



# Chinese compliment responses: Do they vary among different areas?<sup>1</sup>

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While accepting a compliment is very common in English language, deflecting or rejecting a compliment were the most used strategy in Chinese language and culture (Chen, 1993). Recent research studies on compliments and responses yield inconsistent results, Yuan's (2002) study shows a high accepting rate to a compliment comparing to previous studies. The purpose of this study is to account for the variations of Chinese compliment response studies in the literature, specifically to examine one possibility that Chinese compliment responses are different across different regions. Survey questionnaire is used to elicit participants' responses to compliments. 78 questionnaires are collected in total from six different cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Chongqing, Guilin, and Kunming. The written responses from participants are coded into 18 strategies and are further grouped into three categories: Accepting strategies, Deflecting strategies, and Rejecting strategies. Overall, the results show a high accepting rate of 62.60% with 28.27% of deflecting and 9.13% of rejecting rate. Also this study confirms that there are variations among different areas in responding to compliments in Chinese. Speakers in Beijing, Hong Kong, and Chongqing are much more likely to accept compliments than speakers of Kunming and Shanghai. Speakers in Shanghai adopt deflecting strategies the most among all areas studied. However, the underlying rationale to account for the variations needs further investigation. This study provides empirical evidence to support the flexibility in teaching Chinese pragmatics.

**Keywords:** Pragmatics; Chinese; Compliment Responses

Compliment responses is one of the most studied speech acts in pragmatics across languages. Research on compliment responses started from English early on, acceptance of the compliment is the strategy being most commonly adopted among English speakers (Herbert, 1986; Holmes and

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Brown, 1987), while deflecting or rejecting are usually used in some Asian regions such as China, Taiwan, and Japan (Chen, 1993; Yu, 2004; Azuma, 1994).

In Chinese compliment responses studies, Chen (1993) found that Chinese compliment responses are strongly characterized by rejection. Later on, other studies have yielded a wide range of different findings. Loh (1993) reported that the acceptance rate to compliments is less than a half in studying Hong Kong Chinese. In Yuan (2002)'s study, the rate between accepting and deflecting/rejecting the compliment is almost equal. Yu (2004) focused on Taiwanese Chinese and showed an extremely low rate of accepting compliments. Tang and Zhang's (2009) study showed a higher rate of acceptance than the results from Yu (2004) result. To account for the variations of Chinese compliment response studies in the literature, Chen (2010) has proposed two possible reasons. One is that responses to compliments in Chinese have changed over time, the other one is that Chinese speakers differ from one population to another in responding to compliments. In Chen's (2010) study, only the first reason has been examined based on two cross sectional studies using the same questionnaire in Xi'an, China, which shows that now people tend to use accepting strategies more than a decade ago.

The current study is primarily aimed at testing the second assumption: are Chinese compliment responses different among different areas? Secondly, it can also verify whether there is a change or not in areas other than Xi'an. The study will be presented in four sections: literature review, methods, results, and discussions and conclusion.

### **Literature Review**

Compliment is defined as a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some 'good' which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer (Holmes, 1988). However, compliments may also be regarded as a threat to the speaker and hearer's face. Therefore, people select varied strategies in responding a compliment. Compliment responses are situated in each speech community culture, and are considered as a device of interpersonal relationships in daily life (Tang & Zhang, 2009).

Several theories have been used as the framework for the study of compliment responses. Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness theory is the dominant one. Politeness theory attempts to explain how and why people in different cultures establish and maintain social relations through language. They define face as the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself. Every rational social being is interested in saving other's face to maintain the social relationship. Brown and Levinson proposed two types of face, one is positive face and the other is negative face. Positive face refers to the desire for approval and the need to be accepted. Negative face refers to the social member's desire of freedom of action. Compliments or expressing envy or admiration are categorized as a face-threatening act in Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. Compliments predicate some desire of speaker toward hearer or hearer's goods, giving hearer reason to think that the complimentee may have to take action to protect the object of the speaker's desire or give it to the speaker. Even though the speaker is complimenting the hearer, it has a potential threat to the hearer's negative face.

Besides Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, new theoretical constructs are proposed to explain compliment responses. In Leech's (1983) explanatory analysis of politeness he describes the constraints of a compliment as Agreement Maxim and Modesty Maxim. The Modesty Maxim puts pressure on the recipient of a compliment to reject it. Cultural schema is used in Sharifian's (2005) study in accounting for Persian compliment responses. The study argues that the compliment responses are motivated by the schema of modesty in Persian culture. Chen (2001) proposed a self-politeness model, which includes strategies like justify, contradict, hedge, impersonalize, use humor, be confident, be modest, hesitate, and attach conditions.

Regarding to the classification of the compliment response strategies, Herbert (1986) categorized them into three groups: agreement, non-agreement, and other interpretations.

Agreement includes appreciation token, comment acceptance, praise upgrade, comment history, reassignment, and return. Non-Agreement includes scale down, question, disagreement, qualification, and no acknowledgement. Other interpretation has one type as request interpretation. Holmes (1988) developed three broad categories of response to compliments: accept, reject, and deflect or evade. Under accept strategies, there are appreciation or agreement token, agreeing utterance, downgrading or qualifying utterance, return compliment. In reject strategies, there are disagreeing utterance, question accuracy, challenge complimenter's sincerity. In the group of deflect/evade strategies, there are shift credit, informative comment, ignore, legitimate evasion, and request reassurance/repetition. Based on Holme's (1988) classification, Chen (2010) developed 16 strategies, also grouped into three major categories: accepting strategies, evading/deflecting strategies, and rejecting strategies.

In the literature of Chinese compliment responses. Chen (1993) investigated the politeness strategies American English speakers and Chinese speakers use to respond to compliments. The study reported that Xi'an Chinese subjects reject compliment 95.73% of the time, accept them 1% of the time, and use the thanking and denigrating strategy 3.4% of the time. In this study, Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was used to collect data with four scenarios. Loh (1993) studied Hong Kong Chinese in UK. The results were synthesized with rejecting rate 22% of the time while accepting rate 41% of the time. Yuan (2002) provided results from three different data sources: DCT, natural conversation, and interviews. With the DCT data, it showed that Chinese speakers in Kunming reject compliment 28.93% of the time, accept compliment 50.28% of the time, while deflecting compliment 20.79% of the time. With the natural data, reject rate is higher as 33.98%, and accepting rate is lowered to 31.26%. Tang and Zhang (2009) studied Chinese in Australia using DCT with four situations in both Mandarin Chinese and English. The four situations are complimenting on appearance, character, ability and possession respectively. There are 30 Mandarin Chinese native speakers and 30 Australian English native speakers, within which 15 are males and 15 are females in each group. The rejecting rate towards compliment is 14.55%, accepting rate is 48.82%, and deflecting rate is 36.66%.

The results from previous studies of compliment response strategies are inconsistent due to different data collection methods, different time when collecting data, and different population representations. The following section will present the method of the current study which adopts the same data collection tool across different regions within the same time frame.

## **Method**

83 Chinese speakers participated in the study, however, 5 were removed from the data analysis due to partially missed data. Among 78 participants who were included in the final data analysis, 11 of them are from Beijing, 11 are from Shanghai, 12 are from Hong Kong, 12 are from Chongqing, 14 are from Guilin and 18 are from Kunming. There were no compensation for their participation. The selection of the six regions, which are Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Chongqing, Guilin, and Kunming, are based on the previous studies. Hong Kong population was studied in Loh (1993), Kunming speakers were in Yuan's (2002) study, Spencer-Oatery and Ng (2001) investigated speakers in Shanghai and Guilin. I added Beijing due to its important political and economic status in influencing people's language use. Chongqing is another big economic center in the west which was developed later than Beijing and Shanghai and influenced less from western culture.

A survey questionnaire (see appendix A) was used to elicit participants' responses to compliments. The questionnaire was adapted from Chen (2010) in the consideration of making comparison with the same situational scenarios. There were four situations provided in Mandarin Chinese. Small adjustments have been made so that participants can relate more to these circumstances. The survey questionnaire was created on Tencent Questionnaire, which can be shared free on electronic devices through social network. Wechat, the most commonly used Chinese multi-purpose social media mobile application software, is the platform to disseminate the survey

questionnaire. More, several open-ended individual interviews were followed up based on the initial findings.

Excel and Nvivo were used for the data analysis. Coding process was operated in Nvivo software. The written responses from participants were coded into 18 strategies (see Appendix B for detail). 16 strategies were from to Chen's (2010) coding system. Two new strategies were added based on the data from the current study: smile/laugh and promise. 18 strategies were grouped into three categories: Accepting strategies, Deflecting strategies, and Rejecting strategies. The two new strategies were categorized in the group of Deflecting strategies since they are not directly accepting or rejecting the compliment.

## Results

There are 403 strategies used in total from all the written responses of 78 participants. In general, the accepting strategies are used 65.49% of the time, 24.54% of the time people adopt defecting strategies in responding to compliments, while 9.97% of the time speakers reject the compliments (see Table 1). This is surprisingly consistent with Chen (2010): 62.60% of accepting, 28.27% of deflecting, and 9.13% of rejecting strategies.

Among all the strategies, Thanking strategy is the most frequently used one (36.97% of all responses), which is far more frequently adopted than the rest of the strategies. Encouraging strategy ranks at the second position (9.92% of all responses). Returning strategy is the one closely followed (8.68% of all responses). The first three most adopted strategies in responding compliments are all belong to the group of accepting strategies. Seeking confirmation strategy in the group of deflecting strategy is the fourth used strategy (7.94% of all responses). Denigrating strategy in the group of rejecting strategy is at the fifth position (6% of all responses) among all individual strategies.

Table 1  
*Chinese compliment responding strategies*

Strategy	N	%
<b>Accepting</b>	<b>254</b>	<b>65.49</b>
1. Agreeing	20	4.96
2. Thanking	149	36.97
3. Expressing gladness	2	0.50
4. Returning	35	8.68
5. Encouraging	40	9.92
6. A-Explaining	18	4.46
<b>Deflecting</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>24.54</b>
7. Offering	7	1.73
8. Using humor	13	3.22
9. Seeking confirmation	32	7.94
10. Doubting	1	0.25
11. Deflecting	6	1.48
12. D-Explaining	20	4.96
13. Smile/Laugh	18	4.46
14. Promise	2	0.50
<b>Rejecting</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>9.97</b>
15. Disagreeing	12	2.98
16. Denigrating	24	6.00
17. Expressing embarrassment	1	0.25
18. R-Explaining	3	0.74
<b>Total</b>	<b>403</b>	<b>100</b>

Looking at the strategies selection from the six regions, there are variations among different group of speakers. For the accepting strategy use, the rate for speakers from Beijing (69.84%), Hong Kong (72.41%) and Chongqing (70.18%) are similar, while the rate for speakers from Guilin (61.84%), Kunming (51%), and Shanghai (47.62%) are lower. Especially for speakers from Shanghai and Kunming, the rate of adopting accepting strategy is much lower. For the deflecting strategies, Shanghai speakers use them the most (39.67%). The rest of the areas show a great variation from Shanghai, especially Kunming with the lowest rate of 20%. As to the Rejecting strategies, Kunming speakers have the highest rejecting strategy use (29%), while Chongqing speakers' use of rejecting strategy is extremely low (1.75%). The rates for Beijing (7.94%), Shanghai (14.29%), Hong Kong (6.90%), and Guilin (9.21%) are similar. Overall, the relatively high likelihood of adopting accepting strategy is consistent in all areas, however, there are great variation within each strategy across six regions.

Table 2  
*Strategies used among different regions*

	Accepting	Deflecting	Rejecting
Beijing	69.84%	22.22%	7.94%
Shanghai	47.62%	39.67%	14.29%
Hong Kong	72.41%	20.69%	6.90%
Chongqing	70.18%	28.07%	1.75%
Guilin	61.84%	28.95%	9.21%
Kunming	51%	20%	29%

There are other interesting findings related to particular situational scenarios. 8 out of 13 humor strategy are observed in situation 4, which is responding to the compliments on the luxury Cartier watch. The compliment is "Wow! What a watch! I wish I had one like that." Typical responses are: 我买了还后悔了呢 [I regret after I bought it]; 要不要送你嘛 [It is gift to you now]; 高仿的 [It's faked]; 八折卖给你 [I can sell it to you with 20% off]. Some of these responses seems like offering, disagreeing or denigrating. But they are coded into humor strategy because in the interview participants expressed that they are making these comments as a joke. And both speakers in the conversation understand that the complimentee does not mean what he/she is saying, it is just a way the complimentee jokes to defuse the potential conflict, which is discussed as a threat to the complimentee's negative face in Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness theory. Also the complimentee does not feel comfortable if there is a huge difference between two friends. This can be considered as a face saving act, especially under this situation the complimentee feels urged to avoid face threatening act to both speakers due to the high imposition in the compliment. Or the complimentee strongly feels that he/she has to take action to protect his/her luxury Cartier watch since the speaker expressed the desire towards the watch. The degree of imposition is an important factor here in selecting the strategy for a compliment response.

Among four situations, situation 3 is the only one with formal context. 50% of the denigrating responses occur in this context. Some examples of denigrating strategy are: 好多地方拿捏的不好 [there are many places I didn't do well]; 还得多向你请教啊 [I have to learn from you more]; 一般一般 [just so so]; 还是有些不足的 [there are some weakness]. Comparing to other informal situations occurred among friends, the social distance between complimenter and complimentee is larger in this situation as classmates or colleagues. The weight of the potential face threatening act is higher. The complimentee chooses denigrating strategy to show the humbleness, while it is not as much necessary for the complimentee to denigrate him/herself in informal conversations between friends.

## Discussions and Conclusion

This study is consistent with Chen (2010) in showing that Chinese people now tend to accept the compliment rather than deflect or reject. As to which degree people would be more likely to

accept, deflect, or reject, the results confirm that there are variations across different regions. For example, speakers from Chongqing barely reject a compliment, while speakers from Shanghai are likely to deflect/reject a compliment more than half of the time.

However, the rational and patterns to account for the variations are not obvious. One of the possible assumed reasons is that Chinese language use behaviors have been influenced by western culture. But it can not explain the results from this study. Because Shanghai is in the east which has been influenced by western culture earlier while Kunming is the city is the far west which is one of the least affected, and both cities have a low rate of adopting accepting strategy. Moreover, Chongqing located in the west has an extremely low rate of adopting rejecting strategy and a quite high rate of using accepting strategy.

To investigate the underlying patterns of the area variation in compliment responses, further study can include more factors like age, gender and power which are not examined in this particular study. Since the questionnaire link is distributed on social media, it is highly possible that there are not many elderly participants. Also, there might be a gender differences in responding to the compliment. Herbert (1990) found that females are twice likely to accept compliments than males. The study might not represent the language use of the Chinese older generation.

The findings of this study propose appropriate adjustment in teaching Chinese compliment responses. Teaching and emphasizing only deflecting or rejecting strategies to compliments in Chinese may create disconnection in reality. It is no more necessary to correct students when they respond with *Xiexie* [thank you]. Also it is too simplistic to attribute the degree of adopting accepting strategy to western culture influences and hence apply the accepting strategy more from east coast over the inland. Local culture and language practice should be observed when learning and teaching a language.

In conclusion, the current study is consistent with Chen (2010), Chinese speakers are more likely to use accepting strategies than two decades ago. It further provides evidence of area differences in responding compliments to account for the variations in compliment literature. Moreover, variations of compliment responses across different situational scenarios echoed with the previous research (Tang & Zhang, 2009) as well. Humor is observed in this study to mitigate the potential conflict when the complimentee feels a high imposition in the compliment. And speakers are more likely to reject the compliment when they are situated in a formal context with relatively large social distance.

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## Appendix A

### 问卷调查表

#### [Survey Questionnaire]

说明：请就以下情景做出回应，请写下你在现实生活中真实的反应。

[Note: please provide your response to each of the following situations, please write down how you would answer in real life conversations.]

1. 你遇见一位已有一段时间没有见面的熟人，互致问候之后，他/她说：“你真潇洒/漂亮，比上次见面还要潇洒/漂亮。”作为回应，你会说：  
[You meet an acquaintance you haven't seen for some time. After an exchange of greetings, s/he says: "you look so nice! Even nicer than when I saw you last." To this, you reply:]
2. 你穿了一件新上衣，你的朋友早上看见了，说：“好漂亮的上衣！你穿上显得很精神。”作为回应，你会说：  
[You are wearing a new top. One of your friends meets you in the morning and says: "what a nice top! You look great in it!" you reply:]
3. 你在课/会上做了一个演示之后，一位同学/同事走到你跟前说：“演示非常好，我真的很喜欢。”作为回应，你会说：  
[You have given a presentation in your class/workplace. After the presentation, one of your classmates/colleagues comes to you and says: "that was a great presentation. I really enjoyed it." You reply:]
4. 你戴着一块卡地亚手表，你的一位朋友看见后对你说：“多好的一块表！但愿我也能有一块这样的表。”作为回应，你会说：  
[You are wearing a Cartier watch. A friend of yours sees it and says to you: "Wow! What a watch! I wish I had one like that." You reply:]
5. 你是中国哪里人？说什么方言？  
[Where do you live? Which dialect do you speak?]

## Appendix B

Macro level CRs	Micro level CRs	Examples
Accept strategy	Agreeing	我也特别喜欢[I like it a lot too]. 我也觉得挺好的 [I think it's very nice too].
	Thanking	谢谢你的认可 [thank you for your recognition]. 谢谢 [thank you]. 多谢 [many thanks].
	Expressing gladness	你觉得好我都好开心[I am happy that you think it's good].
	Returning	你也是呀, 看起来越来越年轻 [you too, you look much younger now]. 你的耳环也很好看 [your earrings are very pretty].
	Encouraging	你戴上肯定好看 [it will look good on you if you have one].
	A(ccepting)-explaining	我新买的[I bought this one recently].
Deflecting strategy	Offering	下次约你出来请你吃饭[I will pay your dinner next time we meet]. 带你一起去买靓衫[I can bring you to shopping together].
	Using humor	没发现我一直都很精神吗 [don't you know that I always look good] ? 拿去拿去 [take it].
	Seeking confirmation	是吗[is it]? 真的吗[really]? 不是嘲笑我[you are not making fun of me]?
	Doubting	假的吧, 就会开玩笑[it must be fake, you are joking around].
	Deflecting	有需要我们沟通一下[we can discuss more if needed]. 你太会聊天了[you have a good conversational skill].
	D(eflecting)-explaining Smile/Laugh	正好打折的时候买的[I bought it on sale]. 哈哈[hahaha]. 笑笑不说话[smile without saying anything].
	Promise	我会继续努力[I will keep working hard].
Rejecting strategy	Disagreeing	我觉得有些地方还不够好[I think there are places that are not good].
	Denigrating	你过奖了[you are over praising me]. 我穿什么衣服都差不多[I look the same in all clothing, nothing special].
	Expressing embarrassment	惭愧 [I'm embarrassed].
	R(ejecting)-explaining	时间仓促还有些想法没来得及实现 [some ideas are not presented because of the time limitation].