought of the speaker's. An utterance is an interpretive expression of a thought of the speaker's, on the basis of which the hearer makes an interpretive assumption about the speaker's informative intention. But when an utterance is used interpretively, it can also be an interpretation of some attributed thought or utterance, or it can be an interpretation of some thought that is or would be desirable to entertain in a certain way.

### ***Echoic utterances***

As has been said, interpretive utterances can be interpretations of a thought of someone other than the speaker. These utterances are second-degree interpretations of someone else's thoughts. An utterance used as an interpretation of someone else's thought is always an interpretation of the speaker's understanding of that person's thought. These utterances achieve relevance by informing the hearer of the fact that the speaker has said something or thinks something similar to that other person. In other cases, these interpretations achieve relevance by informing the hearer of the fact that the speaker has in mind what that person said and has a certain attitude to it. When interpretations achieve relevance in this way, Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995: 232) say that they are *echoic*.

The most frequently mentioned example of echoic utterances is irony. It echoes the thought of a certain person, or of people in general. The attitude expressed by it is invariably of the rejecting or disapproving kind. The speaker dissociates himself from the opinion echoed and indicates she does not hold it herself. The recovery of these implicatures depends, first, on a

recognition of the utterance as echoic; second, on an identification of the source of the opinion echoed; and third, on a recognition that the speaker's attitude to the opinion echoed is one of rejection or dissociation. What is important is that a speaker can use an echoic utterance to convey a whole array of attitudes and emotions, ranging from outright acceptance and endorsement to outright rejection and dissociation. The recognition of these attitudes and emotions may be crucial to the interpretation process.

Nonetheless, Hamamoto (1998) and Seto (1998) have pointed out that it is necessary to take into account that the source or the immediate antecedent of many echoic utterances may not be straightforwardly identified in many circumstances. Hamamoto (1998) also notes that in some circumstances echoic utterances resemble an echoed proposition and also describe a state of affairs at the same time.

### **A Relevance-Theoretic oriented account of compliments**

As aforementioned, the aim of this paper is to offer an explanation of how and why hearers can understand an utterance as a compliment following Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995). According to this theory, no classification of compliments is needed and no maxim violation is postulated. What is needed is a single general principle for utterance interpretation.

Firstly, it must be said that in many cases an utterance intended by the speaker to be recognised as a compliment is not actually interpreted as such by the hearer, but as a mere description of a state of affairs. This is so because the propositional form of that utterance is true of some state of affairs that is strongly manifest in both interlocutors' mutual cognitive environment. Or, in other words, because the hearer thinks that utterance is merely used to represent something in the real world it resembles, i.e. because he thinks that the speaker is using it descriptively. Thus, all the above examples, except (7), (9) and (13), can be interpreted as

descriptive utterances about something that is strongly manifest in the interlocutors' mutual cognitive environment.

To illustrate this more clearly, if a speaker utters (1) while seeing a blouse in a shop window, the hearer may think that the propositional form of that utterance is just a description of the blouse they are seeing in the shop. In the same way, if the speaker says (1) when meeting the hearer, who happens to be wearing a blouse, he may also think that the utterance is only a description of the blouse. In appropriate contexts, for instance, a hearer may regard (3) as a description of the dinner, and (5) as a description of his performance. Therefore, for an utterance to be understood as a compliment it does not only have to be a representation of the real world, but of something else.

In my opinion, for an utterance to be understood as a compliment, it must be a representation of some other representation that has a propositional form. This means that for an utterance to be understood as a compliment it must be used interpretively. As interpretive utterances, compliments can be said to be interpretations of a thought or opinion of the speaker. They achieve relevance by informing the hearer of the fact that the speaker has said or thinks something that resembles her thoughts, as well as by conveying an attitude to it. The attitude conveyed by the speaker of a compliment, as opposed to irony, must be one of endorsement and acceptance of the proposition expressed.

Thus, in a situation in which two individuals are greeting each other and one of them utters (1), for the hearer to understand that utterance as a compliment, it will have to be manifest to him that the speaker is interpreting her own thoughts or an opinion of hers and, at the same time, that she does indeed believe that the blouse the hearer is wearing is really nice. Similarly, in a context in which an individual has sung a beautiful tune, (5) can be interpreted as a compliment if it is manifest to the hearer that the utterance is an interpretation of the speaker's opinion about the

hearer's performance and if it is manifest to him that she endorses the proposition conveyed by means of that utterance. Finally, to conclude this brief exemplification, for (8) to be understood as a compliment, it must be manifest to the hearer that that utterance is an interpretation of the speaker's own opinion about the shot and that she accepts and endorses that opinion. Therefore, for an utterance to be understood as a compliment, the speaker must be seen as conveying an interpretation of her thoughts or opinions and an attitude of endorsement or acceptance of them.

But compliments can also be interpretations of a thought or opinion of the individual to whom they are addressed; i.e., they can also be echoic utterances. In this case, they may display the speaker's understanding of the hearer's thoughts, so they achieve relevance by informing the hearer of the fact that the speaker has said or thinks something that is similar to his thoughts or opinions and, in addition, has an attitude to it that is of endorsement or acceptance. Therefore, the previous examples can also be interpreted as only interpretive utterances, if it is strongly manifest that those utterances only interpret the speaker's thoughts, or as echoic utterances, if it is strongly manifest that the speaker is making an interpretation of the thoughts or opinions of the person to whom the compliment is being addressed. In both cases, the relevance of the compliment lies on the fact that the speaker has informed the hearer about this and on the fact that she has an attitude of endorsement or acceptance of the proposition expressed.

Imagine an individual has refurbished his living room because it looked a little bit old-fashioned and has therefore spent a lot of money to make it more beautiful. One day he invites a good friend of his to see the new aspect of his living room. This friend knows perfectly well his taste and his idea of what a beautiful living room might look like. Therefore, in such a situation, if this friend of his says (6), this individual may interpret that utterance as a compliment if it is strongly manifest that his friend is showing him her understanding or her interpretation of what she thinks his thoughts or opinion about the living room are. In other words, (6) may be

interpreted as a compliment if it achieves relevance by informing the individual that the speaker has said or thinks something similar to his thoughts or opinions about the beauty of his living room and that the speaker also endorses or accepts those thoughts or opinions about the living room. This means that (6) may be understood as a compliment if it achieves relevance by informing the hearer that the speaker is echoing his thoughts or opinions about the living room and endorsing or accepting them at the same time.

Suppose now that an individual has done a great job and he is aware of it. Another person has seen him and thinks more or less the same about the way in which he did the job. If she utters (4), the individual may understand it as a compliment if it achieves relevance by informing him that the speaker has said or thinks something similar to what he thinks about his job and, in addition, that the speaker endorses or accepts those similar thoughts or opinions about the way in which the job has been done. In this context, (4) may be understood as a compliment if the hearer understands that the speaker is echoing his thoughts or opinions about the job and endorsing or accepting them.

Nevertheless, it is not always clear that in all the possible situations the speaker is echoing the thought or opinions of the hearer. This implies that in some situations there is no easily recognisable source of the echo or no immediate antecedent of the echo (Hamamoto 1998; Seto 1998). However, according to Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995), it must be remembered that any intentional stimulus or behaviour alters the participants' mutual cognitive environment by making mutually manifest to them a set of assumptions. Thus, in situations in which an individual has a new appearance (e.g. 1, 7, 9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 26, 27, 29), performs in a certain way an action (e.g. 2, 8, 15, 19, 23, 24, 27), accomplishes something (e.g. 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 15, 20, 21, 22, 25, 28), etc. that behaviour makes mutually manifest to both participants a certain set of assumptions. In those situations, it is that set of assumptions made mutually manifest to both

speaker and hearer that can be the source of the echo. Therefore, compliments may also echo assumptions strongly manifest in the interlocutors' mutual cognitive environment. They achieve relevance by informing the hearer about the speaker's particular interpretation of those assumptions and by conveying her attitude of endorsement or acceptance of the proposition expressed.

Imagine a woman wearing a new blouse enters a room where her husband is. This will make mutually manifest to both of them assumptions about the blouse that neither of them might have entertained before. In that specific situation, if the husband utters (1), he will be echoing that set of assumptions made mutually manifest and his utterance will be interpreted as a compliment. His utterance will then achieve relevance by informing his wife that he has a particular interpretation of those assumptions made mutually manifest by her wearing a new blouse and by conveying his attitude of endorsement or acceptance of the proposition expressed about the blouse.

Similarly, in a situation in which an individual has performed a part in a play and very few people watched it, that event will make mutually manifest to him and his interlocutor a set of assumptions about the quality of his performance or about what people have missed because of its quality. In that context, if his interlocutor says (19) she will be echoing that set of assumptions mutually manifest in their cognitive environment and her utterance will achieve relevance because it informs the hearer that she has a particular interpretation of those assumptions about the performance and about what people have missed and by transmitting her attitude of endorsement and acceptance of the proposition she expresses.

Finally, in the case of indirect compliments (17-29) it can be assumed that the interpretation of those utterances as compliments will result either from the hearer's understanding that they are being used interpretively or echoically, or from the mere fact that they are indirect speech acts.

As indirect speech acts, they involve an increase of the hearer's processing effort, which must be offset by his recovery of additional contextual effects. In this case, the hearer is entitled to construct or retrieve from his memory as many implicated premises as necessary to achieve an interpretation of those utterances that is consistent with the principle of relevance. By doing so, he will recover the implicated conclusions of those utterances; i.e. those implicatures that the speaker might have expected him to derive because she intended to make her utterance manifestly relevant to him. Some of those implicated assumptions will be more manifest to him than others, depending on the level of mutual manifestness of the speaker's informative intention. The lower their level of mutual manifestness, the more weakly those assumptions are communicated.

Therefore, in the interpretation of indirect compliments, the hearer has to use a set of implicated assumptions, some of which will be strongly communicated by the speaker, whereas others will be recovered on his own responsibility and at his own risk. This will allow him to recover an interpretation of the utterance that is consistent with the principle of relevance. This means that he may or may not recover an interpretation of those utterances as compliments depending on the set of assumptions he uses as premises. But this also involves that the hearer can recover a wider array of weak implicatures that can even lead him to recover an unintended interpretation of the utterance.

## **Conclusion**

In synthesis, compliments can be understood as such if they are recognised to be interpretive or echoic utterances. What is important for the hearer in understanding them is to recognise that the speaker can be interpreting some of her own thoughts, some thoughts or opinions she attributes to him or some assumptions strongly manifest in the mutual cognitive

environment they share. But the speaker must also be conveying at the same time her attitude of endorsement. Therefore, we do not need any classification of commonly used semantic-syntactic patterns for some types utterances to be interpreted as compliments, nor do we need to think that a conversational maxim is being violated. What we need is a single general principle about human cognition and an understanding of three possible ways in which utterances can achieve relevance.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> See Wolfson and Manes (1980) and Manes and Wolfson (1981) for a more detailed presentation of the most usual verbs, adjectives and adverbs in compliments. Herbert (1990) also discusses sex-based differences in compliment behaviour; Holmes and Brown (1987) mention the social factors influencing it, mainly age and status, and Valdés and Pino (1981) analyse the different patterns used among intimates and non-intimates.

<sup>2</sup>This is the basis for Sperber and Wilson's (1986/1995) distinction between *strong* and *weak* communication.

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