

## **Contrasting Attitudes in Compliments: Humility in Japanese and Hyperbole in English**

**Sanae Tsuda**

*Tokaigakuen Women's College*

### **Abstract**

The differences between English speakers and Japanese speakers in their use of compliments form an interesting study. The usage rules in each culture create a strong contrast in the production of the compliments.

### **Introduction**

As a speaker of Japanese, I have always felt that the native speakers of American English are very good at complimenting others by using somewhat exaggerated expressions. For instance, a Japanese man would scarcely compliment his wife or friend about her cooking as follows:

"No one can cook a chestnut soup like you do, Lisa." (NHK Radio English Conversation, 1989, March 8)

In the same way, a compliment on one's appearance like the following sounds unnatural if it is literally translated into Japanese:

"I don't know what you've been up to but you look terrific," said her friend, approvingly. "Like a million dollars!" (*Falling in Love*: 96)

Since the Japanese are not used to such a compliment, they may interpret it as the complimenter's personal interest directed to the recipient in cross-cultural settings.

On the other hand, humility on the part of the complimenter often accompanies Japanese compliment. For instance, they might say:

Trinity University is really beautiful and spacious. Compared to your school, my college is so small that it doesn't look like a university.

It is hard for the recipient to accept such a compliment. When the accompanying humility is very strong, native speakers of English may feel uncomfortable or consider the compliment to be insincere.

The hyperbole in English and humility in Japanese compliments seem completely different, but they seem to have common features when their function in the interpersonal relationship is observed. First, I would like to observe what has been described about the functions of compliments. Secondly, hyperbole in American English is observed by paying special attention to strong adjectives and humility in Japanese is observed in relation to Japanese culture and society. I would like to show that there is a certain common function in English hyperbole and Japanese humility. Both English and Japanese data are quoted from published papers, text books, non-fiction, and spontaneous conversation.

### **I. Discourse Functions of Compliments**

To compliment is to praise others to please them. What is considered as compliment or praise, however, varies from culture to culture as Wolfson (1981) points out. She analyses compliments collected by her students of various nationalities and gives the following example of an Indonesian student to illustrate the cultural difference in compliments.

S(Friend): You have bought a sewing machine. How much does it cost?  
A: Oh, it is cheap. It's a used one. My wife needs it badly.  
(Wolfson: 118)

From my Japanese point of view, this does not belong as a compliment either. Wolfson has found that compliments among Japanese speakers "exhibit a great deal of resemblance to American English compliments." (Wolfson 1981: 118), but she also refers to a Japanese example that deviates from an American criterion for compliment.

S: Your earrings are pure gold, aren't they?  
A: Yes, they are. They must be pure gold when you put them on.  
S: Money is a necessary condition to become attractive, indeed.  
A: I think so too.  
(Wolfson 1981: 119)

Wolfson comments on this example as follows:

For speakers of American English it is difficult to accept the idea that it is considered complimentary to suggest another's attractiveness depends on having money. (119)

From my point of view, however, this is not a compliment unless the complimenter flatters the other person in pointing out how rich she is.

Wolfson classifies typical instances of American compliments into two major categories, appearance and ability, and subclassifies them with examples. (Wolfson 1983: 90-91)

Appearance, especially apparel:	I like those pants on you. (90)
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Personal appearance, homes, furniture, automobiles and other material possessions:	I think your apartment is fantastic. (90)
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General ability:	You do this kind of writing so well. (91)
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Act-specific ability:	You really did a good job. This is really nice. (91)
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As for the topics and relation between the interlocutors in Japanese compliments, the descriptions given by Mizutani and Mizutani (1987) are helpful. According to them, the Japanese "refrain from personal compliments when they have to be polite". They also say that it is customary for recipients to deny the compliments. (Mizutani and Mizutani 1987:149) They explain that the things complimented are usually limited to residence, family, possessions, clothes, appearance or ability. Compliments on residence can be made even in formal occasions when politeness is required and the recipient usually uses a disclaimer.

Ii osumai desu ne ( You have a very nice home.)(45)

Compliments toward children are also very common, since it is easy to compliment young members of the family.

Kawaii okosan desu ne ( She/he is a lovely child.)(45)

To friends: ii happyoo deshita yo  
(your presentation was good.)  
To elders: (kono happyoo o kiite) benkyoo ni narimashita  
(Your presentation helped me a lot.)

Holmes and Brown (1987) collect their data in New Zealand and analyze compliments into two aspects in communication: the pragmalinguistic and the sociopragmatic. Topics for compliments, vocabulary and syntax belong to the pragmalinguistic aspect. The following example illustrates a pragmalinguistic failure in which one lady shows concern about her friend losing weight, but the friend takes it as a compliment.

Complimenter: You've lost a lot of weight. What have you been doing?  
 Recipient: Thank you. I've started jogging regularly and it seems to work.  
 Complimenter: You shouldn't overdo it. You are looking quite thin.  
 (Holmes and Brown: 526)

Complimenter: What a big family you have!  
 Recipient: Yes, but it has its advantages, too.  
 (Holmes and Brown: 528)

In this example, the complimenter comes from a culture in which big families are valued, but the recipient does not take the remark as a compliment and reacts as if he were being criticized for having a big family.

Misunderstanding of hyperbole or humility in American and Japanese cultures can be regarded as pragmalinguistic failure in that both cultures have different ways of stating compliments, but it is difficult to say that the misunderstanding has nothing to do with sociopragmatic failure since hyperbole in English and humility in Japanese are deeply rooted in their cultures.

According to Wolfson, the function of a compliment is regarded as "the creation or maintenance of rapport between interlocutors." (Wolfson 1983: 86) She also indicates that a compliment in American English may have multiple functions such as gratitude, greeting, starters for conversation, or leave-taking. (Wolfson 1983: 90)

As can be seen from the brief reviews of Wolfson (1981), (1983), Holmes and Brown (1987), and Mizutani and Mizutani (1987), compliments in American or New Zealand English and Japanese have multiple functions, such as gratitude or greeting. We have seen that Japanese compliments often include humility on the part of the complimenter. Neither Wolfson, nor Holmes and Brown refer to exaggeration or hyperbole in compliments. Their papers do not, in other words, deal with the problem of how sincere the compliments are. Mizutani and Mizutani rightly point out that compliments in Japanese are closely related to its politeness system. Except for the characteristic of humility, they seem to have much in common with American or New Zealand compliments, in that a compliment is an expression to maintain rapport between the speakers.

## II. Hyperbole in English and Humility in Japanese

Wolfson (1981) points out a compliment lacks originality both in its syntactic form and vocabulary. According to the research done by Wolfson and Mane, the most frequently used adjectives are nice, good, beautiful, pretty and great. The most commonly used syntactic forms are as follows:

- 50% of the data: NP is / looks (really) ADJ.  
eg. Your hair looks tremendous.  
The tie is smashing with the pants.
- 16% of the data: I (really) like / love NP.  
eg. Thanks for the card.  
We really like it. (Wolfson:88)

14% of the data: PRO is really a ADJ NP.  
eg. That was a delicious dinner.  
Thank you for having us.(Wolfson:88)

She also claims that it is possible for us to avoid misunderstanding since the expressions used in compliments are limited and formulaic.

In Japanese compliments, the modifiers used for compliments are highly limited as in the case of English compliment. For instance, modifiers such as *sutekida* (nice), *kireida* (pretty), *yokudekiru* (able), *kakkoi* (colloq. smashing), *saikooda* (colloq. superb), are frequently used.

Exaggerated expressions in American English are found not only in compliments but also in other areas of discourse. Rossiter *et al.* (1988) give an interesting illustration about the ways of stating likes and dislikes using English adjectives. They describe English speakers choosing between neutral adjectives and feeling colored adjectives according to the degree of their likes and dislikes. Even when they use feeling colored adjectives, they try not to go too far beyond the so-called 'tactful box' so that they will not offend the other speakers. For instance, when the interlocutors agree on a subject, each speaker can use strong adjectives without offending the other.

A: Do you like skiing?  
B: Yes, I think it's great.  
A: Yes, marvelous, isn't it? (Rossiter *et al.*, 59)

When they have different opinions or taste, neutral adjectives or softeners such as a bit and rather are employed:

A: Do you like living in Tokyo?  
B: Yes, I find it quite exciting. How about you?  
A: Well, to tell the truth, I don't really like it. (Rossiter *et al.*, 59-60)

When this theory is applied to compliments, strong adjectives are likely to be used, since the complimenter's aim is to praise the other.

Chaika (1982) points out that compliments may be received negatively even by native speakers in certain situations. She gave an assignment to each of her students to compliment a person constantly, and the students reported that the recipient of the compliments either got angry or inquired about the reason behind the compliments. She also points out that the positive acknowledgment of a compliment may be interpreted as bragging, even though compliments usually call for an acknowledgment. Therefore, she

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explains, Americans often use disclaimers instead of acknowledging the compliment in order to avoid such situations. In Japan it is commonly believed that Americans frankly accept compliments while the Japanese often use disclaimers, which seems to be too simple a description of the two cultures according to Chaika.

Let us now observe Japanese humility and its function. A typical instance of Japanese compliment is a conversation between mothers of school age children about their achievement at school. I was often complimented on my daughter's achievement by a mother whose daughter had far better grades than my daughter. For instance,

- Mother A: Otaku no ojoosan wa yoku odekininaru kara iidesu wa. Uchi no konanka dekinakute hontoni komarimasu.  
(Your daughter is really good at school. Compared to her, my daughter is no good at all.)
- Mother B: Iie, tondemo arimasen. Otaku no ojoosan no hooga yoku odekini narimasu mono.  
(Oh, no. Your daughter is far better than my daughter.)

As well as in the above example, the next example also accompanies humility on the part of complimenter.

- A: Sutekina ouchine! Otakuni kurabetara uchinante abaraya-doozendawa.  
(What a nice house you have! Compared to yours, our house is just a shack.)
- B: Sonnakoto naiwayo. Otakunohooga zutto hiroidesho.  
(No. Your house is much more spacious than ours.)

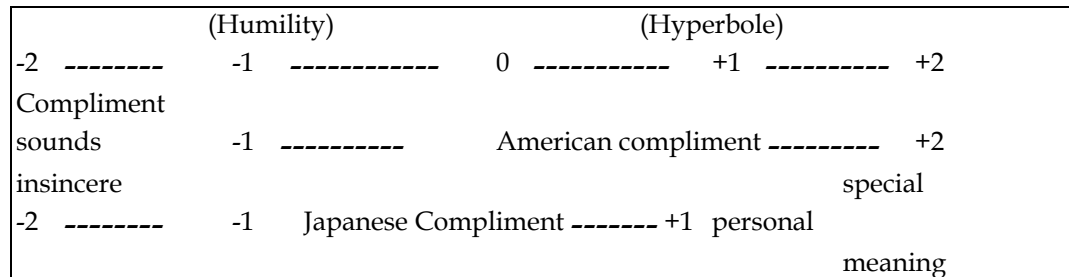
In Japanese compliments, the recipient almost always uses an expression of disclaimer, *tondemono arimasen* (no, that is not true) or its equivalent in a polite conversation, because to accept such a compliment means that the recipient does not acknowledge the part of humility.

In Japanese compliments, it seems that the complimenter very often depends partly upon the recipient's reaction especially when they are formulaic. Therefore, in PTA meetings or rather formal meetings, we are expected to give a disclaimer to the complimenter. Between close friends or family, sincere compliments are also given and positive acknowledgments are also acceptable.

### III. Comparison of American Compliments and Japanese Compliments

English compliments are sometimes expressed with hyperbole, and if it goes too far, the recipient tends to be perplexed or suspects that there might be some intention on the part of the speaker. In a cross-cultural setting, exaggerated compliments may cause misunderstanding. Japanese compliments involve much humility and, if the humility on the part of the complimenter is too much, the recipient feels that the compliment seems far from reality. In a cross-cultural setting, Japanese compliments may be considered insincere, because the humility of the complimenter assumes that the recipient will use a disclaimer or give back some compliment.

Both American and Japanese compliments have a common function of enhancing rapport between the interlocutors. They also have multiple discourse functions such as greeting or expression of gratitude. In spite of their functional similarity, cross-cultural misunderstanding often occurs, since the way of maintaining rapport is quite different in these cultures. While the Americans employ straightforward compliments in enhancing good relationships, the Japanese express compliments by humbling themselves to compliment others, which is also a polite way of keeping good relationships with each other. The difference can be illustrated in the following diagram:



American and Japanese compliments have a common function to enhance rapport between the speakers as long as they stay in their own scale of hyperbole and humility, but their scales are not the same. If Americans employ their own scale (i.e., from -1 to +2 on the scale of humility and hyperbole) to interpret Japanese compliments, misunderstanding is likely to occur below their accepted range (i.e., from -2 to -1). If the Japanese, on the other hand, apply their scale (i.e., from -2 to +1) to interpret American compliments, they are likely to misunderstand when it goes beyond their range (i.e., from +1 to +2).

It is possible to find the reasons why there are such differences between these cultures. Hyperbole of American English, in a way, has a function similar to joking or telling tall tales which do not have much meaning but enhance friendly feeling.



On the other hand, Japanese compliments with humility embody Japan's hierarchical social structure, the dependency relationship illustrated by Takeo Doi (1971), or the high context culture described by Honna (1988). In Japanese discourse routines, many expressions depend on the recipient's reaction. In other words, the first speaker does not explicitly states his intention in his speech and leaves part of it for the recipient to supply. Doi (1971) illustrates an instance from his own experience. When he first came to the States, he was invited to a professor's house and was asked if he were hungry and if he cared to have some ice cream. He politely declined it expecting the professor to ask him again, but he found that the professor literally took his word as refusal. Naturally, he did not receive any ice cream. It was culture shock to him that the Americans took his words literally. Similar psychological dependency can be found in Japanese compliments in that recipients are expected to understand the real intention of the humility of the complimenter.

Honna (1988) points out the difference between high context culture and low context culture. In low context culture as in the United States, people depend more upon the explicit verbal statement than people in high context culture where the verbal statement is not necessary or the statement is not always interpreted literally. Japanese compliment also shows the characteristics of high context culture in that the complimenter expects the recipient to supply the missing part of interaction (i.e., disclaimer.) This will cause great difficulty for non-native speakers of Japanese to understand Japanese compliment.

It is not possible to decide which type of compliment usage is good or bad, since each is deeply rooted in the respective cultural values and structure of society. Although the discourse routines for the compliments of these cultures are contrastive, their functions are similar in that they enhance rapport between the interlocutors. In cross-cultural communication, it is important to find and understand this common function as well as to find and understand the differences in their expression.

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