Laughing Together in Japanese Complimenting Discourse: Collaboratively Constructed Stance

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Introduction

Complimenting behavior “mirrors cultural values” (Manes, 1983, p.96). The object of compliments, who compliments whom, and how compliments are responded to are factors vigorously investigated in the fields of pragmatics and sociolinguistics to uncover preferred styles of the languages or cultures in question.¹ The more the research results are accumulated, the more the complicated nature of complimenting behaviors is revealed. Even when solely examining Japanese data, contradictory results are obtained (Satoh, 2014).

This paper reframes a series of interactions comprising the paying of, and responding to, compliments (compliment discourse). The purpose of the paper is to examine the process of stancetaking as it is collaboratively constructed through these interactions, and to investigate how a potential power imbalance caused by compliment discourse is mediated in the Japanese cultural context. I will approach this question through an investigation of the strategic development of compliment discourse.

Complimenting

In this paper, the term “compliment” will be understood according to Holmes’ definition (1988):

A compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some “good” (possession, characteristics, skill, etc) which is
positively valued by the speaker and the hearer. (p.446)

The spoken act of complimenting is complicated in nature. It can enhance solidarity between a person who pays a compliment (a complimenter) and a person who receives a compliment (a complimentee) (Holmes, 1995). At the same time, it can also highlight a power imbalance that may exist between the two.

Paying a compliment is a speech act wherein the complimenter positively evaluates one aspect of the complimentee. This act can place the complimentee in a higher position than the complimenter by indicating that the former possesses something praiseworthy. However, it can also put the complimenter in a higher position than the complimentee by implying that the former possesses some qualifications by which he/she can evaluate the object of the compliment.

When we receive a compliment, we are expected to respond to it as the second pair part of an adjacent pair (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). The speech act of responding to a compliment also puts either the complimenter or the complimentee in a higher position depending on the complimentee’s responses.

In response, therefore, we must observe and be aware of the balance between agreement and self-praise avoidance (Pomerantz, 1978). Even if a complimentee judges it appropriate to accept the compliment he/she receives, sanctions against self-praise are sometimes forthcoming if a complimentee accepts it without hesitation as pointed out by Satoh (2014).

In responding to a compliment, we must also pay attention to the fact that the response might reveal a judgment of the complimenter’s evaluation ability. If the complimentee rejects the compliment, the inference is that the complimenter’s judgment is incorrect, which is also exemplified by Satoh (2014).

People use various strategies to manage conflicting constraints such as “sifting the evaluation and shifting the referent” (Pomerantz & Heritage, 2013, p.221). For example, several studies have revealed cultural and situational variations in
people’s chosen responses to a compliment. In terms of Japanese researchers, Daikuhara (1986), Terao (1996), and Adachi (2011) among others reveal that in certain situations, people prefer rejection-type responses and in other situations, people prefer evasion-type responses.

However, most of the studies carried out thus far are limited to the observation of a single compliment-response pair. In reality, compliments and their responses rarely end in a simple exchange of just two turns (a compliment and a response). Even when the complimentee deploys a shifting strategy, extended sequences beyond a single pair can be observed. For example, Satoh (2014) observes how the participants of compliment discourse collaboratively construct interactions to manage conflicting constraints between agreement and avoidance of self-praise (Pomerantz, 1978; Pomerantz & Heritage, 2013).

**Stancetaking**

Collaborative behavior observed in compliment discourse involves the subjective and intersubjective activities of the participants. The act of complimenting is defined as subjective activity in the sense that a complimenter chooses a certain object among indefinite choices and gives it positive evaluation. At the same time, it can be termed intersubjective activity since the flow of interaction that follows is deeply affected by how a complimentee responds to the compliment received.

We cannot utter any words without stance. Du Bois (2007) defines stance as follows:

> Stance is a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any dimension of the sociocultural field. (p.163)
The key concept of stance is dialogism, implying that stance is established intersubjectively during interactions. “The stance triangle” (Du Bois, 2007, p.163), consisting of three nodes (Subject 1, Object, and Subject 2), provides a framework for capturing the bidirectional relationship between evaluating objects, positioning subjects, and alignment with other subjects.

In complimenting discourse, the complimenter (Subject 1) takes a certain evaluative stance toward an object that the complimentee possesses (Object), puts oneself in a certain position toward Object and aligns with the complimentee (Subject 2). In receiving a compliment, the complimentee is obliged to present his/her stance through responding to it. That is, the complimentee takes a certain evaluative stance toward Object, which in turn puts him/herself in a certain position toward it, and at the same time aligns either positively or negatively with the complimenter (Subject 1).

The dialogic nature of stance explains alignment, disalignment, and realignment in compliment discourse. By investigating the negotiation process of “who leads and who follows” (Du Bois, 2007, p.161), this paper tries in particular to illuminate the mediation of a potential power imbalance caused by paying and responding to compliments. I will approach this question through the investigation of the strategic development of compliment discourse: the introduction of compliments in a conversation, the development of compliments, and the response exchanges.

Data

The data for the present study is drawn from the Japanese TV talk show “Gout Temps Nouveau,” which was broadcasted through the Fuji Television Network from April 2006 to March 2012, and usually aired at approximately 11 o’clock at night. Most of the 30-minute talk show is devoted to free discussion between three
TV celebrities at a restaurant. The show begins with shots of each celebrity walking into the restaurant, greeting each other, taking a seat and ordering food. This talk show gives the audience the feeling that they are peeking into the lives of three celebrities who are freely enjoying “eating out” and chatting with friends about aspects of daily life, exactly as a group of friends would at a restaurant or at home. This paper chooses the following two episodes for close investigation since they present apparent differences in modes of response to an initial compliment dissolve into similarities by the end. This evolving occurs via several exchanges of compliments and responses:

Data 1 [Remembering the names of the staff]
Broadcast on February 8, 2012
Participants (three male actors):
Koji Yakusho (56), Kanji Furutachi (43), Shun Oguri (29)

Data 2 [You will be a good mother]
Broadcast on January 11, 2012
Participants (three female actors):
Natsuna (22), Rei Okamoto (20), Miori Takimoto (20)

Findings
To Accept or Not To Accept

Some compliments are accepted and some are not. In the former case, a complimentee positively aligns with a complimenter. In the latter case, a complimentee negatively aligns with a complimenter. This section compares compliment discourse that includes an acceptance response and one that includes a rejection response and shows that the difference is caused by the concept of “entitlement,” which determines who can praise what to whom.

The following compliment and response pair is taken from Data 1.  

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3
(1) Acceptance

1. Yakusho: 小栗君は、でも、ものすごくスタッフの名前覚えるように、

2. ほんと、努力して、やってるよね。

Oguri-kun, but you really try hard

to remember the names of the staff.

3. Oguri: まあそうですよ。

Sort of, I do.

In excerpt (1), Yakusho’s compliment is accepted by Oguri. This could be the result of the relationship between the complimenter and the complimentee. The relationship between a stance lead and a stance follow in Du Bois’s term is one of the issues displayed here. Both the complimenter (a stance lead) and the complimentee (a stance follow) are actors: Yakusho, the former, is older than Oguri, the latter, and has had a longer career as an actor. These two factors—age and professional career—cause Oguri to position himself as an obedient follower. That is, these factors give Yakusho a sense of entitlement to praise Oguri when the topic under discussion is related to their profession.

Unlike (1), the following compliment and response pair taken from Data 2 exemplifies the rejection of a compliment:

(2) Rejection

1. Okamoto: でも、いいお母さんになりそう、なっちゃん。

But you will be a good mother, Nacchan.

2. Natsuna: うそ、いや、途中で放棄しそう、hahaha.

You lie, no, I will give up halfway through, hahaha.

In (2), the compliment by Okamoto is rejected by Natsuna. Both Okamoto and
Natsuna belong to the same generation; Natsuna is two years older than Okamoto. There are no apparent hierarchical differences between Okamoto (a stance lead) and Natsuna (a stance follow) in terms of their professional careers as actresses. The non-hierarchical relationship between the two causes Natsuna to become a “disobedient follower.”

Besides “who leads and who follows,” it is the topic of a compliment (the evaluating object) that is deeply related to whether a complimentee aligns with a complimenter positively or negatively in these examples. In (1), the compliment is objective in nature. Yakusho, Oguri, or the third participant (Furutachi) can provide concrete evidence to either support or refute the content of the compliment since they had just worked together for the film entitled “Kitsutsuki to Ame (The Woodsman and the Rain).” On the other hand, in (2), the content of the compliment is subjective. The question of whether or not Natsuna will be a good mother in the future is related to her personality. Therefore, it is difficult to provide evidence to support or refute the statement.

Thus, based on these two exchanges, we can assume that whether a compliment is accepted or rejected is deeply associated with “entitlement:” that is, who praises what to whom in a given cultural context. More specifically, the combination of age, professional career, and objectivity of the object of compliments can decide the stance the participants take.

“Remembering the Names of the Staff”

However, expanding the scope of observation, we can find a similarity between the exchanges in (1) and (2). The excerpt (3) is a continuation of (1), wherein a compliment given by Yakusho is immediately accepted by Oguri. After accepting Yakusho’s compliment, Oguri explains why he tries to remember the names of the staff members:
(3) [Data 1: Remembering the names of the staff]

1. Yakusho: 小栗君は、でも、ものすごくスタッフの名前覚えるように、
2. ほんと、努力して、やってるよね。
   Oguri-kun, but you really try hard
   to remember the names of the staff. [Compliment 1-1]
3. Oguri: まあそうですよね。
   [Sort of, I do.] [Acceptance]
4. Yakusho: 全部名前で呼ぶし。
   [You call all of them by their names. Compliment 1-2]
5. Oguri: ま、自分が結構名前を間違えられたことが多くて、
   Well, I am often called by the wrong name,
6. Furutachi: あ、そうか、そうか。
   Oh, I see. I see.
7. Oguri: もう、ほんとに仲いい人でも、あのよ、ばっと出たら、
8. 小倉さんって言われちゃうことが、あるんですよね。
   Even well-acquainted people, you know, happen to call me Ogura-san.
9. Yakusho: おれ、別所さん。
   I’m called Bessho-san.
10. Oguri: Nuhahahahaha
   Nuhahahahaha,
11. Furutachi: ああそうか。
    Oh, I see.
12. Oguri: でもなんか、それ以来、結構、覚えるように、
    But you know, after such an incident,
    I try hard to remember (their names).
13. まとりあえず、なんか現場で用がなくても呼んでみるみたいね。
    Anyway, I call them by name even for no reasons.
14. Yakusho & Furutachi: ((笑))
In receiving the compliment, Oguri accepts it and explains that he tries to remember the names of the staff members he works with because people often get his name wrong. The other participants, including the complimenter, show their understanding. The complimenter Yakusho and the third party Furutachi both sympathize with the reason behind Oguri’s effort in line 9 and line 11, respectively. Then, in line 13, Oguri, laughing, adds that he calls the staff by name even if he has nothing to say. Triggered by laughter from Oguri, both Yakusho and Furutachi then join in the laughter together. Subsequently, they move on to a new topic.

“\textit{You Will Be a Good Mother}”

The excerpt (4) is a continuation of example (2). After Okamoto’s compliment is rejected by Natsuna in line 2, a long negotiation occurs:

(4) [Data 2: you will be a good mother]

1. Okamoto: でも、いいお母さんになりそう、なっちゃん.
   But you will be a good mother, Nacchan. [Compliment1-1]

2. Natsuna: うそ、いや、途中で放棄しそう、hahaha.
   You lie, no, I will give up halfway through, hahaha.

3. Okamoto: なりそう.
   You will be (a good mother). [Compliment1-2]

   [Evasion]

5. なんだかんだ面倒みちゃうんだろうなって,

6. かんじ.

No, but I wonder, somehow I will take care of (people)

[feel like] [Evasion]
7. Takimoto: [面倒見がいいんだよ。]
   [You will take good care of (people)]  [Compliment 1-3]

8. Natsuna: かなあ。
   I wonder I will  [Weak acceptance]

9. Okamoto: もてるでしょう。
   You are popular among the men, aren’t you?  [Compliment 2-1]

10. Natsuna: ((頭を左右にふる))
   ((shakes her head))

11. もてるとかもてないとかそういう以前の問題だよね。
   The point is before talking about whether I am popular or not.
   [Shift]

12. もうなんか、全然そういう人たちがいないもん。まわりに。
   Well, anyway, there aren’t such people around me.

13. Okamoto: いや、見ていないだけだよ。きっといるんだよ。
   No, you haven’t noticed them yet. There are, surely.
   [Compliment 2-2]

14. Takimoto: [そうだよ。]
   For sure.  [Compliment 2-3]

15. Natsuna: [いやいやいやいや。
   No, no, no, no,  [Rejection]

16. Takimoto: 絶対、スタッフさんとかいっぱい好きだよ。
   Absolutely, there are a lot of staff members who like you.
   [Compliment 2-4]

17. Natsuna: いやいや。
   No, no.  [Rejection]

18. Takimoto: 絶対いるよ。絶対。気づいていないだけだよ。
   Absolutely, there are. Absolutely. You just don’t notice them.
   [Compliment 2-5]
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19. Natsuna: それを言ったら、みおりんもさ、全然気が付かないタイプでしょう。
Judging in that light, Miori, you are the kind of person who doesn’t notice, aren’t you? [Shift]

20. Takimoto: うん気づかない。
No, I don’t notice.

21. 悠霊とかいても気づかないと思う。
I wouldn’t even notice a ghost.

22. Natsuna: そこ？
Is that a point?

23. Okamoto: そこ？
Is that a point?

Okamoto repeatedly pays Natsuna a compliment in different words, while Natsuna exploits various means to avoid accepting the compliment. First, Okamoto compliments Natsuna, saying that Natsuna will make a good mother ([Compliments 1-1 and 1-2]), and receives a negative reaction in line 2. In her response to the second compliment in lines 4, 5, and 6, Natsuna shifts the point about being a good mother to that of being a good carer, and evades acceptance of the compliment she has received.

Picking up the expression “mendomi (good carer)” that Natsuna uses, Takimoto also gives a compliment to Natsuna (Compliment 1-3). This time, Natsuna weakly accepts it in line 8. In their interactions, the degree of alignment between the complimenter and the complimentee is gradually shifting as the evaluating object changes. When the object is related to being a good mother, the alignment is negative. However, the alignment by the complimentee with the complimenter becomes positive when the object is related to being a good carer, which is the topic the complimentee herself raises.

Following that exchange, another compliment and response exchange starts.
Both Okamoto and Takimoto collaborate to give compliments to Natsuna. First, Okamoto gives compliments twice, telling her that she is popular among men (Compliments 2-1 and 2-2); again, Natsuna’s reaction is negative. Natsuna mentions that there are no people around her. Takimoto joins the compliment discourse and enforces Okamoto’s compliments (Compliments 2-3, 2-4, and 2-5). Each time, Natsuna rejects the compliment she receives.

As observed from this interaction, compliment discourse is not limited to a single compliment-response pair. In fact, there are multiple back-and-forth negotiations, until finally, the compliment interaction ceases.

In (4), the compliment discourse beginning with Okamoto ends with Takimoto’s humorous reaction, after which they all laugh together. Takimoto rejects Natsuna’s response that there are no men around her by mentioning that Natsuna does not notice admiring people when they are near her. In line 19, instead of showing alignment or misalignment, Natsuna shifts the evaluating object from herself to Takimoto. She mentions that Takimoto is also similar to her. Natsuna’s comment implies that Takimoto is the type of person who does not notice a man who approaches her. In her utterance, she omits the object of the verb “notice.” Takimoto exploits this. She mentions that she would not even notice if a ghost was standing near her in lines 20 and 21. Shifting the topic from a man to a ghost is unexpected and lends humor to the conversation. Both Natsuna and Okamoto note Takimoto’s funny reaction, after which they share a laugh and move to the next topic.

**Analysis**

This paper examined two examples of compliment discourses. Upon initial examination, these two examples are different: one compliment is accepted and another compliment is rejected. However, in both cases, a compliment and a response are repeated several times in different words, after which the conversation
shifts focus following shared laughter.

In the data observed so far, every stance seems to be taken by each participant’s voluntarily will. However, we must note that “stance can be given or accorded, rather than taken” (Irvine, 2009, p.70).

Complimenting is a type of verbal behavior that encompasses a subtle power game, because paying a compliment means evaluating the object of that compliment, and responding to a compliment includes a further evaluation. If we fail to cope with this power game, some sanctions await, as previously pointed out. In order to exit this power game successfully, laughter is frequently employed as a mutually beneficial solution. That is, it can be observed that laughter works as a contextualization cue, which can be defined as “any feature of linguistic form that contributes to the signaling of contextual presuppositions” (Gumperz, 1982, p.131). In this way, then, laughter terminates the ongoing compliment discourse and catalyzes a change in the conversation topic. This leads us to question why, in fact, laughter is used by participants as a contextualization cue to end the compliment discourse.

To answer this question, it is helpful to take into consideration the functions of laughter during verbal interactions. Modes of language are chosen from the resources available: in this case, from the series of stancetaking choices, which lead to a developed style, as pointed out by Johnstone (2009):

Repeatable linguistic styles emerge out of stancetaking strategies
that prove repeatedly relevant and useful for particular speakers
in particular kinds of interactions. (p.29)

First, laughter is often observed as a kind of verbal behavior that is closely related to a topic shift. Schegloff (2007, p.186) points out that sequence-closing is an adjacency-pair-based process:
1. Close proposing
2. Collaboration with the closing displayed
3. Ratification of the recipient’s alignment

In the examples used in this study, it is not clear whether a close proposing is actually offered, but as far as we can observe, the participants collaboratively and interactively move toward the end of the ongoing topics through several exchanges. The participants find a laughable point: in Data 1, it is the utterance by Oguri that he calls the names of the staff even for no reason and in Data 2, it is Takimoto’s unexpected reaction that she does not notice a ghost around her. After laughing together, the participants add nothing further. All these processes lead the participants to ratify a closing alignment.

In fact, several studies indicate that shared laughter occurs around the termination of a topic (Holt, 2010; Gilmartin, Bonin, Vogel, & Campbell, 2013; Bonin, Campbell, & Vogel, 2014). For example, Holt (2011) points out that by laughing together, the participants “display willingness to bring the topic to a close” (p.407). Through an observation of Japanese conversation styles, Kushida (1995) also illustrates that “laughing with,” instead of “laughing at,” can mark the boundary of a topic.

Second, laughter can ease the tension that might be caused by the giving and receiving of a compliment. Szatrowski (2004) observes that the series of strong invitation and refusal exchanges in Japanese conversations turns into a play frame at the closing stage; this is done to ease the atmosphere caused by the conflicting stances of the participants. A similar observation is made in Warner-Garcia (2014): laughter mitigates an undesirable interactional conflict.

Thus, the nature of shared laughter that is commonly used to signal the end of a topic and mitigate the tension/power imbalance is also employed during
compliment discourse.

Summary

An analysis of the data revealed that the mediation of the power imbalance is achieved through the following processes:

1. Multiple exchanges of compliments and responses
2. Frame shift from “compliment” to “play”
3. Collaboratively exiting compliment discourse by laughing together

Whether the compliment is rejected or accepted, a frame shift from compliment to play is often deployed by the participants in order to exit the compliment discourse. The complimenter or (most often) the complimentee might exchange a joke to ease the tension caused by complimenting and the participants laugh together; this shared laughter functions as the cue for a topic shift. Of course, a consensus among all the participants is necessary for the topic shift to occur, from the compliment discourse to something else. Even if one participant tells a joke, a topic shift cannot be undertaken unless all the participants respond favorably to the joke (for example, by laughing). The data observed so far indicates that laughing together is also shared by the participants as an indicator of a boundary of topic.

Through observing the strategic development of compliment discourse, this paper suggests that laughing together is one of the stabilized repertories for the solution of easing a potential power imbalance, which is achieved by the participants’ intersubjective stancetaking.

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Notes
2. The number in the parentheses indicates age of the participant.
3. Literal translation from the original Japanese into English is presented. The part enclosed by parentheses is not mentioned in the original Japanese but added for clarification of meaning.
4. The information that they worked together is related to the audience at the beginning of the episode.

References


Kim, K. (2012). Nihongo to Kankokugo no “home” ni kansuru taisho kenkyu [Contrastive


**Appendix: Transcription symbols**

- Falling intonation
- Level intonation
- Rising intonation
- Beginning of a overlap talk
- Transcriber’s remarks
- Laughing voice