



American Compliments

Functions of Compliments

In American English we use compliments for a variety of reasons:

- To express admiration or approval of someone's work/appearance/taste (Manes, 1983; Herbert, 1990).
- To establish/confirm/maintain solidarity (Manes & Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson, 1989).
- To replace greetings/gratitude/apologies/congratulations (Wolfson, 1983, 1989).
- To soften face-threatening acts such as apologies, requests and criticism (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Wolfson, 1983).
- To open and sustain conversation (conversation strategy) (Wolfson, 1983; Billmyer, 1990; Dunham, 1992).
- To reinforce desired behavior (Manes, 1983).

A great majority of compliments are addressed to people of similar age and status to the compliment giver (Knapp, Hopper, & Bell, 1984 [©]).

Acceptance responses occur only about a third of the time. In American English, two thirds of the time respondents to compliments do something other than to accept them (Herbert, 1990 [©]).

Major compliment topics can be classified into 3 categories:

1. appearance/possessions

Compliments on someone's appearance or possessions are the most common type of compliments in American English. "Your blouse looks **beautiful!**" is an example of an **adjectival compliment**. About 2/3 of adjectival compliments use the words *nice, good, pretty, great, or beautiful* (Manes & Wolfson, 1981). *Good* is often used for performance and *nice* is mostly used for appearance/attire (Knapp et al., 1984 [©]).

"I really **love** your car!" is an example of a compliment that contains a **semantically positive verb**. *Like* or *love* are used 90% of the time in this type of compliment. Some other semantically positive verbs that are used would be *admire* and *be impressed* (Wolfson, 1989).

2. performance/skills/abilities

"You did a good job!" and "You are such a wonderful writer" are examples of compliments on performance/skills/abilities.

Concise compliments such as "Nice shot!" are typically given by male speakers (Herbert, 1990 [©]).

3. personality traits

Such comments as "Good boy" and "You're so sweet" are compliments on the addressee's personality traits. This category of compliments occurs less frequently than those on appearance/possessions and performance/skills/abilities (Holmes, 1988 [©]).

In terms of sentence structure, compliments in American English can be classified into 9 categories.

NP = noun phrase
ADJ = adjective
PRO = pronoun
V = verb
ADV = adverb

1. Your blouse is/looks (really) beautiful. (NP is/looks (really) ADJ)
2. I (really) like/love your car. (I (really) like/love NP)
3. That's a (really) nice wall hanging. (PRO is (really) a ADJ NP)
4. You did a (really) good job. (You V a (really) ADV NP)
5. You really handled that situation well. (You V (NP) (really) ADV)
6. You have such beautiful hair! (You have (a) ADJ NP!)
7. What a lovely baby you have! (What (a) ADJ NP!)
8. Nice game! (ADJ NP!)
9. Isn't your ring beautiful! (Isn't NP ADJ!)

Above passages from Manes & Wolfson (1981), p. 120.

[Research notes on the section above...]

Responses to Compliments

As noted in the introduction to this website, and at the beginning of this compliment page, Americans rarely accept compliments. Deflecting or rejecting compliments negates the implication that the addressee is superior to the

speaker in any way. In American English, the preference of response strategies other than acceptance may be related to the notion of democracy and equality of all human beings (Herbert & Straight, 1989, p. 39 [©]).

Compliment Response Strategies

- A. Accept
 - o Appreciation Token (*Thanks/Thank you*)*
 - o Comment Acceptance (*Yeah, it's my favorite, too*)*
 - o Praise Upgrade (*Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?*)**
- B. Mitigate
 - o Comment History (*I bought it for the trip to Arizona*)**
 - o Shift credit (*My brother gave it to me/It really knitted itself*)**
 - o Questioning or Request Reassurance/Repetition (*Do you really like them?*)*
 - o Return (*So's yours*)**
 - o Scale Down/Downgrade (*It's really quite old*)**
- C. Reject
 - o Disagreeing Utterance (A: *You look good and healthy.* B: *I feel fat*)*
- D. No Response**
- E. Request Interpretation**
 - o Addressee interprets the compliment as a request: (*You wanna borrow this one too?*)

[Research notes on the section above...]

Above passages adapted from *Nelson, Al-Batal, & Echols (1996), p.419 and **Herbert, 1990, p. 208 [©].

Gender Differences in American Compliments

There are some interesting gender differences in the giving of compliments:

- Compliments given by female speakers tend to have a personal focus and use 1st and 2nd person pronouns: "I love your purse!" "You look great!" (Herbert, 1990 [©]).
- Compliments given by male speakers are often impersonal: "Nice game!" "Good job!" (Herbert, 1990 [©]; Holmes, 1988 [©]).
- Women give and receive significantly more compliments to each other than they do to men or men do to each other (Holmes, 1988 [©]).
- Male compliments are more likely to be accepted than female compliments (Herbert, 1990 [©]).

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