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## Compliment responses in Turkish: A Preliminary Case Study Based on Academic Status and Gender Difference

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the compliment responses (CRs) of Turkish native speakers within the framework proposed by Holmes (1988, 1993). Two variables were used in the study: academic status and gender. At this point, the main focus is directed through naturally occurring conversations and the compliment responses employed by Turkish speakers. The data of the present study is collected through 20 participants' short interviews which contain certain situational domains such as appearance, possession and character to two target groups, namely having equal and higher academic status relative to the complimenter. The results of the current study are discussed in two ways: whether being in the higher or equal status in the context of academic discourse marks any different responses while employing different category or not. Additionally, it is questioned whether or not gender differences have a role in the number of selection of CR categories based on Holmes' study. The findings of this study demonstrate that the participants in this study employed *Accept* strategies more, on the other hand, they used fewer *Reject* strategies. Moreover, the participants that have higher academic status than the complimenter used more CR categories. Another finding is that there are also gender differences in the responses. The female participants used fewer compliment responses than the male participants did. Although the limited number of participants took part in this study, the findings of this study could pave the way for future quantitative empirical studies on the effect of status and gender on responses to compliments.

**Key Words:** Compliment responses, Turkish compliments, Holmes' CR categories, academic status, gender

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## Türkçe'deki İltifat Yanıtları: Akademik Statü ve Cinsiyet Farklılığına Dayalı Bir Durum Çalışması

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### ÖZET

### MAKALE BİLGİSİ

Bu çalışma, anadili Türkçe olan konuşucuların iltifatlara verdikleri yanıtları Holmes'un (1988, 1993) ortaya koyduğu çerçeveye dayanarak araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmada kullanılan iki değişken mevcuttur: akademik statü ve cinsiyet. Bu bağlamda ana odak, Türkçe konuşucuların karşılıklı doğal konuşmalarda kullandıkları iltifat yanıtlarına yönlendirilmiştir. Mevcut çalışmanın verisini, dış görünüş ve sahiplik gibi belli durumsal alanlar üzerinde gerçekleştirilmiş iltifat eden kişiye göre eşit akademik statüde bulunan ya da iltifat eden kişiden daha üst akademik statüye sahip 20 katılımcıyla gerçekleştirilen kısa karşılıklı konuşmalar oluşturmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın sonuçları akademik söylem çerçevesinde eşit ya da yüksek akademik statüye sahip olan katılımcuların iltifatlara verdikleri farklı yanıtlar ve aynı zamanda hangi tür kategorileri daha çok kullandıkları yönüyle iki biçimde tartışılmıştır. Buna ek olarak, Holmes'un çalışmasına da dayanarak cinsiyet farklılıklarının iltifat yanıtları kategorilerinin seçiminde bir rolü olup olmadığı araştırılmıştır. Araştırmanın bulguları bu çalışmada yer alan katılımcuların daha fazla kabul etme stratejisini kullanırken reddetme stratejisini daha az kullandıklarını göstermektedir. Ayrıca, yüksek akademik statüye sahip olan katılımcuların daha fazla iltifat kategorileri kullandıkları gözlemlenmiştir. Diğer bir bulgu da iltifatlara verilen yanıtların cinsiyete göre farklılaştığıdır. Kadın katılımcılar erkek katılımcılara göre daha az iltifat yanıtları kullandıkları saptanmıştır. Bu çalışmada yer alan katılımcı sayısı çok kısıtlı olmasına rağmen, mevcut çalışmanın bulguları statü ve cinsiyetin iltifatlara verilen yanıtlara etkisini içeren daha sonraki nicel ve deneysel çalışmalara zemin hazırlayabilmektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** İltifat yanıtları, Türkçe iltifatlar, Holmes'un CR kategorileri, akademik statü, cinsiyet.

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### Introduction

The present study focuses on the identification of compliment responses employed in Turkish academic context among female and male participants. Speech act theory in general has its roots in the idea that 'the utterance performs an act without explicitly naming it' (Baktir, 2012). In other words, uttering a word counts as the performance of a certain speech act.

The identification of speech acts was initially made by language philosophers especially by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). The idea of speech act firstly was put forward

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by Austin and then developed by his disciple Searle. According to Austin (1962), when we use language, we also ‘do things with words by performing some kinds of ‘acts’. At this point, he clarified ‘performatives’ in which he expressed an utterance that constitutes the performing of an action (Austin, 1962). Additionally, he suggested that a speaker could perform three acts in uttering a word: locutionary act, illocutionary act, perlocutionary act. Locutionary act is the act of saying something, just the utterance itself. Illocutionary act is the act including communicative force of the utterance (Yule, 1996). Lastly, perlocutionary act is the act performed by or the consequence of the saying the utterance (Austin, 1962). The scope of this study is to shed light on the responses given to the illocutionary act of complimenting.

These ideas were implemented by fields interested in language use in social contexts. Henceforth, their theoretical framework was later implemented by several scholars such as linguists, sociologists, pragmaticians, ethnographers of communication, and also scholars of literary criticism (Válková, 2013).

Attracting wide interest of different scholars, ‘speech act theory’ paved its way especially among linguists and philosophers and the notion of ‘speech act theory’ emerged as a theory in pragmatics, which is a subfield of linguistics (Levinson, 1980; Brown and Levinson, 1987). Following the base of the speech act theory, the aim of the present study is to shed light on the question whether academic status and gender have an effect on the responses to compliments.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Definition of Compliments**

As France (1992) puts it, the etymological origin of ‘compliment’ derived from Italian word ‘complimento’ that means “a sentiment of gratitude which comes from the heart and reflects the truth and sincerity of the soul”. Different scholars presented their own definitions from different perspectives. For instance, Manes (1983) defined the term by resembling it to a window through which a society or an individual could view the appraisal that a certain culture has.

On the other hand, Holmes (1993) uses ‘compliments’ as “the most appropriate way of expressing solidarity” to function as an instrument of socializing. As its name suggests, compliments are ‘someone’s admiration or approval of other’s work, appearance, tastes, abilities, and the like, and often function as a social lubricant, establishing and maintaining solidarity’ (Manes, 1983; Herbert, 1990; Golato, 2005; Ishihara, 2010).

### **Compliment Responses**

Compliment responses are somehow reactions to compliments. As Válková (2013) suggests, it is the acceptance of a compliment by means of a compliment response by the addressee, which completes or finalizes the speech act set of complimenting”.

Studies on CRs began with Pomerantz (1978) and the topic kept its popularity for years (Tang and Zhang, 2009). Early works on CRs were generally based on the different varieties of English, such as; the use of compliment responses in American English was studied by Herbert (1986, 1990) and in New Zealand English by Holmes (1988, 1993). In these studies, syntactic structures of the compliments and responses towards them were

mostly studied. In the beginning of the 1990s, more attention was paid to CRs in other languages especially as a pragmatic concern such as in Polish by Herbert (1991), in German by Golato (2002) and in Mandarin Chinese by Cheng (2011). These studies have discovered many similarities and differences about the use of CRs among languages. Complimentees of German, for instance, seem to be in tendency not to use ‘accept’ tokens such as ‘thank you’ in CRs (Golato, 2002). Moreover, social status is found to be a factor influencing speaker’s CR. (Gajaseni, 1994).

CR categories are addressed by three macro levels: accept, reject and evade. These macro levels are also divided into ten micro level CR categories. Table 1 shows the CR categories proposed by Holmes (1993). In the present study, the data is analyzed according to these levels of categories.

**Table 1.** Holmes’ CR categories (taken from Tang and Zhang, 2009)

Macro Level CRs	Micro Level CRs	Examples
Accept	Appreciation token	“Thanks”; “Thank you”; “Cheers”; “Yes”; “Good.”
	Agreeing utterance	“I know”; “I am glad you think so”; “I did realize I did that well”; “Yeah, I really liked it.”
	Downgrading/qualifying utterance	“It’s nothing”; “It was no problem”; “I enjoyed doing it”; “I hope it was ok”; “I still only use it to call people”; “It is not bad.”
	Return compliment	“You are not too bad yourself”; “Your child was an angel”; “I am sure you will be great” It’s not bad”; “Yours was good, too.”
Reject	Disagreeing utterance	“Nah, I don’t think so”; “I thought I did badly”; “No, it is nothing special”; “It is not”; “Don’t say so.”
	Question accuracy	“Why?”, “Is it right?”; “Really?”
	Challenge sincerity	“Stop lying”; “Don’t lie”; “Don’t joke about it”; “You must be kidding”; “Don’t, come on.”
Evade	Shift credit	“That’s what friends are for”; “You’re polite”; “No worries”; “My pleasure.”
	Informative comment	“It wasn’t hard”; “You can get it from [store name]”; “It’s really cheap.”
	Request reassurance	“Really?”

Many researchers have conducted studies about speech acts, such as apologizing, complaint, refusing and thanking (Bayat, 2013). Additionally, the study of compliments and compliment responses received a great deal of attention by the scholars since they somehow reflect social and cultural values as a means of verbal communication but few studies have been done about the compliment responses based upon academic status. However, studies on the compliment responses on ‘status’ have been achieved by many researchers such as Gumperz (1980), Holmes (1987), Herbert (1991), Gajaseni (1994), Cheng (2006), Mohajernia

and Solimani (2013). Among them, Gajaseni (1994) studied compliment responses by contrasting American English and Thai on the basis of the effect of gender and social status.

The relevant literature from Turkish showed that, firstly Ruhi (2006) studied politeness in compliment responses. Then in the following year, she conducted such a study investigating the relation between intentions and politeness on compliment responses in Turkish (Ruhi, 2007). In another more recent study, Şakırgil (2011) conducted a comparative research based on the compliment responses in Turkish and American English regarding form and function. In addition to this Master's thesis, Şakırgil and Çubukçu (2013) studied patterns and topics in Turkish and English compliments. Yuvayapan (2016) again investigated compliment responses in Turkish but she laid emphasis on the effect of second language on the compliments of first language. Dörtkulak (2017) studied compliment responses by concentrating on a Facebook corpus and made comparison between Turkish and American English. A more recent study by Karagöz-Dilek (2020) dissimilarly focuses on the compliments and responses of Turkish EFL learners' compliments and responses in the light of the pragmatic transfer from L1 Turkish to L2 English.

The present study is inspired by Gajaseni (1994)'s study which concentrates on the compliment responses among the people having different social status. However, what makes the present study different from Gajaseni's is that it is based on not only the social status of the participants but also the academic status they have in their department. Additionally, another key concern is the difference between the compliment responses among female and male participants. At this context, on the basis of the compliment responses, the present study aims to answer the following research questions:

- 1- What effects do complimenter's academic status have on the type of compliment responses? Is the status a factor in responding to a compliment?
- 2- Is there any difference between the compliment responses employed by the female and male participants?

### **Methodology**

In the present study, the data is composed of naturally occurring data which is collected through voice recording. The recordings take roughly 17 minutes long. All the participants were asked for their permission and given implicit information about the study in advance. The data includes 20 participants including 13 females and 7 males. The distribution of the participants is not equal but the participants are defined according to their academic status. Those people who have titles such as Assistant Professor, Associate Professor and Professor are postulated as the participants with 'high status'. Those research assistants and also the ones having Master's degree are regarded as 'equal status'. Among these participants, 15 of them are in equal status and 5 are high status relative to the complimenter. The following Table 2 shows the profile of the participants.

*Table 2. The profile of the participants*

Status	Gender	
	Female	Male

<b>Equal</b>	10	5
<b>High</b>	3	2
<b>Total</b>	20	

All the participants were given compliments that are about the participants' appearance, clothing, hair styles or possessions. The participants' voices were recorded upon asking for their permissions. The recordings were then transcribed and evaluated according to the given strategies proposed by Holmes (1993).

### Findings and Discussion

As shown in Table 3, the total number of responses is 52. Although the number of the participants in the high academic status is three times less than the participants in equal status, an initial finding shows that the limited number of the participants in high status are included and the participants in the high status gave more responses (3.2 per participants) than the participants in equal status.

*Table 3. The degree of the compliments per participants*

<b>Status</b>	<b>Equal</b>	<b>High</b>	
<b>Number of participants</b>	15	5	Total: 20
<b>Response</b>	36	16	Total: 52
<b>Compliment responses per participants (%)</b>	2.4	3.2	

Table 3 also shows that the participants who are in equal status with the complimenter gave approximately 2 or 3 responses (approximately 2.4) when the complimenter addressed them. Here, the responses are characterized as the number of categories employed by the participants after the given compliment.

In the following lines, you will find out in detail the strategies that are most frequently preferred by the participants according to Holmes' (1993) categories. The strategies are illustrated with some examples.

*Table 4. The distribution of compliment responses in total*

		<b>ACADEMIC STATUS</b>				<b>Percentage (%)</b>
		<b>EQUAL</b>	<b>HIGH</b>	<b>EQUAL</b>	<b>HIGH</b>	
<b>Macro Level CRs</b>	<b>Micro Level CRs</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	
<b>Accept (68%)</b>	Appreciation token	6	4	3	1	27%

	Agreeing utterance		3	1	1	10%
	Downgrading / qualifying utterance		3		2	10%
	Return compliment	4	4	2	1	21%
<b>Reject (8%)</b>	Disagreeing utterance	1	1			4%
	Question accuracy				1	2%
	Challenge sincerity	1				2%
<b>Evade (24%)</b>	Shift credit	2	1			6%
	Informative comment	3		1		7%
	Request reassurance	2	1	3		11%
<b>Total</b>		19	17	10	6	100%

As Table 4 displays, regarding macro level compliment responses, ‘accept’ strategies are used most. The responders to the compliments in Turkish employ four strategies of acceptance in which the most preferred is the *Accept- Appreciation*-token among the other categories.

Example 1:

C: Saçın çok güzel olmuş bugün canım. (Your hair is so beautiful today, honey.)  
CR7E: *Teşekkür ederim.* (Thank you.)

The second category that is most frequently employed by Turkish responders is *Evade/ Request Reassurance*. In this strategy, the responders give answers that seek confirmation or doubt the praise-worthiness of the thing being complimented. As you can see in Example 2:

Example 2:

C: Hocam bugün çok güzel görünüyorsunuz? (Professor, you look like very beautiful today)  
CRH2: Öyle mi? *Teşekkür ederim.* (Really? Thank you)

Here, in the above example, the responder utters a word ‘öyle mi? (really?) which (s)he seeks for confirmation by the complimenter and in other words, As Holmes (1993) puts it, (s)he requests reassurance by the complimenter.

In the 3rd example, the *Reject/ Disagreeing* compliment response category in which the participant do not willing to make use of is demonstrated:

Example 3:

C: Gömleğin çok güzelmiş.Yakışmış sana. (Your shirt is so good. It fits good on you.)

R: Hayır ya. Eskidi aslında, yıllar önce almıştım. (No not that well. In fact, it is the old one. I bought it years ago.)

In the third macro level of CRs, we can easily observe based on Table 4, the participants do not tend to reject the compliments they are given. Only 4 compliment responses out of 52 were detected as compliments including rejecting strategy. Interestingly enough, the finding of the study also showed that the responders that are in higher status than the complimenter did not reject any compliments during the study. They were always polite to the complimenter and showed their appreciation; however, they did not employ the rejecting strategy. It is possible to say that, in the Turkish context, the preference of the more compliment responses by the participants with high academic status shows that having high academic status brings some responsibilities. Because of superiority, they tend to produce more compliment responses in order not to be offensive. In addition, they could be in struggle for balancing the social distance. On the other hand, the situation is exact the opposite for the participants with equal academic status. They have a tendency to accept the compliment but not to use more compliment responses.

On the other hand, the female participants have a tendency to respond their complimenters more than male participants do. Regarding the status they are in, one can easily say that 29 responses out of 52 belongs to the female participants. They uttered nearly twice more responses than the male participants. Another surprising result is that the male participants, although they are outnumbered by the females, do use ‘accept’ strategy upon the compliments. However, nearly half of the male participants chose to reject the compliments, a case which is not frequently observed in females.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions**

The findings of the present study indicated that people who are in the higher status than the complimenter use many responses to the compliments. Due to the limited number of male participants in high status, this finding would be a tentative one. However, as it can be easily observed in the previous section, the female participants in the higher status than the complimenter produce more compliment responses and communicate with the complimenters particularly by employing many agreeing strategies. On the other hand, the participants in equal status that take place in this study although their number is three times more than the other group did not give many compliment responses. This can be because of the relationship between the complimenter and the complimentees and it is the acquaintance that makes them use fewer responses than the people in the high status.

Another research question that is stated in the very beginning of the study is that whether there is relationship between the responses of the participants’ being female or male. The answer could be “Yes”. In the context of this study, the female participants gave more responses to the compliments. What is more, the male participants, although they are outnumbered by the females, did use ‘accept’ strategy upon the compliments. However, nearly half of the male participants chose to reject the compliments, a case which is not frequently observed in females.

Again, the findings of the study imply the ideas of Herbert (1990). In his study, he underlined the sex of the complimenter as better indicator of the compliment response



strategy used by the participants. He also emphasized that women are more likely to accept compliments from men (68.6%) rather than from women (22.1%). Of course, this cannot be seen as a universal pattern; it might be culturally-motivated. For instance, Chinese people have a tendency to reject compliments to show some kind of modesty (Chen, 1993). On the other hand, a more recent research by Cai (2012) states that ‘acceptance strategy’ is used for a 72.3% of all the compliment responses. These findings are also similar with Sun’s (2002) study in which men choose to opt out almost twice as often as females.

Overall, this paper has discussed both status and gender differences in responding to compliments in the context of Turkish academic discourse. Women are more actively involved in complimenting behavior, both giving and receiving more compliment responses than men, especially on the topic of possessions. When it comes to choosing strategies to respond to compliments, women tend to accept compliments, whereas men tend to opt out more often than women do. The findings from various researchers such as Herbert (1991) and Sun (2002) also confirm the general observations and beliefs that women are more positive and supportive in conversations.

The present study is considerably limited because of the number of participants employed in the study. When it is improved by increasing the amount and broadening scope of the data, the results could be more generalized and the reliability of the study could be more enhanced. In addition, this study is the revised version of the paper that is conducted for the partial fulfillment of the course ‘Contemporary Interpretations in Linguistics’.

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