

Complimenting on *Facebook*: a comparison between native Iberian Spanish and American English users

Elogiar en *Facebook*: una comparativa entre usuarios nativos de español ibérico e inglés americano

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Resumen

La manera en la que las redes sociales se han convertido en una de las más importantes formas de comunicación actual es asombrosa. En apenas una década, las interacciones a través de estas plataformas son casi tan frecuentes como las mantenidas de forma tradicional o “cara a cara”. Este hecho ha supuesto una auténtica revolución en el establecimiento de relaciones en la sociedad actual y en este contexto, Facebook se erige como una de las redes sociales preferidas. Por ello, este artículo se centra en el análisis de cómo una forma particular de comunicación (los elogios) tiene lugar a través de Facebook. Más específicamente, se trata de una comparativa de cómo un grupo de usuarios nativos de español ibérico y otro de inglés americano elogian y reciben elogios en la red.

Abstract

The growth of social media as one of the most important means of communication is breathtaking. In barely a decade, mediated communication has become almost as frequent as face-to-face interactions meaning a total change in the way people build relationships. In this context, Facebook has taken up a main role as it is one of the most popular social networks currently available. Bearing this in mind, this article focuses on the study of a specific form of communication (paying and giving compliments) through the use of Facebook. More precisely, it consists on a comparison between the way in which a group of Iberian Spanish and American English native speakers give and receive compliments on this particular social media.



Palabras clave: Facebook, elogios, español, inglés, redes sociales.

Key words: Facebook, compliments, Spanish, English, social media.

1. Introducción

During the past few decades, the study of compliments has attracted the interest of many linguists. Pioneering works on compliments were written almost thirty years ago and since then, plenty of researchers have dedicated studies to this linguistic phenomenon.

However, the context from which the first compliment corpora were gathered has changed very significantly. With the invention of Internet, people developed extraordinary ways of communicating previously unimaginable. In fact, SMS, E-mails, social networks, etc. produced a never before seen impact in our linguistic interactions especially in written communication. Among all these technological advances, a particular social network became a worldwide phenomenon. With approximately 800 millions of users, *Facebook* has become in the last decade a main scenario for worldwide communication, giving way to a very productive scenario for linguistic research.

All the above considered, this paper examines the behavior of two culturally divergent groups (Iberian Spanish and American English speakers, both males and females) when complimenting through the above mentioned social network. The data gathered make up for a corpora of a total of 203 compliments left on profile pictures.

The project has a cross-cultural pragmatical nature; it aims at discovering the differences and similarities in the complimenting behavior of these groups. More specifically, we will study how women and men give compliments in both cases, the limitations or benefits derived from the media in which these compliments are given, the originality and patterns followed and the use of the “like” option. The findings provide valuable insights into the different ways (most likely as a result of their cultural differences) in which Iberian Spanish and American English *Facebook* users behave with regard to this type of communication.



Moreover, this paper has the secondary purpose of relating a common linguistic phenomenon (studied from other perspectives such as interviews, “face-to-face” conversations, literature, etc.) with a technology that is being used on a daily basis by millions of people all over the world.

Furthermore, the data gathering process follows the guidelines of the common “notebook method”. In this case a total of 20 *Facebook* profiles were studied, taking the first 10 profile pictures as a sample for of the participants. The majority of these individuals had been born or currently lived in two particular regions: Montana (USA) and Navarra (Spain). This was done for the sake of data homogeneity, avoiding any possible diatopical interferences. Furthermore, the paper was structured as follows: beginning with a state-of-the-art of the topic chosen, it continues with an accurate explanation of the method followed, an exposition of the findings and a final discussion of the results.

2. The study of compliments.

In the past few decades, the linguistic phenomenon of giving and receiving compliments has drawn much attention from researchers. Linguists such as Manes, Wolfson, Holmes, Rees-Miller, Chen, etc. devoted important studies on this speech act that is performed in almost every language. The use of compliments has been proved to vary among cultures as different languages make use of distinct sociolinguist norms and linguistic behavior patterns. Therefore, compliments are a very suitable linguistic phenomena in cross-cultural studies (such as the one carried in this paper), as it allows to see the variations from one linguistic community to another one. However (and quite shockingly), little has been analyzed with regard to its use on the Internet. But before we get any further, a definition of the core concepts for this paper is provided in the following lines.

2.1 What is a compliment?



Although we all have a more or less accurate idea of what a compliment is, this speech act may result to be a little vague sometimes. Holmes (1988: 446) defines the notion of 'compliment' as follows:

A compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some 'good' (possession, characteristic, skill, etc) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer.

The first studies on compliments, carried by Manes and Wolfson (1981) more than thirty years ago, set the basis for later research. Later on, Janet Holmes (1988) provided a wide study of sex-preferential trends on the matter. Some years later, Rong Chen (1993) applied these first studies to a cross-cultural research that had focused on the complimenting behavior between American English speakers and Chinese Learners of English. These researches were very useful to our investigation as they dealt with our main concerns: cross-cultural compliment behavior and sex- preferential patterns. However, and following the indications of Rees-Miller (2011: 2673), our society has much changed since those first projects and it is now time to reexamine the first conclusions gathered in the eighties.

2.2. Previous studies on compliments: Manes and Wolfson, Holmes, Chen and Daikuhara.

Manes and Wolfson (1981: 120-121) stated that compliments were largely formulaic as 80% of the corpus collected fit into these structures:

1. NP is /looks (really) ADJ → e.g. Your blouse is beautiful.
2. I (really) like/love NP → e.g. I like your car.
3. PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP → e.g. That's a nice wall hanging.



However, the corpus gathered for this paper did not quite fulfill these expected patterns. Despite the fact that many of them fell into one of the three structures just mentioned, the percentages were largely different. The most popular pattern followed by American English *Facebook* users coincides with Manes and Wolfson's number 1 and it is closely followed by pattern number 2. However, a new recurrent pattern appears in our corpus that was not described in the ones previously states: "looking ADJ" (e.g. looking good/sharp/great). In total, pattern-following-compliments represent only 33% out of all the compliments gathered for this group (in opposition to that 80% from Manes and Wolfson).

Such a small number of pattern-following compliments allow us to question whether compliments given through Facebook are so formulaic as Manes and Wolfson believed them to be. These authors declared that the American compliments they gathered showed a lack of originality which is certainly not the case in our corpus. American users were very creative in the comments left on the profile pictures selected. The reasons that justify this change are varied, but it seems that since interactions are not live, users have plenty of time to reflect on their interactions resulting in more creativity.

Another leading author on this topic is Janet Holmes. She conducted a study on sex-preferential politeness strategies that aimed at discovering the "differences in the way women and men use compliments" (Holmes, 1988: 445). With the assistance of some of her students from a New Zealand school, she gathered a corpus of 484 compliments which allowed her to declare that women give and receive significantly more compliments than men do and that appearance was the most complimented topic. The comparison of these results with our data reveals that these trends are also present in the corpus we gathered via *Facebook*.

Table 1. Compliments according to sex: a comparison between Holmes' corpus and ours.

Complimenter - Receiver	Holmes (1998)		AmEn FB users		IbSp FB users	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Female – Female (F-F)	248	51,2	81	61,3	43	60,6





Female – Male (F – M)	80	16,5	21	15,9	6	8,4
Male – Female (M-F)	112	23,1	21	15,9	17	23,9
Male – Male (M-M)	44	9	9	6,8	5	7,04
TOTAL	484	100	132	100	71	100

Many linguists have provided explanations for this trend. Holmes (1988: 452) cites the Wolfson and states that “women because of their role in the social order, are seen as appropriate recipients of all manner of social judgements in the form of compliments...”. They believed compliments to be a patronizing linguistic strategy serving to build women's confidence. Yet, these declarations resulted in some controversy as it seems that women are placed in a secondary position on the social scale.

Holmes (1988:452), separating herself from the statements just said, declares that “perhaps compliments are not a preferred male strategy for expressing friendship, and men therefore use them only when (as they perceive it) required by societal politeness rules”. In our case, the majority of the compliments received by men, both Americans and Spanish (which amount for 25.6% of all the compliments gathered) were given by women (18.71%). A plausible reason could be that men regard compliments given from another male as a threaten to their sexual orientation and their masculinity. They seem to express their friendship towards other males through different strategies however, the limited scope of this paper does not allow us to go any further into the matter yet a deeper study on the subject could be very interesting for future research.

Another important work for our analysis was the one carried out by Robert Chen (1993) who focused on the different politeness strategies followed by American English speakers and Chinese learners of English. The first ones mostly accept the compliments received whereas the second group usually rejects or disagrees with the compliment. This study enabled us to see that different cultural groups present different linguistic behaviors just as it happened with our participants.



Other comparative studies were also developed during the eighties as for example, that one of Daikuhara (1986) who studied compliments in American English and Japanese. An interesting finding of this research was that the “I like/love NP” pattern didn't appear within the data provided by Japanese students. This is a recurrent fact for us, as it seems that Spanish speakers do not tend to use that structure either (only in 5 compliments out of 71 the equivalent “me *encanta NP*” pattern appears).

Despite the fact that all these studies set the ground for very solid research on this topic, none of them considered the possible context-related variations. More specifically, none of them considered how giving/receiving compliments changed when using an internet-based device such as a social network.

3. Methodology

Pragmatic research has traditionally been carried out in three different ways or “methods”:

- The “armchair” method based on intuited data.
- The “field” which considered only natural data.
- The “laboratory” method based on elicited data.

Authors tended to praise their methods as the only useful ones and criticized the others. Yet, as Jucker (2009) believes, the suitability of a method depends basically on the specific research question.

3.1. Instrument.

Our corpus of 203 compliments consists of naturally produced data posted on *Facebook* by native speakers of Iberian Spanish (71 compliments in total) and American English (132 compliments) gathered through the so-called “field method”. It allows the researcher to collect



natural produced data usually by noting it down in a notebook. This is the reason why some other authors, such as Wolfson (1983) or Holmes (1988), have referred to the “field method” with the term “notebook method”.

Facebook provides a very good opportunity for language research via this methodological process. Millions of daily spontaneous linguistic interactions take place on the social network and these are written down by users from all over the world. This last fact becomes crucial for linguistic research; usually data gathered following the “field” or “notebook” method depended on the collector's memory or on some students that were asked to note down the speech act studied as soon as possible. Unfortunately, modifications of the actual words used by the speakers appeared too frequently, jeopardizing the research objectivity. This problem is now solved, as *Facebook* enables us to work with the natural data produced by the speaker himself and revise it as many times as we wish (so long as the user does not delete the comments).

This said, the compliments gathered for this study were classified into four different groups:

1. AmEn girls: American English girls.
2. AmEn boys: American English boys.
3. IbSp girls: Iberian Spanish girls.
4. IbSp boys: Iberian Spanish boys.

For each participant, a maximum of ten profile pictures (some people did not have that many) were analyzed for specific aspects: number of times it appeared, number of responses and the number of “likes” it had. Then it was noted down (1) as it can be in the example (Appendix A includes the totality of all the compliments gathered):

(1) **1. Girl, Montana (USA), 20 years old.**

PP1

Comp1: Wow! You girls have grown to be gorgeous. B.E.Autiful women! (girl, MT)

PP2 (1 like from a girl)

Comp2: Cute! Lol =] (girl, MT)



R1: :)

Comp3: Beautiful young ladies! (girl, MT)

R2: why thank you :)

This example belongs to the first group. PP1 and PP2 stand for the number of the profile picture, Comp2 and 3 refer to the number assigned to the compliment within the group (following the order of appearance), R1 and R2 mean responses and “like” refers to the number of times that the like button was clicked on.

3.2. Informants

Twenty *Facebook* users were chosen: ten for the AmEng group and ten for the IbSp group. These two groups were simultaneously split into two subgroups: females and males. With this equal division we avoid gathering too much information from one particular sex and less from the other. In fact, Holmes (1988: 450) recognizes that the majority of the collectors from her study were women and that this influenced in the final results:

While recognizing that there are not enough data from the male students to draw firm conclusions, it is worth noting that the data do support this suggestion that the number of compliments noted between females is likely to be greater when the researcher is female (average 10.7 for female data collectors vs. 0.5. for males), while the number of compliments between males collected by male researchers is likely to be greater (average 6 for male data-collectors vs. 4 for females).

The new corpus collected for this project was not influenced by the collector's genre as equal number of *Facebook* participants were assigned to both groups. Numeric differences in the amount of compliments gathered for both groups are not a reflection of genre-based behaviors, but most likely on cultural divergencies.

However, it would be too pretentious to consider this as the “best” or “most suitable” data gathering process in comparison to those previously used in other researches. In fact, some unavoidable aspects need to be taken into consideration with regard to our corpus. The way in which compliments were collected enables us to study the way in which the participant's



Facebook contacts behave and not so much the actual way in which he/she compliments other people. Bearing this in mind, we needed to make sure that the compliment giver was a native speaker and this was done by asking the *Facebook* participant in subject. Compliments given by non-native speakers were not taken into consideration.

Furthermore, only explicit compliments were considered (none implicit or ironical compliments were included). Also, since indirect compliments (those given not to the person addressed but rather to a third party) were repeated a few times, it was decided to take them into consideration in our corpus in opposition to Holmes (1988: 447) who admitted those utterances as cases of compliments, but decided to avoid them in her study.

Finally, the majority of the people participating in the study were from Montana (USA) and Navarra (Spain) although some of the compliment givers were from other regions. They were all native speakers of the English and Spanish.

3.3. Data collection procedure

The data gathering process resulted to be more difficult than initially thought. First of all, only one person collected the compliments which resulted a bit overwhelming at some points. On the positive side, this meant that the same criteria was applied during the whole process, making it more objective.

Only explicit compliments (e.g. “I love your dress!” or in Spanish “*me encanta tu vestido*”) were considered, including compliments that were meant to praise to other people but were posted on the profile pictures.

In the case of the Spanish group, many of the participants did not have ten profile pictures with compliments. A plausible explanation could be that *Facebook* gained popularity among the Spaniards much later than in the United States. In 2008, *Tuenti* (another social network) became very popular in Spain and many internet users had a profile on this social network



instead of *Facebook*. However, the number of Spanish *Facebook* users has been continuously increasing in the last few years forcing almost the extinction of *Tuenti* which is now commonly regarded as a 'teenager' type of social network¹.

The criteria used to classify the compliments goes as follows. First, concerning the sex of the giver and the receiver, four possibilities were available: female to female, female to male, male to female and male to male. Then, compliments were classified into 5 topic-based categories: compliments on appearance, ability/performance, possessions, personality/friendship and miscellaneous. This division follows that of Rees-Miller (2011) with a more detailed fifth category. In our data, a high amount of compliments directly referred to the picture as a whole (34 compliments out of 203 such as "I love this picture" or "Qué *fotaza!*" meaning in colloquial Spanish "what a picture!") and 3 compliments were given about a third person. This could be considered as a linguistic strategy to avoid getting too personal about what we like of the other person (something that can result too intimate and could be uncomfortable sometimes depending on the degree of relationship between both individuals involved) or whether we use it just as a way of saying that we like the picture in general.

In all of the topics described, the users' genders was noted down:

Table 2. Categorization of compliments.

Topic		F-F	M-F	F-M	M-M
1) Appearance	AmEng	48 (23.6%)	9 (4.4%)	7 (3.4%)	2 (0.9%)
	IbSp	38 (18.7%)	4 (1.9%)	9 (4.4%)	3 (1.4%)
2) Ability / Performance	Am Eng				4 (1.9%)
	IbSp			1 (0.4%)	2 (0.9%)
3) Possessions/ Friendship	AmEng	9 (4.4%)		1 (0.4%)	
	IbSp	1 (0.4%)	1 (0.4%)		

¹The Spanish *Observatorio de Redes Sociales* published an analysis of the nation's social network use and concluded that in 2010, 78% of internet users had a *Facebook* account whereas only 35% of them used *Tuenti*. Numbers have been increasing since then.

4) Other:	AmEng				1 (0.4%)
	IbSp				
a) picture	AmEng	15 (7.3%)	8 (3.9%)	6 (2.9%)	1 (0.4%)
	IbSp			3 (1.4%)	
b) A third Person	AmEng				
	IbSp	1 (0.4%)		2 (0.9%)	

Our corpus consists of 203 compliments. However, some of them could not be classified within any of the mentioned categories as they did not clearly stated who or what they were referring to. Therefore, compliments like “awesome!”, “cute!” or “me encanta!” (translation: “love it” without direct object), were included in the corpus but they were not assigned to any of the main categories. This fact is reflected on the percentages shown in the table: a total of 203 compliments were gathered yet, only 176 were adscribed to a particular category.

4. Results

The main questions investigated in this paper evolved around the behavioral patterns of two culturally different groups. More specifically, the research focused on describing the sex-preferential and linguistic patterns of two culturally different groups when giving and receiving compliments on a social network.

4.1. Frequency of compliments: two different behavior patterns (AmEn and IbSp Facebook users).

One of the most obvious relevant features of information gathered for this occasion is related to the total quantity of compliments collected. American *Facebook* users gave a total of 132 whereas the Spaniards only gave 71 in the same setting. In both cases, females received and paid more compliments than men.



Figure 1 illustrates the comparison in numbers of compliments given by the different groups (AmEn and IbSp) and sub- groups (females and males):

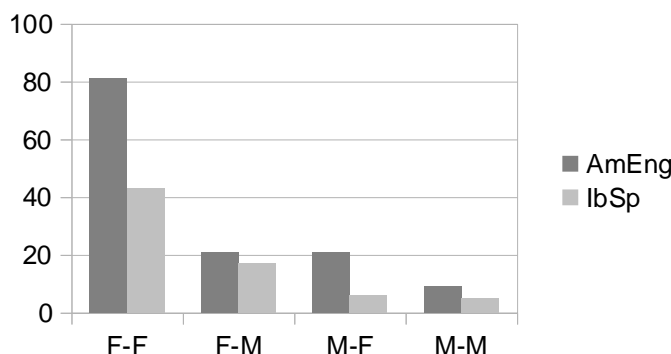


Figure 1. Compliment behavior according to sex of the participants.

The corpus gathered for this study revealed patterns very similar to those pointed out by Holmes (1988). Women gave 79.8% and received 74.3% of the total of compliments whereas men gave 20.1% and received 25.6% of all the compliments. Also, regarding the amount of times people complimented each other, Spanish (except for the F-M column) complimented their *Facebook* friends half the times Americans did. This seems to indicate that Spaniards are less likely to compliment other people, at least when communicating through a social network. Yet, it would be interesting to see whether or not this is also the case of 'face-to-face' interactions. In any case, due to the limited scope of this study, further research should be needed to confirm this hypothesis.

In relation to this, appearance was the most complimented topic (summing a total of 59.11% of compliments, out of which 48.7% were received by women) confirming what Holmes (1988) had also argued in her study. However, the second most popular category in this new corpus was very different from that of Holmes. Praisings of the picture as a whole amounted

for a surprisingly high 16.25% of the total (yet, only 1.4% of these compliments were given within the group of IbSp group). Several reasons could explain this but it seems that the visual nature of *Facebook* in opposition to other social media (e.g. *Twitter* which mainly evolves around written messages posted by users) encourages users to comment on the graphic features of what they see on their newsfeeds.

4.2. Linguistic patterns

Manes and Wolfson (1981) stated that compliments were largely formulaic as more than 80% of the ones they collected followed one of the structures mentioned in section 2.2. Compliments that followed the pattern “NP is/looks (really) ADJ” were the most popular type. In our case, participants seem to also have a preference for this structure as the data showed that 17% compliments given by Americans fell into this linguistic formula. However, the total number of pattern-following compliments is very low if we compare it with Manes and Wolfson' study. Only 33% of all the American compliments followed one of the structures they pointed out.

In the case of the Spanish group it was much more difficult to identify a certain linguistic pattern for compliments. Only 9 compliments clearly repeated the same structure and even in that case, some little variations took place:

(pero) qué ADJ estás/eres (apelativo)!

(intensifier) how ADJ you look/you are (endearment term)!

Furthermore, the most common adjective within the American group was “beautiful” (repeated 22 times) followed by “pretty” (15 times) and gorgeous (7 times). In the case of the Spanish, “guapa” (the adjective for “pretty” in the feminine form) was written 21 times whereas its masculine form was used 4 times, the two of them summing up to a total of 25 times in total.



“Pivón” was the second most used adjective with 6 repetitions (colloquial word meaning “hottie”).

4.3 Responses and “likes”.

A total of 47 compliments were followed by a response from the receiver (33 from Americans and 14 from Spanish). The majority of them expressed an acceptance of the compliment (24) or complimented the giver back(11).

In addition to this, another special phenomenon directly related to the media we are dealing with, is the clicks on the “like” button. AmEn females clicked 87 times on “like” and males 53 times. Surprisingly, IbSp females clicked on “like” 106 times (more than the amount of compliments the whole IbSp group wrote) and males only 34 times. This is something that can be studied from different perspectives and arises many possible interpretations: should we consider the “like” as a way of praising someone/something or as an alternative to actually write down a complimenting comment? Which degree of sincerity do they hold? Do they refer to one thing in particular or the whole picture? The answer to these questions could surely be of interest to linguists or any individual interested in the study of this speech act.

5. Discussion

Once all the data has been explained, interesting reflections and conclusions can be drawn from it. As already mentioned, this new analysis supports some of the finding from previous studies but it also reveals some significant variations worth to take a look at.

5.1 Compliment behavior according to sex of the giver: differences between AmEn and IbSp Facebook users.



In Holmes (1988), percentages showed a clear tendency for women to give and receive more compliments: women gave 67.7% of all compliments in her corpus and they received 74,3% whereas men gave 32.1 % and received 25.5%. This is also the case in our corpus, as has been pointed out in section 4.1.

Females in both cases gave and received more compliments than men. This is quite relevant as it contradicts Wolfson's (1984) hypothesis of women receiving more compliments as a result of their role in social order; compliments would represent men's social power over women according to her. Rees-Miller (2011: 2682), after gathering her own corpus of compliments, declares that Wolfson's generalization can no longer be valid. Wolfson's statement was based on a corpus in which compliments to women were much more numerous than those to men. She also stated that in her corpus, most of the compliments were given by other women and not by men as it would have been expected from Wolfson's study. In our case the pattern of women receiving more compliments does appear, yet the majority of those compliments come from other women, matching what Rees- Miller anticipated. Therefore, compliments in *Facebook* seem not to function as patronizing linguistic devices.

Another interesting feature is the topic that was praised. Appearance was, without any doubt, the most complimented element:

- 1) F-F: Comp56 AmEn girls: Wow! You look amazing! (girl, MT)
- 2) F-M: Comp20 IbSp boys: *Qué guapo primi!* (girl, Navarra) Translation: how handsome, cousin!
- 3) M-F: Comp58 AmEn girls: Dudeeee! That doesn't even look like the (name) I once knew... looking gorgeous girl! (boy, MT)
- 4) M-M: Comp6 AmEn boys: Oh man! Look at those calves!

The fact that we have collected a relative high number of compliments received and gave by males is closely linked to the nature of the database we have used; *Facebook* enabled us to



easily select an equal amount of participants from both sexes and because of this, we were able to see that males are also very frequently complimented on their appearance (see Table 2). In fact, this was the topic on which males from both groups were most complimented on. The constraint against males receiving compliments on their appearance is not as present here as it could be during a “face-to-face” conversation. Males might not receive or give as many compliments as women do but both groups share some patterns in terms of topics.

5.2. Function of compliments in *Facebook*

To determine the function of these compliments and the reasons why people decide to praise others is a very abstract task and it is subject to a wide range of subjective interpretations. However, there are some evidences that cannot be denied. We know that these compliments were not required by the situation (e.g. in a dinner, a guest is expected to say something good about the food) and that they are not patronizing devices either) and we also know that nobody forced these people to leave a praising comment. So what is their function then?

Rees-Miller (2011:2682) suggested that in the case of women, appearance compliments served as phatic communication, “ a kind of small talk that can establish and maintain social relationships through increasing a sense of solidarity and intimacy through shared values”. One of the evidences for this is that women typically ended their interactions with a question (e.g. “I like your hair. Did you straighten it today?”). This does not happen in our corpus; none of the appearance compliments gathered ended in what we could consider a phatic question. Only one compliment about a possession included this form: from a IbSp male to a female “*son tus gafas nuevas? Me gustan!*” (*translation: “are those your new glasses? I like them!”*). Therefore, compliments in *Facebook*, far from serving to an underlying purpose (as for example, maintaining a conversation) seem to express a higher degree of sincerity: people compliment/praise something because they do like it, and not as a way to subsequently obtain something else. *Facebook* users are not required to give compliments neither by the situation nor by conversation rules. Therefore, rather than phatic or linguistic patronizing



devices, compliments on the social media seem to respond to the will of expressing intimacy, friendship or appreciation.

5.3. “Likes” vs. Compliments

Big differences in terms of number of compliments were revealed between the two cultural groups analyzed. The number of compliments gathered from Americans (132) almost doubled those from Spanish (71) within the same setting: equal number of participants, same sex division (5 females and 5 males) and the same number of pictures analyzed. Two possible reasons could explain this fact. On the one hand, *Facebook* became popular in Spain much later than in the US. On the other hand, it could also be as a result of an apparent lower tendency from Spanish people to compliment others.

There seems to be a constraint against Spanish *Facebook* users in writing compliments that it is not present when “liking” the picture. Spanish users clicked 140 times on the like button (being the majority of them from females, 106) and commented only 71 times. Americans clicked on “like” the same amount of times but gave 132 compliments.

Despite this, Spanish *Facebook* users still manifested their appreciation for the pictures posted by a *Facebook* friend but doing so in a more subtle way, by clicking on “like”. It is quite difficult to determine what those “likes” exactly mean or refer to, whether they should be considered a compliment or not. They do express a positive appreciation from another person but is that enough to consider them a compliment? This question will remain unanswered now due to the limitations of this paper but it could be an interesting matter to analyze in the future.

5.4 Originality of compliments given in *Facebook*.

Manes and Wolfson (1981) declared that compliments were largely formulaic as 80% of their data gathered fitted into one of the structures previously mentioned in section 2.2 (being the structure “NP is/looks (really) ADJ” the most popular one, amounting 17% of all the American



English compliments). They also declared that American compliments seemed to be less creative.

Yet, the percentages in our case were largely different. The most popular pattern followed by American English *Facebook* users coincides with number one (representing a total of 17% of all the compliments gathered for this group, females and males included). It is closely followed by pattern number two and a new one: “looking ADJ” (e.g. looking good/sharp/great). In total, pattern-following-compliments represent only 33% out of all the compliments gathered for Americans (in opposition to that 80% from Manes and Wolfson). In the case of the Spanish group, identifying a fixed repeated structure was more difficult. The most common pattern was the following:

1. (pero) *qué ADJ (estás/eres) (apelativo)*
(intensifier) how ADJ (you look/are) (term of endearment)!
How ADJ you look/you are (term of endearment)!

This structure was repeated 9 times: 6 for girls (e.g. “*qué pivón por Dios!*” meaning “what a hottie, my God!”, “*qué bonita eres hija!*” or “how pretty you are!”, “*pero qué guapita estás bollito!*” or “how beautiful/pretty you look sweetly!”, etc.) and three for boys (“*qué guapo estás!*” similar to “you look good!”). However, the number of repetitions is very low and it only amounts for 12.6% of the compliments gathered within the Spanish group.

In any case, it seems that the pattern-following feature identified by Manes and Wolfson (1983) is not as common when compliments are gathered on a social network as it would be in the context of a college. Users seem to show a predisposition towards being more creative in *Facebook* than in other cases. This could be explained because earlier corpora were in many occasions part of oral conversations, where the speakers could not plan their utterances beforehand. In contrast to this, the fact that conversations on Facebook are not immediate, enables users to reflect on what and how they want to say.

5.5. Responses to compliments



Regarding this last aspect, data showed that users tended not to respond to compliments. As communication via *Facebook* is less immediate than in face-to-face interactions, leaving a compliment unanswered seems to avoid violating the Maxim of Modesty or Agreement (Leech, 1983). Yet, in the few cases where participants responded to the compliment, the majority of the responses were of acceptance or a 'return praising' to the initial giver. In this case, Americans responded to compliments in more occasions than Spanish (33 vs. 14). IbSp *Facebook* users seemed to be much more keen on leaving compliments unanswered and avoid getting in the "compromise" of accepting or rejecting the compliment.

6. Conclusions

This project aimed at providing the study of compliments with a more up-to-date perspective. Previous researches on the subject set the basis for the study; however, some revision of the first studies was needed as already Rees-Miller (2011) recognized.

Cross-cultural studies have found in compliments the perfect ground for research. As languages make use of different sociolinguistic norms and linguistic patterns, culturally different behaviors appear in their use.

Facebook has been proved to be a very helpful tool when it comes to study this speech act. The fact that the data is spontaneously produced by native speakers of hundreds of languages who write information on their profiles has meant important advantages in the study of compliments. We no longer need to rely on the collector's memory and objectivity is easier to achieve through random selections of individuals from both sexes providing large amounts of data suitable to be analyzed.

The main concerns of this paper were related to the sex-preferential behaviors for both groups of *Facebook* users, the originality displayed in the compliment use, the use of syntactic patterns and the preference for using the "like" button instead of writing an actual compliment.





After introducing a few differences in the so-called “notebook method”, we gathered 203 compliments (132 for Americans and 71 for Spanish). The first fact is inferred by just looking at the numbers. Americans are more predisposed to give compliments than Spanish.

Within both groups we could see that women received and gave more compliments than men. This agrees with Holmes (1988)' findings. However, a slight difference arose in our case: males tended to receive more compliments on appearance than in any other topic, going against the stereotypical believe that men are not praised on their looks as often as women are.

Also, there was a high tendency on *Facebook* users to compliment the picture as a whole without getting too specific about what they really liked.

Furthermore, we have been able to see how *Facebook* enables higher degrees of creativity when complimenting someone or something. Only 33% of American compliments followed the structures proposed by Manes and Wolfson (1981). The widespread belief of American compliments lacking creativity did not appear in this case. Neither did it happen with Spanish compliments, where syntactic structures were even more difficult to be distinguished.

One of the most remarkable features about Iberian Spanish *Facebook* users is the high amount of times they preferred to click on the “like” button rather than actually write a compliment. Spaniards tend to be less keen on getting precise about what they like of their friends' pictures.

Although recognizing that the amount of compliments was not very large, we have seen how some distinct linguistic behaviors have appeared in our corpus. Larger studies could certainly discover more patterns in the future as the limited scope of this paper unable us from getting any further into some interesting subjects (such as males' consideration of compliments, the sincerity of those “likes”, etc).

Finally, this study has been very enjoyable as new facts have been drawn about the use of compliments. The fact that such an interesting part of communication has been linked to a



technological instrument used on a daily basis by millions of people has produced very surprising results that could serve for later studies.

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