

Japanese Compliment Responses: A Comparison to American English Norms

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This study considers how Japanese cultural and social values are reflected in responses to compliments, comparing them to American cultural norms described in earlier research by Pomerantz (1975, 1978), Wolfson (1981, 1983) and Manes (1983). Fifteen young Japanese studying at the University of South Carolina were brought together on several occasions and their conversations were recorded and transcribed in detail. Twenty exchanges that involved some type of compliment and response were identified and analyzed. A variety of responses was observed, ranging from rejection, which is regarded as standard or ideal Japanese behavior, to acceptance, which could be thought to signal problematic behavior in Japanese situations. Methods of dealing with problematic behavior, including laughter, were also analyzed in terms of Japanese cultural values.

＜褒め言葉に対する日本人の応答～アメリカの一般例と比較して＞

一般的に日本人は褒め言葉を否定し米国人は受け入れると思われているが、実際はどうなのだろうか？この質問に答えるべく、論文では日本人の実例を紹介し、米国人の例と比較しながら、そこにどのように文化的社会的価値観が反映されているか述べている。米国人の褒め言葉とその応答に関するデータや資料は、Pomerantz (1975, 1978)、Wolfson (1981, 1983) や Manes (1983) などの研究を参考にした。また日本人のデータは米国のサウスカロライナ州立大学の15人の日本人留学生間の会話の中から得た。彼らに5・6人ずつ何回かアパートの居間に集まってもらい自然な状態での会話を録音した。そして、約15の褒め言葉とその応答のデータを得、内容別に分類し、分析を試みた。その中で、標準的だと思われている否定あるいは否定的応答や、標準的ではないと思われている肯定的応答などさまざまな応答が論じられている。さらに肯定的応答の際起こる日本人の笑いについても分析し、その文化的背景についても説明している。

INTRODUCTION

Complimenting behavior has been shown to be an area of communication that may vary greatly between cultures (c.f. Pomerantz, 1975, 1978; Wolfson, 1981, 1983; Manes, 1983). Although the language used in making and responding to compliments is often formulaic, the frequency and function of compliments differ from culture to culture. Thus, Wolfson (1981) asserts that especially in this area,

If true communication is to take place among people who come from differing cultural backgrounds, and if interference is to be minimized in second language learning, then we must have cross-cultural comparisons of rules of speaking. (Wolfson, 1981, p. 123)

It is the purpose of this study to try to add to the body of knowledge in this area by examining Japanese responses to compliments and comparing them with the norms of American English outlined by Pomerantz (1978) and Manes (1983). I would like to consider how Japanese cultural and social values are reflected in responses to compliments in which the recipient or a close associate is being praised. This area was chosen because it shows an interesting cultural contrast and a common point of difficulty for those studying Japanese as a second language (Young & Nakajima, 1984; Mizutani, 1979). I will start by reviewing past research on American norms and then outline conventional Japanese rules in this area.

American and Japanese Norms

In analyzing American norms of responding to compliments, Pomerantz (1978) notes that recipients of compliments have to resolve a conflict between two different values: the need to agree with the speaker and the virtue of humility. She explains that this is because compliments are a type of "supportive ritual" (see Goffman, 1976) required by considerations such as politeness or etiquette. Moreover, as Wolfson explains, compliments are used as a social strategy to maintain rapport (1983, p. 86). A denial of the contents of the compliment therefore constitutes a rejection of the expression of support or solidarity (Manes, 1983). On the other hand, acceptance could be viewed as a sign of conceit (Manes, 1983). Thus Pomerantz points out that "the recipient of a compliment faces a conflict in that accepting the compliment and agreeing with the speaker may be seen as self-praise, while at the same time it is impolite to disagree and reject the compliment outright".

Americans therefore use a number of "strategies to avoid or minimize this conflict." The most common is to respond to a compliment by saying "Thank you," thereby accepting the compliment "without

explicitly agreeing with its content" (Manes, 1983, p. 100). The following example is cited by Manes as a typical American compliment and response exchange.

Example 1

A: I like your outfit.

B: Thank you. I wanted to wear it while I could. Pretty soon it'll be too cold.

Situation: *A is a white female, age 20. B is a black female, same age. Both are salesclerks in a department store. Exchange takes place just after B arrives at work. (Manes, 1983, p. 98)*

Manes goes on to cite a few other examples of another frequently used strategy: "to deny or play down the worth of the thing complimented *without overtly denying the compliment.*" She explains that "this is done by focusing attention on some quality other than that specifically complimented." For example, when a young woman comments that another's house is "adorable," the hostess responds, "'Yes, it's really small, though.'in effect saying, 'Yes, it is adorable, *but* it's small.'" Manes notes that "the quality most frequently denied in responses to compliments on attractiveness is newness." On the other hand, when one is praised as a result of talent, s/he may downplay it by saying that it was due to luck. Similarly, someone praised for their work will often respond that it was easy or that no special effort was involved (Manes, 1983, pp. 100 -101).

It should be noted, however, that in none of the examples cited by Manes did the recipient of the compliment overtly contradict its contents. It appears that the words "Thank you," "Well", "Oh", etc. may follow a compliment, but generally not the word "No." According to Pomerantz (1978), the model of standard behavior in American society is the acceptance of compliments; therefore, outright rejection may constitute reportable, puzzling, or troublesome behavior.

In contrast, it is generally accepted in Japanese society that people should not accept compliments referring directly to themselves or their possessions (Young & Nakajima, 1984; Mizutani, 1979). The following exchange from my own study (explained below) appears to offer support for this theory that rejection of compliments is the Japanese norm.

Example 2

A: *Sutekina shatsu ne.*

"It is a nice shirt, isn't it?"

B: [
Uun yasumono yo.
"No, it is cheap (so it is not good)."

Although the Japanese subject B in Example 2 receives a compliment that is similar to that received by the American subject B in Example 1, the Japanese recipient rejects the compliment outright and explains this rejection with a negative evaluation of the object of praise.

This difference and some of the problems that might arise from it were suggested in early studies on compliments themselves. Wolfson (1981, 1983) and Manes (1983) collected a large corpus of data on compliments from a number of cultures, and cross-cultural comparisons were made. They had native speakers of other languages gather examples of compliment-and-response exchanges in their language and translate them into English so that they could be analyzed. Among their examples were the following exchanges that were originally made in Japanese, although only the English translations were reported (Wolfson, 1981, pp. 118-119).

Example 3

S: The hat is really good. It suits you very well.

A: Oh, is that right? It's warm.

Example 4

S: This is nice. Did you buy it in New York?

A: No, it's old. There's something wrong with the strap.

Example 5

S: Your earrings are pure gold, aren't they?

A: Yes, they are. They must be pure gold when you put them on.

S: Money is a necessary condition to become attractive, indeed.

A: I think so, too.

In analyzing these exchanges, Wolfson points out that the compliments in Examples 3 and 4 show a great deal of resemblance to American English compliments. She does note, however, that it is difficult for Americans to accept the idea shown in Example 5 as a compliment. Instead, she suggests that Americans might regard such an exchange as small talk. Thus she suggests that Americans and Japanese share some assumptions about compliments, but not all. She also stresses that "the very fact that such similarities exist may lead to more serious misunderstandings than would otherwise occur" when non native speakers of English do deviate from American rules (Wolfson, 1981, p. 119).

Although the observation focus of Wolfson's research was the compliments themselves, these examples also suggest the above-mentioned difference in response patterns between American and Japanese cultures. Neither of the recipients in Examples 3 and 4 accepts the compliments. In Example 3, the recipient seems to express surprise at the idea that the hat might be attractive, while in Example 4, the recipient responds with a negative evaluation of the object of praise.

Thus it would appear that in Japanese society, the value of humility takes precedence over the need for agreement with the speaker. It might be suggested, then, that in contrast to Pomerantz' model of standard American behavior, in Japanese society, the acceptance of compliments may constitute reportable, puzzling, or troublesome behavior.

To test this hypothesis and clarify how the ideal or preferred performance in Japanese situations differs from that of standard American culture, I collected a small corpus of Japanese compliment-and-response exchanges and analyzed the patterns of response. Because the number of exchanges recorded was small (14), my analysis is necessarily limited to a typology of the responses, and generalizations cannot be made about the frequency or contexts of use. Moreover, because the subjects were all of the same age and social status, and the situation in which the data was collected was not completely natural and may have been influenced by the surrounding culture, the findings of this study are far from conclusive. Nonetheless, it is hoped that this will serve as a first step in making cross-cultural comparisons of the rules of speaking in this area, and that the resulting awareness of differences will facilitate the study and teaching of Japanese as a second language, while also helping Japanese learners of English as a second language and their teachers.

METHOD

This study was based on an analysis of tape-recorded conversations in Japanese. Sacks discusses the significance of this deductive method of analyzing tape-recorded conversations as follows:

The detailed ways in which actual, naturally occurring social activities occur are subjectable to formal description. Social activities - actual, singular sequences of them - are methodical occurrences. That is, their description consists of the description of sets of formal procedures persons employ. The methods persons employ to produce their activities permit formal description of singular occurrences that are generalizable in intuitively nonapparent ways and are highly reproducibly usable. (Sacks, 1984, p. 21)

To examine Japanese responses to praise, then, a number of native speakers of Japanese were brought together on several occasions and their conversations were recorded and transcribed in detail.

The study was conducted in the United States, and the subjects were all young native Japanese speaking students of equal status at the University of South Carolina. There were fifteen subjects, eight female and seven male. Their ages ranged from twenty to thirty.

I recruited subjects by asking friends to participate and to invite other friends as well. Given the limited number of available native Japanese speakers in the area, it was felt that this was the most practical method of obtaining conversations in as relaxed and natural a setting as possible.

The students were invited in groups to my home or my friend's home. The conversations took place in the living room of the home, over lunch. In each instance, all conversation was in Japanese. The participants were aware that research was being conducted and that their conversation was being recorded, but they did not know the specific area of study. They were asked to talk as they usually would. To elicit compliment responses, I purposely paid more compliments during our conversations than would normally be made in Japanese society.

RESULTS

I recorded and transcribed ten hours of conversation. From this data, I was able to collect about twenty exchanges that involved some type of compliment and a response to it. Compliments were identified as "expression[s] of positive evaluation" referring to a person, his or her possessions, family, close friends and so on (Wolfson, 1983, p. 85). Exchanges involving such expressions were transcribed in detail and the types of responses were analyzed. A variety of responses was observed, ranging from rejection, which, as mentioned above, is regarded as standard or ideal Japanese behavior, to acceptance, which could be thought to signal problematic behavior in Japanese situations. The results are presented and analyzed below.

Rejection or Avoidance

As may have been expected considering the Japanese cultural ideal, examples of overt rejection of compliments were observed, as seen in Example 6 below. (Notation of the transcripts follows Atkinson and Heritage, 1984. See Appendix for details.)

Example 6

Situation: *A is looking at food which B prepared.*

A: *Waa: : : oishiso.*

"Oh: : : it looks delicious."

B: *lie, oishiku nain desu kedo: : :*

"No, it is not delicious, but: : :"

Another exchange included a profession of embarrassment on the part of the recipient of the compliment. Although this may not appear to be an outright rejection of the contents of the compliment, the expression employed is a common Japanese formula used to avoid praise.

Example 7

Situation: *A is eating a cake which B made.*

A: *Oishii: : :*

"It is delicious: : :"

B: *Sonna ni ossharanaide kudasai.*

"Please don't make so much of it."

These examples can be seen as prototypical Japanese patterns for rejecting praise. After the first speaker produces a compliment, the recipient rejects it outright or asks the interlocutor to stop, so as to avoid being in the embarrassing position of receiving praise.

Rejection Plus Negative Evaluation of Referent

In the following example from my data, rejection of praise is coupled with a negative evaluation of the referent.

Example 8

A: *Gomyo-san tte ossharu no. li namae desu ne.*

"Your name is Ms. Gomyo. It's a nice name."

(0.8)

B: *lie, warui koto shitara sugu wakarushi, ikkai de oboerarerushi: : :*

"No. If I do something wrong, people know who I am right away, and they remember my name the first time they hear it."

In this conversation, the recipient may be softening her denial of the contents of the other speaker's comment by offering an explanation for her rejection of the praise. A similar pattern can be seen in Example 2 above.

Negative Evaluation of Referent

In the following excerpt, the recipient responded to praise by simply negating the value of the referent.

Example 9

Situation: *A is eating a meal which B made.*

- A: *Oishii desu nee.*
"It's delicious, isn't it!"
B: *Insutanto yo.*
"It is instant."

Here, the recipient's negative evaluation of the object of praise can be seen to function as a rejection of the compliment. A similar pattern can be seen in Example 4 above.

It should be noted that while the first two types of Japanese responses to compliments I have shown are quite different from American patterns in that they involve overt denials of the contents of the compliment, this third type is very similar to the kind of downplaying of the value of the referent described by Manes as a strategy frequently used by Americans to avoid outright acceptance of compliments (Manes, 1983, pp. 100 - 101).

So far I have shown three types of compliment responses from the data: outright rejection, rejection plus negative evaluation of the referent, and simple negative evaluation of the referent. All three can be interpreted as rejections of the contents of the praise. This trend stands in contrast to the typical American response to compliments seen in Example 1.

Considering these patterns in light of the above-mentioned conflict between the need to maintain solidarity and a desire not to appear conceited (Pomerantz, 1978), we may surmise that Japanese people, like Americans, are afraid of being seen as self-praising or conceited in accepting a compliment. However, unlike Americans, they do not face the conflict cited by Pomerantz because rejection of a compliment is not considered impolite in Japanese culture. Outright rejections are acceptable.

In the following sections, I will argue that my data suggests a different conflict, one that occurs when Japanese speakers choose not to reject praise and instead, accept the compliment in some way. I will try to show that this conflict is evident in laughter (often a sign of embarrassment in Japanese discourse) on the part of the giver and/or the recipient of the compliment. I will also try to explain this laughter. To do this, I will look at the various types of compliment responses that involved laughter.

Rejection or Negative Evaluation Accompanied by Laughter

The first two examples from my data showing the use of laughter involve standard Japanese patterns of praise rejection. In Example 10, the recipient rejects the compliment outright and laughs, but there is a pause between the rejection and the laughter.

Example 10

Situation: *A and B, both female students, have been talking about the well-regulated life B leads.*

- A: *Goryoshin no kyoiku ga ii no ne.*
"Your parents gave you a good education, didn't they."
B: *lie, (0.3) Hahhhhhh*
"No"

Although it is rarely possible to determine exactly what laughter means, its use in this case, where the recipient of the compliment is following standard Japanese practice and rejecting the praise, could be attributed to joy at the contents of the praise. On the other hand, it could also be a sign of embarrassment of some sort, since, as mentioned above, laughter is often used in Japanese discourse to signal such discomfort. In this case, in order to conform to the Japanese norm for dealing with compliments, the recipient had to reject the idea that his parents gave him a good education. This could be seen as problematic, since in Japanese society, parents are viewed as objects of respect. Thus, the laughter here could indicate embarrassment at appearing not to feel conventional filial piety. A variation on the use of laughter when rejecting a compliment is seen in Example 11. Here, laughter is produced directly after the recipient gives a negative evaluation of the referent, and the speakers who had offered the compliments join in the laughter.

Example 11

Situation: *A and B, both female students, are complimenting C, the male host of the lunch party, about the dishes used to serve the meal.*

- A: *Sutekina osara desu nee: :*
" These are nice dishes, aren't they: :"

- B: *Hontoni suteki.*
"Really nice."
- C: *Koreshika nain desu.* Hahhhhhhhh
"They're all we have."
- A: [Hahhhhhhhh
- B: [Hahhhhhhhh

In this example, as in Example 10, the recipient's laughter may be interpreted as a sign of joy at the compliment. It could also be seen as an attempt to avoid a more explicit verbal response. The Japanese phrase "*waratte gomakasu*" (to use laughter to avoid making an explicit response) suggests a Japanese tendency to laugh when one wants to conceal something or feels that one cannot express what s/he is feeling or thinking. The recipient of the compliment in this case may simply be at a loss as to how to respond. This could also be why the recipient of the compliment in Example 10 laughed when he failed to continue to respond verbally after initially rejecting the praise.

On the other hand, the laughter in Example 11 may be a sign of embarrassment of some kind, much as it was thought to be in Example 10. Certainly embarrassment makes it difficult to express one's feelings. And as argued by Pomerantz (1978), compliments create the embarrassing possibility of the recipient appearing to be conceited unless s/he denies the content. Thus the recipient in Example 11 may have laughed to indicate discomfort at being the object of praise.

Thus there appear to be three possible explanations for the laughter in Examples 10 and 11: that it signaled joy at the praise, indicated embarrassment of some kind, or was a strategy to avoid an explicit response. I would now like to try to analyze the use of laughter in such situations further by looking at a number of examples in which the recipients of compliments did not follow the Japanese ideal, and the response consisted entirely of laughter or was accompanied by laughter.

Responding With Laughter Alone

Among the responses to compliments in my data, I found two in which the recipients failed to respond verbally to the praise, but laughed instead. In the first example, the laughter is initiated by the recipients of the compliment.

Example 12

- A: *li koe desu ne.*
"You have nice voices."
(0.5)
- B: Hahhhhhhhh
[
- C: Huhhhhhhhh

The laughter here may be interpreted to be a profession of embarrassment at receiving praise, much like the set phrase used in Example 7. On the other hand, it could also be viewed as a strategy to avoid an explicit response, as was suggested for Example 11, or sign of joy at receiving praise, as was suggested for Examples 10 and 11.

We see another case in which the recipient of a compliment failed to respond verbally in Example 13. Here, however, it is the person offering the praise who laughs first and then the recipient of the compliment joins in without responding verbally to the praise.

Example 13

- A: *Sutekina kagu desu ne.* Hahhhhhhhh
" You have nice furniture, don't you."
[
- B: Hahhhhhhhh

In this case, the person who offered the compliment laughed, and did so before the recipient of the compliment responded. The laughter immediately followed the compliment. This might be interpreted as a sign of empathy: Speaker A may have felt the potential embarrassment that could be caused by her

compliment and laughed to show her empathy with the recipient. Similarly, participant C in Example 12 may have joined the recipient of the compliment (B) in laughter because C empathized with the embarrassment felt in having to deal with a compliment.

Acceptance Accompanied by Laughter

Although rejection of compliments is seen as the Japanese ideal, the data collected in this study included examples of recipients who deviated from this norm and accepted the praise offered. In the two examples shown below, acceptance of the compliment was accompanied by laughter.

Example 14

A: *Mori-kun no seta suteki nee:* :
"Mr. Mori's (your) sweater is very nice."

B: *li deshoo?* Hahhhhhh
"It is nice, isn't it?"

A: [Hahhhhhh

Example 15

A: *Yoku benkyo shimasu ne.*
"You study a lot, don't you."

B: *Ee, (0.5) gakusei desu kara.* Hahhhh
"Yes. (0.5) I am a student."

A: [Hahhhh

The laughter accompanying acceptance of these compliments may be seen as a sign of embarrassment at breaking the rules of Japanese conversation. The reason for breaking the rules is hard to determine: are there cases in which Japanese people feel it is all right to accept a compliment - when talking to someone with whom one is relatively intimate and who is of the same status, for example? Or were the subjects perhaps influenced by the cultural milieu they were in? This is quite possible, since their purpose in coming to the United States was to study English. This is an area that deserves more study.

In any case, I would like to point out the fact that in both of the above examples, the givers of praise joined the recipients in laughing after they had accepted the compliment. I will discuss this in more detail below.

The next exchange from my data also included laughter, but in this case, it was initiated not by the recipient of the compliment, but by the person giving the compliments. In this prolonged exchange, the recipient responded with the verbalizations "*Uhn*" and "*Huun*". These are not "words" in the strictest sense. They are a type of response known as *aizuchi* in Japanese. *Aizuchi* are used frequently in Japanese conversation; they are a signal that the conversation partner is listening to and understanding what is being said, and they also are used to encourage a speaker to keep talking. As such, they are considered essential to the smooth progress of a Japanese conversation (Mizutani, 1988; Komiya, 1986).

In Example 16, the recipient of the compliments used *aizuchi* repetitively instead of clearly accepting or rejecting the compliments made about his wife. Because the repeated use of this type of conversational facilitator did not place restraining pressure on the speaker (Spees, 1994), speaker A reasserted the praise, making it stronger with each turn at talk.

Example 16

Situation: A, a female student who is a friend of both the husband and wife who are hosting the party, is talking to the husband, Akio (B) about his wife Maki.

A: *Maki-san wa sugoi ninki desu yo.*
"Maki (your wife) is very popular."

B: *Uhun.*

- A: *Otoko no ko kara tokuni sugoi ninki desu yo.* Huhhh
 "She is very popular especially among male students."
 [
- B: *Huun*
- A: *Shinpai desu ne.* Hahhhh
 "It's a bit worrying, isn't it?"
 [
- B: *Huun*
- A: *Akio-san no mae dewa ienai kedo.* Hahhhh
 "I should not say such a thing in front of Akio (you)."
 [
- B: *Iya: : : Hahhhhh*
 "Shucks ..."

In the above conversation, the increasingly strong compliments were accompanied by laughter on the part of Speaker A. This continued as long as the recipient of the compliments continued to respond with *aizuchi* instead of clearly accepting or rejecting the compliments. When Speaker B finally hesitatingly accepted the praise of his wife, both the praise-giver and the recipient laughed together.

I would now like to try to analyze the laughter that occurred in the cases above where the recipient did not follow the Japanese ideal and instead, either failed to respond verbally or accepted the praise. In all of the examples of this type from my data, both the speaker and recipient laughed when the recipient failed to respond verbally or accepted the compliment. Since rejection of praise constitutes standard behavior in Japanese, failing to respond or accepting praise could be seen as puzzling behavior. Thus, the conversation partner was faced with the dilemma of deciding how to respond. Laughter, which as mentioned above, is a common signal of embarrassment in Japanese discourse, would be one way to indicate this awkwardness. Both the person who offered the praise and the recipient could have been producing laughter as a display to deal with the problem behavior.

This display seemed to solve the dilemma in these examples. Once the recipient and the giver of the praise laughed together, the giver no longer seemed to expect a verbal response. Nor did the recipient appear to feel a need to respond verbally. In this regard the role of laughter may be considered to be a way of completing conversations with harmony.

Jefferson (1984, p. 348) claims that in American English, "laughing together is a valued occurrence which can be the product of methodic, coordinate activities". My Japanese examples which included laughter provided evidence that Japanese may place a similar value on laughing together. By laughing together, participants appear to complete what Goffman (1976) calls "ritual interchanges". He describes such events as follows:

The participants have arrived at a place which each finds viable, each having acquitted himself with an acceptable amount of self-constraint and respect for the others present. (Goffman, 1976, p. 266)

Thus, laughter appeared to help the Japanese conversation partners complete their ritual interchange with harmony. Seward, in discussing Japanese interpersonal relationships, states that "the Japanese felt --- and still feel --- that it is better to be harmonious than right" (1968, pp. 36 -37). Furthermore, as pointed out by Hinds (1976) and Miller (1994) among others, Japanese culture values harmony over confrontation and indirectness over directness. I believe this tendency accounts for the use of laughter at the completion of these conversations, for it allows the participants to smooth over breeches of convention and thus avoid confrontation.

Acceptance Without Laughter

Interestingly enough, my data included some cases in which compliments were accepted without the use of laughter. I would now like to examine these cases to see how they may have differed from those in which laughter occurred.

Example 17

- A: *Okasan wa ii kata ne.*
 "Your mother is a nice person."

B: *Ee* (0.5) *sonkei shite imasu.*
 "Yes, (0.5) I respect my mother."

A: *Soo?*
 "Is that so?"

Example 18

A: *Sensei wa ii kata deshoo.*
 "Your professor must be a nice person."

B: *Ee, hijoni mo zenmenteki ni osewa ni natte imasu.*
 "Yes, he has helped me so much in so many ways."

(0.4) *Koko ni koretanomo sensei no okage desu.*

(0.4) "It was his help that made it possible for me come here (Univ. of South Carolina), too."

A: *Soo desu ka.*
 "Is that so?"

There is no laughter in either of the above conversations even though the recipients accept the praise. Moreover, the people offering the compliments, rather than laughing at the acceptance, show their understanding by saying "soo" and "soo desu ka".

The difference between these examples and Examples 14 through 16, where laughter occurred when recipients accepted compliments, may be seen to lie in the objects of the compliments. In Examples 17 and 18, the first speaker's comments praised the recipient's mother and professor, respectively. While both parents and mentors are considered to belong within a person's inner circle (although a parent is obviously much closer than a mentor), Japanese society also views both as worthy of respect. For this reason, people often accept praise about them. Thus interpreted, acceptance of the compliment in these two examples is neither problematic nor puzzling. This also supports the initial interpretation of Example 10, in which the recipient of a compliment about the upbringing his parents had given him laughed after rejecting the praise. He may well have been embarrassed at contravening the Japanese norm of respecting his parents, even though he had adhered to another norm by rejecting a compliment. Thus we have further evidence that laughter in Japanese conversation is often a signal of nonstandard behavior that creates some embarrassment or awkwardness.

CONCLUSION

Although rejection of compliments was posited as the Japanese ideal, in fact, a variety of responses to compliments were found, and the givers of praise reacted accordingly. A simple outline of the Japanese ideal as opposed to the actual findings are presented in Chart 1 below.

CHART 1. Japanese Responses to Compliments

Theory	Actual Responses	Reaction by Partner
Standard: Rejection	Rejection alone	Acceptance
	Avoidance	Acceptance
	Rejection + Negative evaluation of referent	Acceptance
	(+ laughter)	Laughter
	Negative evaluation of referent (+ laughter)	Acceptance (laughter)
-----	-----	-----
Problem behavior: Acceptance	Laughter alone	Acceptance
	Acceptance (+ laughter or hesitation)	Laughter / Avoidance of overt acceptance when referent is closely tied to recipient / Acceptance when referent is standard object of respect

It may be stated that in general, the responses seen in the data reflect the Japanese cultural values of harmony, modesty, and humility (Seward, 1968; Spees, 1994), and show how these values can be maintained and expressed when compliments are given. The data also suggests a range of acceptable behavior as well as discourse mechanisms to deal with problematic behavior. However, many of these mechanisms differ considerably from American norms described in earlier research. In particular, the social acceptability of rejection of compliments in Japanese stands in stark contrast to the American norm of avoiding such rejections. Moreover, the use of laughter, presumably to signal joy, relieve embarrassment or allow the recipient of a compliment to avoid having to respond verbally, would also appear to differ from standard American behavior.

However, because of the limitations in the data, including the size of the sample, the lack of variation in age and status of the subjects, the slightly artificial nature of the conversations (particularly the use of more compliments than usual in Japanese discourse), and the fact that the subjects were in a different cultural milieu studying the language of that culture at the time the study took place, the results can only be seen as tentative. A far larger corpus, collected in a wide range of natural conversational settings in Japan, needs to be collected and analyzed not only for the types of responses, but also for the frequency of each type and the contexts in which it is used, to allow more conclusive generalizations to be made.

Future research on compliment responses should also involve careful analysis of third person compliments, i.e., compliments of parties who are not present. Other speech acts such as invitations, offers, and requests, as well as the function of laughter in Japanese conversation also need to be studied. In each case, cross-cultural analysis is necessary because speech acts and non-verbal communication reflect social and cultural norms and values, and comparison makes these clearly understood.

Often, if we can understand the forms and functions of speech acts and non-verbal communication in our own culture, it becomes easier to understand, accept, and use the forms required by another language and culture. Also, cross-cultural comparisons are a powerful tool to attain awareness of our own culture. It is hoped that this research will be helpful to those trying to understand Japanese culture and language. Beyond mere words, the ability to respond in expected and appropriate ways to daily speech acts is necessary for learners of Japanese if they are to be able to find their place in Japanese society.

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APPENDIX

Transcript Notation

1. Sequencing

- [A single bracket indicates the point of overlap.
- = The equal signs indicate no interval between the end of one turn at talk and the beginning of the next.
- (0.0) Numbers in parentheses indicate elapsed time in tenths of seconds.

2. Sound-Production

- ? A question marker is not used as a grammatical symbol, but for question- intonation.
- ::: Colon(s) indicate that the prior syllable is prolonged. Multiple colons indicate more prolonged syllable.
- Underscoring indicates various forms of stressing, and may involve pitch and/or volume.
- UC Upper case indicates increased volume.

(Atkinson and Heritage, 1984: pp. ix-xvi)