

Investigating the Complimenting Behaviors of Chinese Speakers of American English

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Cross-cultural pragmatics research on American and Chinese complimenting behaviors has focused primarily on use of different strategies for various functions, topics, and speaker-hearer relationships. However, in addition to strategies, content (what to say) and form (how to say it) play an inevitable and significant role in cross-cultural speech act performance. This study aims to analyze how native speakers of American English perceive the content and form produced by Chinese speakers when giving and responding to compliments in English. In-depth explanations are provided from both sociolinguistic and cognitive linguistic perspectives. Two discourse completion tasks (DCTs) were designed to elicit responses from American speakers in the United States and Chinese speakers of English in Taiwan. These samples were assessed and commented on by 20 American assessors, who were in-service teachers in an MA TESOL program in the United States. Content analysis of assessor comments indicated that eight types of content problems were perceived by American assessors: *Improper amount of information*, *Nonsensical exchanges*, *Rudeness*, *Overstatement*, *No acknowledgement*, *No answer to the question*, *No compliment*, and *Wrong person/thing complimented*. Furthermore, four types of form problems were perceived by the American assessors, including problems with phrasing, grammar, word choice, and alerters.

From an American standpoint, these problems represent violations of Grice's (1975) Conversational Maxims and Brown & Levinson's (1987) Politeness Principles. A critical reflection on what stance Chinese speakers of American English take when performing compliment exchanges is also offered in this paper to provide plausible explanations for their utterances.

Key words: cross-cultural pragmatics, compliment, content, form

1. Introduction

Holmes (1986) defines a compliment as a speech act "which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some 'good' (possessions, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the

speaker and the hearer" (p.485). Following her definition, there have been several significant studies investigating American and Chinese complimenting behaviors, for example R. Chen (1993), Ye (1995), S. Chen (2003) and Yu (2005).

R. Chen (1993) conducted a contrastive study on compliment responses between American English and Chinese by using a DCT with four conversational interactions. The American data produced 339 responses, which were categorized into four super-strategies. *Accepting* (e.g. "Thank you. You made my day") had the most occurrences, followed by *Returning* (e.g. "Your shirt looks good, too"), *Deflecting* (e.g. "Thank you. My mom gave it to me"), and *Rejecting* (e.g. "I don't think I look that much different"). The Chinese data produced 292 responses, which were classified into three super-strategies. *Rejecting* (e.g. "I'm older and uglier") was the most preferred strategy, followed by *Thanking and Denigrating* (e.g. "Thank you. But the sweater is not that nice") and *Accepting* (e.g. "Thank you"). For explanation, Chen adopted Leech's (1983) Politeness Principles to explain the findings that Americans tended to accept the compliments and Chinese rejected the compliments. *Acceptance* in American English is motivated by the Agreement Maxim, which is described by Leech as minimizing disagreement between self and other and maximizing agreement between self and other; while *Rejection* in Chinese is motivated by the Modesty Maxim, which is described by Leech as minimizing praise of self and maximizing dispraise of self.

Ye (1995) worked exclusively on Chinese compliment exchanges. In this study, a DCT consisting of sixteen situations (eight for compliments and eight for compliment responses) was administered to 96 Chinese speakers. These situations were designed based on two contextual variables—complimentee's gender (males vs. females) and compliment topics (appearance vs. performance). In terms of compliments, four strategy types were found in the data. *No response* means that the participants chose not to compliment in a given situation. *Non-compliment* (e.g. "這鞋多少錢?" [How much are the shoes?]) serves to start a conversation by posing a question to ask for the complimentee's provision of specific information. *Implicit compliment* typically occurs in the form of a request (e.g. "好好教我跳跳吧!" [Teach me how to dance well]) or a question (e.g. "甚麼時候學的?" [When did you learn it?]). Finally, *Explicit compliment* refers to the compliments with at least one semantic carrier (e.g. "你的球藝很棒" [Your sports ability is very good]). In addition, there were five types of compliment rejoinders in Ye's study. The most preferred type was *Acceptance with amendment* (e.g. "馬馬虎虎" [It's just so-so]), followed by *Acceptance* (e.g. "多謝誇獎" [Thank you for your compliment]), *Non-acceptance* (e.g. "不敢當" [I don't deserve it]), *Combination* (e.g. "謝謝, 我準備了挺長的時間" [Thanks, I prepared for a long time]) and *No response*. The major contributions of Ye's study are twofold. First, it seems that in the Chinese speech community, compliments on one's performance are more accepted than those on

one's appearance, as evidenced by the avoidance of *Explicit compliment* in the appearance situations and extensive use of *Explicit compliment* in the performance situations. Second, even though total rejection of compliments was not favored by the majority of participants in Ye's study, as was the case in Chen's study, the most frequently used *Acceptance with amendment* by speakers of Chinese does entail avoidance of self-praise.

Both Chen's studies and Ye's investigated the complimenting behaviors of Chinese speakers in Mainland China. A more recent study conducted by S. Chen (2003) found that the compliment response strategies used by Chinese speakers in Taiwan are different from those used by the speakers in Mainland China. She used a DCT with eight situations. Half of them dealt with status-equal interlocutors, while the other half with higher-status complimentees. The findings showed that in situations where the interlocutors were of equal status, the three most frequently used response strategies were *Accepting*, *Mitigating*, and *Returning*. On the other hand, in situations where the interlocutors were of unequal status, the most frequently used strategies were *Accepting*, *Mitigating*, and *Accepting and Mitigating*. Chen concluded that the compliment response strategies used by the Chinese speakers in Taiwan were motivated by Leech's Agreement Maxim. This finding runs counter to R. Chen's (1993) investigation of Chinese speakers in Mainland China and indicates that intralinguistic and intracultural variations may exist in Chinese speech communities.

Yu (2005) examined American and Chinese complimenting behaviors in naturally occurring situations. The data collected were analyzed in terms of strategies, function, topics, and addresser-addressee relationship. When it comes to strategies, both speaker groups produced direct compliments (i.e. those with positive semantic carriers) more frequently than indirect compliments (i.e. those without positive semantic carriers), but Chinese used indirect compliments (e.g. “你擦甚麼香水?” [What perfume did you put on?]) more frequently than Americans. The compliment functions are different in American and Chinese cultures, too. In American culture, compliments serve as a conversation opener to build rapport and negotiate equality between interlocutors. However, in Chinese society where social hierarchy is more clearly defined, compliments are used as genuine praise, not conversation openers. Therefore, Americans pay compliments more frequently to strangers than Chinese. Furthermore, Americans compliment more frequently on appearance or possessions, while Chinese compliment more frequently on ability or performance. This finding coincides with Ye's study. Finally, compliments occur primarily between status-equal people in both speaker groups. However, Chinese tend to compliment superiors and strangers less frequently than Americans. This is because complimenting a superior would be considered flattery by peers unless there is a legitimate reason.

In a nutshell, the above studies concentrated on compliment or compliment response strategies used by speakers of American English and Chinese in relation to function, topic, and speaker-hearer relationship. The similarities lie in the fact that both speaker groups express direct compliments more frequently than indirect compliments and that compliments are most frequently paid to status equals and acquaintances. However, differences have also been found between Americans and Chinese. First, Americans tend to regard compliments as conversation openers, while Chinese use them for genuine praise. Second, Americans tend to compliment a person's appearance/possessions more frequently, while Chinese tend to compliment a person's ability/performance more frequently. Third, it seems that *Acceptance* tends to be a normative compliment response in American English, while *Rejection* or *Deflection* seems to be socially prescribed in Chinese, although there might be variations within the American English and Chinese speech communities.

These studies on strategy use in cross-cultural speech act research have made great contributions to our understandings of American and Chinese complimenting behaviors. However, the problem is that strategy alone may not guarantee successful speech act production.

Leech (1983) posits two conditions for communicative use of language. *Socio-pragmatics* refers to "sociological interface of pragmatics", while *pragmalinguistics* refers to "the more linguistic end of pragmatics" (pp.10-11). An utterance which is considered to be appropriate and effective in a given language should meet the two conditions simultaneously. In laymen's terms, sociopragmatics can be associated with *what to say*, or *content*. In a cross-cultural communication setting, the type and amount of information provided is important in what counts as appropriateness. For example, in Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz's (1990) study, although Japanese speakers of American English employed the excuse strategy in every refusal situation, the excuses they produced were perceived as "vague" by speakers of American English. In their study, when refusing the invitation to his boss's Sunday party, Japanese speakers said: "My children have many problems" or "I have a previous engagement" without mentioning what the problems were or the time and place of the engagement. The most extreme instance of such vagueness is the excuse "I have to go to a wedding," which later turned out to be the Japanese female's own wedding. Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford (1993) also found that content affects the effectiveness of a speech act production. When refusing to take a course, non-English speaking students would provide explanations such as "The course is too difficult," which turned out to be unacceptable to their American academic advisors.

Pragmalinguistics, on the other hand, can be associated with *how to say it*, or *form*. The realization strategies used to perform a given speech act belong to this area. Apart

from strategies, syntax and lexicon (such as tense, word order, idioms, prepositions and choice of words) constitute the base of an intelligible speech act performance in English (Eisenstein & Bodman 1986). The devices used to maximize or minimize the illocutionary force of a speech act also fall into this area. For example, the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989) examined acts of apology and request across seven western languages in terms of syntactic downgraders, lexical and phrasal downgraders, upgraders, and supportive moves. A more recent work conducted by Nguyen (2008) examined the performance of the act of criticism by Vietnamese speakers of English and speakers of Australian English. In addition to differences in realization strategies (direct/indirect criticisms) and semantic formulas (*statement of problems* under the category of direct criticisms and *demands* under the category of indirect criticisms), these Vietnamese English speakers differed from Australian English speakers in the use of mitigating devices, both external (e.g. steers, sweeteners, disarmers, grounders) and internal (e.g. syntactic and lexical/phrasal modifiers).

As perceived appropriateness by target cultural groups is considered indispensable in successful cross-cultural communication, this paper aims to supplement the previous contributions on American and Chinese compliment exchanges in three ways. First, it examines the form and content produced by Chinese speakers of American English to fill the gap in past research, which has focused primarily on strategy. Speakers need to know not only what strategies to use to realize a given speech act in English, but they also need to know (1) what counts as appropriate content to avoid seeming to be uncooperative or even offensive, (2) how to use grammatical forms to make their utterances comprehensible, and (3) how to use certain word- or discourse-level devices to upgrade or downgrade the illocutionary force to make their utterances sound natural in a given situation.

Second, unlike most contrastive pragmatic studies, this study interprets and analyzes the perceptions of American assessors. Following Kramsch's (2009) notion of thirdness in a pluricultural and plurilinguistic world, we need to avoid taking categories such as culture 1 (C1) and culture 2 (C2) as predetermined, but display the multi-voices from both American and Chinese speakers of English to provide a more complete picture. Therefore, through the lenses of speakers of American English, the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic differences may be seen more clearly.

Finally, a new attempt is made in this paper to view the differences between American and Chinese English speakers not only from a sociolinguistic perspective, as customarily employed by contrastive pragmatists, but also from a cognitive linguistic standpoint, namely Chinese lexical semantics. In recent decades, lexical semantics has come into vogue in cognitive linguistics in both English and Chinese (e.g. Baker, Fillmore & Cronin 2003, B. Liu 2004). M. Liu, Huang & Lee (1999) adopted the MARVS

framework to analyze verbs of negative judgment. The findings showed that 不滿, 埋怨, 指責, 罵 [unhappy with, complain, rebuke, scold] differ from each other in terms of their grammatical roles, argument expressions, passive constructions, and the use of degree vs. manner modifiers. Rau & Chen (2010) proposed that when it comes to the English word “compliment”, Chinese may perceive it as various verbs of positive judgment such as 稱讚, 稱許, 稱頌, 稱揚, 誇獎, 誇讚, 讚賞, 讚美, 讚許, 讚嘆, 讚揚, 恭維, 巴結, 拍馬屁, [verbs expressing fine shades of meaning related to praise, approval, adoration, acknowledgement, speaking well, admiration, or flattery, which are distinct in Chinese, but do not have exact equivalents in English] each of which could be manifested in different grammatical roles, functions, topics, and speaker and hearer relationships. This proposal corresponds with Liu’s (2004:53) discussion of the three positive judgment verbs, 肯定, 誇讚, 迎合, [affirmation, praise, accommodation] although he covered a narrower range of lexical semantics in relation to their pragmatic rules. The association of one English word with various semantic representations of Chinese verbal information could also affect the complimenting acts of Chinese speakers of English, as will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

2. Methods

To gather information on content and form in compliment exchanges, two discourse completion tasks (DCT) were designed to elicit responses from three groups of participants.

2.1 Participants

Our participants consisted of (1) Chinese speakers of American English, (2) American English speakers, and (3) North American assessors.

2.1.1 Chinese speakers of American English

The Chinese speakers of American English were selected from three classes of the Applied Foreign Languages Department of a university of technology in central Taiwan. The first author taught these classes in academic year 2008-2009, one in the day program, the other two in the weekend continuing education program. There were a total of 100 speakers in these three classes. Their English proficiency level was at the intermediate level.

2.1.2 American English speakers

The American English speakers were recruited from two universities in the United States. In 2008, the first author recruited a group of 53 American freshmen at a midwestern university enrolled in a general education course. There were 30 females and 23 males, ranging in age from 18-22. Most of them had very little Asian experience. In 2009, the second author recruited 22 American in-service teachers from her graduate level “Intercultural Communication” and “Teaching EFL Listening and Speaking” courses at a midwestern college. Most of them had been teaching in Asia for quite some time. There were 13 females and 9 males.

2.1.3 North American assessors

Since a large body of research has shown that assessors’ behaviors are influenced by their professional and language backgrounds (Lumley 2005), the assessors in this study were carefully chosen with regard to their education, teaching experience, and knowledge of non-western culture.

In 2009, the first author invited two North American EFL teachers to evaluate speaker production of compliment exchanges in a pilot study. Both of them held a bachelor’s degree, but neither of them had majored in language/literature. They were teaching children’s English at the same school in Taiwan, but they had no experience teaching college-level students. One of them had been living in Taiwan for about 10 years and was married to a Taiwanese. However, he could speak very little Mandarin. The other had been in Taiwan for only two years, but had taught English in Mainland China for about three years before coming to Taiwan. He could speak better Mandarin, and wrote some Chinese. They were the first group of assessors in this study.

In 2010, the second author was teaching a two-week intensive course on “Descriptive English Grammar” to a group of 17 American in-service ESL teachers (14 females and 3 males), who were pursuing an MA degree in TESOL at a US midwestern college. They had taught English in higher education in China, Vietnam, and Laos. These in-service teachers were asked to assess the productions of these Chinese speakers of English as one of their course assignments. They were the second group of assessors in this study.

2.2 Material

The major materials used in this study were two written questionnaires in the format of a DCT (Discourse Completion Task). In each questionnaire, there were six

compliment provoking situations. The first author designed these situations based on the power and distance variables for two reasons. First, although compliments occur most frequently between status-equals for both speaker groups, Chinese produce a higher proportion of compliments downwards than upwards. This is because in the Chinese social hierarchy, compliments from inferiors (恭維, 巴結, 拍馬屁 [three variations of flattery]) are usually regarded as flattery and therefore discouraged. But this is not the case for American society, where there is a suppression of asymmetric power relations (Brown & Levinson 1987). Since relative power is less significant to Americans, compliments from inferiors to superiors are socially legitimate. As for relative distance, there is a tendency for Chinese to give fewer compliments (誇讚 [compliment]) to intimates and total strangers than Americans (Yu 2005). Therefore, we wanted to examine whether different perceptions of these two social parameters would lead to differences in American and Chinese productions of compliment exchanges.

In this study, the social power variable had three values: high to low, low to high, and equal. The social distance variable had two values: the interlocutors do not know each other or the interlocutors know each other. Half of the situations dealt with appearance/possession as topics and the other half with ability/performance. Apart from the variable and topic controls, the content of these test situations were written based on college students' life experiences, the first author's own observations and Wolfson's (1983) and Manes' (1983) work on compliments. Key words such as *good*, *great*, *love* or *like* were avoided in the descriptions to prevent speaker duplications. The situations in the first and second questionnaires were parallel in terms of social parameters (power and distance), topics (ability/performance and appearance/possession), and sequencing. The situations used in questionnaires 1 and 2 are summarized as below:

Table 1: Compliment situations in the first questionnaire

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Situation 1: | You are in the park and notice that a kid is skating. You are quite impressed. What would you say to compliment him/her on the skating? How do you think he/she would respond? (Skating: H-L, +D, Ability/performance) |
| Situation 2: | You are a tutor and notice that your student has a new backpack. You are quite impressed. What would you say to compliment him/her on the backpack? How do you think he/she would respond? (Backpack: H-L, -D, Appearance/possession) |

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Situation 3: | You are at a welcome party for international students and meet a new friend. You are quite impressed with his/her Chinese. What would you say to compliment him/her on his/her Chinese? How do you think he/she would respond? ¹ (Chinese: Equal, +D, Ability/performance) |
| Situation 4: | Your roommate just got a new haircut two days ago. You are quite impressed. What would you say to compliment him/her on the haircut? How do you think he/she would respond? (Haircut: Equal, -D, Appearance/possession) |
| Situation 5: | You are at your friend's parents' house for the first time and are impressed by their house. What would you say to compliment his/her parents on the house? How do you think they would respond? (House: L-H, +D, Appearance/possession) |
| Situation 6: | You work part time at a company. You were invited to your boss's house for dinner one Sunday evening. You are quite impressed by the dinner. What would you say to compliment him/her on the dinner? How do you think he/she would respond? (Dinner: L-H, -D, Ability/performance) |

Table 2: Compliment situations in the second questionnaire

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Situation 1: | You are in the park and notice that a kid is drawing a picture. You are quite impressed. What would you say to compliment him/her on the drawing? How do you think he/she would respond? (Drawing: H-L, +D, Ability/performance) |
| Situation 2: | You are a tutor and notice that your student is wearing a new pair of sneakers. You are quite impressed. What would you say to compliment him/her on the sneakers? How do you think he/she would respond? (Sneaker: H-L, -D, Appearance/possession) |
| Situation 3: | You are at a welcome party for the freshmen and meet a new friend. You are quite impressed with his/her dance. What would you say to compliment him/her on his/her dance. How do you think he/she would respond? (Dance: Equal, +D, Ability/performance) |

¹ This situation has two versions. The Taiwan version reads: You are at a welcome party for international students and meet a new friend. You are quite impressed with his/her Chinese. The US version reads: You are at a welcome party for international students and meet a new friend. You are quite impressed with his/her English.

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Situation 4: | Your roommate is dressed with the best clothes. You are quite impressed. What would you say to compliment him/her on the clothes? How do you think he/she would respond? (Clothes: Equal, -D, Appearance/possession) |
| Situation 5: | You are at your friend's parents' car for the first time and are impressed by their car. What would you say to compliment him/her on the car? How do you think he/she would respond? (Car: L-H, +D, Appearance/possession) |
| Situation 6: | You work part time at a company. You were invited to listen to your boss's speech one Wednesday afternoon. You are quite impressed by the speech. What would you say to compliment him/her on the speech? (Speech: L-H, -D, Ability/performance) |

2.3 Procedures

This study was conducted in two consecutive stages. The first stage emerged from the first author's NSC project on instructional efficacy of compliment exchanges (NSC 97-2410-H-275-008). The Chinese speakers of English were given a pretest, a posttest and a delayed posttest during the fall semester of the 2008 academic year.

In September 2008, the first questionnaire was administered to the Chinese speakers as a pretest during their normal class hour. The same questionnaire was also administered to 53 American freshmen. It took them about 40 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

After the pretest, the first author began a 4-week instruction on compliment exchanges, with two class hours per week. After the instruction, speakers were given the second questionnaire as a posttest in class. Nine weeks after the instruction, the first questionnaire was given to the speakers again as a delayed posttest to examine the extent to which instructional effects could be sustained.

To assess each speaker's written performance, the first author developed two simple, four-point scales, and asked the first group of assessors to appeal to their intuition as to how they would feel about the speakers' compliment exchanges in each situation. The scales are described as follows:

Please judge the content and form of the compliment exchanges made by the respondents.

| | | | |
|-------|-------|-------|-----------|
| ----- | ----- | ----- | ----- |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Poor | Fair | Good | Excellent |

The vagueness of the rubric for these scales was intentional. Given the exploratory nature of this study, the looseness in the rubric gave assessors some latitude as to what was considered appropriate content and correct form. Each situation received two scores: one for content and the other for form. Each content score was the average of the two assessors' scores, as was the form score. The assessors were also asked to give comments on the exchange in each situation. A total of 720 situations were evaluated. The worksheet for the assessors was like example (1):

(1)

Situation: You are a tutor and notice that your student has a new backpack. What would you say to compliment him/her on the backpack? How do you think he/she would respond?

You: *Hi, John. I see your new backpack. It is stylish and beautiful. I wish I can have the same backpack. I am dying to have one.*

Student: *Thank you. It is the best gift from my father. He bought it from Italy to courage my recent English proving.*

Scores for content:

Scores for form:

Comment:

The second stage of the study took place in 2010. The compliment data collected from the Chinese English speakers' pretest, posttest and delayed posttest as well as data from the American English speakers were rearranged by the first author and her assistant to construct 20 packets. Each packet consisted of two Chinese English speaker productions and two American English productions. There were a total of 24 compliment exchanges in each packet. All identifying information such as linguistic background and participants' names were removed to avoid possible bias. While the second author was teaching a two-week intensive course on "Descriptive English Grammar" to a group of 17 American in-service ESL teachers, she asked each teacher to assess a different packet based on the following content/form scales. She asked three other in-service teachers who were taking her "Qualitative Research Methods in Second Language Education" course to evaluate the remaining three packets.

Please judge the content and form of the compliment exchanges made by the respondents.

| | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|------|------|------|-----------|--|
| ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- | | | | | |
| 1-2 | 3-4 | 5-6 | 7-8 | 9-10 | |
| Very poor | Poor | Fair | Good | Excellent | |

The scales for the second stage were modified based on the first group of assessors' feedback. First, the assessors felt that the adding of the *Very poor* level would better characterize these speaker performances. Second, since the assessors sometimes struggled with the assignment of level to a given situation when the performance was actually in between (e.g. between *Fair* and *Good*), they suggested having two scores for each level to allow more flexibility. Like the first stage, the second group of assessors was requested to give two scores for each situation: one for content and the other for form and to make comments on each situation evaluated.

2.4 Quantitative and content analysis

A *t*-test was first performed to compare the scores given to Chinese English speakers and American English speakers by the second group of assessors. This was followed by coding the assessor comments for content analysis.

The coding examples for content and form are shown in examples (2) and (3):

(2)

Situation: You are in the park and notice that a kid is skating. You are quite impressed. What would you say to compliment him/her on the skating? How do you think he/she would respond?

You: *Nice job.*

Kid: *Thanks.*

Scores for content (0-10): 4

Scores for form (0-10): 4

Comments: *Usually compliments are more specific than this.*

Coding: **improper amount of information**

(3)

Situation: Your roommate just got a new haircut two days ago. What would you say to compliment him/her on the haircut? How do you think he/she would respond?

You: *Jenny, you have a very cool haircut. You look very different. Where did you make it?*

Roommate: *Oh, I'm so happy you like my new haircut. I made it at that barber shop just around the corner.*

Scores for content (0-10): 8

Scores for form (0-10): 8

Comments: *"Where did you make it?" should be "Where did you get it?"*

Coding: **word choice: make → get**

All the assessor comments were coded by the first author and her assistant using the following procedures. First, a subset of data consisting of 20 comments randomly selected from the assessors of the second group was coded independently. The percent agreement for content and form were 70% and 85%, respectively. Second, the comments which were coded differently were discussed on an item-by-item basis. Third, the rest of the assessor comments were coded independently in their entirety, and the percent agreement figures were 89% for content and 93% for form. Finally, remaining coding discrepancies were eliminated through consensus coding.

3. Results and discussion

Since the purpose of this study was to understand how speakers of American English perceive content and form of the speakers of Chinese English when performing compliment exchanges, we did not consider the differences in speakers' pretest, posttest and delayed posttest performance. Instead, we focused on the overall content and form scores in speaker production and more importantly, the analysis of assessor comments.

3.1 Quantitative analysis

Table 3 shows the *t*-test results of the content and form scores given by the 20 in-service ESL teachers who served as the second group of assessors.

Table 3: The scores given by the second group of assessors

| | Mean | | SD | | <i>t</i> value | p value |
|---------|------|------|------|------|----------------|---------|
| | A | C | A | C | | |
| Content | 8.23 | 5.41 | 1.08 | 1.63 | 9.13 | .00 |
| Form | 8.48 | 5.01 | 1.10 | 1.65 | 11.08 | .00 |

Note: A=American participants, C=Chinese participants

As predicted, the scores for American English speakers' performance were significantly higher than those of Chinese participants ($p < .05$). We can see that for both content and form, the American performance was in general assessed as *Good* or *Excellent*, while the Chinese speaker performance was assessed as *Fair*. This indicates the scales were valid.

3.2 Content analysis

The content analysis examined both “content” and “form.” We begin by presenting the types of errors identified for each category, followed by examples from our data to illustrate each type.

3.2.1 Content

A total of 285 errors were identified in the assessor comments. These errors can be categorized into eight types, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Percentage and raw frequencies of the content errors produced by Chinese English speakers

| Error types | Items | No. of errors | Percentage |
|-------------|--------------------------------------|---------------|------------|
| 1 | Improper amount of information | 86 | 30% |
| 2 | Nonsensical exchange | 71 | 25% |
| 3 | Rudeness | 40 | 14% |
| 4 | Overstatement | 34 | 12% |
| 5 | No acknowledgement of the compliment | 20 | 7% |
| 6 | No answer to the question | 17 | 6% |
| 7 | No compliment | 14 | 5% |
| 8 | Wrong person/thing complimented | 3 | 1% |
| | Total | 285 | 100% |

3.2.1.1 Improper amount of information

As we can see, *Improper amount of information* was the most frequent problem (30%), followed by *Nonsensical exchanges* (25%), *Rudeness* (14%), and *Overstatement* (12%). Three categories occurred in less than 10% of the speaker performances: *No acknowledgement* (7%), *No answer to the question* (6%), *No compliment* (5%) and *Wrong person/thing complimented* (1%). Each error type will be discussed in detail below:

Error type 1 is *Improper amount of information* (30%). About 55% of these examples were found to provide more information than necessary, as shown in example (4).

(4)

You: Your new backpack is so pretty. Is it your present from your parents? You must cherish it.

Student: Yeah! It is my birthday present from my parents. I love it so much.

(Chinese Speaker 3, the *Backpack* situation)

Comment: *This is grammatically correct, but sounds awkward and the compliment itself implies too many things. A better way to say it would be, "Your new backpack is so pretty. Was it a gift?"* (Assessor H, Group 2)

In example (4), we can see from the assessor's comment that the sentence "You must cherish it" was not considered necessary. The appreciation (i.e. "Your new backpack is so pretty") plus a question (i.e. "Was it a gift") are sufficient for this exchange from an American perspective. In fact, a closer look at the data finds that 70% of American participants used a single appreciation strategy (e.g. "I like your backpack") and 26% of them used the combined strategy pattern of appreciation plus a question (e.g. "I like your backpack. Where did you get it"). There were only three follow-up statements (4%) after either the single strategy or the combined pattern (e.g. "Hey, nice haircut. You don't look like Don King after a rough night anymore").

Like the Americans, the Chinese speakers tended to use a single appreciation strategy (45%), followed by the appreciation + question pattern (38%). However, there were 27 follow-up statements (17%) in their productions, which generally expressed the complimenter's presupposition. The example in (4) also implies a patronizing comment from a superior to an inferior, which is not uncommon in a paternalistic society (e.g. "You must cherish it").

On the other hand, 45% of the Chinese English speakers were perceived to express less information than was required. This often occurred in the responses to the compliments, as shown in example (5).

(5)

You: Your new hairstyle is beautiful.

Roommate: Thanks.

(Chinese speaker 10, the *Hair* situation)

Comment: *Simple response for compliment could be interpreted as being short and unfriendly.* (Assessor G, Group 2)

The Chinese English speaker's response to the compliment was apparently not sufficient for American English speakers. Previous research provides a plausible

explanation for this. According to Wolfson (1989), there is “the strong tendency of status-equal Americans to negotiate their roles through opening speech sequences involving such behaviors as complimenting” (p.226). The employment of a simple thank-you without further elaboration may be acceptable in occasions where lower-status females are complimented by higher status males or strangers (Wolfson 1989), but it is inappropriate when status-equal interlocutors are trying to start a conversation to establish solidarity. This has also been confirmed by Rau & Chen’s (2010) quantitative study on compliment exchanges.

Unlike American compliments serving as a conversation opener, Chinese compliments are generally used to show genuine admiration (Yu 2005), so a simple response (e.g. 多謝, 哪裡, 不敢 [acknowledgment, deflection, rejection]) is considered sufficient in the Chinese speech community. In other words, elaboration in the response part becomes optional, not obligatory unless the speaker feels the need to do so.

3.2.1.2 Nonsensical exchanges

Error type 2 is *Nonsensical exchanges*, which had the second highest frequency of all the errors identified (25%). This type of errors refers to those which did not make sense to the assessors, as illustrated in example (6).

(6)

You: I’m very please can invited my boss house for dinner and say I hope it is not too much trouble. Welcome to house. The dinner is very great.

Boss: I enjoy in my dinner time I hope come again. Thank you.

(Chinese speaker 12, the *Dinner* situation)

Comment: *All wrong. It doesn’t make any sense to me.* (Assessor 2, Group 1)

This speaker did not seem to have a complete understanding of the situation. The dinner is at the boss’s house instead of the employee’s house, but the speaker seemed to misjudge the situation by regarding the boss as the invitee because she said: “I’m very please can invited my boss house for dinner...” and the boss replied: “I enjoy in my dinner time I hope come again. Thank you.” If our assumption about this speaker’s intent was right, then the second utterance she wrote in the first pair part should be interpreted as “Welcome to *my* house” and the third utterance should be eliminated because it is inappropriate to compliment one’s own dinner. Generally speaking, such nonsensical exchanges required a process of inference to detect what messages the speakers really wanted to convey.

3.2.1.3 Rudeness

Error type 3 is *Rudeness*, which occupied 14% of all the errors identified in the speaker productions. Some rudeness errors can be found when the speakers mentioned the cost of the object being complimented, as illustrated in example (7).

(7)

You: Wow, your car is so great. I think your car must be very expensive.

Parent: Oh, thank you. Actually, it really expensive, but I love it very much.

(Chinese speaker 20, the Car situation)

Comment: *The reference to money in the compliment could be considered offensive.* (Assessor 1, Group 1)

The money issue highlights the cultural differences between American and Chinese societies. Americans generally have a stronger sense of privacy. A person's age, income, marital status and the price of one's possession are private matters, and social custom requires that permission to ask be requested first (e.g. "May I ask a personal question"). On the other hand, asking about these private matters is regarded as friendliness, concern, admiration or interest in Chinese society, and would not be considered as probing into one's private affairs (Lii-Shih 1999).

Other rudeness errors were found when the exchanges sound like imposition from an American perspective, as in examples (8) and (9).

(8)

You: Your food was delicious. I want to eat again next week.

Boss: Thank you very much.

(Chinese speaker 17, the *Dinner* situation)

Comment: *I think it's a little awkward to ask to eat again with the boss. I feel like eating dinner at your boss's house only happens once in a while.* (Assessor J, Group 2)

(9)

You: Rita, I love your dress so much. Isn't it the one I've been wanting for long?

Roommate: Yeah, do you really think so? I was worried it would be too many colors on it. I am so happy that you like it.

(Chinese speaker 2, the *Clothes* situation)

Comment: *This is an aggressive compliment. It's a nice dress but it's the one I want. How dare you!* (Assessor 2, Group 1)

For the American assessors, the utterance “I want to eat again next week” in example (8) is clearly a demand, while the utterance “Isn’t it the one I’ve been wanting for long” in example (9) may imply coveting other’s possessions. As these English utterances lack hedges or past tense use to express politeness, they may sound impolite and imposing to Americans. However, if we translate them into Chinese, they could be interpreted as reinforcing solidarity with the complimentee, as in the following (8-1) and (9-1), which are perfectly polite expressions in Chinese, as was the question about money discussed earlier.

(8-1) 你燒的菜真好吃，希望下次有機會再嚐嚐你的手藝。 [The food you cooked is very delicious, I hope I have the opportunity to taste it again.]

(9-1) 我好喜歡你的衣服，我一直希望能有一件和你一模一樣的衣服。 [I like your clothes very much, I have always wanted something just like that.]

3.2.1.4 Overstatement

Error type 4 is *Overstatement* (12%), as shown in example (10).

(10)

You: Hey, David, these dishes are delicious! You are the best cook I have ever met. You must have magical hands.

Boss: Wow, thank you for giving me lots of compliments. You make me happy like a bird flying high in the sky.

(Chinese speaker 12, the *Dinner* situation)

Comment: “*You are the best cook I have ever met*” and “*You must have magical hands*” in the you part and “*...happy like a bird flying high in the sky*” in the boss part are overstatements. (Assessor 1, Group 1)

In this exchange, the three metaphors: “You are the best cook I have ever met”, “You must have magical hands” and “You make me happy like a bird flying high in the sky” were considered to be overstatements, or excessive flattery. In Brown & Levinson’s (1987) Politeness Model, these overstatements represent one of the strategies to claim common ground (迎合 [accommodation]), which was considered by the American assessor as inappropriate in the hierarchical relationship between employers and employees in the US institutional culture.

The occurrences of overstatements in the Chinese speaker productions lead us to hypothesize that this can be culturally specific. The English word “compliment” is

generally translated as “讚美 [praise]” in Chinese.² However, there are many near-synonymous verbs of compliment in Chinese, which include 稱讚, 稱許, 肯定, 誇獎, 誇讚, 迎合, 恭維, 巴結, 拍馬屁, and so forth. A preliminary perusal of the Sinica Corpus shows that these words denote various kinds of interlocutor relationships. Among these words, 讚美 [praise] and 稱讚 [positive evaluation] seem to involve compliments from a higher-status person to a lower-status person, as in (a) and (c) or between status-equals, as in (b) and (d). Example (a) indicates parents should praise (讚美) their own children often to boost their self-confidence. Example (b) says a foreign male guest in a wedding ceremony expresses his politeness by praising (讚美) the beauty of the Chinese bride. Example (c) expresses a teacher’s positive evaluation (稱讚) of the quality of a student’s term paper, completed by working hard over several late nights. Example (d) shows friends of a female patient speak positively (稱讚) about her being more lovable after she fell ill.

- (a) 我們每一個家長都應該多讚美我們的孩子，以拾回他們的自信心。
- (b) 彼得參加中國朋友的婚禮，很禮貌地讚美新娘漂亮。
- (c) 老師稱讚我努力好幾夜才完成的報告寫得不錯。
- (d) 林郁芬的朋友，都稱讚她病後比病前可愛。

However, “稱許”, “誇獎”, “誇讚” seem to occur primarily from a higher-status person to a lower-status person, but not between status equals. For example, the manager praises (稱許) his employee for properly handling the crisis, as in example (e). A father praises (誇獎) his son’s honest admittance of his own fault, as in (f). President Lee praises (誇讚) school teachers’ exceeding their expectations, as in (g).

- (e) 總經理徐重仁稱許王炳蘊危機處理得當。
- (f) 他誠實的認錯，反倒使爸爸大大的誇獎了他一番呢！
- (g) 李總統聽後大表欣慰，誇讚學校老師負責盡職。

Finally, “恭維”, “巴結”, “拍馬屁” occur only from a lower-status person to a higher-status person or from a person who intends to get some benefit from the complimentee. For example, Wentian Zhang’s utterances contained flattery (恭維) of Chairman Mao, as in (h). The author tried to win his (superior’s) favor (巴結) by accompanying him to meals and dances, as in (i). Junzhang Jiang tried to brownnose (拍馬屁) Chiang Kai-shek but accidentally touched a sore spot, as in (j).

² 讚美 appears to be a standard translation of “compliment” in MA theses written in English investigating compliments in Taiwan (e.g. Wu 2006).

- (h) 張聞天的發言中仍然有不少恭維毛主席的話。
- (i) 筆者爲了巴結他，時常請他吃飯，陪他跳舞。
- (j) 蔣君章拍馬屁，卻不小心拍到蔣介石的痛處。

The overstatements in example (10) may have been caused by the Chinese speaker's expectations of how to compliment in a low-to-high relationship, as described in this situation. The speaker associated such a relationship with “恭維”, “巴結”, and “拍馬屁” in Chinese, thus displaying excessive flattery in the production. The boss is likely to have acknowledged the flattery by saying “Wow, thank you for giving me lots of compliments” and reciprocated with another exaggerated metaphor, “You make me happy like a bird flying high in the sky.”

3.2.1.5 No acknowledgement of the compliment

Error type 5 is *No acknowledgement of the compliment* (7%), as in example (11):

(11)

You: You speak English really well!

Boss: I hope my English can improve while I live in America.

(Chinese speaker 1, the *Speech* situation)

Comment: *The Chinese should say: “Thank you. I hope my English can improve even more while I’m living in America.”* (Assessor M, Group 2)

In example (11), the boss did not respond with “Thank you,” but scaled down the compliment by saying “I hope my English can improve while I live in America.” An alternative interpretation could be that the response was an intentional move by the boss to regain his/her power by ignoring the compliment, as it is patronizing for the employee to evaluate his/her boss' English ability. In Rau & Chen (2010), we found that the typical compliment response in American English is *thank you + an answer to the question*. However, most Chinese speakers tend to mitigate the complimentary force with or without *thank you* in order to show modesty or power even though they would probably not respond to compliments with total rejection (e.g. “No, no, no, it’s very bad”).

3.2.1.6 No answer to the question

Error type 6 is *No answer to the question*, which was present in 6% of the errors found in speaker productions. example (12) shows that the speakers seemed to lack the knowledge of adjacency pairs used to construct a successful conversational turn.

(12)

You: Where did you buy the backpack? I like the style and color.

Student: Oh, thank you.

(Chinese speaker 8, the *Backpack* situation)

Comment: NS: “Where did you buy *that* backpack?” Also, the student doesn’t answer the question from “You” about where the backpack was bought.
(Assessor C, Group 2)

3.2.1.7 No compliment

Error type 7 is *No compliment*. Fourteen out of the 285 errors involved no specific compliment in the first pair part, as shown in example (13).

(13)

You: Hey, you are wearing a new pair of sneakers, right? Where did you buy it?

Student: I bought it last week at the department store when it was on sale. What do you think about it?

(Chinese speaker 18, the *Sneaker* situation)

Comment: *No compliment achieved.* (Assessor O, Group 2)

Although there is no compliment achieved in the “you” turn, the speaker elicits a compliment in the next turn by asking “what do you think about it.” However, we found three American participants’ cases which had no compliment in the first part of the adjacency pair, but the assessor reported that it sounded “native,” as shown in (14).

(14)

You: Where did you get that?

Student: Oh, my mom got it for me at Target.

(American speaker 4, the *Backpack* situation)

Comment: *Sounds native, but there’s no compliment at all. “You” is just asking a question.* (Assessor C, Group 2)

This assessor’s comment leads us to the distinction between *direct compliment* and *indirect compliment*. According to Yu (2005), *direct compliments* refer to “remarks including linguistic forms that directly and unambiguously frame these comments as compliments” (e.g. “I really like your hair that way”) (p.98). On the other hand, *indirect compliments* refer to “remarks which would be seen as compliments by the addressee, although the positive semantic carrier generally associated with complimenting is

missing at the level of the linguistic form” (e.g. “Wow, what did you do to your hair?”) (Yu 2005:98). In his study, Chinese English speakers used a greater proportion of indirect compliments than American English speakers. From examples (13) and (14), it seems that in addition to conventional direct compliments, questions alone with proper intonation are an acceptable alternative for both American and Chinese English speakers.

3.2.1.8 Wrong person or object complimented

The last error type refers to *Wrong person or object complimented*. There were only three cases found in the speaker productions, each of which resulted from a seeming misunderstanding of the prompt, as shown in example (15).

(15)

You: Hey, the girl over there dance so well. Do you know her? And you tell me more about her! I would like to get to know her.

Friend: Oh, are you talking about Mary? Yeah, she is the most popular girl in the party. Everyone think she is talented and pretty. By the way, she has boy friend already.

(Chinese speaker 11, the *Dance* situation)

Comment: *The student is supposed to be talking to the dancer not someone who can introduce him to her.* (Assessor 1, Group 1)

An alternative interpretation might account for this exchange as an indirect compliment from the speaker’s perspective, due to the perceived gender barrier. The male student resorted to an indirect strategy by making a compliment about Mary’s dance to his friend with the hope that this message might be relayed to her eventually. His friend, on the other hand, noticed his ulterior motive and addressed his underlying question of whether she was available. It is also very likely that the exchange represents a misunderstanding of the task by the respondent—that the compliment was supposed to be addressed to the person, not to someone else.

3.2.2 Form

There were a total of 586 errors identified in the assessor comments. These errors can be categorized into four types, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Percentage and raw frequencies of the form errors produced by the Chinese speakers

| Error types | Items | No. of errors | Percentage |
|-------------|----------------------|---------------|------------|
| 1 | Phrasing | 304 | 52% |
| 2 | Grammar | 164 | 28% |
| 3 | Word choice | 94 | 16% |
| 4 | Alerter ³ | 24 | 4% |
| | Total | 586 | 100% |

3.2.2.1 Phrasing

As we can see, errors in *Phrasing* occurred with the highest frequency (52%), followed by errors in *Grammar* (28%), *Word choice* (16%), and *Alerters* (4%). Each error type will be discussed in detail below:

Phrasing errors refer to “odd, unnatural, or unusual” utterances. The utterances may not contain glaring grammatical errors, but they usually do not sound natural to American English speakers. However, naturalness can often be achieved by slight changes within the utterances. Example (16) is a typical case.

(16)

You: I really like the layout and the decorations in your house.

Parent: Thanks, it took a while to find the perfect decorations to match our personal life.

(Chinese speaker 18, the *House* situation)

Comment: *I really like the layout and the decoration in your house—You have a beautiful house.*

It took a while to find the perfect decorations to match our personal life—It took a while for us to find the perfect decorations. (Assessor C, Group 2)

The assessor changed the compliment “I really like the layout and decoration in your house” to “You have a beautiful house” because as a compliment in American culture, the speaker needs to express directly that the parent has a beautiful house. From the Chinese perspective, however, compliments on possessions are scaled on a continuum from vagueness to specificity. If the possession is of less value (e.g. shoes or clothes),

³ An alerter is defined as “an element whose function it is to alert the hearer’s attention to the ensuing speech act” (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989:277).

then a vague compliment such as “Your dress is beautiful” (你的衣服好漂亮) is sufficient. On the other hand, if the possession is of great value (e.g. cars, houses, piece of art, or other luxury), a simple utterance such as “You have a beautiful house” does not suffice and the complimenter is obliged to point out what is special about the object to show true admiration. Such a distinction between the general and genuine compliments is also reflected in the different use of “讚美” [compliment] vs. “讚賞” [admire] in Chinese, with the former indicating vague compliments and the latter genuine and heart-felt compliments. For example, my relatives compliment (讚美) my luffa, as in (k), but they admire (讚賞) paper-thin china, as in (l).

(k) 親友們來到我家，站在棚下讚美/*讚賞著絲瓜。

(l) 這種磁杯薄如片紙，他們把玩之下，都讚賞/*讚美不已。

In example (k), the use of “讚賞” [admire] would be judged to be overkill because this utterance compliments an attractive but ordinary, garden-variety luffa, which is generally considered to be of little value. There seems to be no need to specify the area to be complimented on (e.g. the color or the size of the luffa), unless it is really huge. In example (l), however, “讚賞” [admire] would be judged as a better word than “讚美” [compliment] because a group of professional connoisseurs would not only “admire”, but also “appreciate” the antique china. The second character “賞” in the compound “讚賞” [admire] refers to the recognition or understanding of the object’s value. Although an American assessor would deem the infinitive phrase “to match our personal life” unnecessary as a compliment response and suggest deletion, a Chinese speaker would probably think that a gorgeous house represents not only a person’s wealth or social standing, but also good taste and a way of life.

The majority of phrasing errors (75%) involve this kind of slight modification. In addition, naturalness can be achieved by the use of modifiers to intensify the complimentary force, as shown in example (17).

(17)

You: How do you do, I am Chung yi. Your Chinese is good. Where did you learn to speak?

Friend: Thank you. I’m Eric. My mother is Taiwanese. So I can speak Chinese.

(Chinese speaker 5, the *Chinese* situation)

Comment: *You: Hi, I’m Chung Yi. **Your Chinese is really good. Where did you learn to speak so well?** Or how long have you studied Chinese?*

American: Oh, thanks. Actually, my mom is from Taiwan so I grew up speaking Chinese. Oh, by the way, I’m Eric. Nice to meet you.

(Assessor N, Group 2)

In example (17), the assessor revised the first part of the pair by using the modifiers “really” and “so well”: “Your Chinese is **really** good,” and “Where did you learn to speak it **so well**?” This English situation takes place in a welcome party where the two college students meet for the first time. The use of intensifiers can change the illocutionary force of the utterances from making an observation or a question to expressing a compliment for the purpose of starting a conversation and establishing rapport between the two strangers.

3.2.2.2 Grammar

Error type 2 *Grammar* errors cover diverse problems, such as verb tense, pronouns, word form, prepositions, gerunds and infinitives, subject and verb agreement, singular and plural nouns, articles, missing words, conjunctions, word order, run-on sentences, and so forth. Since verb tense (41%) and pronoun (14%) problems comprised 55% of all the grammar errors, we shall discuss them in detail below.

Verb tense is one of the most troublesome problems for Chinese speakers of English (Rau 1999). Among all the grammar errors as shown in example (18), verb tense stood out.

(18)

You: Oh your new backpack looks very nice. How much do you spend to buy it?

Student: This is my birthday gift. My parents bought it, so I don't know it cost. I really love it.

(Chinese speaker 4, the *Backpack* situation)

Comment: *A few verb tense errors “do” and “is” should be past tense...*

(Assessor 2, Group 1)

English and Chinese reflects time attributes in a different way. In English, verb inflections are used to indicate temporal locations of situations in relation to speech time, while in Chinese, time adverbs such as *yesterday* and *last year* are used to set the time frame (Li & Thompson 1981). So Chinese English speakers tend to favor perfective verbs when it comes to past tense marking (Bayley 2005).

Missing pronouns were another major problem for Chinese speakers of English, as illustrated by example (19).

(19)

You: Thanks for your invitation. The dinner was good.

Boss: Really? Hope you like.

(Chinese speaker 8, the *Dinner* situation)

Comment: Missing pronoun: and there needs to be a pronoun...hope you like IT.
(Assessor B, Group 2)

In example (19), the assessor changed the utterance “Hope you like” to “Hope you like it” in the second pair part. The speaker’s mistake could be a direct translation from the Chinese want statement 希望你會喜歡.

3.2.2.3 Word choice

Error type 3 is *Word choice* errors. The most common one involves collocations. For example, the Chinese word “學習” can refer to either formal or informal learning, so “學溜冰” “study skating” was used in Chinese English. However, there is a distinction between *study* and *learn* in English. The word *study* refers to learning about a subject, particularly in an educational course; while the word *learn* refers to getting either knowledge or skill, and thus “learn/practice skating” is used in American English. Other examples include “問題”, which can be rendered as both *problem* and *question* in English (e.g. “I have a problem” vs. “I have a question”), and “好”, which can be both *good* and *well* in English (e.g. “The dinner is well” vs. “The dinner is good”). Often the speakers would choose an incorrect word to convey their message, as shown in example (20).

(20)

You: What a such fashionable backpack, you bought it by yourself? I wanna buy one for my son too.

Student: The backpack was my mom bought for me, because I got 100 score on my math. The present was for the victory.

(Chinese speaker 13, the *Backpack* situation)

Comment: The word “victory” is not appropriate here. This student goes to school, not gladiator school. (Assessor 1, Group 1)

Apparently the math test was conceptualized as a metaphor of “combat” by the Chinese student and thus the outcome was considered “victory.” Thus the assessor commented that the student goes to school, not gladiator school, implying that the fight analogy would be fine for those training to be gladiators, but improper in a normal school setting.

3.2.2.4 Alerter

Error type 4 *Alerter* errors are defined broadly as terms of address and greetings, such as titles/roles (e.g. “Professor”), names (e.g. “Judith”), endearment terms (e.g. “Honey”), offensive terms (e.g. “Stupid cow”), pronouns (e.g. “You”), attention getters (e.g. “Hey”) or any combination of them. In our study, we found that the Chinese speakers had problems in the use of titles, names and attention getters, as shown in examples (21)-(23), as they involve moment-by-moment interpretations of interpersonal relationships.

(21)

You: Mr. Tony. You are so kind to invite me and your dish done very well. You should be a good cook.

Boss: Don’t mention it. I welcome to you visited my home and take your time at home.

(Chinese speaker 4, the *Dinner* situation)

Comment: *I think Mr. Tony is a serious mistake. Tony is clearly a first name. And Mr. Tony could be that way meaning he’s very tony. He dresses well... (Assessor 1, Group 1)*

In example (21), the conventional address form for the boss should be title + last name.

(22)

You: Hi, I’m David. Wow, you are very good. Would you mind teach me that?

Kid: Sure. I think it is very easy. Don’t worry. Let we start.

(Chinese speaker 16, the *Skating* situation)

Comment: *We would say names after we are sure we want to know them for a long time...(Assessor A, Group 2)*

The problem in example (22) is that the speaker and hearer are strangers in the park, so there is no need for the adult to introduce himself unless he wants to get to know the child.

(23)

You: Hello, John. You have a new backpack. It is beautiful.

Student: Well, thanks. I bought it last night. I like the photo on it, so I took it home.

(Chinese speaker 12, the *Backpack* situation)

Comment: *You: Hi, John. You got a new backpack. It’s pretty cool looking. Student: Oh, thanks. I got it last night. I really liked the design on it. (Assessor N, Group 2)*

Example (23) points out the difference between *Hello* and *Hi*. Generally, *Hi* is even more informal than *Hello*. In this Backpack situation, the use of *Hi* would be more appropriate because the complimenter and complimentee know each other.

4. Conclusion

This paper documents how content and form errors in compliment exchanges produced by college-level Chinese speakers of English were perceived by American English speakers. The content errors consist of inadequate amount of information, overstatement, irrelevant information, and rudeness. The form errors include problems in syntax, lexicon, phrasing, and alerters.

From the American standpoint, the content errors we identified in §3.2 can be accounted for in terms of violations of Grice's (1975) four maxims described in the Cooperative Principle: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner.

Violation of the Quantity Maxim can account for Error type 1—*Improper amount of information*. The speakers may produce more or less information than is required by the target language. Our study shows that most compliments in American English are achieved by showing appreciation, or by showing appreciation plus a question. Therefore, the responses should be geared toward *acknowledgement of the compliment + answer to the question*.

Violation of the Quality Maxim can account for Error type 4—*Overstatement*. Flattery is perceived when an exaggerated compliment is made without adequate evidence.

Violation of the Relation Maxim can be traced to Error types 5-8, which included *No acknowledgement of the compliment*, *No answer to the question*, *No compliment* and *Wrong person/thing complimented*. *No acknowledgement of the compliment* and *No answer to the question* can be further categorized as *exchange relevance failure* because the speakers demonstrated little knowledge about how to construct a successful turn by using adjacency pairs. On the other hand, *No compliment* and *Wrong person/thing complimented* are *situation relevance failure* since the speakers did not seem to fully understand the prompt.

Finally, violation of the Manner Maxim seems to correspond to Error type 2—*Nonsensical exchange*. The speakers making this type of error usually did not structure their compliments well enough to arrive at a logical sequencing, or their compliments and responses were so unclear that a lot of guessing and inferring are necessary, as in example (6).

The only error type which cannot be explained in terms of Grice's maxims is Error type 2—Rudeness. Why did the speakers appear to be rude to the assessors when

performing compliment exchanges? Did the speakers intend to be rude, or was there any reasonable explanation behind the appearance of rudeness? For this type of error, Brown & Levinson's (1987) Politeness Model may provide a better explanation. Brown and Levinson distinguish two kinds of politeness. Negative politeness refers to the concern that the hearer does not want to be imposed upon, while positive politeness refers to the concern that the hearer wants to be liked or admired. Since compliments are "acts that predicate some desire of S toward H or H's goods" (Brown & Levinson 1987:66), they basically attend to the hearer's need for positive face. For positive politeness, in our study, the American participants tended to employ what Brown and Levinson called "claim common ground" as a strategy to express positive politeness—i.e. notice and attend to the hearer's appearance or possessions. On the other hand, the Chinese speakers' compliments seemed to express more variation. In addition to attending to the hearer's appearance or possessions, they employed other strategies such as exaggeration (e.g. "You must have magical hands"), intensification of self-interest (e.g. "I want to eat again next week"), and assertion or presupposition of the speaker's knowledge (e.g. "I think your car must be very expensive"). By using these strategies, the speakers hoped to maximize the complimentary force of their utterances. These strategies are used to interpret interpersonal relationship in Chinese culture, but they were not perceived as polite or were even considered excessive or rude in American culture.

As for form, basic grammar errors were identified by the American assessors, which included word choice, verb tense, pronouns, word forms, prepositions, gerunds and infinitives, subject and verb agreement, singular and plural nouns, conjunctions, word order, and so on, as shown in examples (18) and (19). This could be attributed to the rather different linguistic systems of English and Chinese. However, even though the grammar was correct, some Chinese speakers were perceived by the American assessors as not expressing compliments in a conventional way. From the American perspective, some Chinese speakers of English seemed to have trouble gauging interpersonal relationships and level of formality in English, thus they did not use intensifiers such as "really" and "very well" in situations where they would be expected to, as shown in example (17). They also used terms of address improperly, as shown in example (21). They could not distinguish between occasions when and when not to address people, as shown in example (22). They also could not distinguish between when to use *Hi* and *Hello* in terms of degree of formality, as shown in example (23). Perhaps Hymes' (1986) SPEAKING grid could be used to increase awareness of meaning variations between American and Chinese English as the eight variables (setting, participants, ends, act sequence, key, instrumentalities, norms of interaction, and genre) are modified for re-contextualization.

In contrastive pragmatics, the differences between American and Chinese speech act behaviors have generally been attributed to a sociolinguistic reductionist perspective of individualism versus collectivism. However, such differences can also be viewed from a cognitive linguistic perspective. Compared with the formulaic American compliments (Wolfson 1983), Chinese English speakers' complimenting behaviors seem to be more complicated, as can be evidenced from the variety of nearly synonymous verbs, as discussed in this paper.

In future research, we propose in-depth investigation into Chinese verbs of positive judgment such as 肯定, 讚美, 稱讚, 稱許, 稱頌, 稱揚, 誇獎, 誇讚, 讚賞, 讚美, 讚許, 讚嘆, 讚揚, 迎合, 恭維, 巴結, 拍馬屁. The preliminary analysis of verbs of judging presented in this study has led us to hypothesize that these verbs are perceived differently to a certain degree by Chinese speakers. We also propose that the Module-Attribute Representation of Verbal Semantics (MARVS) developed by Huang & Ahrens (1999) can be adopted to investigate verbs of positive judging, as was done by M. Liu, Huang & Lee (1999) with verbs of negative judging. In the MARVS framework, verbal information can be identified based on two modules—*Event Module* (referring to event compositional information) and *Role Module* (referring to participant role information). We speculate that perhaps certain verbs of positive judging are process-oriented, while others are state-oriented; and perhaps some of them are goal-oriented, while others are goal-cause oriented. In addition to the MARVS framework, we suggest that these verbs be further examined in relation to function, topic, response, and speaker-hearer relationship since these attributes are characteristic of this particular speech act (Wolfson 1983).

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華人英語讚美行為之探討

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本研究從社會及認知語言學的角度分析英語人士如何解讀華人英語的讚美行為。我們邀請二十位在美國的英語人士針對英語讚美語料加以評分，並寫下他們的評論。結果顯示，在內容方面，評分者共解讀了八種錯誤，例如：「不當的資訊量」、「不禮貌」及「誇大不實」等。至於語言形式方面，評分者則認為華人英語讚美語料包含了在「措辭」、「文法」、「字彙選擇」及「招呼語」等的錯誤。從英語人士的角度來看，這些錯誤違反了 Grice (1975) 的會話原則及 Brown & Levinson (1987) 的禮貌原則。然而，本文試著從華人使用英語進行讚美行為時所考慮的觀點來加以詮釋這些問題。

關鍵詞：跨文化語用學，讚美，內容，語言形式