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**Research Article****Native Speaker's Perception of The Naturalness In The Japanese Speech Act Response of Compliment Among Japanese Learners In Indonesia****Bayu Aryanto\*, Syamsul Hadi, Tatang Hariri**

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Responding to compliment sometimes puts the speech partner in a dilemma. Receiving a compliment can cause a chance of a self-compliment impression. If you refuse a compliment, it will give the impression of not appreciating the reasonable judgment of the speech partner (complimenter). This dilemma will be more complicated for foreign language learners, including those who have linguistic skills at an advanced level. This article contains how native speakers provide an assessment for the compliment responses of speeches to Japanese learners, especially in Central Java and D.I.Yogyakarta. Fifty-three respondents were Japanese learners, and five were native Japanese speakers as judges to assess the naturalness of the respondents' compliment speech responses. Among 424 responses of Japanese learners' compliment speech, 55 per cent of the respondents' speech was considered unnatural. It indicates that there has been a socio-pragmatic failure and a pragma-linguistic failure. Socio-pragmatic failure can be seen in the "lack of competence" to consider extra-linguistic factors, such as the failure to consider whom the partners are speaking, the failure to understand the horizontal distance and vertical distance speech partners. The use of speech levels that are not under the conversation context is quite visible in the data.

**Keywords:** compliment; compliment response; Japanese learners; speech act**How to cite (APA):** Aryanto, B., Hadi, S., & Hariri, T. (2021). Native Speaker's Perception of The Naturalness In The Japanese Speech Act Response of Compliment Among Japanese Learners In Indonesia. *IZUMI*, 10(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.14710/izumi.10.1.1-10>**Permalink/DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.14710/izumi.10.1.1-10>**1. Introduction**

The speech act of compliment is a good impression from the speaker for the speech partner. According to Holmes (1986), this good impression can be in the form of an assessment of appearance, ability, ownership, and individual behaviour. When it is viewed from the function, Mastuoka (2001) provides three functions of compliment speech acts based on the face Brown-Levinson (1996): 1) Compliment acts as a positive affective speech act by fulfilling the needs/desires of a cheerful face and increasing solidarity

among people; 2) Compliment acts as a positive politeness strategy to mitigate face-threatening actions; 3) Compliment can be considered a threat to the face itself if seen from the desire to fulfil the speaker's positive face needs towards the speech partner or the ownership of the speech partner.

On the topic of how someone responds to compliment speech acts, complimentee can experience a dilemma, whether to accept a compliment or reject it. When accepting, there is a concern that complimentee do self-compliment. On the

other hand, if they refuse compliment, the complementee are worried about making face threats because they refuse or do not appreciate a good impression of their speech partners (complimenter).

The speech act of compliment is one of the speech acts which contains a good assessment of the speech partner. This good assessment can be in the form of a good assessment of appearance, ability, ownership, and individual behaviour (Pomerantz, 1978; Holmes, 1986; Furukawa, 2010; Moala, 2013). However, the speech act of compliment can also be understood as a form of irony by the speech partner (Furukawa, 2010). Thus, the speaker's meaning in which it is conveyed must be understood contextually by the partner.

It is often encountered the linguistic phenomenon that the second language learners have difficulty applying the second language's social norms. In socio-pragmatic studies, there have been many discussions about the differences in socio-pragmatic norms of each culture in speaking a speech act, especially the compliment speech act. Researchers, such as Kayo-Fujimura (2014), Wolfson (1981), Daikuhara (1986), have proven that there are differences in pragmatic norms which have led to pragmatic interlanguage studies.

This study aims not only to describe comprehensively how Japanese learners in Indonesia, especially in Central Java and D.I. Yogyakarta, respond to Japanese speech acts of compliment and get a perception of Japanese native speakers whether the speech in the form of a compliment response from Japanese learners is considered natural or unnatural. A theoretical and practical approach is used in this study to determine the language naturalness of a compliment response speech by foreign speakers (Japanese language learners) can be obtained, and the objective results can be seen.

This research discusses the description about the realization of the

response to compliment speech acts by foreign speakers or Indonesian Japanese learners and the research finding of native speakers' assessment to the response of compliment speech acts among Indonesians who speak Japanese. The results of this study are expected to find socio-pragmatic principles applied in Japanese society to the response of compliment speech acts. Then, the results can be counted into consideration for Japanese language learners and teachers to use socio-pragmatic principles in terms of response to Japanese compliment speech acts.

## 2. Methods

The responses to speech acts of compliment obtained from respondents were 53 students of 5th-semester Japanese language learners in five universities in Central Java and Yogyakarta. These respondents are Japanese language learners in the 5th and 6th semester who speak Javanese as their mother tongue. Then, the compliment responses generated from these respondents were grouped into eight categories based on the combination of the relationship between the speech participants and the content of the compliment. These categories are symmetrical relationships (Indonesian students-Japanese students) and asymmetrical relationships (Japanese-speaking students – lecturer who is native speaker of Japanese). These categories consist of four complementary contents: complement for appearance, abilities, possessions, and individual traits. Speech data were obtained using the DCT audio-visual method and interview. In contrast, assessing the respondents' naturalness was carried out using closed questionnaires and interviews with the native speaker.

Data collection results on the compliment speech act were categorized based on the parameters of the relationship between the speech participants and the type of response. In each of these categorizations, the researcher then asked

the native speaker to provide an assessment with two variables, namely 1) natural; and 2) unnatural—those choices based on the perception of Japanese native speaker. Then, the researcher discussed with native speakers to find out the reasons for determining the naturalness of the assessment in each speech datum.

### **Compliment speech acts and responses**

The speech act of compliment is one of the studies which has received significant attention from pragmatic experts. These studies produce rules for the use of language in culture and provide an overview of the use of language by a person in a particular community. (cf. Knap et al., 1984; Manes, 1983; Wolfson, 1984)

Compliments, according to Holmes (1986: 485), are speech acts conveyed by speakers, both explicit and implicit, in the form of sound/positive assessments towards the ownership, characteristics, abilities, which exist in other people. Based on the content of the compliment speech, Holmes (1986: 496) divides them into four categories, namely: 1) Appearance, a compliment that contains a good value for someone's physical appearance; 2) Ability, a compliment that contains the excellent value of a person for physical and non-physical abilities (intelligence); 3) Possession, a compliment that contains the excellent value of something someone has; 4) Personal behaviour or personality, a compliment that contains good values for personal behaviour.

Matsuura's (2004) study includes gender differences, psychological distance, and relationship status, which influence compliment speech acts. The data from Japanese informants can be concluded that Japanese people who have close relationships are categorized as *uchi* (in-group). The compliment speech acts as a form of appreciation are not needed. On the other hand, *soto* or speech partners (out-group) are considered to be treated as someone in a higher position. Thus, the

compliment speech acts aimed to *soto* have a higher frequency than the compliment to *uchi*. From a gender perspective, female informants performed more often than men doing speech acts of compliment.

Research on compliment speech responses has become a research trend since Pomerantz (1978) wrote the article "Compliment Responses: Notes on the Cooperation of Multiple Constraints". According to Pomerantz (1978), the speech act responses of compliment have several strategies in a range of receiving a compliment. One of these things is an attempt by the person being complimented on avoiding the impression of being arrogant (self-compliment avoidance).

There are several forms of self-compliment avoidance. The first form is compliment downgrades by using grammatical and lexical features. It means that people who receive compliments make a response that degrades the compliment or judgement of those who compliment. The second form is referent shifts. It means that people who are complimented compare to others who are more deserving of the compliment. In other words, people who have complimented judge others on being superior to themselves. The third form is returns, the person who is complimented turns to compliment the praising person. This strategy can be categorized into a referent shifts strategy.

Several studies which are often used as the primary reference for research on the response to compliment speech acts are Holmes (1986) and Herbert (1986, 1988, 1990). Holmes (1986) divides speech act responses into three categories: accepting, rejecting, and deflecting. Then, Herbert divides the speech act response categories into five, namely accepting, mitigating, rejecting, request interpretation, no response. Like Holmes and Herbert, several other researchers examined complement speech acts and their responses with the data from their mother tongue or native speakers. The examples of researches on

compliment speech acts and their responses are in Japanese Hirata (1993), Rie (2002), Susanti (2010), and Inukai (2018). The research on compliment speech acts with the data on regional languages in Indonesia was carried out by Sukarno (2015), who reviewed it from eastern politeness, and Sundanese: and Akmal (2013), who studied it from the perspective of verbal and nonverbal speech.

Along with the development of foreign language learning, research with data sources of foreign speakers is also increasing. Research on compliment speech acts and their responses with speech sources of foreign speakers aims to determine complement speech's characteristics and responses. Some of these studies, including compliment speech acts in English by foreign speakers of Arabic, were done by Alfalasi (2007), Mohamed (2015), and Althigafi (2017). Some studies about compliment speech acts in English were done by foreign Japanese speakers, Daikuhara (1986) and Wilson (2014). Another study about speech acts of compliment in English by foreign Vietnamese speakers was done by Lingh (2020). The study about speech acts of compliment in English by foreign speakers of Indonesian was done by Setiadi (2016). The study about speech acts of compliment in Japanese by foreign speakers of Indonesian was done by Rosiah (2017).

### 3. Result and Discussion

Based on the findings on the data, the authors made several groupings with the categorization of symmetrical and asymmetric relationships. Each category is divided into sub-categories based on the four contents of compliment and they will be seen based on the natural level of the speech. Many 424 speeches were obtained in this study with the level of assessment from the results of the verification with the five verifier speakers who are Japanese native speakers and were as follows:

#### Symmetrical relationship

This category is divided into four categories based on the content of the compliment, namely 1) the response to performance compliment; 2) the response to ability compliment; 3) the response to ownership compliment, and 4) the response to individual behaviour. The division aims to get a comprehensive understanding of the speech act responses of compliment in each category. The conversation context in this symmetrical relationship is carried out by Japanese native speakers who act as close friends of students (respondents).

##### a. Response to performance compliment

The contents of the compliment speech to which the respondents responded are as follows:

The students, who are Japanese native speakers, complimented the appearance of Indonesian respondents.

"*Sono batik no gara, suteki da ne. Niatтеру yo* "

'Your batik motif is nice. It suits you. '

In this sub-category, it was found that there were 15 unnatural speeches (28%) and 38 (72%) natural speeches. Here are the examples of compliment response in this category:

1) "A, *hai. Arigatou gozaimasu.*" (polite)

'Yes, thank you'

2) "*Un, arigatou.*" (casual)

'Yes, thank you'

3) "*hee? Hontou desuka*" (polite)

'Really?'

From the three examples, speeches 1 and 3 were considered unnatural by native speakers because they were not using the correct variety of teinei. According to native speakers, it is best to avoid teinei (polite form) and keigo (honorifics form) in the context of a conversation with close friends.

b. response to ability compliment

The contents of the compliment speech to which the respondents responded were as follows: Japanese speaking students complimented the Japanese language competence of Indonesian respondents.

"*Nihongo ga jouzu da ne*" (casual)  
'Gee, your Japanese is good'

In this sub-category, 26 speeches were considered unnatural (49%) and 27 natural speeches (51%). Here is an example of a compliment response in this category:

- 4) "*Uun, mada mada*" (casual)  
'No, not yet (clever) '
- 5) "*Iie, mada mada dame desu*" (polite)  
'No, still not smart'
- 6) "*iie, iie, chotto warui*". (casual)  
'No, no. (still) rather bad (in Japanese) '

Native speakers considered speech five as an unnatural response because of the use of the casual variety, which serves as a marker for negative rejection of "*uun*" (no) and without being followed by a marker of speech in the form of *teinei* "*desu*". The unnaturalness in speech 5 is due to the inappropriate use of various *teinei* because the relationship between speech participant is close. Even though speech 6 used a casual level of speech, it is assessed by native speakers as a speech that is considered '*imifumei*' because it is meaningless.

c. response to ownership compliment

The contents of the compliment speech to which the respondents responded were as follows:

Japanese-native students complimented Indonesian respondents' bags.

"*Sono baggu suteki da ne.*"  
'Your bag is nice.'

There were 30 (57%) unnatural speeches in this sub-category and 23 (43%) natural speeches. Here are some examples of data:

- 7) "*Hai, doumo arigatou gozaimasu*". (polite)  
'Yes, thank you'
- 8) "*Ee, haha kara moratta*" (casual)  
'Yes, my mother gave it.'
- 9) "*Sou kanaa?*"  
'Is it true?'

Speech 7 is considered unnatural by native speakers because of the *teinei* speech level in response to their compliment speech. Moreover, there is the use of the word "*doumo*" which creates an impression of social distancing. The emergence of this social distancing impression is unusual for native speakers in the context of conversations with close friends. Speech 8 is a response type of compliment in the form of the deflecting conversation topic. Speech 9, considered a downgrading, is considered a natural speech used in a conversation between friends.

d. Response to personal trait compliment

The contents of the compliment speech to which the respondents responded were as follows: Japanese speaking students complimented the individual behaviour of Indonesian respondents

"*Jugyochuu itsumo majime ni kiitete, erai yo ne.*"  
'(You) listen to the lecture diligently, that's great. '

35 (66%) responses were judged as unnatural speeches, and 18 (34%) responses were natural speeches in this sub-category. Here are some examples of data:

- 10) "*Iya, sonna ....*" (casual)  
'It's not like that ...'
- 11) "*Un, sou da ne*" (casual)  
'Yes, it is like that.'

Speeches 10 and 11 are both casual. However, speech 10 is categorized as a rejection response type and is considered

natural speech. In contrast to the former, speech 11 is considered an uncommon speech used in Japanese society. The speech in compliment response of data 11 is included in the category of acceptance (accepting), and the final particle "ne" serves to emphasize the content of the speech. Based on these considerations, native speakers assessed that the speaker of speech 11 is overestimating himself, and these speeches are considered unnatural in Japanese society.

### Asymmetrical relationship

This asymmetrical relationship is also divided into four variables based on the content of the complement speech. However, the participants speaking in this asymmetrical relationship are Japanese native speaker who acted as a senior lecturer and complimented the students.

#### a. Response to performance compliment

The contents of the compliment speech to which the respondents responded were as follows: A Japanese speaking lecturer complimented the appearance of Indonesian respondents.

"*Sono batik no gara, suteki desune. Tottemo niatteimasu*"

'Your batik motif is nice, huh. It suits you well'

There were 20 (38%) unnatural speeches in this sub-category and 33 (62%) natural speeches. Here are some examples of responses.

12) "*Sou desu ka. Arigatou gozaimasu*"

'Oh really? Thank you'

13) "*Hai, arigatou. Sensei no fuku mo suteki desu yo*"

'Yes, thank you. your dress is nice too'

Speech 12 is included in the accepting category to compliment speech. However, it begins with the phrase 'sou desuka' as an attempt by the speaker to ask his partner's

certainty about the content of the compliment. Speech 12 is considered natural speech by native speakers. Speech 13 is included in the acceptance category because it is marked with an expression of gratitude in a casual variety, "arigatou", and followed by a speech of compliment "Sensei no fuku mo suteki desu yo". It is considered that speech 13 is not natural because there are two reasons. The first reason is that the gratitude speech "arigatou" is a casual form, and the second reason is that the speech partner is a senior lecturer.

#### b. response to ability compliment

The contents of the compliment speech to which the respondents responded were as follows: A Japanese speaking lecturer complimented the Indonesian students as respondents about their Japanese language skill.

"*Nihongo ga jouzu desune*"

'Your Japanese is good (proficient) huh.'

In this sub-category, 23 (43%) responses judged as unnatural speeches and 30 (57%) responses as natural speeches were found. Here are some examples of data:

14) "*Mada mada desu*"

'No, still not (good at Japanese).'

15) "*Iie, jouzu ja arimasen*"

'No, not very clever yet'.

16) "*Arigatou sensei*"

'Thanks, sir/ma'am (teacher)'

Speeches 14 and 15 are considered natural speech by native speakers. Speeches 14 and 15 are included in the rejecting strategy, but they are different in strategies. The downgrading sub-strategy appeared in speech 14, and the denial sub-strategy could be seen in speech 15. On the other hand, speech 16 is categorized as a complement response in the form of acceptance, but based on the analysis of the native speakers, speech 16 is considered less natural. It is due to the use of casual style in speech 16.

The native speakers give natural speech options by adding "gozaimasu" after the speech "arigatou" as a marker of the polite form (teinei).

c. response to ownership compliment

The content of the compliment speech to which the respondents responded was as follows: A Japanese speaking lecturer complimented the Indonesian respondent's bag.

"*Sono baggu, suteki desune*"

'Your bag is nice, huh?'

In this sub-category, 27 speeches (51%) were considered unnatural, and 26 (49%) were natural speeches. Here are some examples of data:

17) "*Sou desu ka. Arigatou gozaimasu*"

'Oh really? Thank you.'

18) "*Haha kara moraimashita*"

'Mother gave (to me)'

19) "*Kawaii desune*"

'beautiful, right?'

Native speakers judge speeches 17 and 18 as natural speech. The respondent of speech 17 responded with an acceptance strategy even though before giving an expression of gratitude, the respondent tried to avoid self-compliment by using the phrase '*sou desuka*'. Speech 18 is also considered natural speech, but the respondent used a deflecting strategy, trying not to answer explicitly, whether accepting a compliment or rejecting a compliment. This "indecisiveness" is considered a politeness strategy because the respondent experiences a conflict. The conflict is about the worry that his response would be considered as excessive in answering compliment with a receiving compliment strategy. Moreover, there is the worry that the response would be considered disrespectful to the content of the compliment from his speech partner if he did not acknowledge or rejected the content

of the compliment from the lecturer as speech partner.

On the other hand, speech 19 is considered unnatural speech by the Japanese native speakers. In the compliment conveyed by the lecturer as the speech partner, it is better to avoid self-compliment. It is indicated by the appearance of the final particle "*ne*", which confirms acceptance of the compliment content. The speaker/respondent agrees with the compliment content from the speech partner/lecturer.

d. Response to personal trait compliment

The contents of the compliment speech to which the respondents responded were as follows: A Japanese speaking lecturer complimented the individual behaviour (personal trait) of Indonesian respondents.

"*Jugyouchuu itsumo majime ni kiitete, erai desu ne*"

'(You) listen to the lecture diligently, that's great'

There were 36 (66%) unnatural speeches in this sub-category and 17 (32%) natural speeches. Here are some examples of data:

20) "*Hai. Sou desu ka*"

'Yes. Is it like that?'

21) "*E !, sou desu ka. Makoto ni arigatou gozaimashita*"

'Eh, is it like that? Thank you'

Speeches 20 and 21 are considered unnatural by native speakers. The unnaturalness in speech 20 is due to the acceptance response "*hai*" (yes), which is considered ambiguous with the subsequent utterance. The subsequent utterance was asking the truth of the complement content. Speech 20 could be considered natural speech if the positive affirmative speech "*hai*" (yes) is removed. There are different causes for unnaturalness in speech 21. Its causes are the speech "*makoto ni*" and the gratitude utterance that followed. Thus,

speech 21 is considered super polite by native speakers. The speech "*makoto ni*" is usually applied in the context of a shopkeeper/waiter to his customers, so students do not commonly use it to their lecturers.

#### 4. Conclusion

There are several findings on the analysis that determine the naturalness of the response to compliment speeches of Japanese language learners in the Central Java region and D.I. Yogyakarta.

1. The level of speech that does not fit the context of the conversation. In the speech group of symmetrical context, there is a lot of *teinei* and *keigo* used in the speeches causing the impression that speakers/respondents keep a distance from their speech partners (Japanese native speakers). However, the context is given in a symmetrical relationship, which means that the relationship between the speech partners is very close. On the other hand, in the asymmetrical relationship that speech participants have long social distance and asymmetrical vertical distance, many respondents' speeches use the casual level of speech (*futsuutai*). Thus, native speakers considered the impression of "impolite" in their speech. This type of unnaturalness is categorized into socio-pragmatic failure, namely the speaker failure, especially foreign speakers to use language rules inconsistent with extra-linguistic factors. In this case study, the foreign speakers did not pay attention or consider who the speech partner is.

2. The respondents did not comprehend the meaning of their responses toward the compliment speech given. There are indications of pragma-linguistic failure. Therefore, the meaning of the speech conveyed tends not to be understood by the native speakers.

#### Suggestion

The tracing study which Inukai did (2018) that examined how compliment speech acts

and responses appear in Japanese language learning books seems to be in line with the findings of this study. Respondents in this study used the book entitled *Minna no Nihongo Shokyu*. The compliments and responses in the *Minna no Nihon Shokyu* book only appeared in a formal context with a workplace/office setting. Then, if it is viewed from the compliment content, there is only compliment for the appearance and ability of the speech partner. Therefore, it is necessary to think that there is a more comprehensive study on the relationship between Japanese language learning materials in the Central Java region and D.I. Yogyakarta considers the understanding of socio-pragmatic abilities, especially on giving a compliment and responding to compliment.

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