A Contrastive Study of Compliment Responses Among Indonesians and Koreans*

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I. Introduction

What counts as a compliment can vary from culture to culture. Consider whether the following sentences can fall within the category of compliments or not.

(1) C (Husband): You must have been tired doing all the shopping.
R (Wife): Is it so? Now you can do the cooking.

(2) C (Friend): You have bought a sewing machine. How much does it cost?
R: Oh, it's cheap. It's a used one. My wife needs it badly.

(3) C: You've saved a lot of money in your account, ha?
R: Oh, no, Please don't tease me.

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According to Wolfson (1981), these sentences are considered to be compliments by Indonesians. However, they may not be recognized as such in other countries. For instance, it is difficult for English speakers to understand why it is complimentary in Indonesian to mention that a friend has bought a sewing machine, saved money or done a lot of shopping. As for Korean native speakers who participated in this study, only 20% of the subjects counted those sentences as compliments, and 60% of the subjects replied that the decision depends on the individual contexts where these utterances are situated.

Based on this observation, we can say that a single speech act, such as complimenting, may differ very much from one society to another. For any culture, a compliment must express approval of something that both parties, speakers and addressees, regard positively (Manes 1983) and it must be valued by the culture indicated (Holmes, 1988; Manes 1983). Yet, the ways in which people compliment and respond to compliment vary culturally as Doohan and Manusov (2004: 171) say that viewing compliments as important, relational speech acts situates them as cultural constructions that reflect agreed upon ways of behaving. For instance, no matter how delighted a Korean feels about a compliment he/she receives, s/he takes great pains to appear modest and refrain from showing any outward sign of pleasure. Responding to a compliment may also include non-verbal behaviors such as smiles, or even silences in some cultures.

In this regard, compliment responses constitute a subject worthy of further research for cross-cultural analysis given