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Compliment Topics and Gender

Christopher Parisi and Peter Wogan*

Abstract: *This article is based on a corpus of 270 compliments collected on a university campus in the United States. Like previous studies, this one found that compliment topics varied by gender: males gave females a higher proportion of compliments on appearance than skill and females did the opposite, giving males a higher proportion of compliments on skill than appearance. Two overlapping explanations for this statistical discrepancy were found: 1) females feel a relatively greater need to be cautious when giving appearance compliments to males, for fear of seeming too forward or attracting unwanted attention; 2) social norms place greater emphasis on appearance for females and skills for males. While the latter explanation has been noted previously, the former, the role of flirtation, has received scant attention, despite its crucial role in compliment behaviors.*

Introduction

A number of ground-breaking studies have called to our attention various interrelationships between gender, status, and compliment behaviors (Herbert, 1986, 1989, 1990; Herbert and Straight, 1989; Holmes, 1986, 1988, 1996; Manes, 1983; Manes and Wolfson, 1981; Pomerantz, 1978; Wolfson, 1981a, 1981b, 1983, 1984; Wolfson and Manes, 1980). Other studies have sought to build on and extend this research, often by focusing on specific cultural groups and cross-cultural comparisons (Chen, 1993; Farghal and Al-Khatib, 2001; Henderson, 1996; Jaworski, 1995; Johnson and Roen, 1992; Kerbrat-

Orecchioni, 1987; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 1989; Lorenzo-Dus, 2001; Marandin, 1987; Maruyama, 1997; Nelson, Al-Batal, Echols, 1996; Nelson, Bakary, and Al-Batal, 1993; Sims, 1989; Yáñez, 1990).

Inspired by this research, students at Willamette University's College of Liberal Arts—namely, 14 students in Peter Wogan's "Language and Culture" course—collected compliments given in November, 2002 on or near the college's campus in Salem, Oregon. A striking statistical pattern emerged within the 270 compliments recorded. As Table 1 indicates, females received a significantly higher proportion of compliments on appearance from males than males received from females: 60.53% of all compliments given by males to females concerned personal appearance, whereas only 29.27% of the compliments from females to males concerned appearance. In other words, the pattern was inverted, with males giving females almost twice as many compliments on appearance as females gave males, proportionally. The other major topic category, skill, also varied according to gender: 56.09% of female-to-male compliments were about skill, compared with only 31.58% for male-to-female compliments. These topic-distribution patterns are more or less consistent with those discussed by previous authors, such as Manes (1988), who found that personal appearance compliments "typically involve women as speakers or addressees, or both" (p. 98; see also Wolfson, 1983, p. 90). Similarly, Holmes found that nearly twice as many male-to-female compliments were about appearance as skill (Holmes, 1988, p. 458).

Table 1: Gender And Topic Distribution

TOPIC	FEMALE-MALE	MALE-FEMALE	MALE-MALE	FEMALE-FEMALE
APPEARANCE	29.27% (12/41)	60.53% (23/38)	25.92% (7/27)	52.14% (61/117)
SKILL	56.09% (23)	31.58% (12)	66.67% (18)	23.08% (27)
POSSESSIONS	9.76% (4)	2.63% (1)	7.40% (2)	18.80% (22)
PERSONALITY	4.88% (2)	5.26% (2)	--	5.13% (6)
OTHER	--	--	--	.85% (1)
# of compliments	41	38	27	117

Table 1 Note: Columns show percentages, or relative proportion, of each topic among all compliments in a given gender dyad (female to male, male to female, etc.). For reasons explained later, certain compliments (third-party compliments) have not been included in these calculations. Chi Square for all appearance and skill compliments = 22.353, d.f. = 3, exact p = .0000546.

Why are females on this college campus (and elsewhere) receiving relatively more compliments on appearance than males and fewer on skill? While addressing this question about distribution of compliment topics, this article should shed light, more broadly, on gender relations, language use, and qualitative approaches in sociolinguistics.

Methodology

In this study, we—the students and the professor—focused only on patterns that could be quantified statistically, and we used qualitative and quantitative evidence to support our interpretations of those patterns.

Audio Recordings

To enrich contextual understanding, compliment data were captured on audio tape. For a designated two-week period in November 2002, 14 students recorded compliments as they occurred during spontaneous, everyday interactions on our university campus. The students carried hand-held, cassette recorders and recorded all their conversations, except classroom discourse involving professors (which would have complicated the data with age and status differences) and very private moments that students felt uncomfortable recording (though some such moments were not recorded, nobody reported missing any compliments during them). Compliments given by anyone whose first language was not English were excluded, so the subject group was almost entirely made up of heterosexual, white, middle and upper-middle class students between the ages of 19 and 23, the primary student constituency at this private college.

We found the tape recorders did not negatively affect the naturalness of the discourse recorded. The student recorders informed their friends and acquaintances that they were studying "language use in American culture" for a class project; only later, after the recordings were completed, did they tell anyone that they were specifically interested in compliment behaviors. Subjects initially commented on the recorder, sometimes making jokes about it, but even by the end of the first day they were generally acting without special inhibitions; and to be safe, the first day's tapes were thrown out. It helped that subjects had been assured anonymity if desired, and that they were comfortable with recording technologies from other contexts (family videos, camcorders, telephone voice messages, recordings for other classes, etc.).

At the end of each day, the student-recorders reviewed their tapes and transcribed all compliments recorded. Holmes' (1988) definition was used in identifying compliments: "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" (p. 446). Consistent with previous categorization schemes (e.g. Holmes, 1988, p. 496), appearance compliments were defined as those related to the recipient's personal physical attributes, including clothes, skill compliments were defined as those about someone's ability or performance (i.e., academic or athletic accomplishment of a specific task), possession as what someone owns, and personality as character qualities (e.g. "You're so nice!").

Analysis by Compliment Recorders

Departing from the division of intellectual labor found in most (but not all) studies of compliments--with students handing written transcripts over to a professor for analysis--we decided that the students should be directly involved in the analysis at all stages, since they witnessed

the compliment interactions themselves and were most familiar with the personalities, relationship histories, and other subtle contextual factors involved.¹ In class discussions and graded papers throughout the semester, the students interpreted the patterns found in the compliments they recorded, reviewed the research literature, and compared their findings with the overall class data and research literature.

Of course, not all students performed equally well in the class, yet there were several factors that prevented these discrepancies from corrupting the quality of the analysis. For one, these students were highly motivated. They signed up for a 300-level seminar on "Language and Culture," and after a first unit on compliments, voted to throw out the prepared syllabus and spend the remainder of the semester exclusively studying compliments and gender. They were certainly motivated enough to complete the work minimally required for this study: making audio recordings, sharing data with the class, and writing up analyses of the data.

Moreover, our primary statistics are based on clear-cut, straightforward classifications, namely, whether a given compliment was about skill or appearance, and whether the compliment givers and receivers were male or female. These classifications are so clear-cut that there was little room for any student to misinterpret them. The area with the most potential for confusion was the classification of clothing not being worn at the moment of the compliment, which could have conceivably been classified as either a compliment on appearance or possession. After some discussion, we decided to place such compliments in the possession category (and all worn clothing was classified as appearance). Just to be sure this classification rule was consistently followed, the professor and a student independently checked all the compliment transcripts; neither had any disagreements with any of the original student-recorder classifications.

Also, the interpretations provided here are the ones that are the least speculative or idiosyncratic. Although some students came up with other, provocative interpretations, the interpretations provided here are only those supported by statistical evidence and the consensus of the whole class.

The professor (Peter Wogan) served as another source of control, by organizing and guiding the research process, placing results in theoretical context, and writing this article together with Christopher Parisi, one of the students in the class. Given these conditions, the core data and conclusions presented here should not be vitiated by differences in individual student accomplishments.

Interviews

We also used tape-recorded interviews with compliment givers and receivers to gain greater insight into compliment motivations and meanings. These interviews were carried out separately with compliment givers and receivers, a few days after all the compliments were recorded, and they were carried out by the original

student-recorder of the relevant compliment. The interviews were open-ended discussions of general rules of cross-gender discourse on campus and the specific compliments that were given or received by the interviewee.

We did not use the interviews as the final word or as a replacement for statistics on actual compliment behaviors, but we did regard the interviews as a source of insight into speaker and listener motivations. This approach returns compliment studies to their roots in the ethnography of communication, with its emphasis on the native speaker's point of view (Hymes, 1974; see Bucholtz, 2003, p. 46-48).

Explanation #1: Rules Of Romance And Female Guardedness

Based on all the evidence, we came up with two major explanations for the discrepancy in appearance and skill compliments in these cross-gender compliments, or put simply, for the relatively lower proportion of female-to-male appearance compliments. One of the main reasons females gave relatively fewer appearance compliments to males was that they were constrained by gendered rules of romance: that is, females sense that they have to be careful not to look like they're "coming on too strongly" with males. A female-male appearance compliment is risky in a double sense: it could easily be misinterpreted by the male as an invitation to romantic involvement; and even if the female does feel attracted to the male, she could appear too forward if she compliments him directly on his appearance, a more intimate, potentially romantic-sounding topic than, say, performance on a test. Here is the way one interviewee put it, after discussing her crush on a male and reluctance to compliment him directly on his appearance:

Even if a female might compliment a male's appearance with no underlying romantic feelings, it could still be taken the wrong way, since it is not as common [as males complimenting females on appearance]. ...A female will avoid directly complimenting a male on his appearance because she does not want him to know that she is interested in him since it might appear like she is chasing after him, and it is traditionally supposed to be the male's role to pursue the female. (Hoffman, interview with Amanda)²

Interestingly, this student is already aware that females give males relatively fewer appearance compliments, even though none of the statistical patterns in the class data had yet been revealed to her. And though she does refer to the male's role as the pursuer of the female as a "traditional" rule, one that shatters images of gender equality, she still feels that it is one in effect.

This is not to say that females never compliment males on appearance: as our study indicates, this occurs

with some frequency (29%, or 12 of 41, recorded female-male compliments were about appearance). The analysis always has to be based on relative, rather than absolute, contrasts between male and female behavior. In such comparative terms, females are more constrained than males in giving appearance compliments to members of the opposite sex. Strong evidence of such gender differences emerged in several ways.

Exception that Proves the Rule

In another striking pattern, the only self-identified gay male in the class received 33.33% (4/12) of all female-male appearance compliments, while no other male in the class received more than 8% (1/12) of the female-male appearance compliments. During the interviews, females told this young man that they gave him those compliments because they were not worried that he, as a homosexual male, would take them the wrong way, whereas they would not have been as comfortable giving such compliments to their heterosexual male friends because they could have been mistakenly interpreted as "a sexual advance" (Lea, interview with Jennifer). Thus, this gay male's compliments turned out to be the exception that proved the rule about female caution with appearance compliments to males.

Flirtation Levels

There was a striking difference in the level of flirtation found in appearance compliments. Of the 12 female-male appearance compliments, only 8% (1) were deemed to be "flirtatious expressions of romantic interest," as judged by the student recorder/interviewer. By contrast, fully 7 of 23 or 30% of male-female appearance compliments were deemed to be expressions of romantic interest. The imbalance is striking: among appearance compliments, males are nearly four times as flirtatious as females are with the opposite sex. Granted, level of "flirtation" is much more open to recorders' subjective interpretations than our other classifications, but this consistent, overall imbalance in such interpretations constitutes one more indication that gender dynamics are influencing the topic distribution of compliments: the fact that these females are less likely to use compliments flirtatiously than males indicates that they are more guarded and, hence, less likely to give appearance compliments to males than vice versa.

Third-Party Compliments

Another window into female guardedness is provided by "third-party compliments," i.e., a positive comment about a quality valued by the speaker and listener (and presumably the third party) made in same-sex interactions about a person who is not present during the recorded interaction. Third-party compliments obviously involve a much different interactional dynamic than a compliment

given face-to-face, yet they are equally revealing about female guardedness. As Table 2 indicates, by far the largest proportion of third-party compliments came from females speaking to each other about non-present males. Indeed, if such third-party compliments were counted together with face-to-face compliments, they would make

up a full 37.88% of all female-male compliments, well over twice as much as the portion of third-party compliments for male-female compliments and five times the portion of female-female compliments in this category.

TABLE 2: THIRD-PARTY COMPLIMENTS

FEMALE-MALE	(25 of 66 female-male compliments= third-party)	37.88%
MALE-FEMALE	(8/46)	17.39%
FEMALE-FEMALE	(8/125)	6.4%
MALE-MALE	(6/33)	18.18%

Table 2 Note: Percentages show proportion of third-party compliments (those not given in presence of compliment recipient), among all compliments, third-party and face-to-face, in a given gender dyad. Chi Square = 26.727, d.f. = 3, p = .00000627

These statistical discrepancies presumably reflect the relatively greater reluctance of females, compared with males, to make positive comments directly to a member of the opposite sex. These female-female discussions about absent males seem to fit Coates' (2000) definition of "classic backstage talk: the women friends feel able to let down their fronts, to drop their normal 'nice' scripts" (p. 252). This is not to imply that all females in our study innately wished to give appearance compliments to males and could not because of social norms about femininity. Depending on the female's personality and socialization, including internalization and acceptance of gender rules about compliments, individual females may or may not have felt any special desire to compliment males on appearance. Nonetheless, male-female compliments were by far the most common form of third-party compliments recorded, revealing unique dimensions to that gender dynamic.

One possibility is that the males are not as likely to talk with other males about their feelings of attraction to a member of the opposite sex, which would be why fewer male-female appearance compliments were recorded in third-party situations. And obviously female-female sharing of private feelings about a non-present third party can also serve a bonding function. But if such comments were only for bonding by sharing secrets, we would expect to find a similar proportion of third-party compliments from females speaking about non-present females, yet this is hardly the case: a mere 6.4% of all female-female compliments were third-party (compared with 37.88% for female-male compliments), indicating the relatively greater ease with which female-female compliments are given face-to-face compared to female-male compliments. Taken together with the other evidence cited, these statistical discrepancies seem to indicate relatively greater female guardedness.

Recorder Opinions, Plausibility, Interviews

The final source of evidence comes from the class students themselves, who *all* agreed that, in general, females on this campus have to be more guarded than males in expressing romantic interest and that this

difference affects females' appearance compliments to males. The students made this assessment as both student insiders and outside analysts who had spent a semester analyzing compliments on campus.

The class agreement with the female-guardedness explanation derived partly from its consistency with their own experiences in other realms. For example, Barker noted that compliment guardedness is the female counterpart to female caution about where to walk at night. One of Barker's male friends routinely walks her roommate home if they have been out late at night, yet none of his female friends would feel it necessary to do the same for him; the ludicrousness of even suggesting this reversal indicates how far from the norm it would be. Female guardedness is all too common in various realms so the students saw the compliments as consistent with a wider pattern.

The students' opinions were also reinforced by the interviews themselves. Every student in the class recorded at least one interview comment to the effect that females generally need to be careful about appearing to be coming on too strongly with appearance compliments to males. Such comments included the following:

"You can't compliment every guy you see on his clothes or haircut or whatever because the guy could be sleazy and think it's a come-on" (Lea, interview with Jennifer).

"I don't usually compliment guys that I like on appearance because then they'll know that I like them" (Petersen, interview with Katie).

"A female knows that her direct compliment to a male on his appearance is flirty and will most likely be interpreted as so, unless she is directly complimenting a family member or a very platonic friend. And even if a female might compliment a male's appearance with no underlying romantic feelings, it could be taken in the wrong way since it is not as common" (Hoffman, interview with Amanda).

Although comments such as these were made over and over, the compliment and interview tapes did not provide statistical evidence for female guardedness in terms of answers to a single standardized question. Still, the interview and compliment tapes were helpful to the individual student recorders in analyzing the dynamics at work and getting an accurate record of the compliments.³

Taking all the various forms of evidence together—the varying levels of flirtation, the exception of the gay male, the female-male third-party compliments, the class's own observations, and the interview statements—it is clear that female guardedness affected these female-male appearance compliments.

Explanation #2: Social Expectations About Values

The second major explanation for the discrepancy in distribution of topics is that students are following social expectations about male and female priorities: since females are socially expected to value appearance more than males, they receive a greater proportion of compliments on appearance; and since males are expected to value skill, they receive a greater proportion of skill compliments. In other words, since society places different weights on these qualities for males and females, and since a compliment should be about a quality the listener is perceived to value highly, these social norms translate into discrepancies in compliment topic distributions.

This explanation has also been offered by Manes (1983): "In our society [U.S.] it is assumed that women are concerned about appearance, both their own and others', and even more that women of all ages should try to make themselves attractive" (p. 98; see also Wolfson, 1984, p. 241). The statistical patterns in our data also support this explanation, since same-gender compliments follow the same pattern of topic distribution as in cross-gender compliments, with 25.92% of male-male compliments being on appearance vs. 66.67% on skill, and 52.14% of female-female compliments being on appearance vs. 23.08% on skill (see Table 1). In other words, speaking among themselves, each gender replicates roughly the same topic distribution found in cross-gender interactions.⁴ The students and subjects also readily made the connection between compliment topics and social values, noting the premium placed on female appearance in magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and other mass media, and the number of wealthy, average-looking males married to beautiful women, etc. This is the way several interviewees described the situation:

"Some of the most powerful men are totally ugly, but yet they are on *People's* 'Most Eligible Bachelors.'" (Friesen, interview with Kate)
 "I think men value women's appearance more, and I think women value women's appearance more." (Roberts, interview with Adrienne)
 "Society definitely pushes girls to be good looking and guys to be good at things, so it's

more acceptable to compliment guys for their skills." (Gordon, interview with Nate)

"Girls get complimented so often on appearance because girls are supposed to look pretty." (Gordon, interview with Samantha)

Explanation # 2 was confirmed not only by the frequency of interview comments such as these, but, moreover, consistency with previous research, as well as the consistency in topic distribution among same-gender and cross-gender compliments.

Obligatory Compliments: Blurring Of Categories

While we found overwhelming evidence for both explanations, it was much harder to connect one explanation or the other to a specific subset of the corpus.

If there is any truth to explanation # 2, it should have affected *every* appearance and skill compliment recorded since a compliment is supposed to be about something that the recipient values. So while interviewees spoke freely about the differences in social values for males and females, they did not say that they gave a specific compliment because they knew that the recipient valued that quality; the compliment would not have been given if the giver did not assume the recipient valued the quality being commented on. And female guardedness is hard to connect to specific compliments because it is about relative degrees of what females do *not* say (flirtatious appearance compliments) compared with males. This is why most of our evidence is and must be indirect—exceptions that prove the rule, other patterns that connect with these explanations, interview statements about overall behaviors, etc.

It is also hard to separate one explanation from the other because both can easily be at work at the same time. But rather than a problem, we see this ambiguity and overlap as a source of further insight into the complexity of these gender dynamics and compliments, particularly what can be called "obligation compliments." As Manes (1983) notes, some compliments are given in response to a noticeably new acquisition or improvement: "Any recent acquisition, from a new house to new hairdo, will be complimented once it is noticed or brought to one's attention. The omission of a compliment in such a case is tantamount to a statement of disapproval and, as we have seen, may be taken as an insult or rejection" (p. 99). The following compliment from our corpus, in which a female arrives at a house dressed more formally than usual, fits this obligatory compliment category:

Leah:	Hey you guys!
Samantha:	Hi Leah, hi Derek
Nate [to Leah]:	You look very nice tonight. How was the party?
Leah:	Thanks! It was fun. We had a good time
Nate:	Awesome

Situation: Nate, Samantha, and her boyfriend Paul have been hanging out at Nate's house, on a Saturday night. Derek and Leah arrive at the house, coming from a party. Leah is dressed more formally than usual. (Gordon, #3)

However, in certain cases it was not easy to separate obligation from flirtation, as an element of both seemed to be present at the same time. Such blurring occurs, for example, in the following male compliment on a female's skirt:

Ken: You look nice today
 Jane: Thank you
 Ken: I like that skirt a lot
 Jane: Thank you. Yeah I don't know... I hadn't worn a skirt in a really long time and I wanted to wear one even though it's freezing outside so I thought I'll wear a really big coat and that would counteract it

Situation: Campus workplace, where they both work. Two other people were present in the room, but engaged in their own conversation. (Jane, # 8)

On one level, Ken's compliment seems to be brought on by social obligation; since Jane does not usually wear skirts, and since females generally receive compliments on appearance, especially new clothing, Ken was obligated to compliment Jane on her skirt. Indeed, when interviewed afterward, Ken denied the compliment was flirtatious, saying he gave it simply because Jane does not often wear skirts. Jane, however, felt that Ken was just using the relative novelty of her skirt and the social expectations of compliments on special clothing as a cover to make a flirtatious comment (as she put it, a form of "move making"). She inferred this deeper meaning because not every male complimented her skirt that day, and, moreover, Jane fit Ken's comment into a wider context. Both Ken and Jane were single at the time, and Jane sensed Ken's romantic interest in her, particularly after receiving the following compliments as well:

Ken: Jane is beautiful.
 Situation: A written note left in Jane's pocket by Ken while in a coffee shop (Jane # 15)

Jane: Ken's wearing my hat
 Ken: It smells like Jane
 Jane: That's...I don't know whether that's a good thing or a bad thing
 Ken: A good thing
 Jane: It's a good thing. All right
 Situation: In a dorm room, around 7 p.m. Ben, Lizzy, Ken, and Jane are all talking.

Connie, Lizzy's roommate, talks on the phone in the background. (Jane, # 21)

Especially after receiving Ken's strong declaration of his feelings in the written note ("Jane is beautiful"), Jane was more convinced than ever that Ken meant the skirt compliment as flirtatious. Most important, the skirt example shows the way that both social obligation and flirtation can be present in the same compliment behavior. The ambiguity caused by this overlap can work to an interested party's advantage by providing a socially acceptable pretext for flirtatious compliments, as well as a safe escape route should the flirtatious overture be rejected or questioned; being able to disavow responsibility for a flirtatious comment is the equivalent of distancing oneself from a potentially offensive comment by placing it in a joking frame ("I was only kidding").

But rather than being offended by Ken's advances, Jane took them as part of an ongoing dance of romance. And nobody else, male or female, expressed displeasure with any of the other recorded compliments deemed flirtatious—except for one set of compliments, which made the female recipients uncomfortable and demonstrated the potential dangers in the ambiguity between obligation and flirtation compliments. In this case, females were getting dressed in their dorm rooms for a big dance on campus, and a male student complimented them as follows:

Susan: Hi. You guys going to the dance?
 Ron: Susan, you look very nice
 Susan: Thank you
 Situation: In dorm hallway, Susan passes Ron and another male. (Susan, #55)

Ron: [Sticks his head in the room] Wanda, you look good
 Wanda: [laughs uncomfortably] Thank you. O.K., are you going to the dance?
 Ron: Yeah
 Situation: Later that evening, in Wanda's room. Wanda and Susan are getting ready to leave for the dance and Ron pokes his head in the room. (Susan, #69)

Both Susan and Wanda said they were uncomfortable receiving these compliments because Ron is not someone they like much, due to his social awkwardness and occasional inappropriateness (e.g. telling tasteless jokes). Susan stated:

Most of the time I try to be nice to Ron because he really has almost no friends, but I do not like him, don't feel comfortable with him, and definitely don't feel comfortable with him commenting on my physical appearance. That is how Wanda feels, too. We don't want him looking at us that way.

Ron's unwanted compliments show again how an obligatory compliment may easily slide into flirtation on another level—or rather than “flirtation,” the more accurate term here might be “sexual interest” or “sexual harassment” since the females did not welcome this verbal and visual attention. The issue of sexual harassment is worth raising, even at the risk of starting a discussion that would require another full article to resolve. It is not that every male-female appearance compliment is a form of sexual harassment in disguise: indeed, no other females in the study perceived any male compliments as threatening; quite the contrary, the compliments were exchanged between friends, lovers, and potential lovers, and were generally well received. Ron is seen, by males and females alike, as odd, so he should not be taken to represent all males in the study. But as someone who has crossed over the line, Ron reveals what is at stake for females in these compliment exchanges: the possibility of incurring unwanted advances. As one interviewee noted earlier, females have to be cautious, because “the guy could be sleazy and think it’s a come-on” (Lea, interview with Jennifer). Previous research (Johnson, Stockdale, and Saal, 1991) also shows that females are more likely to interpret male behavior as sexual harassment than males do.

Thus, even when the social premium on female appearance applies (explanation # 2), the importance of female guardedness (explanation # 1) may apply as well. Although there were few cases (only Ken, Ron) where someone clearly perceived an overlap between obligation and flirtation, these cases point up the potential for the blurring of those categories. And since, as shown above, females feel the need to be more cautious than males about expressing romantic interest, the potential ambiguity between obligation and flirtation presumably leads females to be more cautious than males even with obligation compliments.

Conclusion

Thus, two potentially overlapping reasons were discovered for the statistical discrepancies in skill and appearance compliments: greater female guardedness, and social expectations about priorities for males and females. The latter explanation has been put forth before in earlier studies (e.g. Manes, 1983, p. 98; Wolfson, 1984, p. 241), but since our study was carried out under different conditions, it was interesting to see this explanation re-confirmed. The major studies of compliments and topic (Holmes, 1986, 1988; Manes and Wolfson, 1981) were carried out in the early 1980’s, with participants not limited to college students, and, in Holmes’ case, in New Zealand, rather than the U.S. It is worth noting that some of the same patterns found in these studies prevail nearly two decades later, on this college campus. This finding would be particularly surprising to anybody who expected compliment behavior to be the same for males and females at this time and in this setting, a university with more female students (54%)

than males, where academic performance is highly valued by females.

The first explanation—about female guardedness—has not been raised in previous compliment studies. In fact, discussion of the “flirtation factor” has been altogether absent, with the exception of Lorenzo-Dus (2001), who noted in passing that in Spain “tradition does place the man as the expected initiator in such [flirtatious] male-female encounters” (p. 116). Given the pervasiveness of flirtation on most college campuses, it may seem surprising that this topic has received so little attention. Perhaps previous researchers did not emphasize flirtation because many times their data were not strictly limited to compliments on college campuses, so the characteristics of the data pool (the age group, setting) reduced the likelihood that flirtation would be much of a factor. Presumably flirtation has also not been emphasized in previous studies due to the focus on quantitative patterns rather than the qualitative analysis of actor motivations.

Quantitative and qualitative methodologies obviously each have advantages and disadvantages, so some combination of the two seems ideal. Pursuing issues raised here, future studies could consider alternative methods for female expression of romantic interest other than appearance compliments (video tapes of paralanguage could be particularly helpful), borders and overlaps between sexual harassment and flirtation, comparisons with flirtation compliments in other cultural regions and age groups as well as in computer-mediated communication, and investigations of frontstage and backstage attitudes toward flirtation and compliment behaviors.

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Notes

- * Christopher Parisi and Peter Wogan wrote this article, but the following students were co-authors in that they also collected and analyzed the data: Claire Barker, Julie Dougherty, Kristin Friesen, Patrick Gordon, Helena Hoffman, Austin Lea, Katrina Miller, Heidi Petersen, Dayna Randleman, Alisa Ray, Rosemary Roberts, Crystal Weber, and David White.
- 1 An apparent exception, for example, is the work of Manes and Wolfson (1981), who report that part of their corpus of compliments was collected by their students “as part of seminars in sociolinguistics conducted by the authors” (p. 116).
- 2 Students from the class are cited by last name, except where a pseudonym is required for confidentiality; in the latter case, and for students whose compliments were recorded, only a first name is given.
- 3 Hence prosodic features are not noted in the transcripts reproduced here since the emphasis is not on prosodic patterns per se, but, rather, students’ interpretations.
- 4 Special thanks go to Deborah Schiffrin for making this connection.

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Peter Wogan is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Willamette University. He can be reached at pwogan@willamette.edu.

Christopher Parisi was a sophomore in Peter's fall 2002 "Language and Culture" class, and he spent the next semester analyzing the class data and writing this article with Peter. Christopher has since graduated with a Bachelors of the Arts in English and Anthropology, and he can be reached at cirlot@hotmail.com.