Filipino and Thai Responses to Compliments in English

Nathaya Boonkongsaen

Hua-talay, Muang District, Nakhonratchasima 30000, Thailand
*Corresponding Author. E-mail address: Nathayagirl_boon@hotmail.com

Abstract

   Cross-cultural differences in the content of compliment responses (CRs) have been extensively investigated, particularly in comparing CRs between the native and non-native speakers of English. However, research investigating the speech acts performed by non-native speakers of various linguistic and cultural backgrounds seems scarce. This study investigated CRs of Filipinos and Thais. The data were collected through the use of written discourse completion tasks (DCTs), with four situational settings (appearance, character, ability and possession). A total of 60 subjects participated in this study. There were 30 subjects in each group, one was Thai and the other was Filipino. All subjects were required to respond to the compliments in English. The overall findings of this study revealed significant differences between Filipino and Thai speakers. That is, Filipinos employed 'Accept' strategies more often than Thais while Thais tended to employ the 'Combination' strategies more than Filipinos. This study highlights that people from different cultural backgrounds have different sets of CRs. The findings also suggest the implications for language teaching so as to raise students' awareness of conducting CRs in English.

Introduction

   "A compliment is a speech act which bestows the credit upon the addressee" (Hobbs, 2003:249). It functions to "grease the social wheels" and thus to serve as "a social lubricant" (Wolfson, 1983, p.89) Responding to compliments is not an easy speech act to perform because the speaker has to balance the two conflicting constraints namely, to agree with one's conversational co-participants and to avoid self-praise (Herbert,1989).

   Many comparative studies of CRs between native(NSs) and non-native speakers(NNSs) of English have been carried out such as the study of CRs of American and Chinese speakers (Chen,1993). The results revealed that the Chinese tended to reject to the compliments while the Americans tended to accept them. Lorenzo(2001) compared CRs between British and Spanish university students. The findings showed interesting aspects of cross-cultural communication. Spanish learners of English tended to upgrade compliments ironically. British students tended to interpret the ironic upgrades as boastful. Misunderstanding in the use of CRs between them could trigger communication breakdowns. Cedar (2006) conducted a contrastive study of CRs between American and Thai speakers. The findings revealed that Americans tended to accept and elaborate positively in their CRs while Thais tended to smile and have no response because of their limited English conversation

competence (Cedar, 2006). More recently, Tang & Zhang (2009) investigated CRs between Australian and Chinese speakers. The findings demonstrated that Chinese tended to use fewer 'Accept' but more 'Evade' and 'Reject' strategies than Australian and the Chinese used far fewer 'Combination' strategies than Australians indicating that "the Australians made more effort when responding to compliments" (Tang & Zhnag, p.1, 2009). The comparative studies of CRs between NSs and NNSs of English have been widely investigated. However, the studies of CRs across the NNSs of English have been rather under-researched in literature. Therefore, more research along these lines is necessary to better understand as well as to reveal the similarities and the differences between them. The Philippines and Thailand are different in cultural backgrounds and English language exposure. People of different cultural backgrounds have different value systems. These different value systems can be reflected in the speech acts of CRs they produce. The investigation of how the NNSs of English respond to compliments in English would benefit the realm of cross-cultural communication as well as English pedagogy.

Research Questions

   (1) What are the differences in compliment responses employed by Filipinos and Thais?

   (2) How differently do Filipinos and Thais respond to compliments in respect of four situational settings?

Research Objectives

The research objectives of the present study were to

（1）Identify the variations in the use of CRs between the Filipino and Thai speakers using English language as a medium for communication

（2）Investigate the use of CRs in respect of four situational settings; appearance, character, ability and possession.

Research Methodology

1. The participants

The participants in this investigation were two groups; Filipinos, Thais. There were 30 participants in each group. Regarding the Filipino participants, all of them were English teachers. Their native languages were Tagalog, Cebuano and Kankanacy. In respect of Thai participants, all of them were English teachers. Their native language was Thai. This study aims to reveal cultural differences between Filipinos and Thais in terms of responses to compliments in English, therefore, all the participants were required to provide the CRs in English.

2. Data collection

The data were collected through a written role-play questionnaire called a 'Discourse Completion Task' (DCT). DCTs are widely used as controlled elicitation tools to collect written discourse for discourse analysis. DCTs are consistent with naturally occurring data, at least in the main patterns and formulas (Golato, 2003). DCT can elicit stereotype that reflects the values of the native culture (Wannaruk, 2005). For all these reasons, DCT was chosen to collect the data. There are four situational settings: appearance, character, ability and possession. These four settings have been widely investigated by many previous research works. A number of four settings may be able to reveal cross-cultural differences in the content of CRs for this study. For all these reasons, these four settings were chosen to be the settings for data collectin. In each setting, the CR was required from the interlocutors of equal status.

3. Data analysis

The CRs were analyzed based on the Holmes's (1988, 1993) and Yu's (2003)categories of CR strategies. Holmes (1988, 1993) categorized the CR into three macro levels: Accept, Reject and Evade. Yu (2003) explored the CR at discourse level and proposes the combination strategies. The categories adapted here have four macro and ten micro strategies as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: CR categories

Macro level of CR	Micro level of CR
1. Accept	1.Appreciation token
	2.Agreeing utterance
	3.Downgrading utterance
	4.Return compliment
2. Reject	5.Disagreeing utterance
	6.Question accuracy
	7. Challenge sincerity
3. Evade	8.Shift credit
	9.Informative comment
	10. Request reassurance
4. Combination	The participants responded with more than one micro strategies such as 'Appreciation token' + 'Return compliment'

DCTs were coded according to the categories of CR strategies above. For example, in the situation where a participant responded to a compliment about possession, it was analyzed as follows.

Your friend : Your laptop looks so cool.
You　　　　： It's a new arrival.

The above data were coded into the category of 'Evade' at the macro level and the 'Informative comment' for micro level. Furthermore, if the participant responded with more than one micro strategies such as "Thank you". "It's a new arrival". These utterances were coded into 'Combination' strategies with two micro patterns which were 'Appreciation token' and 'Informative comment'. 'Appreciation token' pattern was coded when the participant said appreciation such as "Thank you", "Thanks a lot". Informative comment pattern was coded when the participant gave the informative comment to what had been given the compliment such as "it is really cheap", "it is new". After the coding, the total number of CR strategies was then counted in terms of the percentage.

Findings

Findings are presented in two parts namely, CRs in general patterns and CRs in four situational settings.

1. CRs in the general patterns

The CRs in general patterns were classified into macro level; 'Accept', 'Reject', 'Evade' and

'Combination' strategies. Table 2 below shows the frequency of CRs in terms of percentage.

Table 2: Percentage of Filipinos and Thais Employing CR Strategies at Macro Level

Macro level of CRs	Filipinos	Thais
Accept	41.7	28.3
Reject	7.5	5
Evade	20	22.5
Combination	30.8	38.3
Total	100	94.1

5.9% of Thai participants smiled with no response

Table 2 shows that Filipinos and Thais did not follow the same order of preference. Filipinos employed 'Accept' the most and 'Reject' the least while Thais employed 'Combination' the most and 'Reject' the least. There was no big difference in the frequency of use of 'Reject' and 'Evade' between the two groups.

2. CRs in four situational settings

In this section, the findings about the use of CRs are classified into macro and micro levels with regard to the four situational setting. It provides us to see a more detailed picture of CRs in each setting.

2.1 CRs in the setting of appearance compliments

Table 3: Percentage of Filipinos and Thais Employing CR Strategies at Macro and Micro Levels

Macro Level	Filipinos	Thais	Micro Level	Filipinos	Thais
Accept	56.7	26.7	Appreciation token	50	26.7
			Return compliment	6.7	0
Reject	0	3.3	Disagreeing utterance	0	3.3
Evade	6.7	10	Shift credit	3.3	3.3
			Request reassurance	3.3	6.7
Combination	36.6	46.7	Appreciation token +Return compliment	26.7	10
			Appreciation token +Request reassurance	6.7	20
			Appreciation token +Question accuracy	3.3	6.7

* Combination strategies show the top three micro patterns employed by Filipinos and Thais

Table 3 shows that at the macro level, Filipinos employed 'Accept' while Thais employed'Combination' strategies as the most preferred options. At the micro level, the 'Appreciation token' is the first option for both groups. In the 'Combination' strategies, Filipinos responded with 'Appreciation token' + 'Return compliment' while Thais responded with 'Appreciation token' + 'Request reassurance' for their first option. Examples of CRs in the setting of appearance are presented as follows.

Mr. Bosson : Wow! How wonderful you are today!.

Filipino (CR1) : Thank you. (*Accept*/Appreciation token)

Filipino (CR9) : Thank you and so you do. (*Combination*/Appreciation token + Return compliment)

Thai (CR5) : Thank you. I just want to look special for you today. (*Combination*/ Appreciation token + Shift credit)

Thai (CR27) : Come on!. I don't think so. (*Reject*/ Disagreeing utterance).

2.2 CRs in the setting of character compliments.

Table 4: Percentage of the Filipinos and Thais Employing CR Strategies at the Macro and Micro Levels

Macro Level	Filipinos	Thais	Micro Level	Filipinos	Thais
Accept	20	16.7	Appreciation token	13.3	3.3
			Agreeing utterance	6.7	13.3
Reject	26.7	6.7	Disagreeing utterance	26.7	6.7
Evade	43.3	73.3	Shift credit	36.7	73.3
			Informative comment	6.7	0
Combination	10	3.3	Appreciation token + Downgrading	3.3	0
			Appreciation token + Shift credit	0	3.3
			Disagreeing utterance+ Shift credit	3.3	0

* Combination strategies show the top three micro patterns employed by Filipinos and Thais

Table 4 shows that at the macro level, Filipinos and Thais employed Evade for the most preferred option. At the micro level, the most popular option for the two groups was 'Shift credit'. In the 'Combination' strategies, Filipinos tended to combine the micro patterns differently. Examples of CRs in this setting are presented as follows.

Ms. Lee : Thanks. Without your help, I don't know what I would have done. How kind and helpful you are!.

Filipino（CR2）: No, not at all. (*Reject*/Disagreeing utterance)

Filipino（CR10）: Don't mention it. (*Reject*/Disagreeing utterance)

Thai（CR20）: Come on Lee. We're neighbors, aren't we? (*Evade*/Shift credit)

Thai（CR12）: I did realize it. (*Accept*/Agreeing utterance)

2.3 CRs in the setting of ability compliments.

Table 5 shows that at the macro level Filipinos employed 'Accept' while Thais employed 'Combination' strategies as their most preferred options. At the micro level, Filipinos and Thais employed 'Appreciation token' for their first option. In the 'Combination' strategies, Filipinos employed 'Appreciation token' + 'Shift credit' while Thais employed 'Appreciation token' + 'Downgrading' for the first option. Examples of CRs are presented as follows.

Mark : Wow!. You did a very good job. How clever you are.!

Filipino（CR30）: Thanks! You're such a good friend. (*Combination*/Appreciation token+ Shift credit)

Filipino（CR10）: Thanks! I really appreciate for that. (*Accept*/Appreciation token)

Thai（CR 2）: Thanks Mark! I think, I could have done it better. (*Combination*/Appreciation token + Downgrading utterance)

Thai（CR 18）: Thanks. I think it was just ok. (*Combination*/Appreciation token + Downgrading)

2.4 CRs in the setting of possession compliments

Table 5: Percentage of the Filipinos and Thais Employing CR Strategies at the Macro and Micro levels

Macro Level	Filipinos	Thais	Micro Level	Filipinos	Thais
Accept	56.7	43.3	Appreciation token	50	36.6
			Agreeing utterance	3.3	0
			Downgrading	0	6.7
			Return compliment	3.3	0
Reject	0	6.7	Disagreeing utterance	0	6.7
Evade	10	0	Shift credit	3.3	0
			Informative comment	3.3	0
			Request reassurance	3.3	0
Combination	10	46.7	Appreciation token +Downgrading	10	16.7
			Appreciation token +Shift credit	10	6.7
			Appreciation token +Return compliment	6.7	10

* Combination strategies show the top three micro patterns employed by Filipinos and Thais

Table 6: Percentage of Filipinos and Thais Employing CR Strategies at the Macro and Micro Levels

Macro Level	Filipinos	Thais	Macro Level	Filipinos	Thais
Accept	33.3	26.7	Appreciation token	30	26.7
			Agreeing utterance	3.3	0
Reject	3.3	3.3	Disagreeing utterance	3.3	0
			Challenge sincerity	0	3.3
Evade	20	6.7	Shift credit	10	3.3
			Informative comment	3.3	3.3
			Request reassurance	6.7	0
Combination	43.4	56.6	Appreciation token + Informative comment	16.7	40
			Appreciation token + Shift credit	20	6.7
			Appreciation token + Agreeing utterance	0	6.7

* Combination strategies show the top three micro patterns employed by Filipinos and Thais

Table 6 shows that at the macro level, Filipinos and Thais followed the same order of preferences. At the micro level, both Filipinos and Thais employed 'Appreciation token' for first option. In 'Combination' strategies, Filipinos and Thais employed 'Appreciation token' + 'Informative comment' as the most preferred option. Examples of CRs are presented as follows.

Jane : Wow.! Your laptop looks so cool.

Filipino (CR 21) : Thanks, Dear. (*Accept*/ Appreciation token)

Filipino (CR 28) : Really? (*Evade*/Request reassurance)

Thai (CR2) : Thanks, I just bought it a few days ago. (*Combination*/Appreciation token + Informative comment)

Thai (CR17) : Thanks, only 27,000 baht. (*Combination*/Appreciation token + Informative comment)

Interpretation and Implication

CRs in general pattern

In general, Filipinos employed 'Accept' the most and 'Reject' the least while Thais employed 'Combination' the most and 'Reject' the least. The different strategies they use indicated the important role culture playing in the speakers' speech act of CR. It could be implied from the research that for Filipinos, the speech act of CR more closely resembled those of a native English speaker than those of Thais. Chen (1993) found out that American NSs of English accepted to the compliments more than Chinese. More recently, Tang and Zhang's study (2009) also found out that Australian NSs of English accepted to the compliments more than Chinese. The Philippines is one of the English speaking countries in the world, by 1901, public education used English as the medium of instruction (McFarland, 1993). Now, English language is used in the media, religious affairs and business. Espinosa (1997) pointed out that in some areas of the Philippines, English is more popular than the Filipino language. The other interesting finding in the general pattern is that Thais employed the 'Combination' strategies more than Filipinos. This seems to reflect the social norm in Thai culture. As Thai respondents in this study were English language teachers. Some were continuing their Phd in English. Undoubtedly, their English conversational competence were sufficiently developed to elaborate their feelings when conducting CRs. For example, in the situation where a participant

responded to a compliment about appearance. One of Thai respondents answered "Thank you!". "I just want to look special for you today". One of the reasons for this is that "Thai people are known for their tolerance and compromising nature." Vongvipanond (1994). This may be the social norm that predisposes Thai respondents in this study to make much use of 'Combination' strategies. The findings in this study were different from those found in Cedar's study (2006). Cedar did the study on Thai and American responses to compliment in English. The findings revealed that only five percent of Thai respondents responded in the category of positive elaboration. The reason for the difference between the present study and Cedar's study could be due to the different groups of participants. In Cedar's study (2006), Thai respondents were adult students enrolling in an intensive English course in the United States. The average residency period was less than one year. So, their English conversational competence might not have been developed enough to enable them to elaborate their positive feelings sufficiently.

CRs in four situational settings.

Filipinos consistently employed 'Accept' strategies more than Thais in all four situations.

In the setting of appearance compliment, Filipinos employed Accept strategies much more than Thais. This indicates that Filipinos seem to be confident in expressing appreciation in appearance compliments. This study seems to support that the language speech act behavior of CRs amongst Filipinos is similar to that of the NSs of English. Chen (1993) found that American NSs made much use of 'Accept' in their CRs in appearance. Thais employed more 'Evade' and 'Combination' strategies in this setting. Thais might not want to explicitly accept to their appearance compliments as modesty is a virtue and a cultural norm embedded in Thai society.

In the setting of character compliments, Thais and Filipinos chose 'Evade' as the most preferred strategy. When looking at the micro level, both Thais and Filipinos were happy with 'Request reassurance'. This indicates that both groups try to avoid praising themselves with regard to their characters. Thais employed 'Evade' more frequently than Filipinos. This may be attributed to the modesty that Thais are expected to show within their society.

In the setting of ability, Filipinos made much use of 'Accept' while Thai employed 'Combination' strategies as the most preferred option. When looking

at micro patterns, it was found that most Filipinos chose 'Appreciation token' (e.g. "Thank you") as the preferred option. While Thais tended to employ 'Appreciation token' + 'Downgrading'. (e.g. "Thanks. I think I could have done it better.") as the preferred option. This may suggest that Filipinos feel more confident explicitly expressing acceptance of compliments about their abilities, while Thais try to combine the pattern to mitigate self-praise in their CRs. No matter how much Thais feel appreciated by the compliments, they do not express "Thank you" solely, they try to be self-effacing in their responses to compliments from others.

In the setting of possession, both Filipinos and Thais followed the same pattern. This may indicate that they have similar perceptions regarding possession compliments. However, Thais made more use of 'Combination' strategies than Filipinos while Filipinos made more use of Accept strategies than Thais. This implies that Thais do not want to outwardly show their pride when receiving possession compliments. When receiving a compliment about a laptop, a Thai may say, "Thank you. It's not expensive. You could buy it. The last interesting finding is that some Thais responded to the appearance, character and possession compliments by smiling while none of Filipinos did. Responding to compliments by smiling can carry many meanings. Smiling creates a friendly atmosphere between interlocutors. This norm may not be understood by the speakers of other languages. This study has attempted to contribute to the understanding of the cultural similarities and differences in the use of CRs between Filipino and Thai speakers. Teachers of English need to pay conscious attention to cultural differences of the speakers. People from different cultural backgrounds and previous English language exposure levels may apply different cultural norms in conducting CRs. Hence, information that might be useful for understanding cross-cultural communication, for example, the movies, CRs articles should be provided as a useful tool for a teacher of English to raise students' awareness of conducting CRs.

Recommendations

Firstly, the present study has investigated the CRs in English between in Filipinos and Thais with written role-play or DCT. Therefore, in carrying out any further research, other research methods should be explored, e.g. oral role-play. Data from oral role-play might yield different insights. Secondly, in each type of eliciting statement in the present study, the CR was required to the interlocutors of equal status. In carrying out a further research, conversations between interlocutors of unequal status should be included. Thirdly, it appears through literature reviews of CRs between Filipinos and Thais, to date no researcher appears to have taken gender, as a variable, into consideration. Therefore, gender should be considered as another possible factor affecting CRs. Fourthly, even if the results suggest that Filipinos opted more for Accept than Thais, the situation may be different if the compliment settings are different. Further research should explore more situations which have not been examined in this study in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture of CRs between Filipinos and Thais.

Acknowledgements

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