

# Women, Men and Politeness

*Janet Holmes*

Edited with Notes

by

Kazuyuki Watanabe



THE EIHŌSHA LTD.

Women, Men and Politeness

by

Janet Holmes

Copyright © Longman Group Limited 1995

These annotated extracts from WOMEN, MEN AND POLITENESS 01 Edition is published by arrangement with Pearson Education Limited, United Kingdom.

Japanese translation rights arranged with Pearson Education Limited, Harlow, Essex, U.K. through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo

PRINTED IN JAPAN

## は し が き

本書は Janet Holmes [houmz] 著の *Women, Men and Politeness* の中から第4章と第5章の2つの章を選び、リーディングのテキストとして編纂したものである。原著は書名から想像できるように、英語の「ていねい表現」の男女差を社会言語学的に考察した研究書であるために、読みにくいであろうと思われるかもしれない。実際は専門語は多少使用されてはいるものの、全体的に見れば比較的読みやすい。英語自体もきちんとした文体で書かれており、英語の構造を論理的にとらえる練習には最適の読み物となっている。

ここで選んだ章は日常生活で遭遇することが多い「ほめことば」と「謝罪」を扱っており、話題が身近で理解しやすく、興味深い内容となっている。特に必要な専門語はスペースの許す限り解説しているのので、社会言語学、語用論、談話分析などの特別な知識のない大学1,2年の学生でも楽しめる読み物となっている。

注釈者としては、専門語に加えて、漫然と辞書を引いただけでは正確な意味がとらえにくい語句を取り上げて解説することにした。具体的な注釈に当たっては、英文の意味が正確に理解できるように、英語でパラフレーズした場合も少なくない。もちろん、訳語の方が分かりやすいと思えば、そのようにし、かつ必要に応じて例文を付け加え、問題の語句の正しい使い方を示した。

学生諸君も単に訳語に置き換えて満足することなく、語や文の本当の意味と使い方を進んで学ぶようにしていただきたい。ただやみくもに辞書に当たるのではなく、前後関係から語句の意味を前もって予測し、それを辞書で確認するという方法をとれば、英語の実力養成に大いに役立つはずである。

注釈者がこのテキストのために使用した辞典は「注釈」の最初の頁にリストアップしているが、そのうち、*Macmillan English Dictionary* (2002)、*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1995, 2003)、*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2000) の3辞典からの引用が特に多くなった。当然

のことながら、これらの辞典は、分かりやすい定義、熟語及び口語表現の豊富さ、ていねいで分かりやすい解説、例文の多さから見て、非常に優れているからである。

原著者はニュージーランドの Victoria University of Wellington の言語学教授で、*Women, Men and Politeness* のほかに、*An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (1992) の著者、*Sociolinguistics: Selected Readings* (Penguin Books, 1972) の共編者として知られている。論文としてはニュージーランド英語、言語とジェンダー、談話標識、ポライトネスに関するテーマなど幅広い。

このテキストの第1章は原著の第4章をもとにしているが、ページ数の制約のために、主として最後の十数頁を省略した。どのように短縮するかについては、この章の短縮版とも言える *Complimenting—A positive politeness strategy* (Jennifer Coates (ed.), *Language and Gender: A Reader* (1998) に掲載) を参考にした。第2章は、原著の第5章から末尾の約5頁を省いたものである。

本テキストを読んで気になることがあるとすれば、それは例として出されている対話の部分の句読点に関するものである。普通ならばコンマを挿入すると思われるような箇所にもコンマが使われていないのに気付くであろう。たとえば、5頁の *Yes, they were good weren't they?* の *good* と *weren't* の間にはコンマが使用されていない。しかし会話の表記ではありうることなので、一応原著の方針を尊重してもとのままにしておいた。明らかにミス・スペリングと思われる箇所は修正した。注釈作成に関しては最善を尽くしたつもりであるが、至らぬ点もありうると思われるので、何かお気づきの際には是非ご教示をお願いしたい。

最後に、このテキストの出版に際し、英宝社の方々、特に宇治正夫氏にはいろいろな意味でお世話になった。この場を借りてお礼を申し上げたい。

2003年10月

編注者 渡辺 和幸

# CONTENTS

はしがき

1. What a lovely tie! Compliments and positive politeness strategies .....	3
Paying compliments	3
Who pays most compliments?	10
How do women and men pay compliments?	17
What do women and men compliment each other about?	22
Can a compliment be a power play?	27
Conclusion	32
2. Sorry! Apologies and negative politeness strategies .....	35
Why apologise?	36
Who apologises most?	38
How do women and men apologise?	42
What deserves an apology?	48
Offending the boss is a serious matter	58
Friends and forgiveness	63
How do people respond to an apology?	68
Why apologise? Some answers	73
<b>Notes</b>	<b>77</b>



# Women, Men and Politeness





## 1 *What a lovely tie!* *Compliments and positive politeness strategies*

Do women and men differ in the way they use particular speech acts to express politeness? How would one measure any differences? Should the relative frequency with which women and men use compliments, greetings, or expressions of gratitude be considered, for instance? The form of a directive (e.g. *Shut up!* versus *Let's have a bit of hush now*) is very obviously relevant in assessing how polite it is in any particular situation. What can we deduce about female and male patterns of politeness by examining who uses particular speech acts to whom? In this chapter and the next I will focus on two speech acts—compliments and apologies—to show how analysing particular speech acts can provide interesting suggestions about gender differences in politeness behaviour.

### **Paying compliments**

#### **Example 1**

*Two colleagues meeting in Pat's office to discuss a report.* 15

Chris: Hi Pat. Sorry I'm late. The boss wanted to set up a time for a meeting just as I was leaving.

Pat: That's OK Chris. You're looking good. Is that a new suit?

Chris: Mm. It's nice isn't it. I got it in Auckland last month.

Have you had a break since I last saw you? 20

Pat: No, work work work I'm afraid. Never mind. Have you got a copy of the report with you?

Positive politeness can be expressed in many ways but paying a compliment is one of the most obvious. A favourable comment on the addressee's appearance, as illustrated in example 1 is a very common way of paying a compliment as we shall see. Compliments are prime examples of speech acts which notice and attend to the hearer's 'interests, wants, needs, goods', the first positive politeness strategy identified and discussed by Brown and Levinson (1987).

*What is a compliment?*

But what is a compliment? There are a number of positively polite speech acts in the exchange between Pat and Chris—greetings, friendly address terms, expressions of concern and compliments. I would want to count *you're looking good* and *is that a new suit* as examples of compliments. The first is a direct compliment, while the fact that the second counts as a compliment is inferable from the discourse context and the fact that things which are new are generally highly valued in western society. When collecting and analysing examples of a particular speech act, it is important to have a clear definition in order to decide what counts and what does not. This is how I have defined a compliment:

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.

(Holmes 1986)

As the utterance *is that a new suit* illustrates, a compliment may be indirect, requiring some inferring based on a knowledge of the cultural values of the community. There are other ways in which a compliment may be indirect too. Compliments usually focus on something directly attributable to the person addressed (e.g. an article of clothing), but examples 2 and 3 demonstrate that this is not always the case. 5

### **Examples 2 and 3**

(2) *Rhonda is visiting an old schoolfriends, Carol, and comments on one of Carol's children.*

Rhonda: What a polite child!

10

Carol: Thank you. We do our best.

(3) *Ray is the conductor of the choir.*

Matt: The choir was wonderful. You must be really pleased.

Ray: Yes, they were good, weren't they?

The complimenters' utterances in these examples may look superficially like rather general positive evaluations, but their function as compliments which indirectly attribute credit to the addressee for good parenting in (2), and good conducting in (3), is unambiguous in context. 15

*Why give a compliment?*

20

Compliments are usually intended to make others feel good. The primary function of a compliment is most obviously affective and social, rather than referential or informative. They are generally described as positively affective speech acts serving to increase or consolidate the solidarity between the speaker 25

and addressee. Compliments are social lubricants which create or maintain rapport, as illustrated in all the examples above, as well as in example 4.

**Example 4**

*Two women, good friends, meeting in the lift at their workplace.*

5 Sal: Hi how are you? You're looking just terrific.

Meg: Thanks. I'm pretty good. How are things with you? That's a snazzy scarf you're wearing.

Compliments are clearly positive politeness devices which express goodwill and solidarity between the speaker and the addressee. But they may serve other functions too. Do compliments have any element of referential meaning, for instance? While the primary function of compliments is most obviously affective, they also convey some information in the form of the particular 'good' the speaker selects for comment. They provide a positive critical evaluation of a selected aspect of the addressee's behaviour or appearance, or whatever, which in some contexts may carry some communicative weight. Johnson and Roen (1992), for instance, argue that the compliments they analysed in written peer reviews, simultaneously conveyed both affective (or interpersonal) meaning and referential (or ideational) meaning in that a particular aspect of the review was chosen for positive attention. It is possible that some compliments are intended and perceived as conveying a stronger referential message than others. Very clearly, the relationship between the complimenter and recipient is crucial in accurately interpreting the potential functions of a compliment.

In some contexts, compliments may function as praise and

encouragement. In an analysis of over a thousand American compliments, Herbert (1990) suggests some compliments serve as expressions of praise and admiration rather than offers of solidarity. This seems likely to reflect the relationship between the participants. Praise is often directed downwards from 5 superordinate to subordinate. So the teacher's compliment about a student's work in example 5 would generally be regarded as praise.

**Example 5**

Teacher: This is excellent Jeannie. You've really done a nice job.

Tannen seems to be referring to this function of compliments 10 when she identifies compliments as potentially patronising.

Giving praise . . . is . . . inherently asymmetrical. It . . . frames the speaker as one-up, in a position to judge someone else's performance.  
(Tannen 1990)

It is possible, then, that in some relationships compliments 15 will be unwelcome because they are experienced as ways in which the speaker is asserting superiority. Compliments directed upwards from subordinate to superordinates, on the other hand, are often labelled 'flattery'. In analysing differences in the way women and men use and interpret compliments, it 20 will clearly be important to consider compliments between status unequals, exploring the possible alternative interpretations which they may be given.

Compliments may have a darker side then. For some recipients, in some contexts, an apparent compliment may be experi- 25

enced negatively, or as face-threatening. They may be patronising or offensively flattering. They may also, of course, be sarcastic. When the content of a compliment is perceived as too distant from reality, it will be heard as a sarcastic or ironic put-down. I was in no doubt of the sarcastic intent of my brother's comment 'You play so well' as I was plonking away at the piano, hitting far more wrong than right notes. Focusing on a different perspective, Brown and Levinson suggest that a compliment can be regarded as a face-threatening act to the extent that it implies the complimenter envies the addressee in some way, or would like something belonging to the addressee. This is perhaps clearest in cultures where an expression of admiration for an object imposes an obligation on the addressee to offer it to the complimenter, as in example 6.

**Example 6**

- 15 *Pakeha woman to Samoan friend whom she is visiting.*  
 Sue: What an unusual necklace. It's beautiful.  
 Eti: Please take it.

In this particular instance, Sue was very embarrassed at being offered as a gift the object she had admired. But Eti's response was perfectly predictable by anyone familiar with Samoan cultural norms with respect to complimenting behaviour. In other cultures and social groups too, compliments may be considered somewhat face-threatening in that they imply at least an element of envy and desire to have what the addressee possesses, whether an object or a desirable trait or skill. And in debt-sensitive cultures, the recipient of a compliment may be regarded as incurring a heavy debt. In such cultures, then, the

function of a compliment cannot be regarded as simply and unarguably positively polite.

Even if intended as an expression of solidarity, a compliment might be experienced as face threatening if it is interpreted as assuming unwarranted intimacy. Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (1989) comments that in her Polish and British compliment data, compliments between people who did not know each other well caused embarrassment. Compliments presuppose a certain familiarity with the addressee, she suggests. This is likely to be true of certain types of compliments in many cultures. Compliments on very personal topics, for instance, are appropriate only from intimates, as in example 7.

**Example 7**

*Young woman to her mother who is in hospital after a bad car accident.*  
Oh mum you've got your false teeth—they look great.

The mother had been waiting for some time to be fitted with false teeth to replace those knocked out or broken in the car accident. There are not many situations in which such a compliment could be paid without causing embarrassment.

At the darkest end of the spectrum are utterances which have been called 'stranger compliments' or 'street remarks'.

**Example 8**

*Man on building site to young woman passing by.*  
Wow what legs! What are you doing with them tonight sweetie?

These serve a very different interpersonal function from compliments between friends and acquaintances. Though some

women interpret them positively as expressions of appreciation, others regard them as examples of verbal harassment. It seems likely that both the speaker's intentions and the hearer's interpretations of these speech acts are extremely variable, and  
 5 require detailed analysis in context. Though I have mentioned them here for completeness, the discussion below is not based on data which included 'stranger compliments'.

Different analysts have thus identified a number of different functions of compliments in different contexts:

- 10 1. to express solidarity;
2. to express positive evaluation, admiration, appreciation or praise;
3. to express envy or desire for hearer's possessions;
4. as verbal harassment.

15 These functions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but the relationship between the participants is crucial in interpreting the primary function of a particular compliment: analysis in context is essential. Distributional data can also be suggestive, however, as we shall see in the next section which  
 20 describes the way compliments are used between New Zealand women and men, and discusses what this suggests about their function as politeness devices.

### **Who pays most compliments?**

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?*

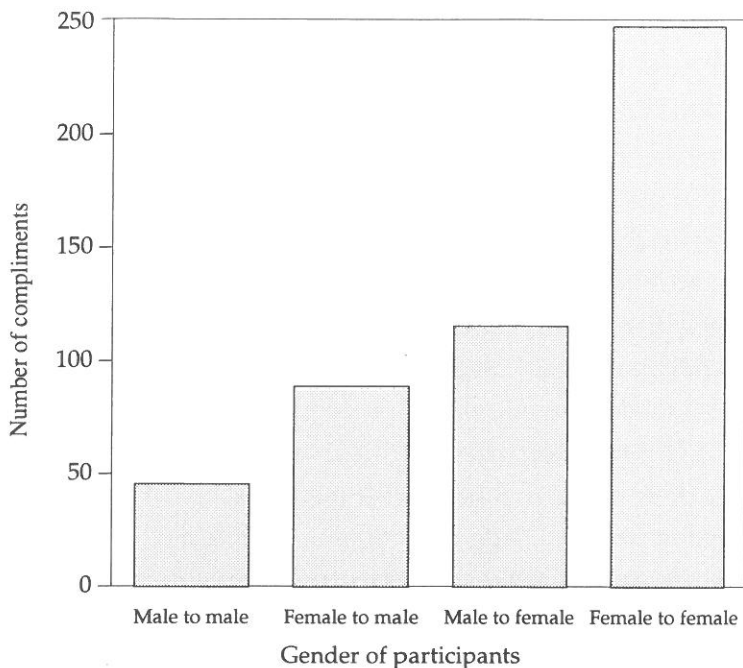


The following analysis of the distribution of compliments between New Zealand women and men is based on a corpus of 484 naturally occurring compliments and compliment responses. The data was collected using an ethnographic approach, a method which derives from anthropology, and which 5 has been advocated by Hymes over many years (1962, 1972, 1974), and very successfully adopted by researchers such as Nessa Wolfson. This approach combines some of the advantages of qualitative research with the generalisability gained from quantitative analysis. Compliments and their responses 10 are noted down, together with relevant features of the participants, their relationship, and the context in which the compliment occurred. Using a number of people as data collectors, it was possible to gather a large number of compliments from a wide variety of contexts. Most, however, were produced by 15 adult Pakeha New Zealanders, and it is therefore the compliment norms of this group which are being described.

The New Zealand compliments collected in this way revealed a very clear pattern. Women gave and received significantly more compliments than men did, as Figure 1.1 illustrates. 20

Women gave 68 per cent of all the compliments recorded and received 74 per cent of them. By contrast, compliments between males were relatively rare (only 9 per cent), and, even taking account of females' compliments to males, men received overall considerably fewer compliments than women (only 26 25 per cent). On this evidence, complimenting appears to be a speech behaviour occurring much more frequently in interactions involving women than men.

Other researchers report similar patterns. Compliments are



**Figure 1.1** Compliments and gender of participants

used more frequently by women than by men, and women are complimented more often than men in two different American studies, and in research on compliments between Polish speakers. This same pattern also turned up in a rather different context—that of written peer reviews. In this more information-orientated context which involved writing rather than speech, one would not have predicted gender contrasts. But even in writing women tended to use more compliments (or ‘positive evaluative terms’ to quote Johnson and Roen’s precise measure) than men, though the differences were not quite statistically significant.

These differences in the distribution of compliments between women and men have led to the suggestion that women and men may perceive the function of compliments differently. Women may regard compliments as primarily positively affective speech acts, for instance, expressing solidarity and positive politeness, while men may give greater weight to their referential meaning, as evaluative judgements, or to the potentially negative face-threatening features discussed above. 5

Herbert (1990), for instance, draws a parallel between the lower frequency of compliments given by South Africans compared to Americans, and the lower frequency of compliments between men compared to women. Where compliments are frequent, he suggests, they are more likely to be functioning as solidarity tokens; where they are less frequent they are more likely to be referentially orientated or what he calls 'genuine expressions of admiration'. In support of this, he points to the fact that in his data the responses elicited by the rarer male-male compliments were more likely to be acceptances, reflecting the recipients' recognition of their evaluative function. 10 15 20

### **Example 9**

*Mick and Brent are neighbours. They meet at Brent's gate as he arrives home.*

Mick: New car?

Brent: Yeah.

Mick: Looks as if it will move.

Brent: Yeah it goes well I must say.

Female compliments, however, were more likely to elicit alternative responses, such as shifting or reducing the force of the compliment.

**Example 10**

*Friends arriving at youth club.*

5 Helen: What a neat outfit!

Gerry: It's actually quite old.

Responses which shift or reduce the compliment's force reflect the function of such compliments as tokens of solidarity, he suggests, since they indicate the recipient's desire to restore  
10 the social balance between speakers. There were no such gender differences in compliment responses in the New Zealand corpus, so this explanation cannot account for the less frequent use of compliments by New Zealand men.

It is possible, however, that men may more readily perceive  
15 compliments as face-threatening acts than women do. They may feel embarrassed or obligated by these unsolicited tokens of solidarity. The male threshold for what counts as an appropriate relationship to warrant mutual complimenting may differ from the female. Wolfson's 'bulge' theory suggested that  
20 certain linguistic behaviours, such as compliments, occurred more frequently between friends than between strangers or intimates. The bulge represented the higher frequency of such polite speech acts to friends and acquaintances. But the 'bulge' or the range of relationships within which compliments are  
25 acceptable politeness tokens may be much narrower for men than women. Female and male norms may differ. While one cannot be sure of the reasons for the imbalance in the distribu-

tion of compliments in women's and men's speech, it is widely agreed that women appear to use compliments mainly as a means of expressing rapport, while they do not appear to function so unambiguously for men.

This interpretation would be consistent with research which suggested that women's linguistic behaviour can often be broadly characterised as facilitative, affiliative, and cooperative, rather than competitive or control-orientated. In much of the research comparing patterns of male and female interaction, women's contributions have been described as 'other-orientated'. If women regard compliments as a means of expressing rapport and solidarity, the finding that they give more compliments than men is consistent with this orientation. Conversely, if men regard compliments as face-threatening or controlling devices, at least in some contexts, this could account for the male patterns observed.

In studies of compliments elsewhere, women also received more compliments than men. Compliments between women are most frequent in all the studies, but it is noteworthy that men compliment women more often than they compliment other men. One explanation for this might be that women's positive attitude to compliments is recognised by both women and men in these speech communities. Perhaps people pay more compliments to women because they know women value them.

Alternatively, one might focus on why people do not compliment men as often as they do women. It appears to be much more acceptable and socially appropriate to compliment a woman than a man. One possible explanation based on an

analysis of the power relations in society points to women's subordinate social position. Because compliments express social approval one might expect more of them to be addressed 'downwards' as socialising devices, or directed to the socially insecure to build their confidence. Nessa Wolfson (1984) takes this view:

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 . . . the way a woman is spoken to is, no matter what her status, a subtle and powerful way of perpetuating her subordinate role in society.

In other words, she suggests, compliments addressed to women have the same function as praise given to children, that is they serve as encouragement to continue with the approved behaviour. They could be regarded as patronising socialisation devices. Interestingly, even in classrooms it seems that females receive more praise or positive evaluations than males. It is possible that one of the reasons people do not compliment males so often as females is an awareness of men's ambivalence about compliments and of the possibility that men may regard some compliments as face-threatening acts, as embarrassing and discomfiting, or experience them as patronising strategies which put the speaker 'one-up'. If this is the case, then it is not surprising that the fewest compliments occur between men.

The way compliments are distributed suggests, then, that women and men may use and interpret them differently. While women appear to use them as positive politeness devices, and

generally perceive them as ways of establishing and maintaining relationships, men may view them much more ambiguously as potentially face-threatening acts, or as having a more referential evaluative message which can serve a socialising function. In the next section an examination of the syntactic patterns of compliments will throw a little further light on these speculations. 5

### How do women and men pay compliments?

#### Examples 11-15

(11) You're looking nice today.

(12) What great kids! 10

(13) That's a beautiful skirt.

(14) I really love those curtains.

(15) Good goal.

Compliments are remarkably formulaic speech acts. Most draw on a very small number of lexical items and a very narrow range of syntactic patterns. Five or six adjectives, such as *good*, *nice*, *great*, *beautiful*, and *pretty* occurred in about two-thirds of the New Zealand compliments analysed. Wolfson (1984) noted the same pattern in her American corpus of nearly 700 compliments. And syntactic patterns prove similarly unoriginal. One of just four different syntactic patterns occurred in 78 per cent of all the compliments in the New Zealand corpus. Similarly, three alternative syntactic patterns accounted for 85 per cent of the compliments in the American corpus. Compli- 15 20

ments may be polite but they are rarely creative speech acts.

Nor are there many gender differences in this aspect of politeness behaviour. Most of the syntactic patterns and lexical items occurring in compliments seem to be fairly equally used by women and men, as Table 1.1 demonstrates. There are, however, two patterns which differ between women and men in an interesting way in the New Zealand corpus. Women used the rhetorical pattern *What (a) (ADJ) NP!* (e.g. *What lovely children!*) significantly more often than men. Men, by contrast, used the minimal pattern *(INT) ADJ (NP)* (e.g. *Great shoes*) significantly more often than women. The former is a syntactically marked formula, involving exclamatory word order and intonation; the latter, by contrast, reduces the syntactic pattern to its minimum elements. In other words, a rhetorical pattern such as *What a splendid hat!* can be regarded as emphatic and as increasing the force of the speech act. Using a rhetorical pattern for a compliment stresses its addressee- or interaction-oriented characteristics.

But the minimal pattern represented by *nice bike*, which was used more by men, tends to reduce the force of the compliment; it could be regarded as attenuating or hedging the compliment's impact. Interestingly, too, there were no examples of the more rhetorical pattern (*what lovely children!*) in the male-male interactions observed. So there seems good reason to associate this pattern with female complimenting behaviour.



**Table 1.1** Syntactic patterns of compliments and speaker gender

Syntactic formula	Female %	Male %
1. NP BE (LOOKING) (INT) ADJ <i>e.g. That coat is really great</i>	42.1	40.0
2. I (INT) LIKE NP <i>e.g. I simply love that skirt</i>	17.8	13.1
3. PRO BE (a) (INT) ADJ NP <i>e.g. That's a very nice coat</i>	11.4	15.6
4. What (a) (ADJ) NP! <i>e.g. What lovely children!</i>	7.8	1.3
5. (INT) ADJ NP <i>e.g. Really cool ear-rings</i>	5.1	11.8
6. Isn't NP ADJ! <i>e.g. Isn't this food wonderful!</i>	1.5	0.6
<b>Subtotals</b>	<b>85.7</b>	<b>82.4</b>
7. All other syntactic formulae	14.3	17.6
<b>Totals</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Examples 16–18**

(16) I love those socks. Where did you get them?

(17) I like those glasses.

(18) Referring to a paper written by the addressee.

I really liked the ending. It was very convincing.

Studies of compliments by other researchers provide sup- 5  
port for this suggestion that women's compliments tend to be  
expressed with linguistically stronger forms than men's. Hav-  
ing analysed over one thousand American compliments,  
Herbert reported that only women used the stronger form *I*  
*love X* (compared to *I like X*), and they used it most often to 10

other women. In written peer reviews, Johnson and Roen noted that women used significantly more intensifiers (such as *really*, *very*, *particularly*) than men did, and, as in Herbert's data, they intensified their compliments most when writing to other  
5 women.

These observations provide further support for the point that it is important in analysing hedging and boosting behaviour to examine the particular types of speech acts which are being boosted, and, in particular, to note whether the speech act is  
10 intended and perceived as affectively positive or negative. It is possible to strengthen or alternatively to reduce the force of a positively affective speech act such as a compliment in a variety of ways. By their selections among a narrow range of syntactic formulas and lexical items, men more often choose to  
15 attenuate the force of their compliments, while women tend to increase their compliments' force. This supports the suggestion that women expect addressees to interpret compliments as expressions of solidarity rather than as face-threatening speech acts. By contrast, men's tendency to attenuate compli-  
20 ments supports the proposal that men perhaps perceive compliments as less unambiguously positive in effect. In other words, the differences which have been noted in the distribution of syntactic and lexical patterns between women and men is consistent with the view that women tend to regard compli-  
25 ments as primarily positively affective acts while men may feel more ambivalent about using them.

**Examples 19 and 20**

(19) You're looking stunning.

(20) I especially liked the way you used lots of examples.

In general, it is also true that women use more personalised compliment forms than men, while men prefer impersonal forms. There is some evidence for this in the New Zealand data, 5 as Table 1.1 illustrates, but it is even more apparent in Herbert's American corpus, and Johnson and Roen's written peer reviews. Well over half (60 per cent) of the compliments offered by men in Herbert's corpus were impersonal forms, for example, compared to only a fifth of those used by women. By 10 contrast women used many more forms with a personal focus (Herbert includes both *you* and *I* as personalised forms). Almost 83 per cent of female-female interactions used personalised forms compared to only 32 per cent of male-male compliments. The peer reviews analysed by Johnson and Roen 15 revealed a similar pattern. The women used more personal involvement strategies, especially to other women.

This evidence echoes the patterns noted in research on verbal interaction, which suggested that women tend to prefer personalised and expressive forms as opposed to impersonal 20 forms, and supports a view of women's style as more interpersonal, affective and interaction-orientated compared to the impersonal, instrumental and content-orientated style more typical of male interaction. So, where the linguistic features of women's compliments differ from men's, the differences 25 tend to support the proposition that women regard compliments as other-orientated positive politeness strategies

which they assume will be welcome to addressees, whereas for men, and especially between men, their function may not be so clear-cut.

### **What do women and men compliment**

#### **5 each other about?**

##### **Examples 21–24**

(21) *Appearance compliment.*

I like your outfit Beth. I think I could wear that.

(22) *Ability/ performance compliment.*

Wow you played well today Davy.

10 (23) *Possessions compliment.*

Is that your flash red sports car?

(24) *Personality/ friendliness.*

I'm very lucky to have such a good friend.

Women and men tend to give compliments about different  
15 things. To be heard as a compliment an utterance must refer to something which is positively valued by the participants and attributed to the addressee. This would seem to permit an infinite range of possible topics for compliments, but in fact the vast majority of compliments refer to just a few broad topics:  
20 appearance, ability or performance, possessions, and some aspect of personality or friendliness. In fact, compliments on some aspect of the addressee's appearance or ability accounted for 81 per cent of the New Zealand data.

Within these general patterns, there is a clearly observable  
25 tendency for women to be complimented on their appearance more often than men. Over half (57 per cent) of all the compli-