

Compliments and compliment responses in Israeli Hebrew: Hebrew university in Jerusalem students in interaction



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Abstract

By examining how Hebrew speakers respond to compliments, this study suggests a taxonomy of compliment responses, adds to the scarce knowledge about pragmatic patterns in Hebrew, and reveals parts of the “cultural script”/habitus of the Israeli speech community. A new variation of the classic Discourse Completion Test was devised and applied to compliment responses of Hebrew-speaking students. The findings suggest that Hebrew speakers tend to accept compliments more than any other politeness strategy choice, and their responses to compliments tend to be more diversified than in other cultures. A compliment’s object had the most influence on strategy choice when responding to it, with an apparent differentiation between “external compliments” (appearance, performances, and possession) and “internal compliments” (physical appearance, talent, and personality), where the former is welcomed and the latter is not. A discussion about the specific socio-cultural history of Israel showed that the linguistic choices are part of a larger cultural performance of *firgun*, a relatively new socio-pragmatic practice that indicates a shift in Israeli politeness habitus. © 2017 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Focusing on compliments and compliment responses as a micro-level speech act that serves as a “cultural mirror” (Manes, 1983:96) has yielded fascinating insight into many speech communities (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001; Nelson et al., 1996; Sifianou, 2001). Nevertheless, while linguistic literature on compliments and compliment response is vast (see for example Golato, 2002; Holmes, 1986; Maíz-Arévalo, 2012b), pragmatic research on Hebrew is scarce and most has been carried out on speech acts such as requests and apologies (Blum-Kulka et al., 1985; Blum-Kulka, 1992[2005]).

This study will examine how Hebrew speakers respond to compliments by examining Hebrew-speaking students at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (HUJI) as a sub-group of Hebrew speakers. To my knowledge, this is the first research on compliments and compliment responses in Hebrew. The study aims to add to the scarce knowledge of Hebrew pragmatic patterns, and through it, discover some part of the habitus (Bourdieu, 1980[2005]) of the Israeli speech community.

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The first part of this paper is a theoretical background of politeness research within a socio-pragmatic framework and a discussion of the specific socio-cultural history of Israel, which, I argue, is relevant to the understanding of the pragmatic choices made by Hebrew speakers, as in other cultures. In Section 2, a devised form of the classic Discourse Completion Test methodology is presented, which aims to address the physical part of language as well as to lessen the imaginary character of the method. Section 3 will discuss the study results and offer conclusions regarding the subtle yet significant change in the Israeli Hebrew politeness habitus, as reflected by Hebrew speakers' choices for compliment response.

1.1. Theoretical framework

1.1.1. Politeness

Politeness is habitus (Locher and Watts, 2005); it is a schematic system of social interaction guidelines acquired by a speech community. A certain speech act will assume different forms in each speech community, according to its specific habitus. For example, a speaker's knowledge of the frequency of thanking as a speech act; its linguistic form; and the appropriate time, place, and social context in which it should be said is acquired during a child's language acquisition process according to the norms and conventions of his/her speech community. These guidelines become second nature and do not require deliberate thought. As habitus, the schematic system of politeness enables speakers to assess a specific social context and act accordingly.

Although not explicitly declared, Blum-Kulka sees politeness as habitus. For Blum-Kulka (1992[2005]), a specific culture will determine the values of these parameters and conventionalize them to a "cultural script,"¹ which in turn will determine the felicity conditions of a specific linguistic strategy in a specific context. This approach to politeness is based on the understanding that politeness is culture specific and, therefore, its components are not predetermined.

Locher and Watts (2005:11) explicitly used Bourdieu's concept of habitus to describe the social norms and expectations that guide interactants in verbal and non-verbal instances of relational work. In their criticism of Brown and Levinson (1978[1987]) they reverted to Goffman's (1967[1972]) original definition of face, arguing that it does not reside inherently in an individual, but rather is constructed discursively. They added that no utterance or speech act is inherently more or less polite, because contexts are spontaneous and speakers rely on their habitus. For Locher and Watts (2005:12, 16), the best way to understand discourse and social interaction is by considering what is politic and non-politic, or un-marked and marked, in a specific politeness habitus performed in actual context. This approach requires consideration of socio-pragmatic patterns in a culture-specific context and therefore calls for observation of politeness among Hebrew speakers.

1.1.2. Politeness in Israel

Blum-Kulka is essentially the only linguist to research habitus in Israeli Hebrew. Scholars like Katriel (1986, 2001) and Almog (1997, 2004) studied the cultural values of Israeli society as reflected in Hebrew usage, but from a sociological–anthropological point of view. And so, the linguistic literature on the subject is very scarce. In a meta-pragmatic paper, Blum-Kulka (1992[2005]:258–259) addressed habitus and universality. In order to discover culture's role in habitus, she interviewed Hebrew-speaking Israelis about politeness. As expected, meta-pragmatic questions made interviewees aware of their actions and words and they tended to provide social-cultural expectations in an attempt to present their best selves. When asked to define politeness, Hebrew speakers gave two main connotative definitions: a positive one that included patience and tolerance, restraint, courtesy, respect, and kindness; and a negative one, which perceived politeness as "external", "dishonest", and "unnatural". Their definition resonates with the Western folk tradition of *decorum*, but came with a cultural warning that politeness is an external packaging of communication that serves as means to avoid harming interlocutors. Blum-Kulka concluded that Israelis are highly aware of the components of speech events (context, speakers, and specific speech act), which is why they demonstrated a large variety of politeness strategies in navigating interactions. In addition, she noted a clear differentiation between the public and the private spheres in the Israelis' perception of social life. While the politeness code in the private sphere is more or less stable, the code of the public sphere is still being formed. As Lakoff (2000:49) explained, known social frames do not require deliberate thought and are therefore unmarked, while frames that are not yet set still do and are therefore marked, as would be the case with Israelis' perception of the private and public spheres, respectively. For the Israeli interviewees, among family and friends (the private sphere) there was no need for politeness, it was only required outside of their inner circle (public sphere). Blum-Kulka's main conclusion stated that the Israeli politeness code was still unstable, due to the relative newness of Israeli society.

¹ "Cultural scripts" refers to Blum-Kulka's (1992[2005]) use of the term for cultural conventions that motivate linguistic and behavioral choices in a speech community. This use of the term should not be confused with the ethnopragmatic technique used by Goddard and Wierzbicka (2004), although both refer to cultural norms, values, and practices.

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