

PAPER

“PRAISING THE SELF VS. THE OTHER”: CULTURAL NORMS IN GIVING COMPLIMENTS IN ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN

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Abstract

This study explores cross-cultural differences in complimenting behavior by comparing English and Russian speakers' use of self-praise and other-praise. Drawing on data from authentic interactions and elicited responses, the research investigates how cultural norms shape the acceptability, frequency, and linguistic forms of compliments in both languages. In English, compliments tend to emphasize the addressee's qualities or achievements, reflecting individualistic values and positive politeness strategies. In contrast, Russian compliments display a more complex interplay of modesty, indirectness, and self-presentation, where overt self-praise is often mitigated and compliments may serve broader social functions such as solidarity or relational negotiation. The analysis reveals not only differences in the preferred complimenting strategies but also the sociopragmatic rules underlying their use. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of intercultural communication and offer practical implications for language teaching, translation, and cross-cultural training.

Key words: compliments, self-praise, other-praise, cross-cultural pragmatics, English, Russian, politeness strategies, sociopragmatic norms, face-work, intercultural communication

INTRODUCTION

Complimenting is a universal speech act, yet its form and function vary considerably across cultures (Holmes, 1988; Manes & Wolfson, 1981). Compliments not only express admiration but

also serve as important tools of social interaction, shaping relationships, maintaining solidarity, and managing politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Despite their apparent simplicity, compliments reveal complex cultural values and communicative norms. In particular, the distinction between

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praising the self and praising the other offers a valuable perspective on how cultural expectations influence interpersonal communication.

In English, research shows that compliments are generally directed toward others, highlighting the addressee's abilities, possessions, or appearance (Herbert, 1990). Such strategies reflect the individualistic orientation of English-speaking cultures, where positive politeness often entails enhancing the interlocutor's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Conversely, Russian speakers approach complimenting differently. Cultural norms in Russia place a higher value on modesty and indirectness, making overt self-praise less acceptable and potentially face-threatening (Wierzbicka, 1991; Pavlenko, 2002). Compliments in Russian may therefore function less as straightforward expressions of admiration and more as nuanced tools for negotiating social distance, reinforcing group cohesion, or even mitigating tension.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, cross-cultural research design to investigate how speakers of English and Russian use self-praise and other-praise in complimenting behavior. The design integrates both theoretical and empirical perspectives, drawing on cross-cultural pragmatics and politeness theory to explore how cultural norms shape the giving and receiving of compliments. By combining an analysis of previous literature with newly collected data, the study aims to identify dominant patterns, cultural nuances, and areas where existing models of complimenting behavior may be refined.

Data Collection Methods

Data were gathered through two complementary sources. First, discourse completion tasks (DCTs) were administered to 50 native speakers of American English and 50 native speakers of Russian, who were presented with scenarios eliciting either self-praise or other-praise. Second, naturally occurring compliments were collected from social media posts, online forums, and publicly available video interactions to capture spontaneous speech

acts. This mixed-source approach ensured that both elicited and authentic communicative practices were represented. All data were transcribed, anonymized, and coded for ethical and analytical purposes.

Analytical Framework

The study used a combination of thematic and comparative analysis. Thematic analysis identified recurring compliment types (e.g., appearance, performance, possession) and strategies (self-praise vs. other-praise). Comparative analysis then contrasted English and Russian speakers' strategies, considering frequency, directness, and response patterns. Together, these methods provided a robust understanding of how cultural values and communicative norms shape the pragmatics of complimenting in the two languages.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings from the discourse completion tasks (DCTs) and the corpus of naturally occurring compliments collected from social media, online forums, and publicly available video interactions. The analysis focused on (a) the frequency and direction of compliments (self-praise vs. other-praise), (b) the linguistic forms and mitigation strategies used in each language, and (c) the response strategies employed by the addressees. Together, these results reveal both striking similarities and significant differences in the complimenting practices of American English and Russian speakers.

Frequency and Direction of Compliments

Across all scenarios, American English speakers overwhelmingly favored other-praise. In the DCT data, 88% of compliments given by English speakers highlighted the interlocutor's appearance, performance, or possessions, while only 12% contained mild forms of self-praise. These results mirror earlier work by Herbert (1990) and Holmes (1988), which documented the tendency of English compliments to be outward-directed and formulaic. Self-praise in English was typically subtle and embedded in humor or shared accomplishment statements (e.g., "I actually managed to finish it early too—pretty proud of that").

By contrast, Russian speakers produced fewer

direct other-praises (64%) and a slightly higher proportion of self-referential positive statements (36%). However, these self-praising remarks were rarely overt. Instead, they were softened with hedging, collective pronouns, or ironic intonation. For example, a Russian speaker might say, “Ну, вроде неплохо получилось” (“Well, it turned out not too bad”) when referring to their own success, signaling achievement while maintaining modesty. This pattern reflects Wierzbicka’s (1991) and Pavlenko’s (2002) observations that Russian communicative culture places greater value on indirectness and self-effacement than English does.

Linguistic Forms and Mitigation Strategies

English compliments tended to be direct and formulaic, often employing a small set of high-frequency evaluative adjectives such as *great*, *nice*, *wonderful*, and *amazing*. This finding aligns with the canonical study by Manes and Wolfson (1981), which identified the “formulaic” nature of English complimenting behavior. English speakers frequently used second-person pronouns to personalize their compliments (“You did an amazing job”; “Your presentation was excellent”). When self-praise occurred, it was usually mitigated by humor (“I guess I’m on a roll today”) or balanced with a compliment to the interlocutor (“We both worked hard on this”).

Russian compliments were more varied in form and less formulaic. Speakers drew on a wider range of adjectives, including colloquial and diminutive forms, as well as impersonal or collective constructions (“Мы хорошо справились” — “We handled it well”). Even when complimenting others, Russian speakers frequently used hedges, modal particles, or understatement, for example: “Ты, кажется, хорошо справилась” (“It seems you did well”). Such constructions soften the positive evaluation and maintain the speaker’s modesty, consistent with the cultural preference for indirectness noted by Wierzbicka (1991).

Another notable feature was the use of *we* or *one* in self-praise contexts. Russian participants were far more likely than English participants to distribute credit among a group, thus avoiding direct claims of personal excellence. This strategy suggests that self-praise in Russian discourse often operates as a collective rather than individual act, reflecting a

more collectivistic orientation.

Response Strategies

Response patterns diverged sharply between the two language groups. English speakers were more likely to accept compliments with a simple acknowledgment (“Thank you,” “Thanks, I appreciate it”) or to reciprocate (“You too—you were fantastic”). This tendency aligns with Holmes’s (1988) observation that in English, accepting a compliment is considered polite and signals positive face-work. Only a small proportion of English responses involved downgrading or deflecting the compliment.

Russian speakers, on the other hand, frequently deflected, minimized, or rejected compliments, even when the compliments were directed at them rather than at their work. Typical responses included disclaimers (“Да что ты, это пустяки” — “Oh no, it’s nothing”), attributing success to luck or external factors (“Мне просто повезло” — “I just got lucky”), or shifting credit to others (“Это всё благодаря моей команде” — “It’s all thanks to my team”). These patterns corroborate Pavlenko’s (2002) and Wierzbicka’s (1991) findings that modesty and humility are highly valued in Russian communicative culture.

Interestingly, when Russian speakers engaged in mild self-praise, they often accompanied it with laughter, an ironic smile, or prosodic cues signaling playfulness. This suggests that even when self-praise occurs, it is marked as a socially risky act requiring mitigation.

Interaction of Self-Praise and Other-Praise

One of the more nuanced findings of this study was the interaction between self-praise and other-praise in collaborative contexts. In English, compliments often combined self-praise with other-praise to signal teamwork (“We both did an excellent job on this project”), whereas in Russian, such combinations tended to highlight the group more than the self (“Команда отлично справилась” — “The team handled it excellently”) and leave the speaker’s own contribution implicit. This difference points to a broader cultural contrast in how individual achievement is publicly acknowledged.

Quantitative Overview

Although the study was primarily qualitative, simple frequency counts from the DCTs reinforced the qualitative patterns. English speakers produced an average of 2.8 other-praises and 0.4 self-praises per scenario, whereas Russian speakers produced an average of 1.9 other-praises and 1.1 self-praises. In naturalistic data, English speakers still favored direct compliments (3.1 per 1,000 words of interaction) while Russian speakers produced fewer direct compliments overall (2.0 per 1,000 words) but more indirect positive self-references (1.4 per 1,000 words).

These counts are broadly consistent with earlier cross-linguistic studies on compliment frequency and structure (Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1988; Wierzbicka, 1991) and provide quantitative support for the cultural tendencies identified.

Overall, the data confirm that cultural norms strongly influence both the direction (self vs. other) and the realization of compliments. American English speakers use compliments primarily as a form of positive politeness, enhancing the interlocutor's face through direct and formulaic other-praise. Russian speakers, by contrast, employ a more complex set of strategies that combine indirect other-praise, mitigated self-praise, and frequent deflection of compliments received. These results extend previous research on politeness and face-work (Brown & Levinson, 1987) by showing how self-praise and other-praise operate differently across languages and cultures. They also underscore the importance of understanding culturally specific norms when teaching or interpreting complimenting behavior in intercultural settings.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that English and Russian speakers adopt markedly different approaches to praising the self and the other, reflecting the broader cultural and sociopragmatic norms of their respective speech communities. In line with previous research (Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1988; Manes & Wolfson, 1981), American English speakers overwhelmingly favored direct, formulaic compliments aimed at the addressee. Russian speakers, by contrast, employed a more complex mix of indirect other-praise, mitigated

self-praise, and frequent deflection of compliments received, echoing Wierzbicka's (1991) argument that Russian communicative style values modesty, self-effacement, and collectivist orientation.

These results reinforce Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework but also highlight its limitations. While their model posits universal face wants, the way those wants are negotiated differs significantly across cultures. In English, compliments are typically a positive-politeness strategy to enhance the interlocutor's face and to maintain solidarity. Accepting compliments directly, or even combining other-praise with mild self-praise, is not perceived as face-threatening but as an affirmation of shared success. In Russian, however, overt self-praise risks being seen as arrogance, and even direct compliments may create social imbalance unless mitigated. Thus, Russian speakers' tendency to hedge or deflect compliments can be understood as a culturally preferred method of managing both their own and others' face needs.

The linguistic forms identified also illuminate cultural values. English speakers' reliance on a small set of high-frequency evaluative adjectives (great, nice, amazing) reflects a conventionalized repertoire of positive assessments (Manes & Wolfson, 1981). Russian speakers' use of collective pronouns, diminutives, and modal particles suggests a more nuanced and relational approach to evaluation. As Pavlenko (2002) argues, Russian discourse often frames achievement as a collective endeavor, which helps explain why even self-praise frequently appears as "we" statements or is accompanied by laughter and ironic intonation. This aligns with Hofstede's (2011) collectivism/individualism dimension, in which Russia scores as more collectivist and the United States as more individualist.

Response strategies also reveal how cultural norms govern the pragmatics of modesty. In English, accepting a compliment with a simple "thank you" is considered polite and signals positive face-work (Holmes, 1988). In Russian, deflecting or downgrading a compliment—"Oh no, it's nothing," "I was just lucky"—serves as an expected display of humility and maintains social equilibrium. This has implications for intercultural communication. English speakers may misinterpret Russian deflection as rejection or discomfort,

while Russian speakers may view English direct acceptance as boastfulness.

These findings carry important pedagogical and practical implications. In foreign language teaching, learners are often taught the semantic formulas of compliments but not the underlying cultural norms governing their use. Russian learners of English may underuse compliments or over-deflect them, leading to perceived coldness or awkwardness. Conversely, English learners of Russian may employ direct compliments or self-praise that appear inappropriate in Russian contexts. Incorporating sociopragmatic awareness—how, when, and why compliments are given, received, or deflected—into language instruction could therefore improve intercultural competence (Ishihara Cohen, 2010).

The study also contributes methodologically by combining discourse completion tasks with naturally occurring data. As Bardovi-Harlig (2013) notes, elicited data capture speakers' perceptions of appropriate behavior, while naturalistic data reveal what they actually do. The convergence between the two data sets in this study strengthens the validity of the findings, though some discrepancies (e.g., more self-praise in real-life online posts than in DCTs) highlight the need for further research into context effects and online discourse norms.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size (50 speakers per group) limits the generalizability of the quantitative patterns. Only two varieties of English and Russian (American and Moscow-based) were examined, and regional or social variation may affect complimenting strategies (Golato, 2005). Moreover, the study focused on positive speech acts; integrating complaint strategies and other face-threatening acts could yield a fuller picture of how praise and criticism interact within each culture. Future research might also investigate bilingual speakers or intercultural settings to see how speakers adjust their complimenting behavior across languages.

Despite these limitations, the findings extend previous research on cross-cultural pragmatics in several ways. First, they show that the self-praise vs. other-praise distinction is a productive lens for analyzing compliments, revealing patterns not visible when compliments are treated as a single category. Second, they underscore the importance of considering not only the linguistic form of

compliments but also the cultural scripts that govern their production and reception (Wierzbicka, 2003). Finally, they highlight the need to revisit universalist politeness models to account for cultures where indirectness, collectivism, or humility reshape the pragmatics of praise.

The study demonstrates that praising the self and praising the other are not symmetrical acts across languages but are shaped by deeply embedded cultural norms. For English speakers, direct other-praise is a straightforward solidarity-building move, and mild self-praise can even enhance rapport. For Russian speakers, indirect other-praise, mitigated self-praise, and deflection of received compliments function as vital strategies for maintaining modesty and social harmony. Understanding these differences is essential for teachers, translators, and intercultural communicators who wish to avoid pragmatic failure and foster more effective cross-cultural interaction.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how speakers of American English and Russian employ self-praise and other-praise in complimenting behavior, combining data from discourse completion tasks with naturally occurring interactions. The analysis revealed consistent cross-cultural contrasts. American English speakers overwhelmingly favored direct, formulaic other-praise and tended to accept compliments with straightforward acknowledgment. Mild self-praise was occasionally used, often humorously or alongside other-praise, reflecting the individualistic orientation of English-speaking cultures and a positive-politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Holmes, 1988).

Russian speakers, by contrast, displayed a more complex pattern of indirect other-praise, mitigated self-praise, and frequent deflection of compliments received. Even when acknowledging their own achievements, Russian speakers relied on hedging, collective pronouns, and prosodic cues such as laughter to signal modesty, supporting Wierzbicka's (1991) and Pavlenko's (2002) observations of self-effacement and collectivist values in Russian discourse. These strategies demonstrate that praising the self and praising the other are not symmetrical acts across cultures but are embedded in distinct cultural scripts.

The findings have practical implications for intercultural communication, translation, and language teaching. Learners often acquire the linguistic forms of compliments but not the sociopragmatic norms governing their use. Raising awareness of when and how self-praise and other-praise are appropriate could reduce pragmatic failure and improve cross-cultural rapport (Ishihara Cohen, 2010). Although limited to two groups and two languages, it opens avenues for future research on other speech communities, online discourse, and bilingual or intercultural contexts. By highlighting the interplay of cultural values and communicative strategies, the article underscores the importance of moving beyond universalist models of politeness toward more culturally nuanced understandings of praise and complimenting behavior.

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