

# English Compliments by Chinese and German Female EFL Speakers

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## Abstract

Based in the field of variational pragmatics, the present study investigates the effect of one of the macro-social factors, regional factor, on the use of compliment strategies. More specifically, the present study would like to find out whether in the same situation, the compliment strategies used by Chinese female EFL speakers and German female EFL speakers differ. A questionnaire was designed in order to collect the data, which employs two Discourse Completion Tasks (DCT). A corpus of 20 dialogues were collected, consisting of 10 from Chinese informants and 10 from German informants. In the present study, all social factors, except the regional one, are controlled, which means the informants were asked to complete two dialogues which happen in two given situations, between two friends in the same age group and of the same gender (sex). Furthermore, the gender (sex) and age of the informants are homogenized, which ultimately makes the regional factor the only prominent and researched macro-social factor. After analyzing the data, the results of each of the two given situations are respectively achieved. First, by comparing the frequencies of the two main types of compliments, explicit compliments and implicit compliments, used by Chinese female EFL speakers and German female EFL speakers. Second, by comparing the frequencies of varieties of sub-categories of the two main types of compliments. Moreover, the frequencies of two types of modifiers used in the compliments are objects of analysis. Finally, the results of a previous study on American English compliment strategies is included in the comparison, to show whether the English compliment strategies used by EFL speakers and English native speakers differ.

**Keywords:** English compliments, regional variation, compliment strategies

## 1. Introduction

The field of variational pragmatics is a recently established sub-field, which is located at the interface of pragmatics with dialectology and the aim of which is to overcome the shortcomings of the two disciplines. As one of the oldest disciplines in linguistics, dialectology investigates some of the central levels of the language system (Schneider & Barron, 2008), for instance, the intralingual variation at phonetic, phonological, grammatical and lexical levels, which results from the different geographical and social perspectives of the speakers. Under such circumstances, the pragmatics level, namely the language use in terms of communicative functions, linguistic action and interactive behavior (Schneider & Barron, 2008), has been excluded from the analyses in dialectology. Meanwhile, for a long time, the cross-cultural pragmatic research was dominated by an ethnocentrism, which means “the Anglo-Saxon conversational conventions for ‘human behavior’” (Wierzbicka 1985, p. 146) were the default standards when investigating language variations at a pragmatic level between different languages, even for those studies in which English was excluded from the comparison. Although such standards were overturned by Anne Wierzbicka in 1985, one of the existing shortcomings of cross-cultural pragmatics is taking the basic assumption that language communities of native speakers are homogeneous wholes (Schneider & Barron, 2008). This means cross-cultural pragmatics is only interested in the pragmatic variations between different languages, which ignores the fact that even within the same language, factors like region, social class, gender (sex), age or even generation also have an impact on language variation.

Thus, variational pragmatics was established by combing the two disciplines of pragmatics and dialectology, but filtering out the shortcomings. Also, variational pragmatics can be considered a twin discipline of historical pragmatics (Jucker, 1995) (Note 1). According to Schneider and Barron (2008), while the interest of historical pragmatics is the pragmatic variation over time, variational pragmatics focuses on pragmatic variation in geographical and social space. More specifically, variational pragmatics is generally interested in the impact of the five main acknowledged macro-social factors, which are region, gender (sex), age, social class and ethnicity

on the communicative language use, at either national or sub-national level.

Like many other studies in the field of variational pragmatics, the present study investigates the varieties of one of the most researched language, the English language. Unlike many other studies in which the varieties of English are the first language (L1) of the informants, the present study chooses German and Chinese informants of whom the varieties of English are the second language (L2). The present study analyzes the impact of the regional (or national) factor, which is the only uncontrolled macro social factor, on the communicative language use. Consequently, the aim of the present study is to show the potential relationship between regional differences and the compliments given by Chinese and German informants in two situations. One of the situations is only about appearance/possessions, and the other is only about abilities/performance. The design of the two situations in the present study is based upon the results of certain previous studies, which is specifically explained in section 3.

In the following sections of the paper, the definition and functions of compliments are initially outlined. After that, the method of the present study is introduced, which includes data collection (questionnaire design), data processing and the justification for the choice of only selecting female informants. The last two sections consist of the findings from the analysis, with the participation of the results of a previous study on American English compliments.

## 2. Compliments

According to Ronald Boyle (2000), in the past two decades, compliments were the speech acts which drew the most attention in the fields of pragmatics, discourse analysis and even sociolinguistics. Holmes (1988, p. 446) defines a compliment 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 etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer. Like many other speech acts, such as small talk for instance, compliments also have the “phatic function”, which means, as a positive politeness strategy, compliments could create and maintain a good relationship between speakers and hearers when communicating.

### 2.1 Explicit Compliments

In Boyle’s study (2000), compliments can be called explicit compliments when “(they) are recognized as compliments outside of context, being realized by a small set of conventional formulae...”. Thus, explicit compliments can also be called “formulaic compliments”. The conclusion that explicit compliments are “formulaic” is achieved in Manes and Wolfson’s study (1981), which is also used in Boyle (2000) to support such an argument. According to Manes and Wolfson (1981):

...over 50 per cent of compliments make use of one syntactic pattern, NP {is/looks} (really) ADJ, while two other syntactic patterns, I (really) {like/love} NP and PRO is (really ) a/an ADJ NP, accounted for a further 31 per cent of the 686 compliments in the corpus...two thirds of adjectival compliments employ only five adjectives: nice, good, beautiful, pretty, and great... just two verbs, *like* and *love*, occur in 86 per cent of all compliments which contain a semantically positive verb.

For this reason, explicit compliments are “formulaic”, which implies easier access to analyses and comparisons. Also, because significantly more “formulaic” compliments than implicit compliments were collected in the previous studies on compliments, for instance, more than 90 per cent of the collected compliments in Maíz-Arévalo (2010) are formulaic and 78 per cent of the compliments collected in Nelson et al. (1993) use three syntactic patterns, the previous studies on compliments pay exclusively more attention to explicit compliments than implicit compliments, even in most of previous studies, the implicit compliments are completely ignored. For example, in Wolfson and Manes (1980) and Holmes (1988) the corpora only consist of formulaic compliments. Moreover, Herbert (1997, p. 488) observes that the existing studies, including his own, “deal almost exclusively with explicit compliments”. For the formulaic feature explicit compliments have, Maíz-Arévalo (2012) defines explicit compliments as “those linguistically realized by declarative sentences which in turn can be affirmative (e.g., *Your hairstyle is so pretty!*) or exclamative (e.g., *What a nice handbag!*), with limited lexical choice of verbs and adjectives”. In her study (2012), Maíz-Arévalo constructs the following system of compliments (Figure 1):

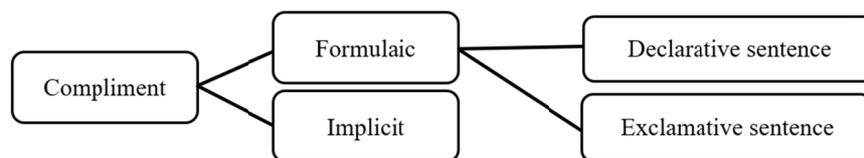


Figure 1. System of compliments (part)

Note. Maíz-Arévalo and García-Gómez, forthcoming 2012, p. 983.

## 2.2 Implicit Compliments

According to some of the previous studies which focus specifically on the implicit compliments, for instance Boyle (2000) and Maíz-Arévalo (2012). Boyle (2000) defines implicit compliments as those “in which the value judgement is presupposed and/or implicated by Gricean Maxims” and Maíz-Arévalo (2012) points out that “(implicit compliments) do not necessarily have a ‘fixed’ linguistic form like explicit compliments do and hearers need to infer the corresponding implicature for their interpretation”. Thus, while explicit compliments are “formulaic” and are directly functioned on the complimenting targets which use some conventional and “fixed” syntactic patterns, adjectives and verbs, implicit compliments do not necessarily include a positive lexical item, such as *like* (positive verb), *beautiful* (positive adjective), etc. Conversely, they use some indirect methods to show sincerity to the hearers, such as *contrast* (e.g., Your presentation was so good! *Unlike what I did.*), *want statement* (e.g., Your handbag is really cute! *I want to buy one too.*), *evaluation* (I like your presentation. *You spoke so freely.*) and many others (Lin et al., 2012).

## 3. Method

After introducing the theoretical background of the present study and some previous studies on the topic of compliments, in this section, the intention of the questionnaire design in the present study, data collection, reasons for choosing female informants only and data processing are illustrated.

### 3.1 Questionnaire Design and Data Collection

The present study of English compliments by Chinese and German female EFL speakers is based on a corpus of 20 dialogues (or 40 turns), 10 (20) each from both Chinese and German informants. The instrument used in the present study is a questionnaire, which consists of five items: two discourse completion tasks (DCT) on compliments and three questions which inquire personal information. The reasons for using written questionnaire data instead of naturally-occurring data in the present study include the guarantee of comparable data and better controlled social variables.

In the questionnaire, the aim of the present study is initially and briefly explained in three languages, namely English, Chinese and German, to ensure the informants’ right to know. No further detailed information is provided to make sure the collected data are uninfluenced. Then, the first question the informants were asked to answer is “*When did you start to study English?*” The informants were expected to give the age they started to learn English in the form of “\_\_\_ years ago”. After that, the informants were asked to complete two dialogues between two friends of the same gender (sex) which happen in two different situations. More specifically, the informants were first informed of the descriptions of two given situations, then they only needed to write down the opening turns of two potential dialogues which happen in those two situations between “*You*” and “*Friend*”. “*You*” give a compliment on targets which depend on the situations, and the “*Friend’s*” response is default which is always “*Thank you!...*”. The last two questions the informants were asked were that of their nationality and age. To protect the informants’ privacy, they only needed to choose the age zone they belong to. Three age zones are given in the questionnaire, which are “20–25 years old”, “26–30 years old” and “More than 31 years old” (Note 2). The intention of the arrangement of such a question sequence in the present questionnaire is to avoid putting questions with privacy like age at the beginning of the questionnaire, or before the DCTs. The informants may lose patience with the rest of the questions if they are initially asked about their age, which may have an influence on the results.

The two designed situations in the present questionnaire are respectively about appearance/possessions and ability/performance. The description of the first situation about appearance/possessions is “*You notice one of your female friends bought a new handbag, how will you compliment on that?*” and the second situation about ability/performance is described as “*One of your female classmates did well in her presentation, how will you compliment on her good performance?*” The choice of these two categories of complimenting targets is based

upon previous studies on compliments, for instance, Manes and Wolfson (1981) and Wolfson and Manes (1980); these two studies are based on a corpus of more than twelve hundred examples which were collected in the daily speech situations. The results of the studies show most of the collected compliments “focus on either appearance and /or possessions or abilities and/ or accomplishments” (Chen, 1993). Another study done by Holmes (1988a, p. 496) shows 92.5% of the collected compliment responses are about appearance/possessions and ability/performance. Also, conclusions of the two studies in Knapp et al. (1984) indicate that 93% and 83% of the collected compliments “focus on performance and appearance/attire” (Knapp et al., 1984, p. 17). Moreover, since all the informants in the present study are female students studying in the university, they are most likely to be familiar with topics about presentations or handbags.

### 3.2 Informants

As mentioned in the previous section, all the 20 informants included in the present study are EFL speakers who are female students studying in Universität Bielefeld, 10 each from Germany and China. Furthermore, all the German and Chinese informants are aged between 20 and 30 and have been studying English for at least 15 years. 7 German informants out of 10 chose the age zone “20–25 years old” and 3 chose “26–30 years old”, while 6 Chinese informants chose “20–25 years old” and 4 chose “26–30 years old”, which shows the overall average ages of the two groups of informants are approximately the same. Thus, variables like “age”, “gender(sex)” and “ethnicity” are homogenized, to make the regional factor the only analyzed variable (information about social class was not available).

Furthermore, in her *Paying compliments: A sex-preferential politeness strategy*, Holmes studies the impact of gender on complimenting behavior, namely “the hypothesis that compliments may serve different functions in women’s and men’s interaction” (Holmes, 1988, p. 445). In her study the corpus of 484 compliment exchanges is borrowed from Manes and Wolfson (1980), which was collected by 25 New Zealand students who chose this topic. As the results show 67.7% of all the recorded compliments were given by women, including compliments from females to females (F-F) and from females to males (F-M), and women received 74.3% of the collected compliments (M-F and F-F). It is also very significant that complimenting behaviors between males rarely happen, which only account for 9% of all the recorded compliments. Even after taking account of females’ compliments to males, males received only 25.5% of all the compliments. Thus, at least in Holmes’ study (1988), women give and receive significantly more compliments than men do, which implies “complimenting appears to be a speech behavior occurring much more frequently in interactions involving women than men” (Holmes, 1988, p. 450).

Based upon the relevant results of Holmes’ study (1988), and considering the fact that the present study is a quite small-scale one which includes only 20 informants, the present study chooses female informants only to ensure the results are valid.

### 3.3 Data Processing

The collected dialogues in the present study are analyzed from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. The central levels of analysis are the levels of moves and modifiers. As explained in Schneider’s studies (1988 & 2008), while turns are unambiguously marked by the speaker labels “A” and “B” (“You” and “Friend” in the present study), the analysis of moves focus on the identification of the move types.

According to the definitions and linguistic forms (Note 3), the collected moves are first categorized into two main types, namely explicit compliments (EC) and implicit compliments (IC). Furthermore, the ECs and ICs are respectively categorized into several sub-types.

In light of the “formulaic” feature the EC has, ECs collected in the present study are further categorized into four sub-types, which are borrowed from Bai (2015):

- A. The adjectival explicit compliments: NP {is/looks} (really) ADJ, e.g., Your bag is really beautiful!
- B. The adverbial explicit compliments: (NP/PRO) (was/were) ADV PP or You V (NP) ADV, e.g., (Your presentation was) Well done! You did it perfectly!
- C. The verbal explicit compliments: I (really) {like/love} NP, e.g., I love your handbag.
- D. The nominal explicit compliments: PRO {is/are} (really) (a/an) ADJ NP, e.g., That’s a really nice handbag!

To further explain what an EC should be like, one collected compliment from the corpus is discussed here, which drew a lot of attention during the process of analyzing the data. As mentioned in the previous sections, ECs are those directly functioned on the complimenting targets. For instance, in the examples shown above, the complimenting target “bag” is always the central target of the compliments, or rather, the emphasis of the

compliments, no matter it is positioned as a subject or an object. In the corpus there is a compliment “You look so pretty with the new handbag.”, on which a lot of time was spent to decide whether it belongs to EC or IC. It was at last categorized into IC, for the reason that the most direct complimenting target of the compliment is “You” instead of “the new handbag”, and in the context, “‘You’ look so pretty” implies the addresser’s appreciation for “the new handbag”. But if the form of the compliment is changed to “The new handbag looks good on you.”, then it is obviously an EC.

According to the collected data, the four sub-types of ICs are borrowed from Lin et al. (2012) and Yuan (2002):

Table 1. Sub-types of implicit compliments

Type	Definition & example
Admiration	To show the speakers’ admiration by setting the addressees as learning target, e.g., I like your presentation. <i>When you have time, could you give me some advices?</i>
Shift	To compliment on the central targets by showing addressers’ appreciation for other (relevant) aspects of the addressees or switching to show appreciation for (aspects of) targets other than the addressees (’), e.g., This handbag looks very nice. <i>You have a good taste.</i>
Explanation	To describe the good aspects of the complimenting targets, e.g., Your presentation was so good! <i>You spoke freely and seemed confident.</i>
Information Question	To ask the addressees for their opinion, advice or experience, or to request the addressees to give some information, e.g., Your handbag is so nice! <i>Where did you buy it?</i>

The sub-types “Admiration” and “Explanation” are from Lin et al. (2012), “Information Question” is borrowed from Yuan (2002). The last sub-type “Shift” is originally created and named here, to meet the needs of the present study. “Shift” is normally used along with (after) EC(s), for instance, “You are pretty. *Your husband is so lucky.*”

The collected modifiers **are excluded from** the analysis of move types, which are simply categorized into two sub-types:

- a. Intensifying adverbials. (e.g., *It is really beautiful!*)
- b. Emotional expressions. (e.g., *Wow! That handbag is so nice!*)

The following two examples are respectively taken from *situation I* and *situation II*, which are presented here to illustrate the specific categories.

- 1) *Oh girl! That handbag is so nice! Where did you buy it?*
- 2) *Wonderful! Good job! When you have time, could you please give me some advices?*

The first example consists of two moves and two modifiers, namely one emotional expression “*Oh girl!*”, one intensifying adverbial “*so*”, one adjectival EC “*That handbag is so nice!*” and one information question “*Where did you buy it?*”.

The second example consists of three moves and no modifier, which are one adjectival EC “(The/your presentation was) *Wonderful!*”, one nominal EC “*Good job*”, and one admiration “*When you have time, could you please give me some advices?*”.

### 3.4 Limitations of the Present Study

Resulting from the limited number of available Chinese informants in the university, the corpus of only 20 questionnaires is too small for more findings. Moreover, all the informants included in the present study are students, which may result in similarities among their compliment strategies.

## 4. Results

In this section, the results of *Situation I* and *Situation II* are separately discussed, instead of being compared together. Since the DCTs employed in the present study only require the informants to give the opening turns of two potential dialogues, the level of the turn is excluded from the analysis. Instead, the results are discussed by comparing the frequencies of the move types, namely the frequencies of ECs, ICs and their sub-types. Again, it should be emphasized here that the two types of modifiers are analyzed as independent targets.

### 4.1 Situation I

*Situation I* is about appearance/possessions only, whose given description is “*You notice one of your female friends bought a new handbag, how will you compliment on that?*”. The discussions of the results start with the

structure of the collected compliments, the “compliment” here refers to the complete utterance of complimenting written by informants in each of the two situations, no matter how many moves (or compliment units, to which modifiers do not belong) it consists of.

#### 4.1.1 Structure of the Compliments

In *situation I*, without the consideration of modifiers, the compliments produced by Chinese informants consist of one or two moves. The overall total is 13 moves, including ECs and ICs, which means that on average a compliment by Chinese English (CE) speakers consists of 1.3 moves. The compliments written by German English (GE) speakers comprise either one or two moves and the total number of moves is 15, which means the average number of moves each compliment consists of is 1.5. Thus, in light of such calculated data, the GE speakers wrote longer utterances of compliments than CE did.

Figure 2 shows the average number of moves per compliment in CE data and GE data:

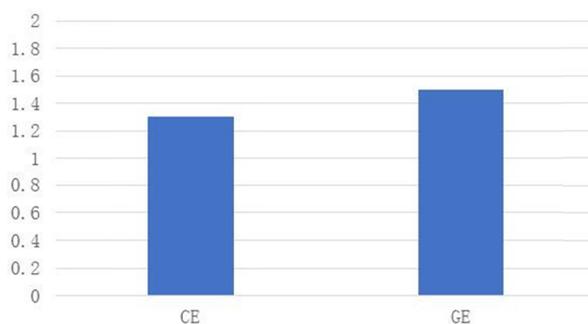


Figure 2. Average number of moves per compliment in *situation I*

Since each given compliment could employ more than one move, Table 2 shows the number of two main move types which were collected in *situation I*, namely EC and IC.

Table 2. Number of two main types of compliments in *situation I*

	CE	GE
EC	10	12
IC	3	3

CE speakers produced 10 ECs in total while GE speakers gave 12 ECs. The number of ICs given by CE speakers is 3, which is also the number of ICs produced by GE speakers. Thus, in *situation I* about appearance/possessions GE speakers used slightly more ECs than CE speakers did, but the frequencies of ICs used by the two groups of informants are almost the same.

More findings of the two English language varieties could be revealed by analyzing the combinations of move types in *situation I*.

As the collected compliments (both CE and GE ones) consist of one or two moves, four types of move combinations can be found in CE and GE data. Table 3 presents the frequencies of the four types of combinations in CE and GE data. For both CE and GE compliments, the most frequent type of combination is “One EC” only, which accounts for 60% of CE compliments and 50% of GE compliments. Moreover, 10% and 20% of CE and GE compliments consist of two ECs. 20% and 30% of CE and GE compliments use the combination of “One EC + One IC”. It is also worth noting that 10% (1) of the CE compliments use “One IC” only, and such a combination does not exist in GE data.

Table 3. Distribution of move combinations in *situation I*

	CE	GE
One EC	60% (6)	50% (5)
Two ECs	10% (1)	20% (2)
One EC + One IC	20% (2)	30% (3)
One IC	10% (1)	-
Total	100% (10)	100% (10)

Thus, according to the number of two main types of compliments and distribution of move types in *situation I*, not many differences could be found between CE and GE compliments. Thus, the previous section of analysis (4.1.1) implies that when complimenting on appearance/possessions, GE speakers prefer longer compliments with more ECs, while CE speakers use shorter compliments in which ICs are possible to be used alone.

The next step of the analysis is to work on the specific types and sub-types of moves.

#### 4.1.2 The Level of Explicit Compliments

As introduced in section 3.3, the ECs collected in the present study are categorized into four sub-types, which are the adjectival EC (e.g., *It is so beautiful. It's so nice.*), the nominal EC (e.g., *What a nice handbag. You have such a cute bag*), the verbal EC (e.g., *I love your handbag. The new bag fits you well.*) and the adverbial EC (e.g., *Well done. You did it perfectly!*). Table 4 shows the frequencies of four types of ECs in *situation I*.

Table 4. Frequencies of four types of explicit compliments in *situation I*

	CE	GE
The adjectival EC	60% (6)	41.6% (5)
The nominal EC	30% (3)	8.4% (1)
The verbal EC	10% (1)	50% (6)
The adverbial EC		
<i>Total</i>	<i>100% (10)</i>	<i>100% (12)</i>

It is not difficult to notice that the adjectival ECs were primarily preferred by CE speakers, which account for 60% of all the collected CE ECs, while the verbal ECs were most frequently used by GE speakers, which take the proportion of 50%. After further analysis, the most surprising findings are the extremely high occurrence of the two syntactic patterns “(I think) NP {is/looks} (really) ADJ” in the CE adjectival ECs (100%) and “I (really) {like/love} NP” in GE verbal ECs (100%). It means all the collected CE adjectival ECs and GE verbal ECs are in those two forms. Thus, two names are additionally given to the two syntactic patterns, *description* after “(I think) NP {is/looks} (really) ADJ” and *appreciation* after “I (really) {like/love} NP”. Relevant assumptions to explain the high occurrence of these two forms are discussed in the conclusion section.

#### 4.1.3 The Level of Implicit Compliments

Since very limited number of ICs were collected in *situation I*, no tables or figures are used in this section. Three of the collected ICs were from CE speakers, which are:

- 1) *You look so pretty with the new handbag.*
- 2) *Where did you buy it?*
- 3) *You have a good taste!*

Three others were given by GE speakers:

- 1) *Where did you buy it?*
- 2) *Where did you buy it?*
- 3) *Where did you get it?*

The finding is quite prominent. While 1 and 3 belong to “Shift”, 2, 4, 5 and 6 are typical “Information Question” (Note 4).

#### 4.1.4 Modifiers

The observations about modifiers are significantly clear. Table 5 shows the number of two main types of modifiers identified found in *situation I*.

Table 5. Number of two main types of modifiers in *situation I*

	CE	GE
Intensifying adverbials	7	6
Emotional expressions	1	5

Examples of intensifying adverbials are “*really*”, “*so*”, “*very*”. Emotional expressions include “*Oh*”, “*Wow*” and “*Oh girl!*”. It is clearly reflected that in *situation I* intensifying adverbials were used by CE and GE speakers with approximately the same frequencies, while emotional expressions such as “*Wow*” and “*Oh*” were prominently preferred by GE speakers.

#### 4.2 Situation II

situation II is about performance/abilities only, which is described as “One of your female classmates did well in her presentation, how will you compliment on her good performance?”. In this section, the results of situation II are presented in the same sequence as in section 4.1. The discussions start with the structure of compliments, then levels of explicit and implicit compliments, and finally end with the level of modifiers.

##### 4.2.1 The Structure of the Compliments

In *situation II*, the compliments produced by CE speakers consist of either one or two moves, but unlike in *situation I*, the GE speakers each gave between 1 and 5 moves. The overall number of moves given by CE speakers is 14, thus, the average CE compliment in *situation II* consists of 1.4 turns, whereas the GE speakers gave 19 moves in total, which means on average a GE compliment consists of 1.9 moves. Compared with the data in *situation I*, the findings are significant; while in *situation II* the average number of moves per compliment given by CE speakers stays almost the same (1.3 in *situation I* and 1.4 in *situation II*), the phenomenon is more prominent that GE speakers gave longer compliments (1.5 in *situation I* and 1.9 in *situation II*).

Figure 3 shows the average number of moves per compliment in CE and GE data in *situation II*.

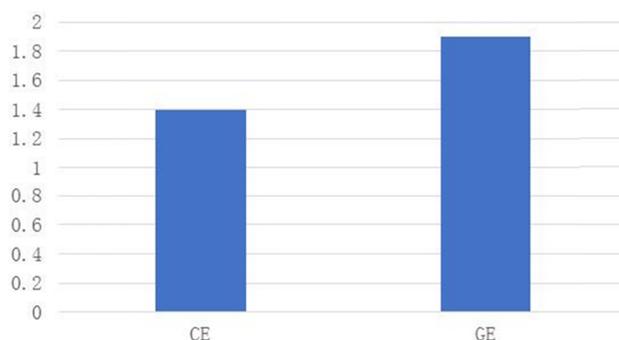


Figure 3. Average number of moves per compliment in *situation II*

Table 6 presents the overall number of ECs and ICs given by CE and GE speakers in *situation II*.

Table 6. Number of two main types of compliments in *situation II*

	CE	GE
EC	11	16
IC	3	3

Therefore, 11 and 16 ECs were respectively collected from Chinese and German informants. Moreover, like it is in *situation I*, CE and GE speakers gave the same number of ECs, which is 3.

As shown in Table 7, compared with results achieved in *situation I*, more types of move combinations are identified in *situation II*. The compliments with only one EC were still the first choice for both CE and GE speakers, which account for 70% and 50% of the CE and GE data. The rest of the Chinese informants chose compliments with “One EC + One IC” (30%). Whereas the CE data contribute only two types of move combinations, GE data provide five types of move combinations. It is also worth noting that one of the ten German informants gave compliments with “Four ECs + One IC”. Thus, the findings on the move combinations could suggest that GE informants were more likely to use compliments with multiple moves, while CE speakers still preferred compliments with one or two moves.

Table 7. Distribution of move combinations in *situation II*

	CE	GE
One EC	70% (7)	50% (5)
Two ECs	-	20% (2)
One EC + One IC	30% (3)	10% (1)
Two ECs + One IC	-	10% (1)
Four ECs + One IC	-	10% (1)
<i>Total</i>	<i>100% (10)</i>	<i>100% (10)</i>

#### 4.2.2 The Level of Explicit Compliments

As Table 8 illustrates, of all the collected ECs in *situation II*, 45.5% of the ECs given by CE speakers were adverbial ones, for instance, “*Well done.*”, “*You did (it) perfectly.*”, and “*You did (it) quite well.*”. The adjectival ECs can just employ one adjective, such as “...(a) *Wonderful (presentation)!*” and “...(a) *Incredible (presentation)!*”, or with the syntactic pattern “NP {is} (really) ADJ”, for instance, “*Your presentation was really great!*”. Meanwhile, the adjectival and adverbial ECs were used by the German informants as their priority choice with the same frequency (37.5%). The nominal ECs (e.g., *Good job! You did an excellent job!*) and the verbal ECs (e.g., *I like your presentation. I liked your performance.*) were used with relatively lower frequencies by both CE and GE speakers.

Table 8. Frequencies of four types of explicit compliments in *situation II*

	CE	GE
The adjectival EC	18.2% (2)	37.5% (6)
The nominal EC	27.3% (3)	12.5% (2)
The verbal EC	9% (1)	12.5% (2)
The adverbial EC	45.5% (5)	37.5% (6)
<i>Total</i>	<i>100% (11)</i>	<i>100% (16)</i>

#### 4.2.3 The Level of Implicit Compliments

6 implicit compliments were identified in *situation II*, 3 each from CE and GE speakers:

- 1) *When you have time, could you please give me some advices?*
- 2) *How did you prepare for this?*
- 3) *I am proud of you!*
- 4) *You spoke freely and seemed confident.*
- 5) *You spoke freely and your presentation was well ordered and easy to follow.*
- 6) *You were so related.* (Your presentation was closely related to the topic.)

1, 2, 3 were from CE speakers, while 4, 5, 6 were produced by GE speakers. While 1 belongs to “Admiration” and 2 is an “Information Question”, 4, 5, 6 can clearly be categorized into “Explanation”. IC 3 is categorized into “Other”, for the reason that no sub-type of implicit compliments was identified to make it fit in.

#### 4.2.4 Modifiers

Table 9 presents the number of intensifying adverbials and emotional expressions collected in *situation II*. Thus, when complimenting on presentations, no emotional expression was used by CE or GE speakers, meanwhile, GE speakers produced 8 intensifying adverbials and that number is prominently larger than the number in the CE data.

Table 9. Number of two main types of modifiers in *situation II*

	CE	GE
Intensifying adverbials	4	8
Emotional expressions	0	0

## 5. Compliments in American English

In her *Compliments and Compliment Responses* (1986), Holmes shows the syntactic patterns of compliments in American English (AmE). According to her findings, 86.2% of all the collected compliments are “formulaic”, which use 4 syntactic patterns. Table 10 presents the general results of Holmes (1986), which was summarized by Kayo Fujimura-Wilson.

Table 10. Syntactic patterns of compliments in AmE

	Syntactic formula	AmE
<i>a</i>	NP {be} (INT) ADJ e.g., Your hair is really great. {be} Looking e.g., You are looking terrific.	53.6%
<i>b</i>	I (INT) {like/love} NP e.g., I simply love that skirt.	16.1%
<i>c</i>	PRO {be} (a/an) (INT) ADJ NP e.g., That’s a very nice coat.	14.9%
<i>d</i>	(INT) ADJ (NP) e.g., Really cool earrings.	1.6%
	<i>Total</i>	<i>86.2%</i>

Note. Fujimura-Wilson, 2014, p. 23.

As presented in Table 10, the central level of analysis in Holmes (1986) is the level of “formulaic” compliments, which accords with the level of explicit compliments in the present study. But unlike what is done in the present study, Holmes does not take the situational factor into consideration, which means the collected compliments in her study are not further categorized into target-based sub-types. Therefore, the following comparisons between the data from the present study and AmE data from Holmes (1986) are arranged to stay at the level of explicit compliments only; moreover, adaption should be made for both sides of the data. According to Table 10 and sub-types of ECs in the present study, type *a* should be categorized into the adjectival ECs, type *b* should belong to the verbal ECs, while type *c* and *d* are namely the nominal ECs in the present study.

In the present study, overall 21 ECs and 28 ECs were collected from CE and GE speakers. In the CE data, informants gave 8 adjectival ECs, 6 nominal ECs, 2 verbal ECs and 5 adverbial ECs. Meanwhile, in the GE data, informants produced 11 adjectival ECs, 3 nominal ECs, 8 verbal ECs and 6 adverbial ECs. Thus, a new table (Table 11) is presented to illustrate and compare the frequencies of the four sub-types of ECs in the data of the three English language varieties.

Table 11. Frequencies of four sub-types of explicit compliments in AmE, CE and GE data

	AmE before adaption	AmE after adaption	CE	GE
The adjectival EC	53.6%	62.2%	38.1% (8)	39.3% (11)
The nominal EC	16.5%	19.1%	28.5% (6)	10.7% (3)
The verbal EC	16.1%	18.7%	9.5% (2)	28.6% (8)
The adverbial EC	-	-	23.8% (5)	21.4% (6)
<i>Total</i>	<i>86.2%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100% (21)</i>	<i>100% (28)</i>

The most obvious finding is that the adjectival ECs are the most frequently used ECs in the data of all three English varieties, but such a frequency is prominently higher in AmE data (62.2%, compared with 38.1% in CE data and 39.3% in GE data). Moreover, while the nominal ECs were least preferred by GE speakers (10.7%) and the verbal ECs were not regularly used by CE speakers (9.5%), hardly any adverbial ECs are found in AmE data. Combining the results shown in Table 10, the AmE speakers seem to prefer ECs with syntactic pattern “(I think) NP {is/looks} (really) ADJ” (*Description*) to ECs with syntactic pattern “I (really) {like/love} NP” (*Appreciation*) (Note 5), which phenomenon can also be found in CE data.

## 6. Conclusion

The present study is situated in the field of variational pragmatics, which tries to investigate the relationship between the use of compliment strategies and the regional (or national) differences. The analysis is based on a corpus of 40 collected compliments, 20 each produced by Chinese and German informants; each informant gave

two compliments in two target-based situations, namely situations about only appearance/possessions and about only performance/abilities. The central levels of analysis include the level of explicit compliments, the level of implicit compliments and the level of modifiers.

When giving compliments in both appearance/possessions-related and performance/abilities-related situations, GE speakers employed more moves in their compliments than CE speakers did, which implies longer compliments in GE data. In the light of such a finding, it can be argued that the reading of Gricean maxims in Chinese culture seems to be “Be brief”.

When complimenting on appearance/possessions, for instance, on friends’ new handbags in the present study, both CE and GE speakers used compliments with just one EC as the priority choice, but GE speakers were more likely to give compliments with double moves. When it comes to the level of explicit compliments, the adjectival ECs were mostly preferred by CE speakers and the verbal ECs were used by GE speakers with the highest frequency. Another surprising discovery is that, when all the adjectival ECs produced by Chinese informants make the use of *description* “(I think) NP {is/looks} (really) ADJ”, *appreciation* “I (really) {like/love} NP” accords with the syntactic pattern of all the adverbial ECs given by GE speakers. Such a phenomenon may result from the cultural differences between China and Germany, that is, if an addresser uses *appreciation* to compliment on one of an addressee’s possessions in China, there is a high possibility that the addressee would give the addresser that possession, which may cause unnecessary embarrassment. Among all the sub-categories of ICs, when complimenting on appearance/possessions, “Information Question” was prominently preferred by GE speakers, that is, GE speakers would not hesitate to ask where to get the possessions the addressees have. But CE speakers used “Shift” more frequently; “Shift” is a less direct implicit compliment strategy, which is realized by switching addressers’ appreciation from the central targets (of the compliments) to other aspects of the addressees or possessions or even to (aspects of) targets other than the addressees (?). Moreover, when giving compliments on appearance/possessions, more modifiers were used by GE speakers among which significantly more emotional expressions, such as “Wow” and “Oh, girl”, were employed.

When complimenting on performance/abilities, for instance, on classmates’ presentations, CE speakers included in the present study preferred compliments which employ no more than two moves, meaning that they used only one EC or one EC followed by an IC in their compliments. Meanwhile, data collected from GE speakers shows that GE speakers were more likely to use longer compliments with multiple moves. With regard to ECs, the findings do not indicate significant differences between CE and GE data; while CE speakers preferred the adverbial ECs in the performance/abilities-related situation, the adverbial ECs and adjectival ECs were used by GE speakers with the same frequency. Contrastively, the findings of ICs show prominent features. All the ICs produced by GE speakers are “Explanation” and ICs given by CE speakers are categorized into “admiration” and “Information Question”, which means when complimenting in performance/abilities-related situations, GE speakers would give details to explain the good aspects of the complimenting targets, for instance, the good aspects of the addressees’ performance or abilities, but CE speakers would show intention of learning from the addressees or asking further information about the complimenting targets. Therefore, while the similarities between CE ECs and GE ECs could imply the performance/abilities-related topics are relatively “safer” for complimenting in both Chinese and German cultures, the differences between ICs in CE and GE data could indicate the different attitudes towards the performance/abilities-related complimenting targets in those two cultures. Furthermore, in *situation II*, no emotional expressions were collected in both CE and GE data, but GE speakers gave significantly more intensifying adverbials than CE did, upon which hypotheses could be build that performance/abilities-related situations are more serious than appearance/possessions-related ones, in which emotional expressions are not so appropriate.

The previous illustration shows the results of the levels of analysis. But considering that the corpus employed in the present study is relatively small, all the presented results should only be treated as hypotheses. More large-scale studies should be carried out in the future for further findings.

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## Notes

Note 1. It is a quotation used by Schneider and Barron in the introduction section of their *Variational Pragmatics* (2008).

Note 2. See appendix for more details.

Note 3. See section 2 “Compliments”.

Note 4. See Table 1.

Note 5. See section 4.1.2.

## Appendix

**\* The aim of the present study is to analyze the frequencies of different English compliment strategies used by German female EFL speakers and Chinese female EFL speakers.**

**\* 本调查目的在于研究德国英语作为外语的女性使用者和中国英语作为外语的女性使用者用英语进行赞美时运用不同赞美策略的频率。**

**\* Das Ziel dieser Studie besteht darin, die Verwendungshäufigkeiten der verschiedenen Kompliment-Strategien zu untersuchen. Die Teilnehmer sind deutsche weibliche Englisch als Fremdsprache-Sprecher und chinesische weibliche Englisch als Fremdsprache-Sprecher.**

1. When did you start to learn English?

\_\_\_\_\_ years ago.

2. Situation I : You notice one of your female friends bought a new handbag, how will you compliment on that?

*You:* \_\_\_\_\_.

*Friend:* Thank you!...

3. Situation II : One of your female classmates did well in her presentation, how will you compliment on her good performance?

*You:* \_\_\_\_\_.

*Classmate:* Thank you!...

4. Your nationality:

German

Chinese

5. Your age:

20-25 years old

26-30 years old

More than 31 years old

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