



How gender affects compliments in Italian

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from a long-term study on compliments in Italian, employing different theoretical and methodological approaches. This study adopts variational pragmatics to investigate the impact of gender on compliments. We examine whether Italian compliments exhibit gender-specific patterns that transcend cultural variations, as suggested in prior research. After revisiting in a variational perspective the wide collection of spontaneous speech analyzed in an earlier phase of the research, new data are drawn from a questionnaire submitted to a sample of 576 young speakers in the University of Catania (Italy). This questionnaire explores various facets of complimenting, including frequency, object, modulation, and function. This analysis reveals a distinct gender pattern, highlighting a pragmatic role of compliments that is salient in women's interaction. Among them, compliments are much more common and intensified, they concern mostly appearance, and they are a positive politeness strategy as they serve an important interpersonal function: linked to the concept of phatic communion, compliments are acts aimed at creating, maintaining, and strengthening mutual solidarity.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to assess the impact of gender on the speech act of compliments in Italian among youngsters. The pragmatic variability in giving and receiving compliments is examined focusing on gender – one of the macro-sociolinguistic factors that affect language use, and compliments in particular (Rees-Miller, 2011). Investigating the case of present-day Italy, gender-based patterns of compliment behavior can be observed and compared to other socio-cultural contexts examined in the literature. Compliments have been investigated in many languages,¹ but hardly with respect to Italian and to its sociolinguistic variability (cf. Alfonzetti, 2009, Alfonzetti, 2013, Castagneto, 2016, 2019; Castagneto and Sidraschi, 2018; Castagneto and Italiano, 2022).

In order to study the correlation between the linguistic act of complimenting and the social variable of gender, it is necessary to assume the latter as a fundamentally ideological construct (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013). The dual gender schema is endorsed since childhood (cf. Bem, 1981; Liben and Bigler, 2002; Miller et al., 2023) and acts as a

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¹ The space of this paper does not allow for a detailed listing. In addition to the studies mentioned in these pages, focused on English varieties (Pomerantz, 1978; Wolfson, 1984; Holmes, 1988; Herbert, 1990), it suffices to mention the early works on many different languages (Chen, 1993; Farghal and Al-Khatibb, 2001; Ruhi and Doğan, 2001; Ralarala and Dlali, 2007).

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fundamental social institution (cf. Bourdieu, 1998). Gender does not represent an inherent trait of the individual, as can be said for the notion of sex (Queen, 2014), but rather a construction that is produced and reproduced through a network of social and discursive practices. In other words, gender is not something we possess, but rather something we do (West and Zimmermann, 1987; Butler, 1990) within an interactional dimension. Since primary socialization, language conveys, allows, or imposes a gender characterization, and compliment practices are employed for the construction of gender identity (Holmes, 2012: 301–336).

This study aims to address the speech act of compliments not as much as a reflection of pre-existing categories, but rather as something that contributes to the construction and maintenance of such sociocultural categories, a means for speakers to position themselves within the gender order (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013: 47–48).

2. Methods and research questions

2.1. Methods

This paper presents the main results of the third phase of a broader long-term study on compliments in Italian. The study has been conducted with diverse methods and collection techniques, assuming that the integration of different methodologies provides a more comprehensive view of the object of analysis.

The first phase of the research was based on the field method, and more specifically on the conversational analysis of a large collection of spontaneous speech recorded in a wide range of communicative situations in the cities of Catania and Rome, Italy (Alfonzetti, 2009). The main objectives were: (i) to situate compliments within the theoretical models of politeness; (ii) to identify the criteria for defining compliments as illocutionary acts; (iii) to develop a typology of responses; (iv) to reconstruct the structures of the compliment-response sequences in talk-in-interaction; (v) to analyze compliments within the framework of emotive communication, establishing their relationship with the modulation of illocutionary force (both strengthening and mitigation).

In order to address some theoretical issues that emerged, a different method was used in the second phase. A questionnaire was submitted to a sample of 300 informants, and structured interviews were conducted (Alfonzetti, 2011, Alfonzetti, 2017). The questions aimed to elicit opinions on the functions of compliments, the extent of the merit chain, the importance of spontaneity as a felicity condition for prototypical compliments, the issue of identifying implicit compliments, and the viability of applying the notion of mitigation to compliments.

Results from these two phases show that, in the Italian context under examination, compliments are conceived as face-enhancing acts (Sifianou, 2001) aimed at pleasing and gratifying the interlocutor, social lubricants (Wolfson, 1983), and convergence strategies to express solidarity and shorten interpersonal distances (Boyle, 2000). This socio-pragmatic outline of compliments parallels that of American cultures (as well as Slavic or Mediterranean), whereby compliments are frequent and often intensified, in opposition to the “supranational North Western European region of shared cultural values” hypothesized by Kasper (1990: 199), in which compliments less often function as social lubricants and tend to be mitigated. However, such conclusions have a serious limitation: an underlying idealization of linguistic communities, which are thought as homogeneous sets of members who act uniformly, neglecting the social variability of language use (Kasper, 1995: 72–74).

Therefore, a third phase was undertaken from a variational pragmatics perspective (Schneider and Barron, 2008; Barron and Schneider, 2009), assuming that “cultural norms reflected in speech acts differ not only from one language to another, but also from one regional and social variety to another” (Wierzbicka, 1985: 146). With reference to the variational pragmatics approach (Barron and Schneider, 2009), compliments are analyzed on the *actional level*, as their production and reception is assessed in terms of speech acts, and on the *topic level*, with respect to their object. Due to the limits of the method used (questionnaire, rather than analysis of actual speech), this paper does not address the *interactional level*, because conversational sequences are not examined.²

The questionnaire elicited self-evaluative data on the perception of giving and receiving compliments. Most of the questions were multiple-choice and focused on crucial aspects of compliments, i.e. frequency, function, object, and modulation. The informants are youngsters with a medium–high level of education: 576 people, aged between 17 and 35, who are students at the University of Catania, Italy.³ Of the total sample, 353 people identified as women, 214 as men, and 9 as other types of gender identity (non-binary, fluid, etc.). Given the small number in the ‘other’ category, this paper focusses on opposition between the main identities composing the dual schema of the gender order.

² The questionnaire included some discourse-completion tasks (a technique falling under the *laboratory method*, Jucker, 2009), but the answers collected need further and more qualitative analysis that exceed the scope of this paper.

³ Geographic variability is not considered in this study. A balanced sample of informants from the main geo-linguistic areas of Italy might of course shed light on regional differences, and this might well be a topic for further studies. Nonetheless, considering one geographic point or two (in this case, the city of Catania and Rome) is common practice for linguistic and pragmatic research, and it does not imply that language is analyzed with reference to socio-cultural peculiarities (unless this is addressed as the topic of the study, cf. Castagneto and Italiano, 2022).

2.2. Research questions

This study addresses aspects of compliments in which previous research has identified significant gender differences, often transcending linguistic and cultural boundaries (Rees-Miller, 2011).

- *Frequency.* Many studies show that women give and receive compliments more frequently than men, especially in interactions among themselves. This has been evident since the pioneering work on gender and compliments in American English as well as from studies on various other languages (cf. fn. 1).
- *Object.* Women tend to give and receive compliments primarily on appearance (physical looks, clothing, accessories, etc.), while men receive them rather on possessions, skills, and performances (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013: 78). Among men, compliments may be perceived as a threat to one's negative face (Wolfson, 1983: 93): those on physical appearance may cause embarrassment or surprise (Holmes, 1995: 131–135) and those on material objects might denote desire and envy.
- *Modulation.* Women are more likely to intensify compliments, whereas men tend to mitigate or downplay them (cf. Holmes, 1988, 1995; Herbert, 1990).
- *Function.* Women seem to use compliments mainly as acts of solidarity and positive politeness, while men perceive them as a face-threatening act (FTA), causing embarrassment and discomfort (Holmes, 1988: 452, 1995: 124–125).

Responses are another key factor in analyzing compliments. The literature outlines a complex picture, along two lines of interpretation. According to a maximalist view, the differences between men and women are significant and depend on the gender of the person giving the compliment. Simplifying the findings in Herbert (1990), compliments given by women are less likely to be accepted compared to those from men, especially when directed at women. According to a minimalist view, the difference in responses does not lie in the choice of general strategies (i.e. acceptance, refusal/disagreement, avoidance) but in their respective subcategories. The case of New Zealand (Holmes, 1995) – where men tend to ignore compliments while women prefer to transfer credit or provide informative comments or show disagreement – confirms the gender pattern of compliments as FTAs in the behavior of men and as a strategy for positive politeness in that of women. As mentioned above (§ 2.1), this study does not examine responses, which requires further and methodologically different analysis (cf. fn. 2).

3. Spontaneous speech data revisited from a gender perspective

The theoretical issues dealt with in the first phase led to disregard the impact of variability on the exchange of compliments. Starting instead from the assumption that speech acts vary even within the same culture in relation to different factors, the collection of spontaneous speech was reanalyzed from a gender perspective. Thus, we decided to follow Holmes' suggestion made over thirty years ago,⁴ which has however largely gone unheeded: that is, to consider observations on gender differences derived mostly from ethnographic research just as provisional hypotheses. Indeed, these observations need to be verified with more in-depth analyses of spontaneous speech, in order to overcome the limitations arising from both the notebook and the laboratory methods (cf. Jucker, 2009, Alfonzetti, 2017).

Before presenting the results of the questionnaire survey, the findings from the reanalysis of the speech data will be illustrated in relation to the specific focus of this third phase of our research.

3.1. Frequency

The analysis confirms the trend observed in many previous studies on different languages and cultures: even in the collection of Italian compliments, women give and receive far more compliments than men in all situations. This finding had already been noted by Alfonzetti, 2009, but we are now able to provide more precise quantitative data. The collection contains 148 compliments, distributed as follows among the four dyads: woman to woman, man to woman, woman to man, and man to man.

- Woman to woman: 63 %
- Man to woman: 22 %
- Woman to man: 11 %
- Man to man: 4 %

Thus, women give 74 % of all the compliments in the collection: 63 % to other women and 11 % to men. They receive 85 % of the compliments: 63 % from other women and 22 % from men.

⁴ Holmes (1988: 463): «The next stage in the analysis of compliments will involve a thorough analysis of taped material, enabling detailed interpretation of the functions of compliments in a wide range of contexts».

Men give 26 % of the compliments: 22 % directed at women and only 4 % at other men; they receive 15 % of the compliments, of which 11 % come from women and 4 % from other men. This confirms the very low percentage of compliments exchanged between men.

A more detailed analysis confirms moreover another interesting finding, which has also emerged from previous research: in compliments directed at women, both from men and from other women, differences in role, status, and age, that otherwise regulate compliments directed at men, are nullified. In other words, while the deference accorded to high-status men places strong restrictions on compliments directed at them by subordinates or younger people, an adult high-status woman is often complimented by younger and lower-status speakers, even on her physical appearance. This supports the assertion by [Wolfson \(1984: 241\)](#), according to which “sex overrides status”, and the finding by [Holmes \(1995: 135\)](#) that “higher status females were twice as likely to receive compliments as higher status men”.

Here is an example from the collection ([Alfonzetti, 2009](#)) that clearly illustrates this point. In (1), a salesperson, while delivering carpets purchased by the customer in-store, sees an exercise step in the living room and compliments her on her physical shape, to which she responds with a disagreement, expressed with an antiphrastic “yes”, accompanied by a smile and a slight blush.

(1) Between salesperson and customer

- 1 Am io oggi pensavo che lei andava in palestra ma vedo che la fa qua la ginnastica
'today I thought you go to the gym but I see you do your exercises here'
2 Bf sì la faccio a casa
'yes, I do it at home.'
3 Am ha un fisico da attrice [da top model
'you have a body like an actress or a top model'
4 Bf [sì! ((smiling and blushing))
'yes

This phenomenon is also observed in interactions between women, but with significant differences in how they react: in (2), a young hairdresser (A), while styling a client she sees for the first time (B), compliments her on her youthful appearance, eliciting a smile once again. However, unlike in (1), the smile is accompanied by an explicit thank you and followed by an expression of implicit appreciation, an unequivocal sign of how much the client appreciated the hairdresser's flattering words.

(2) At the hairdresser's

- 1 Bf io il mio dovere l'ho fatto già ho due figli uno di diciotto e una di quindici adesso basta
'I did my duty already I have two children one is 18 years old and one is 15 that's enough'
2 Af lei ha due figli così grandi? io credevo che si fosse sposata da pochi anni come me
'you have two so grown-up children? I thought you had married a few years ago like me'
per questo le ho detto di darci del tu credevo che andava ancora all'università sembra molto più giovane
'that's why I told you to be on first name terms with each other I thought you were still a university student you look much younger'
3 Bf grazie! ((smiling)) che bella giornata oggi!
'thank you! ((smiling)) what a beautiful day today!'

Thanking and showing gratitude for the “gift” received is a reaction that assigns to the compliment the value of a face-enhancing act aimed at eliciting pleasure in the recipient ([Marandin, 1987: 85](#)). On the contrary, the embarrassment, blush, and absence of explicit thanks in (1) would suggest that the compliment is treated as a FTA, although the smile might reveal some satisfaction, which, due to the relationship between participants and gender differences, is attempted to be masked by means of avoidance and/or disagreement strategies. In (2), however, despite the asymmetric relationship, gender identity may lead the compliment to be perceived and treated as an affective positive polite act. Examples of this kind in the speech data are numerous but none directed at a man.

3.2. Object

The reanalysis of the speech data also confirms gender differences found in previous studies regarding the object of compliments: women give and receive far more compliments on physical appearance, clothing, accessories and jewelry. Here are some quantitative data.

- Out of 19 (13 %) compliments on beauty and natural talents, all except one are directed towards women, from both other women (9) and men (10). None from man to man.
- Compliments on a new haircut or hairstyle are in all 14 (9 %): 10 among women, 4 from woman to man, in all four cases from someone who had suggested the recipient to cut their hair; a situation where the compliment takes on a directive function (see 2.4). No compliments on hair from men.
- Out of 8 compliments (5 %) on staying in shape and/or weight loss, 6 are exchanged between women, one from man to woman, and one from man to man. The latter, however, seems to be a FTA, as the recipient, as revealed by his somewhat displeased agreement, had indeed lost weight due to health reasons.
- Of the 10 compliments on appearing or seeming younger, 8 are directed at women, with 5 from other women and 3 from men. None from man to man. Two compliments from women to men are exchanged in a humorous context within friendly relationships.

- All 18 compliments (12 %) on clothing or accessories except one are between women; one from man to woman; none between men.
- Compliments on elegance are 7 (5 %): 3 from woman to man, 2 among women, 1 from man to woman, and 1 from man to man. However, the analysis of the latter reveals it to be a strategy aimed at mitigating a sort of criticism; during a dinner at friends' in Rome, one of the guests complains about feeling very hot, to which another responds: "but you are very elegant although you are dressed heavy".
- All 17 compliments (11 %) on jewelry are exchanged between women.
- The 13 compliments (9 %) on home and interior objects are exchanged between women, except for 3 from man to woman.
- Women also receive the majority (26 out of 34, 23 %) of compliments on skills and performance, a type of compliment more closely tied to the context of situation (Rees-Miller, 2011).
- Of the rare compliments (5 = 3 %) on personality and temperament, 4 are directed at women (3 from men, 1 from another woman) and one from man to man.
- The few (4) compliments on other items (car, city and children) are all directed at women: 3 from other women, 1 from a man.

3.3. Form and modulation

From the collection of speech, a general tendency towards intensification of compliments through a variety of verbal and non-verbal means emerges. A careful analysis focusing on the gender variable highlights a significant difference: unlike women, men rarely use highly emotional elements to reinforce compliments – such as smiles, affectionate tone of voice, phonological elongations, interjections, diminutives, and marked syntactic constructions – which are very common in compliments made by women. Example (4) provides some instances of compliments with marked syntactic structure, extracted from different situations, all formulated by women.

(3)
 Guarda che belli::na quella borsetta!
 'Look how ni::ce is this little bag!'
 Che bella sciarpa che hai!
 'What a beautiful scarf you have!'
 Che belli::no quel lume B!
 'How ni::ce is that lamp B!'
 Che bella che sei qual!
 'How beautiful you are here!'
 Bellino questo cappottino! ((between old women))
 'How nice this small coat!'

Holmes also notes in New Zealand the female tendency to enhance the expressive function through the use of "rhetorical pattern 4 (e.g. *What a neat blouse*)", while men more often use "minimal pattern 5 (e.g. *Great shoes*) [...] attenuating or hedging it" (Holmes, 1995: 454).

In compliments made by men, both to men and women, syntactically unmarked phrases prevail, as in (4), where a man praises a friend's culinary skills while observing him preparing fish skewers, receiving a radical disagreement in response.

(4) Between friends
 1 Am sei un grande!
 'you're great!'
 2 Bm no! ma che ci vuole? veramente non ci vuole niente
 'No! but it's not all that difficult...really. it's just as easy'

In most cases, men tend to treat the compliment, both in formulating it and in reacting to it, as if it were an assertive illocutionary act, that is, an act aimed solely at representing or describing reality (Kissine, 2013: 181). This point deserves further consideration. In the first phase of the research, compliments were defined as hybrid acts: the person giving a compliment expresses a feeling of interest, affection, and admiration towards the recipient (expressive component), through a positive evaluation of something or someone more or less closely connected to them (representative component).

Based on what emerges from this reanalysis, it could be argued that in compliments made by men, the assertive component is usually stronger than the expressive one, contrary to what happens in most compliments made by women. In fact, as noted by Sbisà (2001: 1794), emphasizing "the expressed inner state" contributes to characterizing the act as expressive: a statement such as "Oh, it is so pretty" – reinforced by the interjection and the adverb so – is "more clearly a compliment than 'It is pretty'", which lacks any intensifying elements.

This detailed analysis sheds light on how compliments are formulated and received differently based on gender, highlighting distinct patterns in linguistic expression and emotional modulation.

3.4. Function

Determining the function of compliments, especially whether they serve different functions based on gender, is the most complex theoretical question. There is a lack of explicit and “objective” elements, as available in examining the form and object of the compliment or in measuring frequency and degree of modulation. The risk, therefore, is one of over-interpretation by the researcher. In the analysis of conversational data, we thus sought to adopt a discursive approach, focusing on both conversational and situational context and on relational work and participants’ interpretation (Watts, 2003; Terkourafi, 2005). Indeed, the reaction is a key clue for understanding how the compliment was perceived and interpreted, thereby revealing its function in each communicative exchange.

The analysis shows that, regardless of gender, compliments serve various functions closely tied to circumstances and to the relationship between the giver and receiver of the compliment, to the object of the compliment, the reaction it elicits, and thus to the structure of compliment-response sequences, etc. The main functions identified in the recorded material are.

- *Phatic function*: Compliments fall within the phatic communion, a notion elaborated by Malinowski regarding linguistic uses where bonds of union and solidarity are created by the mere exchange of words. In compliments, however, it is precisely directing words of admiration towards the recipient that functions as social lubricants, creating, maintaining, or strengthening friendships and mutual solidarity. The phatic function should thus be understood broadly (Boyle, 2000).
- *Ritual function*: In some situations, compliments are so strongly expected that their absence could be perceived as a signal of inattention, disapproval, or even competitive antagonism. According to Leech (1983: 136), “where the Approbation Maxim is in force, a failure to commit oneself to a favourable opinion implies that one cannot (truthfully) do so”: in other words, “the lack of praise implicates dispraise”.
- *Directive function*: When directed top-down within asymmetric relationships, compliments aim to reinforce behavior deemed appropriate and can thus be considered a polite form of instilling social norms and conventions (Ruhi and Doğan, 2001: 369).
- *Mitigating function*: Sometimes compliments are used as strategies of positive politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 103–104) to mitigate the negative effects of FTAs such as criticisms, requests, reproaches, etc.
- *Reinforcing function*: Sometimes compliments aim to intensify other expressive acts, such as greetings, good wishes, and especially thankfulness (Held, 1989: 186–187).

The only gender difference emerging from the reanalysis of conversational data concerns the phatic function, which can certainly be considered typical in compliment exchanges among women. Instead, it is not possible to establish significant correlations between gender and the other functions. The main clue legitimizing the correlation between gender and the phatic function is the frequency with which giving a compliment leads to expansions that develop into more or less lengthy thematic sequences, linked to the compliment-response sequence by the object of the compliment. This usually occurs in interactions between people bound by more or less intimate relationships in convivial circumstances. However, upon reanalyzing the conversational data, it was noted that all thematic sequences originated from compliments exchanged between women. These are usually compliments about clothing, a new haircut, or a piece of jewelry, as in ex. 5, taken from a family lunch. Here, after a long pause, one of the diners (A) self-selects to compliment the host’s earrings, B, thereby introducing a topic that fills the communicative void. Initially, B responds with a brief informative comment (turn 2), which, after A’s intensified repetition of the compliment (turn 3), develops into a story recounting the circumstances of the earring purchase in detail. The conversation continues at length, involving a third person, G, A’s sister, who joins the discussion following A’s topic shift in turn 7, where she introduces the relationship between earring type and hair length, which will be debated over multiple turns, until the hostess moves towards the kitchen to continue preparing lunch.

(5) FAMILY LUNCH

((participants are all standing in the dining room, waiting to sit down at the table))

((long pause))

1 Af ((to her husband’s cousin)) ah! carini questi orecchini sono

‘ah! how nice these earrings are’

2 Bf questi me li sono regalati io due anni fa

‘these I gave myself two years ago’

3 Af ah:::! sono un amore

4 Bf ‘ah:::! they are lovely’

perché dovevo andare da dall’omeopata si era dimenticato della mia visita e lì vicino c’è una gioielleria

‘because I had to go to my homeopath ...he had forgotten my visit and nearby there is a jewelry store’

in via Vittorio Emanuele che vende gioielli antichi ho pensato ma tu vedi sto stronzo

‘in Vittorio Emanuele street that sells antique jewellery I thought but you see this asshole’

[gli dovevo dare cinquanta euro ((laughing))=

‘I should give him fifty euros ((laughing))=

5 Af [((laughs))

- 6 Bf =quel giorno ero proprio nera dico ora entro li avevo visti dico meglio un regalo (a qualcuno)
 =that day I was really angry I say now I go in I had seen them I say better a gift (to somebody)
 [cioè
 [thai is
 7 Af [carini sono poi coi capelli corti=
 'they are nice especially with short hair'
 8 Gf =questi stanno bene
 'they fit short hair'
 [the conversation goes on for a long time]

In this example, and in many similar ones, compliments appear to be a routine part of relational work among women in everyday life circumstances (Locher and Watts, 2005). Compliments, as mentioned earlier, primarily serve to reinforce a sense of solidarity and intimacy through the sharing of common values. Conversely, men exchange very few compliments in similar situations; this suggests that compliments do not serve the same function for them. Men do not consider compliments as the most appropriate way to express solidarity (Koenraad, 2012); instead, they seem to prefer other strategies, such as solidarity insults (Talbot, 2019) or what Culpeper (1996) defines as *mock impoliteness*.

4. Results from the questionnaire

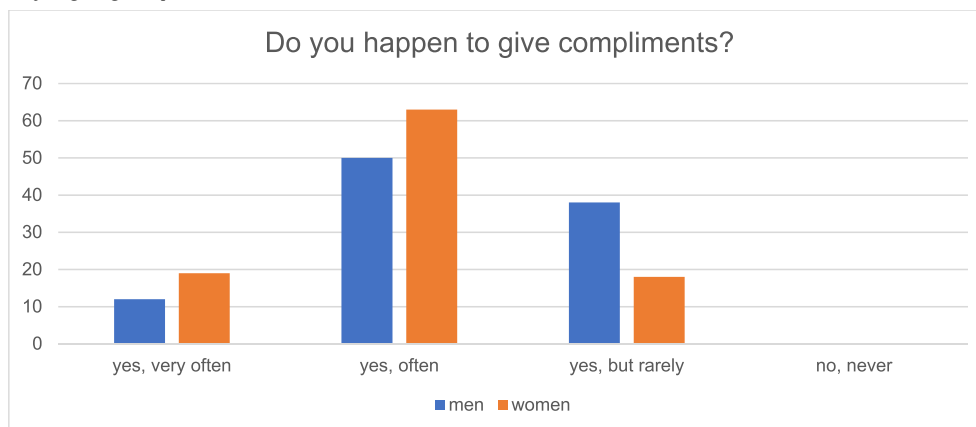
As previously mentioned, the questionnaire was submitted to a sample of young people from the University of Catania, in order to investigate their perception of the act of giving and receiving compliments and to assess gender-based variability. The most relevant aspects emerging from the answers are presented in following subsections, taking into consideration the key points under examination (frequency, object, modulation, and function). The results are then discussed (§ 5), before drawing the general conclusions (§ 6).

4.1. Frequency

For each aspect under examination (frequency, object, modulation, function), a table is reported to show the most relevant results that emerge from the questionnaire.⁵ As regards frequency, consider Table 1.

Table 1

Perceived frequency in giving compliments.



To the question on the perception of giving compliments (*Do you happen to give compliments?*) 19 % of women answer “yes, very often” compared to 12 % of men, and “yes, often” in 63 % of cases compared to 50 % of men. Conversely, only 18 % of women answer “yes, but rarely” compared to 38 % of men.

Percentages that are entirely consistent are recorded for *Do you happen to receive compliments?*. Compared to giving compliments, receiving them is perceived as less frequent on average, but the same gender ratio persists: women respond more “yes, very often” (9 % compared to 7 % of men) and “yes, often” (55 % compared to 44 %), while men prefer the response “yes, but rarely” (49 % compared to 35 %).

⁵ The questionnaire was composed in the language under examination, Italian. All the questions and answers are reported here in English (our translation).

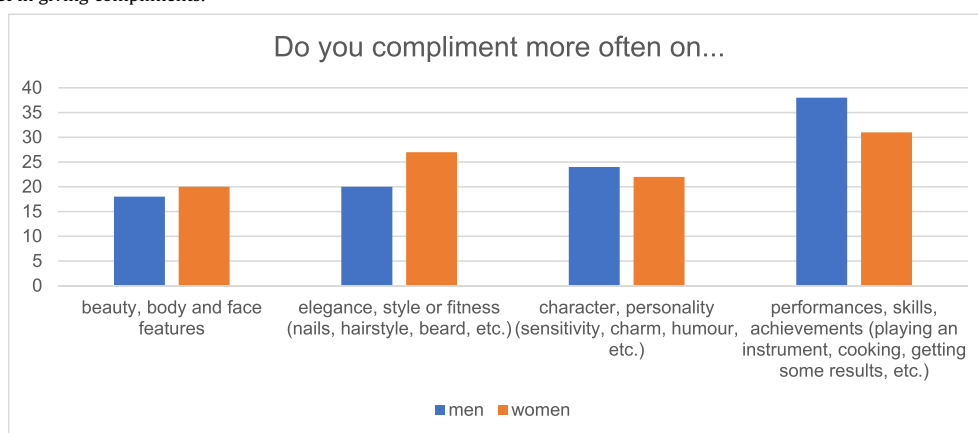
To this very clear picture, we add a small but significant data point: the response “no, never,” is completely absent for the first question, and is chosen by 1 % of women for the second question. This could be interpreted as further proof of the relevance of compliments (frequent but also functionally significant) for women. The response is only apparently contradictory, as it does not reflect the actual language use but rather self-evaluation: it is possible that some of the young women claim not to receive compliments at all due to psychological reasons, that is, for insecurity or modesty. This would further prove that this speech act is very important in interactions among women.

4.2. Object

Regarding the object of compliments, the questionnaire asks *Do you compliment more often on:* and *Do you receive more often compliments on:*, with four possible answers: a) “beauty, facial and body features”; b) “elegance, style, and physical form (look, nails, hair, beard)”; c) “character, personality (sensitivity, charm, humor, etc.)”; d) “skills, talent, competence (playing well, cooking a good dish, achieving a good result, etc.)”.

In the question about giving compliments, women exceed men in answers a) (20 % vs. 18 %) and b) (27 % vs. 20 %), and conversely, men exceed women in answers c) (24 % vs. 22 %) and d) (38 % vs. 31 %), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Perceived object in giving compliments.



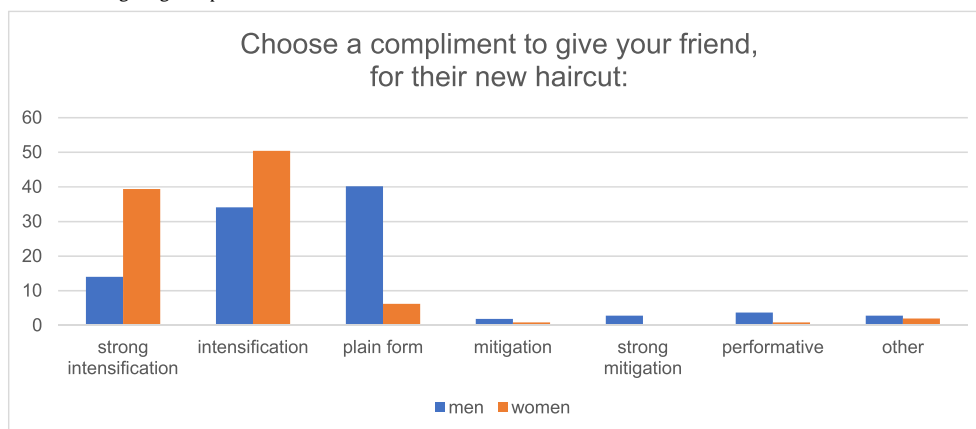
The difference increases in the question about receiving. Answers a) and b) are preferred by women (24 % and 23 %, compared to 16 % in both cases), while c) and d) are more often chosen by men (30 % and 38 % compared to 26 % and 27 %).

4.3. Modulation

The questionnaire investigates modulation by presenting a situation where somebody is supposed to give or to receive a compliment. Participants are asked to choose the preferred compliment, among variants that vary in their degree of intensification or mitigation or include an explicit performative. In the question *You see your best friend with a new haircut that looks good on them. You want to give them a compliment*, the variants are ordered from the strongest intensification to the strongest mitigation, with the neutral form in the middle, and concluding with the performative: a) “New haircut? Wow! It’s amazing, it looks great on you!” (strong intensification); b) “This new haircut looks great on you” (intensification); c) “This new haircut looks good on you” (neutral form); d) “This new haircut looks quite good on you” (mitigation); e) “I think this new haircut doesn’t look bad on you” (strong mitigation); f) “You got a new haircut? Congratulations!” (performative). Table 3 shows the answers to the first question.

Table 3

Preference for modulation in giving compliments.



The gender differences are evident. Intensification is preferred by women: the strongly intensified form (40 %) and the intensified form (50 %) account for 90 % of women's responses, while men have much lower percentages (respectively 14 % and 34 %), totaling 48 %. Regardless of gender variability, intensification is the preferred tendency for the whole sample (almost half of the men and nearly all the women), and mitigation seems generally unsuitable for compliments.

Although the percentages are minimal, a gender pattern also emerges for mitigation. Mitigated responses are chosen by men with very low but still proportionally higher numbers (almost 5 %) compared to women (below 1 %). The data on the realization of the compliment through a performative are also very similar, showing very low numbers and being more associated with male choices (4 %, compared to 1 %). The neutral, non-modulated form is preferred by men (40 %), while women rarely choose it (6 %). For reasons of space, we do not report the data from the question about receiving (*Which of the following compliments would you prefer?*), as the results are entirely in line with those just presented.

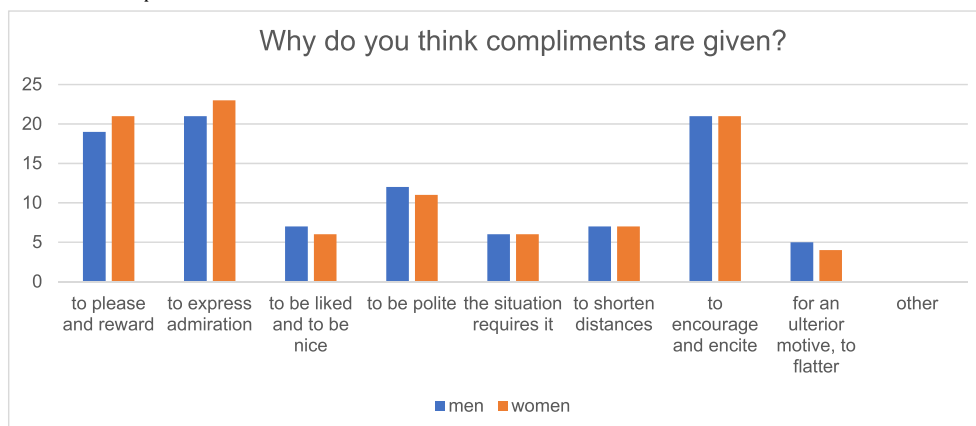
Overall, a clear picture emerges: women decidedly prefer intensification, rejecting all alternatives; men prefer the neutral form and more readily accept mitigation and the use of the performative. However, a very significant difference emerges between modulation when giving or receiving a compliment: in receiving, mitigation registers near-zero percentages (about 1 %) for both genders. Mitigation is completely disliked by the whole sample, suggesting an interpretation of the compliment as a face-enhancing act within this cultural context. In viewing the compliment as a verbal gift and gesture of solidarity, intensification is perceived as the most appropriate strategy to strengthen its illocutionary force. Mitigation would be more suited in the view of compliments as FTAs, in order to reduce the threat to the interlocutor.

4.4. Function

To verify the perception on the function of compliments, the questionnaire explicitly asks, *Why do you think people give compliments?* The possible responses are: a) "To please the recipient, to gratify them"; b) "To express one's admiration"; c) "To be liked by the recipient, to appear friendly"; d) "To be polite"; e) "Because the situation requires it"; f) "To shorten the distance with the other person"; g) "To encourage, motivate, or spur the recipient on"; h) "To achieve a secondary goal, for flattery". See Table 4.

Table 4

Opinions on the function of compliments.



Gender differences are almost nonexistent: the percentages often align, and the gap never exceeds two percentage points. It becomes evident that the function is not really suitable for eliciting explicit judgments. Therefore, it is necessary to assess other aspects, which are closely related to general notion of the function of compliments.

The questionnaire includes the question *Are there circumstances in which you feel almost obliged to give a compliment?*, which is aimed at investigating normativity and related to the ritual function (see § 2.4). The response “It can happen, sometimes I feel almost obliged” is chosen by 68 % of women and 53 % of men, while conversely, “No, I do not feel obliged” is chosen by only 28 % of women compared to 43 % of men. The response “Yes, often I feel practically obliged” is perceived as exaggerated by the entire sample (4 % of women and 3 % of men). Thus, it results that women perceive the social obligation to give compliments more than men.

A second aspect concerns gender roles in interaction (see the discussion of frequency and different dyads, § 2.1), highlighted by the questions *Do you more often give compliments to:* and *Do you more often receive compliments from:*. Although the answer “There is no difference” is the majority response (in about two out of three responses, regardless of gender), it is useful to compare preferences between the alternatives “People of your same gender” and “People of a different gender”. The difference emerges clearly: women declare they more often give compliments to people of the same gender much more than men do (37 % vs. 6 %), and conversely, men more often give compliments to people of a different gender (26 % vs. 1 %). Consistent data results from the second question: women more claim to often receive compliments from the same gender (40 % vs. 11 % of men), and men from the opposite gender (35 % vs. 11 % of women). The data confirm the frequency of compliments among the interactive dyads already recorded in the collection of spontaneous speech (§ 2.1).

In addition to gender roles, we can also evaluate another type of social relationship. The questions *Do you more often give compliments to:* and *Do you more often receive compliments from:* show the differences according to age groups, offering the answers “People of your same age,” “People older than you,” “People younger than you,” in addition to “There is no difference” (which is once again the majority response for the entire sample, around 60 %). The gap between women and men is less clear than for gender roles, but remains significant: women claim that they more often give compliments among peers than men (36 % vs. 31 %), who instead perceive they receive more from older people (20 % vs. 15 %).

5. Discussion

The data just presented show a clear overall picture of a gender-based pattern. We can discuss the results according to the main focal points of frequency, object, modulation and function of compliments.

- *Frequency.* The self-evaluative data confirm the higher frequency of compliments in interactions among women, which is pointed out by the literature (§ 2.2) and is found in the speech data (Alfonzetti, 2009).
- *Object.* The results confirm the tendency of women to give and receive compliments on appearance, whereas men give and especially receive more compliments on personality traits or talents and abilities.
- *Modulation.* Overall, a clear picture emerges: women definitely prefer intensification, rejecting all alternatives; men prefer the neutral form and more readily accept mitigation and the use of the performative. In general, mitigation is disliked by the whole sample, suggesting an interpretation of the compliments as face-enhancing acts within the cultural context.
- *Function.* Though the dedicated question does not yield clear-cut results, a general gender pattern appears evident: women recognize the normativity of compliments and claim to give and receive more compliments among people of the same gender and age (ritual, phatic, and interpersonal function, § 2.4) more than men do.

In order to reflect on the function of compliments, different aspects should be considered, namely normativity, gender roles, and age relationships, and compared with results on frequency, object and modulation. The concluding remarks are dedicated to this reflection.

6. Conclusion

This work presents the final phase of a comprehensive study on compliments in Italian, revisiting the spoken data (Alfonzetti, 2009) from a gender perspective and exploring the perceptions of a sample of youngsters through a questionnaire. The consistency between conversational data and elicited self-evaluations is the first significant result: the analysis of spontaneous speech and the questionnaire converge towards a rather uniform interpretation of the main issues considered.

The first issue is frequency. Both the spoken data and the questionnaire, in line with studies on the topic, show a much higher frequency of compliments among women, especially between themselves, while compliments are rare among men and extremely rare between themselves. Regarding the object of compliments, occurrences in speech and self-evaluative data confirm the difference between women and men: the former prefer compliments about appearance, while the latter prefer those related to personality traits or talent and performance. The third relevant issue affected by gender variability is modulation. In speech, strategies of intensification are rare among men in comparison with women. The questionnaire confirms this, showing that women almost categorically prefer intensification, while men choose non-

intensified forms and accept mitigated ones. Regardless of gender differences, the issue of modulation has allowed the recognition of the face-enhancing nature of compliments within the relevant cultural context. In fact, compliments are eagerly intensified, because they are considered a positive politeness strategy. Conversely, mitigation is generally rejected by the sample because the compliment is not perceived as a FTA and therefore does not need to be mitigated.

These three issues converge in the interpretation of the more complex issue, namely function, since neither the speech data nor the self-evaluation questionnaire offer explicit results to understand the pragmatic value of compliments. By integrating these three fundamental elements with other aspects investigated by the questionnaire, we can interpret the gender differences with respect to function. The research, in its various phases, has shown that compliments are much more frequent, more intensified, and focused on appearance for women, while for men they are rare, less intensified, and concerning personality and performance. Furthermore, the questionnaire showed that frequency is not only higher among women but also among peers, and that young women perceive the compliment more as a social obligation.

A gender pattern thus becomes clear. Within a view of the compliment as a positive politeness strategy, shared by the entire sample and valid for the overall cultural context, women exhibit behavior and perceptions oriented towards ritual, phatic, and interpersonal functions. Based on the hybrid nature of compliments (Alfonzetti, 2013), the expressive component seems central to communicative practices of women, relegating the verdictive component to the background. Conversely, the use and self-evaluation by men indicate a clearer assertive function, as shown by their preference for non-modulated forms and lesser perception of normativity. It is mainly among women that compliments serve as a strategy of phatic communion, with a high degree of rituality, and they help to strengthen social solidarity through the sharing of common values in interaction.

This study on compliments in Italian, even in light of the results presented here, offers perspectives worthy of further reflection. Among these, the topic of responses stands out, as well as the impact of other social variables such as age or regional dialects. Also, extending the account of the contemporary gender order would be of great interest: non binary identities may present new or peculiar facets in the use and social meaning of compliments, whose analysis could enrich the interpretation of the dual schema accounted for in this study.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Giovanna Alfonzetti: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.
Giulio Scivoletto: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no competing interests. Therefore, they have nothing to declare.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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