Digital Politeness: A Gendered Analysis of Complimenting Behaviour on Social Media

Abdelfattah Laabidi
Moulay Ismail University of Meknes, Faculty of Sciences.
Laboratory of Applied Linguistics and Artificial Intelligence Research Laboratory
a.laabidi@umi.ac.ma

Abdelouahed LAACHIR
The Higher School for Education and Training, Hassan I University-Morocco, Laboratory of Education, Humanities and Languages.
Abdelouahed.laachir@uhp.ac.ma

Infi Ouidad
Moulay Ismail University of Meknes, Faculty of Sciences, Laboratory of Applied Linguistics and Artificial Intelligence Research Laboratory
o.infi@umi.ac.ma

Abstract

With the rapid advancement of technology and the excessive use of social media as platforms for communication, the shades of digital politeness and complimenting speech acts have become a worthy study area. This paper examines the overlap between digital communication, gender, and complimenting behaviour in online communication. It mainly sheds light on how men and women differ in using, reacting and interpreting compliments in online interactions. The current study adopts a quantitative approach by mixing descriptive and inferential statistics. Data are collected using a discourse completion test that comprises seven distinctive scenarios with different power, distance and ranking position relationships. The participants are 62 students from ENS, Moulay Ismail University. After running a Pearson Chi-squared test for each scenario in the DCT, the findings reveal a strong correlation between gender and the choice of complimenting strategies, claiming that gender is an impactful variable affecting compliments' making and interpretation in online contexts. It also concluded that the differences between male and female language users lie in the excessive use of additional cues by female speakers to express emotions, like emojis, liking, tagging and sharing. This study can eventually deepen and enhance the debate on politeness in online dyads by highlighting the intricacies of gendered compliments speech acts. It affords a foundation for further research into pragmatic competence in online contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the field of pragmatics, pragmatic competence is always perceived as the study of language and its theoretical features for issuing new theories of solving some linguistic and context issues. Its focus has always been the impact of the context, including social status, age, ranking position, gender and distance, on language use and the ability of these features to

manipulate the language and get manipulated by it (Holmes & Brown, 1987). For this reason, it can be said that pragmatic competence study can function as a bridge between disciplines like sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and pragmatics (Laabidi, 2021). Lately, to anticipate and overcome the language barriers between the speakers, the primary focus of pragmatic competence study has been on politeness and its new formulas.

With the advancement of new technologies and especially the excessive use of social media, digital politeness emerged as a new field of interest, an extension of Brown and Levinson's 1987 theory of politeness. Politeness or linguistic politeness is major in constructing interpersonal relationships in any context. Therefore, issuing any speech act can be face-threatening if the speaker cannot adapt his language to the specificities of the social variables determined by the milieu of use. The primary motivation for this study is to investigate the impact of gender as a social variable on the use of specific digital politeness strategies by studying complimenting speech acts. The study of the compliment speech act underwrites valuable evidence concerning when and to whom a speaker may offer a compliment, how to interpret implied social and cultural meanings, and how to respond appropriately when one receives a compliment (Aceves, 1996).

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Politeness in the Digital Era

Politeness as a theory has always been interested in rules that govern interactions between human beings. This theory was first introduced by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), and it was built on Goffman's (1967) notion of face. According to Goffman (1967), face is the self-image that every person wants others to recall him/her with. So, a person's face can be emotionally invested, lost, maintained or enhanced in conversations. In this regard, Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) assert that there are two aspects of face desire: positive face and negative face. The negative face represents a person's desire to be free and self-sufficient rather than imposed upon.

In contrast, a positive face refers to one's need to be admired and appreciated by others (Zhang, 2020). The theory also claims that some face-threating acts may threaten either the speaker or the hearer's face. These face-threatening acts are mitigated and redressed using politeness strategies, which include positive politeness strategies, negative politeness strategies, bald on-record strategies, and off-record strategies Brown and Levinson (1987).

Over the last decades, technology has dramatically impacted how people communicate; due to the advancement in technology and communication, researchers introduced a new field of study in pragmatics: digital politeness. It generally stands for using communication and language strategies in online interactions to show consideration, respect and sympathy towards others, making an inclusive and positive online environment (Kösling & Reiter, 2019). In the same line of arguments, Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2019) state that digital politeness entails the purposeful use of digital communication techniques like emoticons, linguistic forms and emojis to minimize and mitigate face threats, construct social relationships and maintain these relationships in an online speech community. Differently put, these strategies become a set of rules that govern the interaction between the users of each community, and they become necessary for any online interaction to be successful.

Compared to face-to-face politeness, it can be noted that in digital politeness, users usually use strategies such as traditional politeness markers, hedging and the avoidance of direct criticism (Herring, 1996). To mitigate face-threatening acts, users, in parallel with the

previously mentioned strategies, can use emojis to compensate for the absence of facial and vocal cues in texts, helping users express feelings and emotions (Locher & Graham, 2010). In this concern, Zhao and Jiang (2021) consider emojis as pragmatic markers that distinguish digital politeness, mitigate face-threatening acts and enhance interpersonal relationships in online discourse. According to Evans (2017), these markers have become an international common visual language, transcending linguistic obstacles and allowing intercultural understanding in digital spheres.

2.2. Gender and Politeness

Politeness in language is considered a purely female issue since women are always expected to be polite and indirect, unlike men's linguistic behaviour, which can be direct, rough and aggressive (Laabidi, 2021). According to Mills (2003), politeness is a linguistic move that marks a civilized act from the speaker and softens the directness and roughness of the speaker; this move in many cultures is related to femininity. It is a distinctive linguistic act that mainly links women to the upper or middle class and keeps them away from the working class. Politeness is concerned with caring for others' feelings, and that is why many linguists associate women with positivity since they always tend to display friendliness and nicety.

In their analysis of the linguistic behaviour of men and women, Brown and Levinson (1987) concluded that in single-sex conversations, women are more polite than men. To put it differently, women's speech is elaborated for positive politeness whereas men are balder on record in their speech. This means that women use more 'emphatic particles' in parallel with positive politeness strategies like exaggerated intonation, rhetorical questions, intensifiers and irony to show sympathy. However, men also have distinctive strategies, such as the use of sexual jokes, lectures, advising and narrating stories. In this realm, Holmes (1995) asserts that women, in general, use more politeness strategies than men with the purpose that they can escape face-threatening acts and, therefore, maintain social harmony.

Gender differences in language are attributed to different factors; in this regard, Brown and Levinson (1987, 1978) and Mills (2003) claim that the role women play in society necessitates that women act politely and gently to show femininity and men act harshly and roughly to reveal their power and masculinity. Another factor that can lead to gender differences in politeness is the education males and females received in their childhood. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), in many communities and at an early age, females are encouraged to talk gently like ladies and boys are asked to speak roughly like men. However, according to Mills (2003), these factors might not be the reason why women and men use politeness strategies differently for the simple reason that they were based on stereotypes that were constructed and widely used in many societies and which became later rules that men and women have to abide by.

2.3. Speech Act of Complimenting

In socio-pragmatics, compliments are always perceived as positive politeness strategies employed by the speaker to establish, maintain and foster social relationships by showing concern and admiration to the hearer (Yuan, 2002). They are strategies that attend to the hearer's positive face and wants, showing that they are appreciated, praised and liked (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Accordingly, Holmes (1988) and Manes & Wolfson (1981) claim that a compliment is a socially constructed speech act that directly or indirectly attributes credit to the hearer for some admired and precious properties, traits or skills which is generally valued and appreciated by the speaker and the hearer alike.

Complimenting behaviour is affected by many variables. Culture is a significant variable that inevitably affects the choice of complimenting strategies and its implications. Complimenting as a speech act is culturally bound and context-specific. In this regard, Holmes (1988) infers that what can be regarded as a compliment in one culture may be considered an insult in another. For example, Arab and Persian speakers employ more proverbs and idioms while complimenting others, unlike Americans, who use direct and frequent ways of complimenting (Wolfson & Manes, 1981). This result was again asserted by Nelson, Al-Batal, and Echols (1996), who compared Egyptian Arabic to English in complimenting strategies. Their study found that English American compliments are concise and straightforward compared to Egyptian-Arabic compliments, which are elaborate and contain similes and metaphors.

Gender is another variable that impacts the interpretation of compliments in different settings. The distribution of compliments by gender shows not only who compliments more but also reveals the sociolinguistic tendencies related to gender identities in society; women are said to compliment more than men, focusing on appearance, whereas men more frequently compliment women than they do other men generally compliment properties and performance (Holmes, 1988). Additionally, for males, issuing a compliment can be competitive or evaluative; however, for females, compliments are a tool for showing solidarity and establishing or maintaining relationships (Coates, 2013). Also, women are more likely to appreciate compliments. By contrast, to show their masculinity, men often refuse them. According to Herbert (1990), this difference not only reveals social norms and anticipations vis-à-vis gender roles but also highlights divergent interpersonal objectives, with females seeking connection and care and men accentuating status and performance.

3. METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this study is to investigate the influence of gender as a social variable on the use of specific digital politeness strategies by studying complimenting speech acts in the Moroccan context. Therefore, to achieve this goal, a quantitative research approach is adopted in this study, using both inferential and descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics describe the strategies used by the participants to react to the discourse completion test scenarios, and inferential statistics assess the relationship between gender variables and the use of online politeness strategies.

A discourse completion test is used for data collection. DCTs are widely used in pragmatics because they allow eliciting specific speech acts under controlled conditions, offering the possibility of cross-cultural and interlanguage comparisons (Kasper & Dahl, 1991). They are also effective for collecting large amounts of data from large numbers of respondents in a minimal period, especially if the study's objective is to analyze a specific pragmatic feature, as is the case of this study (Félix-Brasdefer, 2003). For this study, the DCT comprises seven scenarios with different societal features: social distance, power (the relative social power between the speaker and hearer) and ranking positions (the level to which the speech act imposes on the hearers' liberty).

Situation one is for close friendship, which means there is equal power, low social distance and low raking position; situation 2 is for acquaintance relationship; equal power (medium SD, equal P, low R); situation 3 for an influencer/stranger; equal power (high SD, equal P, low

R), situation 4 depicts Professor/Superior and student relationship; higher power (medium SD, higher P, medium R), situation 5 is about subordinate/junior relationship, lower power (medium SD, lower P, low R), situation 6 reflects sibling/family member relationship; equal power (low SD, equal P, low R), and situation 7 is for opposite-gender stranger relationship; equal power (high SD, equal P, medium R).

The sample for this study was selected using availability sampling to reach many respondents. It is composed of 68 respondents from Moulay Ismail University of Meknes. The respondents are second and third-year university students from the English department. The research questions this study sets to answer are: (RQ1) To what extent does gender impact politeness strategies in compliments on social media platforms? And (RQ2) what are gender-based differences in the frequency, context and content of complementing behaviour in online interactions?

4. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

From the answers of the respondents, it can be deduced that eleven complimenting strategies were used by the respondents; these strategies are explicit digital compliment (direct and unambiguous praise), intensified and hyperbolic compliment, personal and playful compliment, human-based and indirect compliment, intensified and encouraging compliment, professional and formal compliment, indirect non-verbal compliment, non-interaction/ passive admiration, motivational and confidence-boosting compliment, indirect or sarcastic compliment and emotionally expressed and personalized compliment. It can also be noted that the previously mentioned strategies were all used by female respondents, and only eight were used by male respondents.

Along with the aforementioned compliment strategies used by the respondents, many emojis-enhanced compliments were employed to reinforce emotion and tone. Additionally, many respondents claimed that they would use tagging as an indirect complimenting strategy to suggest admiration. Engaged-based compliments are another strategy the respondents used very often, especially liking posts and sharing them with others, showing admiration and appreciation. Meme-based compliments, namely funny memes and GIFs, are another strategy the respondents used to compliment others in the discourse completion test, especially when complimenting people with the same or low power, distance and ranking position.

As indicated in the table below, the findings of the DCT suggest that in situation one, 26.78% of the female respondents used intensified and hyperbolic complement strategy, 26.78% used personal and playful compliments, 25% employed explicit digital compliments (direct and unambiguous praise) and 21.42% used human-based and indirect compliment. In situation two, 26.78% of the respondents utilised explicit digital compliments (direct and unambiguous praise), 25% used intensified and encouraging compliments, 25% used professional and formal compliments, and 23.21% employed personal and playful compliments. However, in situation three, 26.78% used explicit digital compliments (direct and unambiguous praise), 26.78% used an intensified and hyperbolic compliment, 25% used non-interaction/ passive admiration, and 21.24% employed indirect non-verbal compliments. In situation four, 39.28% of the female respondents used explicit digital compliments (direct

and unambiguous praise), 30.35% employed intensified and encouraging compliments, and 30.35% used professional and formal compliments. Concerning situation 5, 55.35% used motivational and confidence-boosting compliments, and 44.64% used explicit digital compliments (direct and unambiguous praise). In situation 6, 35.71% employed explicit digital compliments (direct and unambiguous praise), 32.14% used indirect or sarcastic compliments, and 32.14% used personal and playful compliments. For the last situation, 30.35% used an intensified and encouraging compliment, 26.78% used explicit digital compliment (direct and unambiguous praise), 23.21% employed emotionally expressed and personalized compliments and 19.64% used non-interaction/ passive admiration.

Table 1: Compliment Strategies Used by Female Respondents

Situation / Strategy		S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7
Explicit digital compliment (direct and unambiguous praise)	F	14	15	15	22	25	20	15
	P	25	26.78	26.78	39.28	44.64	35.71	26.78
Intensified and hyperbolic compliment	F	15	0	15	0	0	0	0
	P	26.78	0	26.78	0	0	0	0
Personal and playful compliment	F	15	13	0	0	0	18	0
	P	26.78	23.21	0	0	0	32.14	0
Human based and indirect compliment	F	12	0	0	0	0	0	0
	P	21.42	0	0	0	0	0	0
Intensified and encouraging compliment	F	0	14	0	17	0	0	17
	P		25	0	30.35	0	0	30.35
Professional and formal compliment	F	0	14	0	17	0	0	0
	P		25	0	30.35	0	0	0
Indirect non-verbal compliment	F	0	0	12	0	0	0	0
	P		0	21.42	0	0	0	0
Non interaction/ passive admiration	F	0	0	14	0	0	0	11
	P		0	25	0	0	0	19.64
Motivational and confidence boosting compliment	F	0	0	0	0	31	0	0
	P	0	0	0	0	55.35	0	0
Indirect or sarcastic compliment	F	0	0	0	0	0	18	0
	P	0	0	0	0	0	32.14	0
Emotionally expressed and personalized compliment	F	0	0	0	0	0	0	13
	P	0	0	0	0	0	0	23.21
Total	F	56	56	56	56	56	56	56
	P	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

As far as male respondents are concerned, as shown in the table below, only eight compliment strategies from those used by female respondents were used by males, and three other strategies were not. The strategies not used by male respondents are emotionally expressed and personalized compliments, human-based and indirect compliments and personal

and playful compliments. The strategies widely employed by male respondents are explicit digital compliments (direct and unambiguous praise) and motivational and confidence-boosting compliments in all situations.

Table 2: Compliment Strategies Used by Male Respondents

Situation / Strategy	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7
Explicit digital compliment (direct and unambiguous praise)	F 3	2	5	3	3	11	12
	P 25	16.66	41.66	25	25	91.66	100
Intensified and hyperbolic compliment	F 3	0	0	0	0	0	0
	P 25	0	0	0	0	0	0
Intensified and encouraging compliment	F 0	2	0	1	0	0	0
	P	16.66	0	8.33	0	0	0
Professional and formal compliment	F 0	0	0	8	0	0	0
	P	0	0	66.66	0	0	0
Indirect non-verbal compliment	F 0	0	1	0	0	0	0
	P	0	8.33	0	0	0	0
Non interaction/ passive admiration	F 6	0	5	0	0	0	0
	P 50	0	41.66	0	0	0	0
Motivational and confidence boosting compliment	F 0	8	1	0	9	0	0
	P	66.66	8.33	0	75	0	0
Indirect or sarcastic compliment	F 0	0	0	0	0	1	0
	P	0	0	0	0	8.33	0
Total	F 12	12	12	12	12	12	12
	P 100	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

To measure the impact of gender on the choice of compliment strategies, a Pearson Chi-Square test was run for every situation. The Pearson Chi-Square is an effective statistical tool employed to determine whether there is a correlation between two or more variables. As revealed in the table below, the p-value in situations 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 and 7 is less than the standard significance level of 0.05, meaning the result is statistically significant. In other words, in these situations, there is a statistically significant association between gender and the choice of complimenting strategies. To put it differently, gender impacts the choice of complimenting strategies, and the result is highly significant. However, in situation four, the p-value is .052, more than the standard significance level of 0.05. So, in this situation, there is no statistically significant correlation (or association) between gender and the choice of complimenting strategies.

Table 3: Pearson Chi-Square Test Result for every Situation

		value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Situation 1	Pearson Chi-Square	33.798[a]	4	.000
Situation 2	Pearson Chi-Square	43.815[a]	4	.000
Situation 3	Pearson Chi-Square	29.847[a]	4	.000
Situation 4	Pearson Chi-Square	5.903[a]	2	.052
Situation 5	Pearson Chi-Square	49.569[a]	2	.000
Situation 6	Pearson Chi-Square	12.649[a]	2	.002
Situation 7	Pearson Chi-Square	22.127[a]	3	.000

5. DISCUSSION

It can be noted from the strategies used to compliment in online contexts that the respondents used seven direct complimenting strategies, which are intensified and hyperbolic compliment, explicit digital compliment (direct and unambiguous praise), personal and playful compliment, intensified and encouraging compliment, professional and formal compliment, motivational and confidence-boosting compliment, and emotionally expressed and personalized compliment and four indirect strategies which are human-based and indirect compliment, indirect non-verbal compliment, non-interaction/passive admiration, and indirect or sarcastic compliment. The excessive use of direct strategies, especially by female respondents, indicates clarity and sincerity and, therefore, reduces ambiguity, making the speaker's intentions interpreted.

In parallel with the previously mentioned strategies and in accordance with Locher and Graham's (2010) findings, respondents, especially female respondents, made use of some online communication markers such as emojis. These emojis are softeners to boost emotional expression by making compliments more friendly and personal. Liking, sharing, and tagging are new forms of complimenting techniques that users of online platforms can employ to compliment others. These new techniques are not only used to show appreciation. However, they are also considered indirect politeness strategies that mark digital politeness and can establish, maintain and boost a social relationship.

This study also confirms Holms's (1995), Laabidi's (2021), Mills's (2003), and Brown and Levinson's (1987) findings, which claim the existence of gender differences in the choice of politeness strategies in general, including complementing strategies. This finding in this study is asserted first by the different frequency rates of use of strategies by male and female respondents in the same situations and second by the results of the Pearson Chi-square test run for each situation in the DCT, and which concluded that gender is an impactful variable in the choice of adequate complimenting strategies except in situation four which is purely about a professional relationship that necessitates certain formality and neutrality in language from the speaker. As in Mills (2003), these gender differences can be attributed to the fact that women are expected to be more emotionally expressive and interpersonally oriented whereas men are said to use compliments to show status.

6. CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Our study investigates the impact of gender on the choice of online complimenting strategies in different settings. Data for this study are gathered using a discourse completion test, which is composed of seven scenarios with different power, distance and ranking position relationships. The obtained data are codified and analysed using SPSS, which allows for generating both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics are used to describe the frequency of complimenting strategies used by male and female speakers, and inferential statistics are used to measure the impact or correlation between gender and the choice of complimenting strategies in digital communication.

A key implication of this study is that gender is an impactful variable in formulating, delivering and interpreting online compliments. This study also concludes that a good understanding of politeness in complimenting online promotes inclusive and prosperous communication between the speaker and the hearer. Further, it can be deciphered from the current study's findings that gendered language patterns are reinforced in digital space by using nonverbal cues and icons like emojis or even by liking, sharing and tagging, which are excessively used by female users more than male ones.

This study studied complimenting in digital communication in relation to gender using only a discourse completion test. However, further research can be carried out by mixing quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments through observation and a DCT at different stages of the study. The use of observation can provide real-life and more authentic findings. The number of participants in this study can be larger to get deeper insight into the issue. Therefore, using a DCT in Arabic can be more inclusive to more study participants and hence cater to the limited population.

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