

COMPLIMENT RESPONSES:  
L2 LEARNERS' RATIONALES BEHIND THEIR RESPONSES

褒めへの返答：日本語学習者の判断基準

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Previous research shows that American learners of Japanese tend to differ from native Japanese speakers in their compliment responses (CRs). Some researchers have reported that AJs tend to respond more negatively than native Japanese speakers. It has also been reported that AJs' CRs tend to lack the use of avoidance or deflection. Since no evidence of pragmatic transfer has been reported, it is likely that AJs attempt to conform to the target language (TL). Yet, their attempt often results in deviance. There is a need therefore to investigate the reasons why learners do not always succeed in conforming to the TL norms.

This study is a part of my dissertation and it compares the CRs of the following informant groups: American learners of Japanese (AJs) and native Japanese speakers (JJs). It attempts to examine the informants' rationales behind their CRs, which is done through a written discourse completion task (WDCT) format accompanying rank order questions designed to tap into the informants' reasoning.

A total of five types of situations are considered in the WDCT, and two of them will be presented in this paper (i.e., Situation 1 and Situation 2 respectively). These situations involve a compliment addressed to the respondent's parents (i.e., "Your mother/father looks young"). Through a comparison of the two informant groups' CRs and their rationales for their CRs, the current study attempts to identify the cause of the disparities between L2 learners and TL speakers. Thus, the findings of the present study will raise language instructors' awareness of how and why L2 learners' CRs tend to differ from those of TL speakers. Moreover, it will offer suggestions for the reevaluation of classroom instruction. Below is a list of research questions and hypotheses. More details will be discussed along with the results.

RQ1: Will AJs' CRs significantly differ from JJs' when a superior compliments the recipient on his or her family member's physical appearance (i.e., Situation 1)?

H1: In the situation described in RQ1 (i.e., Situation 1), AJs' and JJs' CRs will show statistically significant differences as JJs will attempt to avoid responding negatively to the superior while AJs will prefer negative responses.

RQ2: Will AJs' CRs differ from JJs' when a friend compliments the recipient on his or her family member's physical appearance (i.e., Situation 2)?

H2: In the situation described in RQ2 (i.e., Situation 2), AJs' and JJs' CRs will show no statistically significant differences as both AJs and JJs will often respond negatively.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEWS

It has long been believed that native Japanese speakers typically respond to compliments with denials in order to express modesty. To the best of my knowledge, however, this widely-held view of Japanese CRs is not fully supported by any empirical studies. In some studies (i.e., Hirata, 1999; Ohno, 2005; Shimizu, 2009), the use of negative responses (e.g., denial and disagreement) in their Japanese data is less than 15%. In Saito and Beecken's (1997) study Japanese participants were likely to use a mixture of three strategies, namely Positive (e.g., acceptance and agreement), Negative (e.g., denial and disagreement), and Avoidance (e.g., question, topic shift, and explanation). In the same vein, Kume, Tokui, Hasegawa, and Komada (2001) reported that characters in Japanese TV dramas tend to use a variety of strategies to avoid accepting compliments, such as showing embarrassment and using humor. Furthermore, Koike (2000) found gender and generational differences in this respect, particularly in the use of denials and modesty.

American native English speakers, on the other hand, seem to differ from Japanese speakers. Many studies suggest that Americans are inclined to accept compliments with "Thank you," although some researchers (i.e., Pomerantz, 1978; Herbert, 1986) disagree with this view. Knapp, Hopper, and Bell (1984) investigated Americans in a wide range of age groups from two geographical areas in the U.S. and found that the majority of their CRs consisted of acceptance. Comparative studies with Japanese speakers (i.e., Yokota, 1986; Baba, 1996; Saito & Beecken, 1997; Kume et al., 2001; Shimizu, 2009) also reported that Americans are more likely than Japanese speakers to accept compliments.

With respect to how American learners of Japanese respond to compliments in Japanese, Yokota (1986) and Shimizu (2009) reported that their JFL (Japanese as a foreign language) participants were more likely to respond negatively than their native Japanese participants. It has also been reported that JFL learners' CRs tend to lack the use of avoidance or deflection (Yokota, 1986; Saito & Beecken, 1997; Shimizu, 2009). In a JSL (Japanese as a second language) study, Baba (1996) reported that her JSL participants' CRs tend to differ from those of Japanese speakers' when they were complimented on their family members' physical appearance or attire. Overall, it appears that American learners of Japanese attempt to conform to the TL norms instead of transferring their L1 norms into the L2 (second or foreign language) norms. Yet, their attempt often results in deviance.

Saito and Beecken (1997) and Shimizu (2009) suggest that American learners' deviation from the TL norms may be attributed to textbooks and classroom instruction. Saito and Beecken (1997) examined six Japanese language textbooks used widely in the U.S. and found that all six textbooks view Japanese CRs as negative. Similarly, some American participants in Shimizu's (2009) study reported that they were taught to deny compliments in their Japanese classes in the U.S. It appears that teaching-related factors are to some extent responsible for American learners' deviation from the TL norms. However, it would be too hasty to conclude classroom instruction alone is the cause of learners' deviation since it is also possible that learners take situational variables into account, including the relationship between complimenter and recipient. Yet, it is unclear how learners perceive situational factors when they respond to compliments. There is a

need therefore to investigate the reasons why learners do not always succeed in conforming to the TL norms.

### 3. CURRENT STUDY

#### 3.1 INFORMANTS

A WDCT was prepared for American learners of Japanese in the U.S. ( $n = 31$ ) and native Japanese speakers living in Japan ( $n = 26$ ). They were labeled as AJs and JJs respectively. Age ranged from 18 to 24 in AJs and 18 to 29 in JJs. AJs had more males than females (20 males; 11 females), while JJs had more females than males (10 males; 16 females).

AJs were American students taking Japanese language courses at an American university. AJs consisted of second, third, and fourth-year students of Japanese (i.e., third semester and above). Thus, first-year students of Japanese (i.e., first and second semesters of Japanese courses) were not recruited because most of them still lacked language skills and had little knowledge to draw on when it comes to compliment responses in Japanese. The second and third-year students were volunteers who received extra credit as an incentive, whereas all of the fourth-year students participated in the study as part of their Japanese language course assignment. Moreover, if students had studied or lived in Japan or if they had close family members who speak languages other than English, including Japanese, those participants were excluded from AJs. This is because their exposure to foreign languages and cultures might influence their CRs.

JJs consisted of native Japanese speakers living in Japan who were recruited through personal connections, and they were all volunteers. Their compliment responses are used as the normative L1 Japanese data. For this reason, the participants who were exposed to foreign cultures for a prolonged period of time were excluded.

#### 3.2 METHODS

A combination of the WDCT and a post-hoc rank order questionnaire was used as the primary research instrument. This was prepared in two forms: online version and paper-and-pencil version. The online questionnaire was used primarily because informants could participate in the study at any time and anywhere as long as they had internet access. Moreover, the survey had no time limit as informants could spend as much time as they needed to complete it.

The first page of the questionnaire asked about informants' demographics, including age, gender, nationality, native language, and so forth. The rest of the questionnaire contained five types of situations with two similar scenarios each. In other words, it contained a total of ten scenarios in which compliments were given. Informants read the scenarios and wrote their CRs in Japanese. If informants thought that a non-verbal response was most appropriate, they were allowed to write their action (e.g., "silence," "smile," etc.) instead of any actual wording. Moreover, each scenario came with a rank order question that asked informants to rank five situational aspects of the scenario in order of their importance. In this paper, the results of four of the scenarios will be discussed (i.e., Situations 1 and 2).

In both Situations 1 and 2, the recipient is complimented on his or her parents' physical appearance. The only difference between the two is that the complimenter is a

superior (i.e., boss in a company or teacher at college) in Situation 1 and a friend in Situation 2.

Given differences in languages and cultures between the two groups, the questionnaire was tailored to each informant group. In other words, two types of questionnaires were used in this study. JJs completed the questionnaire in Japanese. With respect to AJs, however, they read scenarios in English but provided their CRs in Japanese. Below is an excerpt from the AJs' questionnaire.

Last winter, you traveled to Hawaii with your parents. When you are showing the pictures you took there to your co-workers, your Japanese boss, Mr. Nakamura, comes by and offers a compliment.

Mr. Nakamura : お父(とう)さん若(わか)いね。 (Your father looks young.)

You: \_\_\_\_\_

After reading the scenario in English, the AJs read the compliment in Japanese with an English translation and then wrote their own CRs in Japanese. Moreover, each CR scenario was subsequently followed by a rank order question, as shown below.

When you responded to this compliment, which of the following aspects did you take into consideration? Please number the following aspects from 1 to 5 according to its importance (#1 is the most important item, while #5 is the least important item).

- \_\_\_\_\_ The complimenter is a superior.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Whether or not I agree with the complimenter.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I am complimented on my parent.
- \_\_\_\_\_ My parent's physical appearance is complimented.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Others (Please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

As is shown above, five situational variables were prepared for each rank order question. Informants were asked to rank the importance of the five items by numbering them from 1 to 5. With regard to *Others*, AJs were allowed to write either in Japanese or English since this is not a CR in itself.

### 3.3 CODING OF CRS

In this study, all the CRs are divided into 25 micro categories and then grouped into four macro categories (i.e., Positive, Negative, Avoidance, and Others). The semantic formulas of the CRs are omitted in this paper due to limitations of space.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 SITUATION 1

As is mentioned before, in both Situations 1 and 2, the recipient is complimented on his or her parents' physical appearance. The only difference between the two is that the complimenter is a superior in Situation 1 and a friend in Situation 2. The recipient's CRs were divided into Positive (P), Negative (N), Avoidance (A), and Others (O). Table 1 shows the results for CRs in Situation 1.

Table 1 Comparison of AJs' and JJs' CRs in Situation 1

Language group	Response type			Frequency %	
	P	N	A	O	Total
AJs	22 35.48	23 37.10	6 9.68	11 17.74	62 100.00
JJs	11 21.15	9 17.31	7 13.46	25 48.08	52 100.00
Total	33 28.95	32 28.07	13 11.40	36 31.58	114 100.00

Chi-Square:  $\chi^2(3, n = 114) = 14.5478, p = 0.0022$

As can be seen in Table 1, AJs' and JJs' CRs are significantly different. Thus, the results support Hypothesis 1, which predicts that AJs' and JJs' CRs show statistically significant differences. AJs preferred both Positive (35.48%) and Negative (37.10%), while JJs used the Others strategy for nearly half of their CRs (48.08%). JJs also combined different strategies much more often than did AJs.

The respondents were also asked to rank five situational aspects of the scenario in order of their importance, and Rank 1 (most important) and Rank 2 (second most important) were counted in the analysis. These situational variables are: (1) the complimenter's status (Status), (2) the recipient's self-evaluation of the aspect complimented (Eval), (3) being complimented on one's parent (Parent), (4) the parent's physical appearance (Appear), and (5) other factors, if any (Others). Table 2 shows the results of the rank order data.

Table 2 Comparison of AJs' and JJs' Rank Order Data in Situation 1

Language group	Response type				Frequency %	
	Status	Eval	Parent	Appear	Others	Total
AJs	55 44.35	9 7.26	35 28.23	15 12.10	10 8.06	124 100.00
JJs	36 34.62	30 28.85	23 22.12	8 7.69	7 6.73	104 100.00
Total	91 39.91	39 17.11	58 25.44	23 10.09	17 7.46	228 100.00

Chi-Square:  $\chi^2(4, n = 228) = 18.8077, p = 0.0009$

Table 2 shows that the rank order data also revealed statistically significant differences. AJs viewed the complimenter's status as most important (44.35%) and the recipient's self-evaluation as least important (7.26%). They also attached some importance to the fact that the recipient's parents are being complimented (28.23%). JJs, on the other hand, viewed Status (34.62%), Eval (28.85%), and Parent (22.12%) as the important variables. Eval in particular shows a stark contrast between the two groups as JJs were much more likely to respond according to their self-evaluation of the compliment than were AJs.

It is worth noting that AJs used the Positive and Negative strategies almost equally in this situation (Positive 35.48%; Negative 37.10%). Considering the high percentages of Status (44.35%) and Parent (28.23%) for this group, it can be presumed

that AJs had different rationales for their use of each strategy. AJs' preference for the Negative strategy can be explained by their motivation to express modesty toward a superior. Their frequent use of the Positive strategy in Situation 1, on the other hand, may be attributable to the recipient's parents being the target of the compliment. Even though the complimenter is a superior, the compliment is directed to the respondent's parents, not the respondent himself or herself. In the retrospective interviews, one of the AJ participants reported in Japanese that: *Meue no hito desu kedo, oya ga homerareta kara, sukoshi enryo shinakute ii to omoimasu.* (Although the complimenter is a superior, since my parents are being complimented, I don't need to hold back a lot). Since his parents are the ones being complimented, this student thinks that he does not need to be as modest as when the compliment is paid directly to him.

With respect to JJs, they used the Others strategy for almost half of their CRs (48.08%), and they also used the Positive and Negative strategies to some extent (Positive 21.15%; Negative 17.31%). JJs' use of Eval (28.85%) is also far greater than AJs' (7.26%). Considering their reasonably high percentage of Eval, it is likely that JJs' Positive and Negative strategies are attributable to their honest evaluation of their own parents. In other words, the respondents attempted to express their honest evaluation of their parents without simply disagreeing with the complimenter, using the Others strategy such as "*Arigatoo gozaimasu. Demo jissai sonnakotonai ndesu yo.* (Thank you. But she is actually not [young].)."

#### 4.2 SITUATION 2

Situation 2 differs from Situation 1 only in the complimenter's status (i.e., a friend). It was hypothesized that no significant differences would be found in this situation. According to Yokota's (1986) and Baba's (1996) studies, JJs tend to reject compliments about their parents, particularly about their parents' physical appearance when the complimenter is of equal status. Since AJs generally prefer negative responses, both groups were hypothesized to respond negatively. Table 3 shows the results of their CRs.

Table 3 Comparison of AJs' and JJs' CRs in Situation 2

Language group	Response type			Frequency %	
	P	N	A	O	Total
AJs	19 30.65	11 17.74	17 27.42	15 24.19	62 100.00
JJs	5 9.62	16 30.77	11 21.15	20 38.46	52 100.00
Total	24 21.05	27 23.68	28 24.56	35 30.70	114 100.00

Chi-Square:  $\chi^2 (3, n = 114) = 10.2946, p = 0.0162$

Table 3 indicates that the chi-square test resulted in statistical significance. Since non-significance was expected, the results do not support Hypothesis 2. Contrary to the hypothesis, AJs used the Negative strategy least frequently (17.74%). Their dominant strategies are Positive (30.65%), Avoidance (27.42%) and Others (24.19%). With regard

to JJs, they used the Others strategy most frequently (38.46%) and the Positive strategy least frequently (9.62%), which sharply contrasts with AJs' frequent use of the Positive strategy. Since JJs used the Negative strategy fairly frequently (30.77%), the results support Yokota's (1986) and Baba's (1996) studies.

The rank order data also showed statistically significant differences, and the results are similar to Situation 1. AJs attached the most importance to the complimenter's status as well as relatively high importance to Parent and Appear. JJs, on the other hand, viewed Status, Eval, and Parent as almost equally important. Table 4 shows the results of the rank order data.

Table 4 Comparison of AJs' and JJs' Rank Order Data in Situation 2

Language group	Response type				Frequency %	
	Status	Eval	Parent	Appear	Others	Total
AJs	45 36.29	12 9.68	31 25.00	23 18.55	13 10.48	124 100.00
JJs18-29	30 28.85	28 26.92	30 28.85	9 8.65	7 6.73	104 100.00
Total	75 32.89	40 17.54	61 26.75	32 14.04	20 8.77	228 100.00

Chi-Square:  $\chi^2(4, n = 228) = 15.7079, p = 0.0034$

The data show that AJs viewed the complimenter's status as most important (36.29%), while their self-evaluation was least important (9.68%). It is likely that the decrease in their Negative strategy is attributable to the change in the complimenter's status from superior to equal. Indeed, a couple of AJ students in the retrospective interviews reported that it is not necessary to express modesty because the complimenter is a friend, which can explain AJs' frequent use of the Positive strategy.

Furthermore, it is equally worth noticing that both AJs and JJs used the Avoidance strategy frequently. The analysis of micro categories revealed that what AJs used as the Avoidance strategy in Situation 2 was mostly Smile (SMI), while JJs mostly used Question/Reassurance (QUE). In the retrospective interviews, one of the AJ students explained he was not entirely sure how to respond to the compliment in this situation. He might have thought that he would not need to deny the compliment to show modesty since the complimenter was a close friend. However, he hesitated to agree with the complimenter because he was afraid that agreement might make him look conceited. This reasoning may account for the decrease in Negative strategy use and the increase in Avoidance strategy use compared to the previous situation. Thus, it can be presumed that some AJs felt that neither positive nor negative responses would be appropriate but did not find a better alternative except for the opt-out (i.e., Smile).

With respect to JJs, the most noticeable differences from the previous situation (i.e., Situation 1) are the decrease in Positive strategy use and the increase in Negative and Avoidance strategy use. Even though their use of the Others strategy decreased a little, it remains quite high (38.46%). In other words, JJs used all but the Positive strategy frequently. Moreover, the rank order data are similar to the previous situation. Although their Status use decreased a little, it remains reasonably high (28.85%). Thus, it is likely that JJs' shift in their CR strategies is due to the change in the complimenter's status from

superior to equal. It should also be considered that even though JJs responded more positively in the previous situation (with the complimenter of higher status), they frequently combined different strategies to mitigate their disagreement with the complimenter (i.e., the Others strategy). Thus, it can be presumed that many JJs did not think of their parents as young and attempted to express their disagreement or doubt to the complimenter of equal status, which resulted in the increase in their Negative strategy use in Situation 2.

Overall, both AJs and JJs tailored their CRs to the complimenter's status. In the Positive strategy, however, the two groups showed a stark contrast. Contrary to expectations, AJs responded much more positively than did JJs. Such discrepancies may be attributable to the different rationales behind their CRs. It can be interpreted from the data that AJs felt that it was less necessary to deny compliments to show modesty, while JJs felt it less necessary to show appreciation to status equals. This may account for the differences in their use of CR strategies in Situation 2.

## 5. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

At the beginning level or in a first-year Japanese course, students cannot use a variety of strategies to realize speech acts due to their lack of linguistic resources. As is often the case with a beginning Japanese course, students learn to use what appears to be the safest CR strategy, namely denial (e.g., "*Iie, mada mada desu*" ("I still have a long way to go")). Hence, they are often taught to play it safe, which is a necessary strategy considering their language level. However, some students may think of it as the only or at least the best strategy in responding to compliments. Moreover, stereotypical explanations given by the instructor or in a textbook may reinforce their false perception of Japanese speech acts. Therefore, when speech acts are introduced in class, it is important to raise beginning students' awareness of a variety of speech act strategies.

Intermediate and advanced students need follow-up lessons in order to revisit the speech acts they learned in beginning level courses. With their higher language proficiency, they should be linguistically ready to learn more varied strategies to realize speech acts. It is, however, not always clear what speech act strategies are considered appropriate or natural according to the TL norms. In fact, native speakers do not always reach a consensus. Thus, the instructor may encounter difficulties in discerning what is appropriate and what is not for a given set of students. One way to reintroduce speech acts is to expose them to a variety of speech act strategies through videos and to have them discuss why the speaker decided to use a particular strategy.

## 6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study initially planned to make a comparison between AJs with extra exposure to the Japanese culture and those with little or no exposure other than their classroom experience, such as students who have participated in a study abroad program and those who have never been to Japan. Due to a lack of students with extra exposure to Japanese culture, however, this comparison was not possible. It is thus suggested that future studies should include the investigation of AJs with additional exposure to Japanese culture outside of class, such as students who have completed a study abroad program or those who are currently studying in Japan. A comparison between the



“exposure” group and “non-exposure” group may provide deeper insight into the link between exposure to the TL culture and L2 learners’ development of pragmatic ability.

Moreover, many of the third and fourth-year AJs reported in the interviews that they did not receive (or did not remember receiving) any instruction on how to respond to compliments in Japanese. Nevertheless, some of them still claimed that it is important to reject compliments to show modesty. This raises the question: when and how did AJs start viewing typical Japanese CRs as denial? If second-year AJs already share the same perception with third and fourth-year AJs, another study needs to be conducted with AJs in their first-year courses.

One possibility would be to conduct a longitudinal study of the development of AJs’ pragmatic knowledge from their first to their second year. Apart from false beginners, most beginning learners have little or no knowledge of Japanese CRs. As they learn the language, they learn speech acts from the instructor and the textbook. Thus, a longitudinal study is most likely to shed light on how learners gain their knowledge of Japanese CRs.

The research methods also have some limitations. The WDCT used in this study elicited written data in a one-turn response only. Future research should include a research instrument that elicits oral data with multiple turns, such as role-plays. Moreover, due to time and geographical constraints, retrospective interviews were conducted only with AJs. Interviews with JJs might have elicited additional information that may be useful for interpreting their data.

Lastly, not all compliments make the recipient feel good. Even sincere compliments may make the recipient feel awkward or offended, such as a compliment on a certain body part. Moreover, if the recipient senses the complimenter’s ulterior motive, the recipient may interpret the compliment as flattery. Similarly, compliments can also be used as criticism or even veiled insult if spoken with a sarcastic tone of voice, as in complimenting someone sarcastically on a failed business project. However, the present study investigated responses to sincere compliments only. It did not examine how the recipient might respond to flattery, insincere compliments, or sarcastic compliments. It is highly likely that the recipient will respond to sincere compliments and to flattery differently. Thus future studies should explore a variety of compliments and CRs.

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