

## ¿Qué Guapo!: A Comparative Study of Mexican Spanish and American English Compliments<sup>1</sup>

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### Contrastive Pragmatics

Within the field of applied linguistics, the theoretical paradigm of communicative competence (Canale & Swain 1980, Habermas 1970, Hymes 1971, 1972, 1974; Wolfson 1981, 1983) has been largely responsible for an increase in speech act research related to contrastive pragmatics. In order to investigate aspects of communication across cultures, small units of comparable discourse must be used. Commonly used units of discourse are speech acts. The term "speech act" has been defined as a functional unit of communication (Cohen 1995). Examples of speech acts include making refusals, making statements, asking questions, apologizing, leave-taking, making introductions, and giving compliments. This paper presents the results of a cross-cultural study on the speech act of complimenting, comparing various aspects of Mexican Spanish and American English compliments.

A primary goal for conducting cross-cultural studies of speech acts is to obtain pragmatic knowledge of the rules of the speech act. This knowledge may decrease instances of cross-cultural misunderstanding, embarrassment, frustration, and anger (Beebe & Takahashi 1989). Thomas (1983) defines pragmatic competence as "the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context" (p. 94). Thomas goes on to point out that if an L1 speaker perceives the purpose

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of an L2 utterance as other than the L2 speaker intended, pragmatic failure has occurred: the utterance failed to achieve the speaker's goal.

One cause of pragmatic failure is pragmalinguistic transfer, the use of L1 speech act strategies or formulas when interacting with members of an L2 speech community (Leech 1983). This transfer has been addressed in a number of speech act studies (Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz 1990; Blum-Kulka 1982, 1983; Edmonson, House, Kasper, & Stenmer 1984; Eisenstein & Bodman 1986; Garcia 1989; Houck & Gass 1995; Olshtain 1983; Olshtain & Cohen 1983; Takahashi & Beebe 1993; Thomas 1984; Wolfson 1989).

It is sometimes difficult to determine whether pragmatic failure results from L1 transfer or from other factors. In other words, why do language learners experience certain kinds of pragmatic failure? In order to understand the causes of pragmatic failure, it is helpful, and perhaps even necessary, to conduct cross-cultural studies that investigate students' L1 strategies (Wolfson 1989).

Speech act studies have been criticized as being ethnocentric in that most have investigated variations of English (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper 1989; Rose 1994). The present study is valuable, in part, because it was conducted in Spanish as well as English and the results contribute to an understanding of appropriate ways to make compliments in Spanish.

### **Compliments**

The speech act of complimenting was selected because compliments tend to be a "troublesome aspect of English for learners from different cultural backgrounds" (Holmes & Brown 1987: 525). Holmes and Brown note that non-native speakers of English are frequently embarrassed by the frequency with which Americans compliment. A compliment is defined broadly as an expression of praise or positive regard.

The most extensive study of American compliments has been conducted by Wolfson and Manes. Using ethnographic methodology, they collected over 1000 American compliments in a wide range of situations. The results of their work (Wolfson 1981, Wolfson & Manes 1980) indicate that 80% of American compliments fall into three syntactic patterns:

<i>Syntactic Patterns</i>	<i>Examples</i>
NP + be/look + (intensifier) + ADJ <sup>2</sup>	Tom's tie is gorgeous.
I + like/love + NP	I love your shirt.
PRO + be + ADJ + NP	This is a great party.

Two of these three patterns depend on adjectives for their positive semantic value. In Wolfson and Manes' work, the five most commonly used adjectives were—NICE, GOOD, BEAUTIFUL, PRETTY, and GREAT. They found Americans praise appearance more than any other attribute.

Also using ethnographic methodology, Holmes and Brown (1987) collected 200 compliments in New Zealand. Their results were similar to those of Wolfson and Manes. Almost 80% of the compliments belonged to one of the above syntactic patterns; two-thirds used one of five adjectives: NICE, GOOD, BEAUTIFUL, LOVELY, and WONDERFUL. Again, the most frequently praised attribute was appearance.

In a study comparing Japanese and American compliments, Barnlund and Araki (1985) used interviews to collect their data. Interviewees were asked to describe (1) the most recent compliment they had given and received, (2) the relationship between the giver and receiver of the compliment, (3) the attribute praised, (4) the exact words used in the compliments, and (5) the day the compliment was given. Interview data indicated that the Japanese and Americans tend to compliment five attributes: appearance, work/study, personality traits, skill, and taste, but with varying degrees of frequency. Japanese most frequently praised skill and work/study, whereas Americans most frequently praised appearance. The Japanese also complimented much less frequently than Americans. The compliments reported by the Japanese had occurred, on the average, 13 days before the interview, whereas the compliments reported by the Americans had occurred, on the average, 1.6 days earlier.

Nelson, El Bakary, and Al Batal (1995) used similar methodology in studying Egyptian Arabic and American English compliments. They found that American compliments tended to be shorter and more frequent than Egyptian compliments. Egyptians were more likely to use similes and metaphors and long series of adjectives in their compliments. Both Egyptians and Americans most frequently complimented appearance, but both also compli-

NP = noun phrase, ADJ = adjective, PRO = pronoun

mented personality traits and skill/work. Egyptians complimented personality traits more frequently than Americans, and Americans complimented skill/work more often than Egyptians.

Aceves (1996), in a study on Mexican Spanish compliments, also employed the methodology originally used in Barnlund and Araki (1985). The average number of words in her corpus of Mexican Spanish compliments was 4.2. The Mexican compliments praised appearance (62%), traits (22%), and skill/work (16%). Mexican females praised both males and females, but Mexican males tended to praise females and not males. Not one Mexican male complimented another male on appearance or on skill/work. Commonly used adjectives were *bonita(-a)* (PRETTY), *simpático(-a)* (NICE), *guapo(-a)* (HANDSOME), and *padre* (COOL). Compliments were given, on the average, 11.2 days before the interview.

### The Present Study

This study investigated Mexican Spanish and American English compliments to determine similarities and differences in (1) compliment form, (2) attributes praised, (3) gender of compliment giver and receiver, (4) compliment frequency, and (5) role relationships.

#### *Method of Data Collection*

It is often argued that speech acts should be studied in their natural contexts using ethnomethodology (Wolfson 1983); however, ethnomethodology is difficult for cross-cultural studies due to problems of comparability (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper 1989). For this reason, the present study uses the methodology developed by Barnlund and Araki (1985) and expanded by Nelson et al. (1995) to collect compliment data. Thirty Mexican and thirty-five American university students or recent university graduates between the ages of 18 and 30 were interviewed. All of the subjects, both Mexicans and Americans, lived in Mexico at the time of the interviews, and many attended the University of the Americas—Puebla; half were males and half females. Interviewees were asked to describe the most recent compliment they had given, received, and observed; the relationship between the compliment giver and the recipient; the attribute praised; the exact words used in the compliment, and the day the compliment was given. Interviews were conducted in the native language of the interviewees. This procedure produced a data base of 90 Mexican and 103 American compliments.

The interviewers were graduate students in an M.A. Program in Applied Linguistics at La Universidad de las Américas - Puebla. They were taking a graduate course in research design, and course requirements included conducting the interviews and analyzing the data. Several students in the class were teachers, and they interviewed other teachers to obtain compliment data; all teachers were, however, recent university graduates and under the age of 30.

In American English, the most common word used to indicate praising another person is "compliment," and the American interviewers used this word. In Mexican Spanish, however, there are four words that can be translated as "compliment". They are *cumplido*, *halago*, *pirapo*, and *elogio*. The interviewers who were native speakers of Mexican Spanish agreed that *cumplido* and *halago* more closely approximated the American English word compliment than *pirapo* or *elogio*. They noted that *pirapo* referred primarily to comments about physical appearance (e.g., eyes, body), carried connotations of flattery, and when given by a male to a female, often had sexual overtones. *Elogio*, also, referred particularly to physical appearance. A Spanish and English dictionary (Vox 1994) defines both *cumplido* (p. 81) and *halago* (p. 144) as "compliment". *Pirapo* (p. 205) is defined as "compliment, piece of flattery" and *elogio* (p. 106) as "praise, eulogy." Based on the interviewers' knowledge of their native language and the dictionary, interviewers used the words *cumplido* and *halago*.

## Results

### *Compliment Form*

Compliment form refers to the language used to express the compliment. The American English and Mexican Spanish compliments shared similarities in form; they were both relatively short and primarily adjectival. Both also used a limited number of syntactic patterns; however, the Mexican Spanish compliments were more varied in their syntactic structure than the American compliments. The Mexican data set also included compliment forms that did not occur in the American data. For example, the Mexican data included one-word compliments, whereas the American data did not.

In this study, the average numbers of words in the compliments reported by American females was 5.6 and the average for American males 4.8. The number of words ranged from two to twelve. The average compli-

ment reported by Mexican females contained 6.0 words and by Mexican males 5.4 words. The range was from no words (a whistle) to 27 words.

An analysis of the syntactic patterns of the American compliments indicated that 68% of the American compliments used one of the three syntactic patterns identified by Wolfson (1989). The patterns are  $-NP + be/look + ADJ$ ,  $I + like/love + NP$ , and  $PRO + be + ADJ + NP$ .

Of these three patterns, the one most commonly used in this data set was  $-NP + be/look + ADJ$ —and is illustrated in (1) and (2). Forty percent or 41 of the 103 American compliments used this pattern.

(1) Your chicken is delicious. (AF17)<sup>a</sup>

(2) That drawing was pretty cool. (AM17)

Eighteen, or approximately 18%, of the American compliments followed the pattern  $-I + like/love + NP$ . An illustration is given in (3).

(3) I liked your lesson. (AF40)

The third pattern— $PRO + is + ADJ + NP$ —was used in ten of the American compliments. For example,

(4) You are a very amazing, sincere, and caring person. (AF12)

(5) That is a beautiful picture. (AF45)

The similarity in syntactic patterns between compliments in this study and compliments in Wolfson (1989) indicates the reliability of this method of collecting data.

Syntactically, some of the Mexican compliments were more complex than the American compliments. However, even though each of the Mexican syntactic patterns involved several permutations, the basic patterns remained constant. Four syntactic patterns accounted for 64, or 71%, of the Spanish compliments.

<sup>a</sup>The first letter (A or M) following the compliments refers to American or Mexican and the second letter (F or M) stands for female or male speakers. The number refers to the researchers' cataloging system.

Syntactic Pattern	Example
<i>Qué + A<sup>2</sup>(+)*</i>	<i>¡Qué rica comida!</i>
<i>Encantar/gustar (+)</i>	<i>Me gustan tus ojos.</i>
<i>(NP) + ser/estar/ver + (intensifier) + A</i>	<i>Te ves muy bien.</i>
<i>(NP) + ser/estar/tener + NP</i>	<i>Eres un buen jugador.</i>

Forty-one of the 90, or 45%, of the compliments in this data set belonged to one basic syntactic pattern, *Qué + A (+)*. An example of this pattern in its simple form is given in (6).

- (6) *Qué guapo!* (MF37)  
 "How handsome!"  
 "You're handsome."

In this data set, the great majority of the compliments that began with *Qué* were followed by an adjective (e.g., *bonita*). One was followed by an adverb (e.g., *bien*). The amount of variation in this pattern is illustrated by the range of structures used after the *Qué + A* construction. The structures were as follows: (1) NP, (2) NP + *tener*, (3) *ver venir ser/estar*, (4) *ver venir/ser/estar + NP/PP*, and (5) subordinate clauses.

One variation is *Qué + A + NP*. This pattern is illustrated in (7) when one female compliments another on her necklace.

- (7) *Qué bonito collar!* (MF19)  
 "What a pretty necklace!"  
 "I like your necklace."

Seven compliments in the data set employed this pattern.

A second variation of the *Qué + A* pattern is *Qué + A + NP + tener*. A male complimenting a female on her eyes used this pattern in (8).

\*"A" refers to either an adjective or an adverb.

<sup>2</sup>(+) = an additional component may be added.

<sup>3</sup>For many of the Spanish compliments, two translations are given. The first is a near-literal translation from Spanish to English. The second is what a native American English speaker might say.

(8) *¡Qué bonitas ojos tienes!* (MM24)

"What beautiful eyes you have!"

"You have beautiful eyes!"

Five compliments followed this pattern.

Variation three is *Qué + A + ver venir ser/estar*. Examples are given in (9), (10), and (11).

(9) *¡Qué bonita te ves!* (MM17)

"How pretty you look!"

"You look pretty."

(10) *¡Qué chistoso eres!* (MF42)

"How funny you are!"

"You're really funny."

(11) *¡Qué guapo vienes!* (MF18)

"How handsome you look!"

"You look really handsome."

Seventeen compliments used this pattern. Compliment (11) illustrates a special use of the verb *venir*. *Venir* generally means "to come," but in this case, it is used idiomatically to mean "the way you look right now."

This pattern, *Qué + A + ver venir ser/estar*, can be extended to include a NP or a PP as in *¡Qué + A + ver venir ser/estar + NP/PP*. Seven compliments in the data set extended this pattern with a noun or prepositional phrase. Examples are given in (12) and (13).

(12) *¡Qué linda está la casa!* (MF16)

"How cute is the house!"

"The house is so pretty."

(13) *¡Qué padre está tu esfera!* (MF21)

"How cool is your round ornament (on your necklace)!"

"That ball (on your necklace) is really cool!"

Three compliments used *Qué + A + Subordinate Clause*, as illustrated in (14).



(14) *Qué bueno que se te ocurrió esta idea!* (MM34)

"How good that you had this idea!"

"It was great that you had this idea!"

The pattern *Qué + A + Verb* was used by only one compliment. The compliment is (15)

(15) *Qué bien bailas!* (MM26)

"How well you dance!"

"You're a great dancer."

The second most common syntactic pattern used the verbs *gustar* (to like) or *encantar* (to love). In these compliments, the verb carried the illocutionary force of the compliment, meaning that the verb carried the positive semantic meaning, the intent to praise. Five compliments employed the pattern *Encantar/gustar + NP*. An example is

(16) *Me encanta la carta.* (MF 17)

"I love the letter."

A variation of this pattern, used in three compliments, is *Encantar/gustar + como qué + subordinate clause*, as in (17)

(17) *Me encanta como se te ve el cabello suelta.* (MM14)

"I love how your hair looks loose."

The third pattern, (NP) + *ser/estar/ver + (intensifier) + ADJ*, was used in seven compliments. For instance,

(18) *Estás muy alto y esús muy ancho.* (MF44)

"You are very tall and very broad."

"You're really tall and well built."

The fourth pattern, (NP) + *ser/estar tener + NP*, is illustrated in (19).

(19) *Es una linda niña.* (MF8)

"She is a cute baby."

Eight compliments used this pattern

Both the American and Mexican compliments were primarily adjectival. Seventy-two per cent of the American compliments and 68% of the Mexican compliments used adjectives. Five adjectives, 80%, GOOD, GREAT,

BEAUTIFUL, and PRETTY, accounted for 69% of the English adjectives used. Four adjectives, *bonito(-a)* (PRETTY), *bueno(-a)* (GOOD), *guapo(-a)* (HANDSOME), and *bien* accounted for 66% of the Spanish adjectives used. Although *bien* is usually regarded as an adverb in Spanish, it functions as an adjective in many of these compliments, as exemplified in ¡*Qué bien te ves hoy!* ("How nice you look today!")

The Mexican Spanish data set included compliments that were unlike any in the American English data set. For example, in (20) a boyfriend complimented his girlfriend on her appearance. This compliment is more poetic than any of the American compliments.

- (21)  *Parece que se están cayendo los ángeles del cielo.* (MM37)  
 "It seems that the angels are falling from the sky."

Although generally *-ita* in Mexican Spanish creates a diminutive, in some cases as in (22), it represents affection and familiarity, and is a term of endearment. In (22), *Flaquita* may also be a nickname that the boyfriend uses for the girlfriend. Because it may be a nickname, it is difficult to translate into English because the English equivalent does not exist. In (23) and (24), the *-ita* functions somewhat differently. In (23) the interlocutors were acquaintances and in (24) they were strangers. The *-ita* still carries the force of the compliment, the intent to praise, but it does not represent familiarity. Instead, the utterances are probably a form of flirtation and a comment on the receivers' physical attributes. All of the *-ita* compliments were given by males to females.

- (22) *Flaquita* (MM41)  
 "Little skinny one."  
 (23) *Miñequita* (MM38)  
 "Little doll."  
 "Hey doll"  
 (24) *Mamacita* (MM33)  
 "Little mother"  
 "Hey babe"

A Mexican graduate explained that *mamacita* is not a polite way for a male to compliment a female and would seldom be used by someone with a university education.

In one of the Mexican compliments, no words were uttered. A male whistled at a female (MM30). The interviewee stated that the whistle was intended and taken as a compliment.

#### *Attributes Praised*

In order to determine the attribute being praised by the compliment, each researcher (*i.e.*, data collector/student) read through the compliments that he or she had collected. Individually, each noted that almost all of the attributes praised matched the coding scheme used in Nelson *et al.* (1995). The compliments praised either appearance, personality traits, or skill/work. Researchers coded the compliments that they collected as belonging to one of these categories. The few compliments that did not belong to a category were coded as "other." In preparation for writing this paper, the course instructor, Gayle Nelson, also coded each of the compliments. An intercoder reliability of 94% was determined by comparing the codings of the student researchers with those of the course instructor. For each discrepancy, the course instructor and the data collector/student met, looked at the transcripts of the interviews to check the intent of the original speaker (*i.e.*, complementer), and decided which category best fit the compliment.

The category "appearance" refers to the way a person looks (*e.g.*, hair, eyes, clothes). "Skill/work" refers to the "quality of something produced through...skill or effort: a well-done job, a skillfully played game, a good meal" (Manes 1983, 101). "Traits" refer to personality characteristics such as intelligence and thoughtfulness.

As shown in Table 1, personal appearance was the most frequently praised attribute in both cultures. Forty-nine, or 55%, of the Mexican compliments and 56, or 54%, of the American compliments praised appearance. Over 80% of the American compliments on appearance praised a specific aspect of appearance. The most commonly praised attribute was hair as in (25).

(25) I like the way it [your hair] looks in the back. (AM16)

**Table 1: Attributes Praised by Mexican and American Compliments**

<b>Mexican</b>				
<i>Appearance</i>	<i>Traits</i>	<i>Skills/Work</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
49 (55%)	13 (15%)	20 (22%)	8 (11%)	90 (100%)
<b>American</b>				
<i>Appearance</i>	<i>Traits</i>	<i>Skills/Work</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
56 (54%)	16 (15%)	28 (28%)	3 (3%)	103 (100%)

Other attributes complimented were shoes, outfits, shirts, arms, and eyes.

Compliments of this type are exemplified in (26) and (27).

(26) Nice citrus shirt. (AF23)

(27) I like your shoes. (AM18)

About 20% of the American compliments on appearance related to the recipient's total look as in (28).

(28) You look very nice today. (AI'58)

In contrast, 60% of the Mexican compliments on personal appearance praised general appearance. Examples are given in (29) and (30).

(29) *¿Qué bien te ves hoy?* (MF5)

"How nice you look today!"

"You look nice today."

(30) *Estás muy bonita.* (MM39)

"You are very pretty."

The Mexicans also complimented eyes, hair, and clothes as in (31) through (33).

(31) *Me gustan mucho tus ojos.* (MM31)

"I like your eyes very much."

"I really like your eyes."

(32) *¿Qué padre se te ve el pelo?* (MF6)

"How cool your hair looks!"

"Your hair looks cool."

(33) *¡Está muy padre tu suéter!* (MF24)

"Your sweater is cool."

The second largest category for both Americans and Mexicans was skill/work. As shown in Table 1, it accounted for 28% of the American data set and 22% of the Mexican data set. In (34), an American teacher compliments a student.

(34) *Great job on your test!* (AM14)

The Mexicans also praised each other for doing a good job. Examples are given in (35) and (36).

(35) *Tocas muy bien la batería.* (MF11)

"You play the drums very well."

(36) *Tu exposición fue muy interesante.* (MM18)

"Your presentation was very interesting."

Traits accounted for 15% of the American and 15% of the Mexican compliments. Both Americans and Mexicans complimented intelligence, a sense of humor, thoughtfulness, and kindness, as exemplified in (37) and (38).

(37) *You are so nice.* (AF20)

(38) *Eres una persona inteligente.* (MF7)

"You are an intelligent person."

#### *Gender of Compliment Giver and Recipient*

As shown in Table 2, 46 out of 90 or 51% of the Mexican compliments and 64 out of 103 or 61% of the American compliments reported were given by females. Both Mexican and American females praised both males and females on personal appearance more often than they praised traits or skill/work. Mexican and American males also praised appearance more than traits or skill/work; however, all of the appearance compliments given by Mexican males were given to females. Not one appearance compliment was given by a Mexican male to a Mexican male.

**Table 2: Attributes Praised According to Nationality and Gender of Giver and Receiver of Compliment**

<b>Mexicans</b>					
<i>Females</i>					
	<i>Appearance</i>	<i>Traits</i>	<i>Skills/Work</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
F to F	10 (23%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)	16 (35%)
F to M	16 (35%)	5 (11%)	7 (15%)	2 (4%)	30 (65%)
Total	26 (58%)	7 (15%)	9 (19%)	4 (8%)	46 (100%)
<i>Males</i>					
	<i>Appearance</i>	<i>Traits</i>	<i>Skills/Work</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
M to F	23 (53%)	5 (11%)	7 (16%)	1 (2%)	36 (82%)
M to M	0 (0%)	2 (5%)	5 (11%)	1 (2%)	8 (18%)
Total	23 (53%)	7 (16%)	12 (27%)	2 (4%)	44 (100%)
<b>Americans</b>					
<i>Females</i>					
	<i>Appearance</i>	<i>Traits</i>	<i>Skills/Work</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
F to F	23 (36%)	5 (8%)	12 (19%)	0 (0%)	40 (63%)
F to M	13 (20%)	5 (8%)	5 (8%)	1 (1%)	24 (37%)
Total	36 (56%)	10 (16%)	17 (27%)	1 (1%)	64 (100%)
<i>Males</i>					
	<i>Appearance</i>	<i>Traits</i>	<i>Skills/Work</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
M to F	15 (38%)	0 (0%)	7 (18%)	2 (6%)	24 (62%)
M to M	5 (13%)	6 (15%)	4 (10%)	0 (0%)	15 (38%)
Total	20 (51%)	6 (15%)	11 (28%)	2 (6%)	39 (100%)

### *Compliment Frequency*

The interview data indicate that the Americans complimented slightly more frequently than the Mexicans. The Americans reported compliments that were given an average of 1.5 days before the interview. This frequency is similar to the 1.6 days in Barnlund and Araki (1985) and the 1.6 days in Nelson et al. (1995). The Mexicans reported compliments that were given an average of 2.1 days before the interview.

Perhaps a more important finding is the difference between the complimenting behavior of males and females. American males complimented an average of 2.2 days before the interview and Mexican males 2.5, whereas American females complimented .8 days earlier and Mexican females 1.7

days earlier. These differences reveal that apparently both American and Mexican females compliment more frequently than males.

### *Relationship Between Compliment Giver and Receiver*

Both Mexican and U.S. females complimented friends more frequently than any other relationship (see Table 3). They differed, however, in the number of compliments given to intimates and acquaintances. Of the compliments given by Mexican females, 30% were to intimates (i.e., *novios* or boyfriends) and 12% to acquaintances, whereas 8% of the compliments given by American females were given to intimates and 31% to acquaintances. Both Mexican and U.S. males frequently complimented friends and intimates. U.S. males complimented acquaintances (31%) more frequently than Mexican males complimented acquaintances (18%).

**Table 3: Relationships Between Giver and Receiver of Compliment**

<b>Mexicans</b>						
<i>Females</i>						
	<i>Intimates</i>	<i>Friends</i>	<i>Relatives</i>	<i>Acquaintances</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
F to F	0 (0%)	11 (24%)	4 (9%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	16 (35%)
F to M	14 (30%)	9 (19%)	3 (7%)	4 (9%)	0 (0%)	30 (65%)
Total	14 (30%)	20 (41%)	7 (17%)	5 (12%)	0 (0%)	46 (100%)
<i>Males</i>						
	<i>Intimates</i>	<i>Friends</i>	<i>Relatives</i>	<i>Acquaintances</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
M to F	10 (22%)	13 (30%)	4 (9%)	7 (16%)	2 (5%)	36 (82%)
M to M	0 (0%)	2 (5%)	5 (11%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	8 (18%)
Total	0 (22%)	15 (35%)	9 (20%)	8 (18%)	2 (5%)	44 (100%)
<b>Americans</b>						
<i>Females</i>						
	<i>Intimates</i>	<i>Friends</i>	<i>Relatives</i>	<i>Acquaintances</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
F to F	0 (0%)	24 (38%)	2 (3%)	13 (20%)	1 (2%)	40 (63%)
F to M	5 (8%)	11 (16%)	0 (0%)	7 (11%)	1 (2%)	24 (37%)
Total	5 (8%)	35 (54%)	2 (3%)	20 (31%)	2 (4%)	64 (100%)
<i>Males</i>						
	<i>Intimates</i>	<i>Friends</i>	<i>Relatives</i>	<i>Acquaintances</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
M to F	10 (26%)	2 (5%)	3 (8%)	8 (21%)	1 (02%)	24 (62%)
M to M	0 (0%)	9 (23%)	2 (5%)	4 (10%)	0 (0%)	15 (38%)
Total	10 (26%)	11 (28%)	5 (13%)	12 (31%)	1 (02%)	39 (100%)

## Discussion

In order for students to become communicatively competent in a second language, they need both grammatical and pragmatic competence (Thomas, 1983). However, achieving pragmatic competence may, at times, be complicated due to pragmatic transfer – using the rules governing speech events from one's first language speech community when interacting with members of a second language community. Pragmatic transfer can lead to pragmatic failure, to not understanding the illocutionary force of an utterance, to not understanding what is meant by what is said (Thomas 1983). Such situations can result in cross-cultural misunderstandings and communication breakdowns. Cross-cultural studies such as this one contribute to our knowledge of appropriate compliments in Mexican Spanish and also to our understanding of pragmatic transfer as a possible cause of pragmatic failure.

The results of this study suggest similarities and differences in Mexican Spanish and American English compliments. Similarities include the speech act itself, complimenting is common in both cultures. Both cultures also share similarities in compliment forms and attributes praised. Over 65% of both Mexican and American compliments were adjectival and used a limited number of adjectives. Consistent with the work of Wolfson (1989), this study indicates that Americans frequently use the adjectives *NICE*, *GOOD*, and *GREAT*. Consistent with the work of Aceves (1996), Mexicans frequently use *bonito(-a)* and *guapo(-a)*.

Both Mexican and American compliments also tend to use a limited number of syntactic structures. The American pattern—I + like/love + NP—is similar to the Mexican pattern—*Encantar/gustar* + NP. The American pattern—NP + be/look + (intensifier) + ADJ—is similar to the Mexican pattern—(NP) *ser/estar/ver* + (intensifier) + ADJ. Additionally, the American pattern—PRO + be + ADJ + NP—is similar to a Mexican pattern (NP) *ser/estar/tener* + NP. Considering attributes, in both the United States and Mexico, individuals praise personal appearance, personality traits, skill, and work. As Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993) point out, behaviors that are consistent across L1 and L2 usually result in communicative success.

Although the two groups share similarities, they also differ. One difference is gender. Mexican males rarely compliment one another on appearance, whereas Americans males do. In fact, Mexican males, in general, are less likely to compliment each other than are American males. This gender-



based cultural difference could lead to misunderstanding. Take the example of an American male, who drawing on his LI strategies for complimenting, praises a Mexican male on appearance. The American's intent is to indicate friendliness. If the Mexican male interprets the intent of the compliment differently, then pragmatic failure has occurred. The compliment did not produce the desired result.

A second gender difference relates to males complimenting females. Overall, Mexican males compliment females on appearance more often than American males compliment females on appearance. This difference could also lead to pragmatic failure. For example, a Mexican male, using LI compliment strategies, might whistle or make utterances such as *mujerquita* or *flaquita* to an American female with the intent of making the female feel positive about her looks. If the American female feels insulted, the compliment resulted in pragmatic failure. The intended results were not realized. On the other hand, American males, when interacting with Mexican females, may not compliment them as frequently as the females expect. This lack of complimenting could also result in pragmatic failure.

Another difference relates to role relationships. American males and females compliment acquaintances more often than Mexicans do, and Mexican females compliment intimates more often than U.S. females do. Because of this difference in complimenting acquaintances and intimates, it is possible that Americans could compliment Mexican acquaintances of the opposite sex with the intent of being friendly, and the Mexican could interpret the compliment as an initial move toward a more intimate relationship. To avoid these types of misunderstandings, it is important that foreign or second language students of Spanish and English learn the sociolinguistic rules of speech acts such as compliments.

A final difference between Mexican and American compliments relates to syntactic structure. The Spanish pattern  $-(Qu\acute{e} + A) + \text{---}$  is not a common American pattern. However, it does not appear to be a difficult pattern to learn. Because it is the most commonly used form in Mexico, and because it does not appear difficult to learn, it seems reasonable for students of Spanish as a second language to learn the  $(Qu\acute{e} + A)$  patterns.

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