

A Comparative Study of Online and Face to Face Compliments in of Turkish Young Adult Instagram Users

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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with linguistic and pragmatic differences in Turkish compliments among Turkish young adult Instagram users in online and face-to-face contexts. With a focus on structures, functions, and topics, the study aims to answer key questions regarding the interpretation of genuineness, intentions behind compliments, and the impact of gender and status dynamics. Thirty young adult participants (15 male, 15 female), all L1 Turkish and L2 English speakers, participated in this mixed-method study consisting of a questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire is made of Likert scale questions about fishing for compliments in both contexts, and includes a discourse completion task (DCT), which gathers compliments in hypothetical scenarios in face-to-face and Instagram contexts. Furthermore, the interviews explore interpretations, self-presentation habits, and gender & status dynamics. Their compliments were categorized and compared in terms of structure, function, and topics. In the DCT scenarios, relationships, and hierarchy (friends, cousins, professors) of people in discourse were mentioned, so that the context could be better understood. This research discusses compliments in face-to-face and online settings within the framework of the existing literature on politeness theory. It further hypothesizes that online compliments are perceived as less genuine, thinking from the point that individuals show different aspects of their identities offline, whereas in online environments, they present themselves to everyone, within a structured and limited profile. The study hypothesizes this limited and edited “self-presentation” phenomena to change perception of genuineness in two contexts. The results of the Discourse Completion Task revealed that face-to-face compliments use finite sentences ($p < 0.0001$), with 103 instances compared to 36 on Instagram, while Instagram compliments favor non-finite forms (words/phrases and emojis, $p < 0.0001$), with 41 instances compared to 6 in face-to-face contexts.

Moreover, the compliment function that was used the most is approval & admiration, while the most used compliment topic is appearance. Additionally, results reported that compliments face to face affect participants’ self-esteem more than Instagram compliments. There’s a significant difference between the intention of boosting confidence and the actual function of incoming compliments to boost the person’s confidence ($p < 0.001$). Thus, it is revealed that participants did not compliment to boost the other person’s confidence, but their confidence is boosted when they receive a compliment. About the gender differences and tendencies, the results revealed that females prefer complimenting female friends face to face more than males, while males complimented male teachers significantly more than females. The study offers insights into young adult Instagram users’ complimenting behaviors, enriching our understanding of communication dynamics, and providing an insight into pragmatics and social media behavior. The fact that the participants are all from METU is a limitation of this study, due to questions in generalizability. The study was conducted with 30 participants, which is another limitation about generalizability. Despite the exclusive focus on METU students may limit generalizability, it provides a controlled sample for in-depth analysis.

When it comes to the insights the study provides to the field of linguistics, it offers a lens for examining how gender and social roles shape discourse practices. Since speech event production is important in pragmatic and communicative competence, it could be useful for classroom implications for language teachers. Last but not least, the study can give language teachers ideas on how digital platforms can be used in education and this can equip students with the skills to use technology effectively, by examining the effects compliments in social media on language education.

Keywords: Pragmatics; Compliments; Turkish; Online