



# Compliments in Indonesian Cultures: A Literature Review

Karmila Mokoginta<sup>(✉)</sup> 

Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia  
karmila.mokoginta@unhas.ac.id

**Abstract.** Complimenting can be considered an important communicative event. The use of compliments can be influential in enhancing the quality of interactions especially from social perspectives. This study aims to review several researches about compliments in Indonesian cultures to find out aspects of compliments covered in the studies. Furthermore, this research is intended to investigate which cultures in Indonesia have been covered in the compliment studies. It is found that the study about compliments has been very popular among Indonesian scholars. The researchers have covered several issues, including compliment strategies, compliment responses, and the influence of gender and social status on compliments. Nevertheless, only a few studies refer specifically to certain ethnics in Indonesia. Further investigations are needed to obtain a more systematic description about compliments in Indonesian language, including a detailed description of syntactic patterns. This is considered significant in building more detailed theories about Indonesian language. Finally, the fact that Indonesia consists of many cultures brings a demand for researchers to conduct studies about compliments in various ethnics in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** complimenting · Indonesia · culture

## 1 Introduction

Complimenting is an important communicative event. As part of phatic communication, compliments are very helpful in maintaining social connection between participants in an interaction. Compliments have an essential role as they facilitate improvement in people connection (Yousefvand et al., 2014: 182). Therefore, it is significant to master compliment strategies as part of communication skills, and it is important to develop theories that can explain this communicative function.

Meanwhile, similar to communication in general, complimenting mechanism is strongly influenced by culture. It is then necessary to conduct studies investigating complimenting within various cultural contexts. Unfortunately, in many studies on cultural elements, the general perception of national culture is still dominant. In Indonesia, especially, the country appears to be considered one homogenous culture. In fact, Indonesia consists of so many ethnic groups, which means that there are many cultural variations. This concern demands more studies that are within the context of specific ethnic groups in Indonesia.

© The Author(s) 2023

M. Hasyim (Ed.): ICLC 2022, ASSEHR 756, pp. 260–270, 2023.

[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-070-1\\_22](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-070-1_22)

This writing is intended as an initial effort to review researches on complimenting in Indonesian cultural context. Important findings of the studies will be elaborated, and finally the aspects of compliment discussed in the studies, and the part of Indonesian culture that is investigated will be highlighted.

## **2 Theoretical Background**

One definition of compliment was proposed by J. Manes (cited in Solodka and Perea, 2018: 42). The expert explains that compliments can be defined “as those speech acts which have the reflection and expression of cultural values because of their nature as judgments, over expressions of approval or admiration of another’s work, appearance or taste”. This definition shows that the nature of complimenting focuses on positive perception about others. This is similar to Grasmik’s (2013: 4) opinion that “Making a compliment to an addressee means to praise him or her positively for his/her look, possession or achievement”.

However, it is important to note that compliment mechanism can be culture-specific. The way people compliment in one culture can be different from that of people in other cultures. This is especially important in the context of using a language as a second or foreign language. Ignorance of the cultural differences can cause problems, starting from a simple misunderstanding to the total breakdown of communication. It is emphasized that “Lack of knowledge in and attention to how compliments and their responses function, as other speech acts, can cause serious problems and result in miscommunication” (Yousefvand et al., 2014: 183).

## **3 Method**

This study was conducted by reviewing several researches related to complimenting in Indonesian cultural settings. The steps employed in the literature review included: (1) reading the articles carefully to determine the purpose of writing, the complimenting aspects covered in the research, parts of Indonesian culture covered in the study, and the important findings of the study; (2) classifying information obtained in the review; (3) analysing the information obtained in the review; (4) drawing some conclusions related to the purposes of the review.

## **4 Studies Related to Complimenting in Indonesian Cultural Contexts**

### **4.1 Constructing Compliment in English and Bahasa Indonesia: A Comparative Study (Akhyar, 2015)**

In the study, the author compared complimenting in English and Bahasa Indonesia, and suggested several ways of teaching compliments in the class of English as a Second Language. The researcher relied on the data from observations as well as other sources, i.e., a paper entitled “Compliments in Cross-Cultural Perspectives” for English

data; and a research about “Respon Pujian dalam Bahasa Indonesia oleh Dwibahasawan Indonesia-Inggris” [Compliment Responses in Bahasa Indonesia by Indonesian-English Bilinguals] for the Indonesian data. The first thing can be clearly seen in the study is that the explanation about English compliments is more comprehensive than Indonesian compliments. With regards to English compliments, Akhyar refers to two previous studies by Wolfson in 1981, and by Manes and Wolfson, also in 1981 (pp. 148–149). The patterns concluded in the studies are as follows:

[is]  
 NP (really) ADJ  
 [looks]

[like]  
 NP (really) NP  
 [love]

PRO is (really) (a) ADJ NP

You V (a) (really) ADJ NP  
 You V (NP) (really) ADV  
 You have (a) (really) ADJ NP  
 What (a) ADJ NP!  
 ADJ NP!  
 Isn't NP ADJ!

On the other hand, the discussion on Indonesian compliments is not comprehensive. Most of the discussion is not supported with sufficient data. There is no systematic description of compliment patterns, like those provided by experts in English compliments. However, the researcher presents three important claims: (1) compliments are important in Indonesian culture that prioritizes close relationship and togetherness, as the manifestation of religious and traditional values (p. 147); (2) there can be variations of compliments across different contexts and ethnic groups in Indonesia (p. 147); and (3) Indonesian compliments can be expressed in metaphorical forms (pp. 147–148). In addition, Akhyar's suggestions on the methods of teaching compliments in ESL classes (p. 148) are very valuable. The researcher concluded that compliments have an important role in both English and Indonesia. In both languages, compliments are organized in various patterns.

#### 4.2 Respon Pujian Oleh Mahasiswa Multikultural (Studi Kasus Dengan Tinjauan Sosiopragmatik) [Compliment Responses by Multicultural Students (a Case Study with Socio-pragmatic Approach)] (Rachman and Kinanti, 2018)

Another study by Rachman and Kinanti (2018) were conducted among students of IKIP Budi Utomo (Budi Utomo Teachers College) to find out the realization of compliment responses. The students were from various ethnic groups. The data showed that the

respondents used various strategies in responding to compliments, including rejecting, accepting, interpreting, silence, and the combination of the strategies (pp. 17–20). The rejecting strategy was used with further comments to show politeness (pp. 20–21); while the accepting strategy was used in indirect ways through jokes, further comment, expression of gratitude to the God, expression of hope, expression of gratitude, and stories about the origin of the object of compliment (p. 21). The researcher explains that this indirectness is related to the tradition of Indonesian people as part of “eastern” culture (p. 21).

#### 4.3 Respon Pujian Dalam Bahasa Indonesia Oleh Dwibahasawan Indonesia-Inggris [Compliment Responses in Bahasa Indonesia by Indonesian-English Bilinguals] (Mukminatien and Patriana, 2005)

Mukminatien and Patriana (2005) describe the findings of a study about compliment responses used by Indonesian-English bilinguals. The data were taken in 2004 and 2005 from students and lecturers who used English and Bahasa Indonesia (p. 173), but no specific ethnic groups are mentioned. The setting was informal, and there was no social distance (p. 177). The findings revealed some strategies that were considered uncommon in Indonesian culture, including appreciation token, comment acceptance, and praise upgrade (pp. 173–175) and this phenomenon can be considered an evidence of interlanguage (p. 176). The followings are examples of data related to appreciation token, comment acceptance, and praise upgrade in the study (p. 174) with my translation.

##### Appreciation token

(Dosen memuji mahasiswanya).

A: *Kamu cantik lo kalau pakai rok.*

B: *Terimakasih. (tersenyum senang).*

A: *Tapi kenapa ya kok umumnya cewek sekarang suka pakai celana panjang ?*

B: (tersenyum) *Lebih nyaman, Mam.*

[(A lecturer complimented a student)

A: You are beautiful when wearing a skirt.

B: Thank you. (Smiled happily).

A: But why do women commonly prefer trousers now?

B: (smiling) More comfortable, Mam.]

**Comment Acceptance**

(Percakapan sesama dosen mengomentari jilbab baru).

A: *Cakep jilbabnya.*

B: (Tersenyum) *Terima kasih. Aku suka yang dominan hitam gini ini.*

A: *Ya. Ibu pantes aja pakai hitam. Kalau aku ya* (ujaran tidak dilanjutkan, sambil pergi keluar ruangan).

[(Conversation between lecturers, commenting on new headscarf).

A: The headscarf is nice.

B: (Smiling) Thank you. I like a headscarf with black as the dominant color like this.

A: Yes, black suits you. For me well (the utterance was not continued, while B gets out of the room)]

**Praise upgrade**

(Di ruang dosen, percakapan sesama dosen)

A: *Blusnya bagus ya. Lucu.*

B: *Ini mahal* (sambil tersenyum bercanda)

A: (Tersenyum) *Wah iya ya, saya lupa kalau Ibu kaya*

[(In the lecturers' room, conversation between lecturers)

A: The blouse is nice. Funny.

B: This is expensive (while smiling for a joke)

A: (Smiling) Well yes yes, I forget that you are rich]

#### **4.4 Patterns and Strategies of Responses to Compliments: A Case Study on Post-graduate Students of One State University in Indonesia (Handayani, 2015)**

Another study by Handayani (2015) focused on comparing males and females in complimenting. The respondents were Indonesian post-graduate students without any specification of ethnicity (p. 21). The research elaborated the patterns and strategies used by males and females in responding to compliments. It was found that males tended to use the simple pattern (e.g. conversation 1), while females tended to use the complex pattern (e.g. conversation 2) (pp. 22–23).

**Conversation 1**

R *Jaketnya bagus, beda dua sisi.*

S-3 *Makasih*

(Handayani, 2015: 22)

[R The jacket is nice, there are two different sides.]

S-3 Thank you.]

**Conversation 2**

R 'Hei, kerudungnya bagus warnanya, aku juga punya lho yang warna itu.'  
 S-18: 'Lucu ya, aku suka warnanya, ada biru dan ungu-ungu seperti gimana gitu, sama seperti tasku' [It's cute isn't it, I like the color, it has blue and purple, it's just unique, like my bag.]

(Handayani, 2015: 22)

[R Hi, the scarf has good color, I also have (a scarf) of that color.  
 S-18 It's cute isn't it, I like the color, it has blue and purple, it's just unique, like my bag.]

The research also found that male respondents tended to use down-grading strategies (55.53%), while female respondents tended to use accepting strategies such as confirmation (37.5%) and tagging (31.25%) (p. 23).

#### **4.5 The Socio-pragmatic Dimensions of Complimenting in Maros Buginese Culture (Dwinita et al., 2013)**

The study by Dwinita et al. (2013) is more specific and comprehensive. Its discussion is limited to the issue of socio-pragmatic influences on compliments, especially in relation to gender and social status. Furthermore, the coverage of analysis was also limited to Buginese culture, especially the people living in Turikale Sub-district, Maros regency, South Sulawesi. This specificity makes the discussion more focused so that more understanding can be gained regarding the influence of Indonesian culture on compliments. The study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Several techniques, including observation, interview, questionnaire, and field note were used in collecting the data.

The results of the analysis showed that complimenting has an important role in the communication of Buginese society. It functions as a phatic expression to greet someone after not meeting for a long time, and as an expression of politeness and solidarity (pp. 5–6). Complimenting can serve to open the channel of communication, indicating that there will be something to say later on (pp. 5–6).

Other findings are related to gender. The data showed that males and females from higher status compliment more than those from lower status (p. 6). Unfortunately, there is no further interpretation from the researcher regarding this phenomenon. There is a possibility that compliments from people with lower status to people with higher status are considered flattering. Another gender-related finding is that the frequency of male-to-female complimenting was higher than that of female-to-male complimenting (p. 6). Not expressing compliments, according to the researcher, is a way to maintain good attitude in line with the cultural expectation for females, especially unmarried ones (p. 6). Men's higher frequency in giving compliments is also found in husband-and-wife relationship (p. 6). Besides the above findings, this research also found that behavior can be another topic of compliment, in addition to the three reasons of providing compliments in a theory by Wolfson in 1983. In general, the research findings bring a conclusion that gender and social status may influence one's complimenting behavior.

#### 4.6 Compliments Across Gender and Power Relation Among Indonesian EFL Learners (Indah, 2017)

Relationship between complimenting, gender, and power relation becomes the focus of another study by Indah (2017). The context is still Indonesian culture, but not in specific ethnicity. One specificity of this study is that the respondents were college students. In terms of power-relation (pp. 135–139), the findings show that the respondents were more modest in complementing people of the same and higher status. In contrast, they can express more detailed compliments to people with lower status. This is similar to the findings by Dwinita's in the context of Buginese culture. In terms of gender (pp. 139–142), one of the findings show that women have longer compliments. They also provided more kinds of compliment responses. These findings are comparable to the study by Handayani (2015) which found that females tended to use complex compliments.

#### 4.7 Responses to Compliments Within Minangkabau Families in Pauh, Indonesia (Flores et al., 2019)

The study by Flores et al. (2019) was also very specific as it investigated compliment responses used by family members in Minangkabau culture, Indonesia. As many as 20 families participated in the research (p. 59). The data were collected and classified based on a taxonomy proposed by Herbert (p. 60). The study also used secondary data obtained from an expert in Minangkabau culture named Musra Dahrizal Katik Rajo Mangkuto (p. 59).

The findings showed that the respondents used various types of responses including appreciation token, comment acceptance, reassignment, return, question, and disagreement (p. 61). A bigger proportion of the responses is in the agreement category (p. 62). The respondents and the expert of Minangkabau culture explained that although hierarchy characterized Minangkabau culture, very close relationship between participants can result in agreement responses to compliments (p. 65).

In addition, two strategies used by the respondents were not found in Herbert's taxonomy (p. 66). They are expression of compliment to the God and provision of additional explanation (p. 66). The former was realized commonly using the Arabic word "Alhamdulillah", and according to the researcher it reflected the strong influence of Islam in Minangkabau culture (p. 66). The latter can be illustrated when, replying to a compliment "Wow Dad/Mum you look very handsome/beautiful (where are you going?)", a person says "I'm going to a wedding party" (p. 66).

The followings are several examples of compliment and compliment responses in the study by Flores et al. (2019).

Wife : *Ndeh, tambah gagah se uda mah se uda mah.*  
**'Wow, hubby, you are more handsome today'.**

**Husband:** *Emang dari lahianyo lah gagah juo.*

**‘Indeed, I’m handsome since I was born (joking)’.**

(Flores et al., 2019: 66)

Child 1: : *Ndeh, gagah bana Apa kini.***‘Wow, you look very handsome Dad’.****Father** : *Oh nan rancak ko lah dari dulu ko.***‘Oh I’m handsome since a long time ago! (joking)’.**

(Flores et al., 2019: 66)

Husband : *Ndeh manih bana bini ambo ko ha.***‘Wow, you are very beautiful/sweet my wife’.****Wife** : *Tu iyo manihnyo. Kok ndak manih ma amuah Apa.***‘Yes, I’m sweet, if I’m not, you won’t like me (joking)’.**

(Flores et al., 2019: 67)

**4.8 Comparison of How Arabic and English Foreign Language Learners Compliment and Respond to Praises (Kamsinah et al., 2022)**

This research investigated the case of compliment and compliment responses among Indonesian learners of English and Arabic languages in a university in Indonesia (p. 158). The objective was to analyze the compliment strategies used by Indonesian learners of Arabic and English languages; and how the learners respond to compliments (p. 160). Data, in the forms of compliments and compliment responses, were obtained from respondents’ responses to several scenarios given by the researchers, which were then followed with online interviews to discuss the responses (p. 160).

The findings revealed some interesting differences between learners of Arabic and English languages. The researchers reached a conclusion that the learners of English language employed more various types of compliment strategies and compliment responses, compared to the learners of Arabic language (p. 166). However, the two groups were similar in terms of the dominant compliment responses they used: reassignment and appreciation (pp. 166–167).

**4.9 Discussion**

The effort by Handayani (2015) to classify her research data into complex and simple compliments is very good. It successfully proved one significant difference between Indonesian males and females in complimenting. This finding about pragmatic pattern needs to be completed with further analysis of syntactic pattern. The syntactic patterns of English compliments discussed in Akhyar (2015) can be a good example in formulating the syntactic patterns of compliments in Bahasa Indonesia.

Akhyar (2015) has also claimed that different ethnic groups in Indonesia may have different ways of complimenting. However, from the eight studies reviewed above, only two studies specify the discussion on certain cultures, Buginese and Minangkabau. In



fact, Indonesia consists of around 360 ethnic groups (Kedutaan Besar Republik Indonesia di Canberra Australia), so the room for exploration and discussion is still widely opened. The advantage of having a specific discussion is that it brings an opportunity for researchers to dig deeply into the specific culture, and the findings will broaden our perspective of Indonesia as a multi-culture nation.

Another important issue to be highlighted is about the common assumption of compliment responses in Indonesian culture. Mukminatien and Patriana (2005) claimed that the Indonesian-English bilinguals in their study would probably become bicultural people, as shown in their responses to compliments which also included the accepting strategies (p. 177). This consideration might be related to the assumption that Indonesians tend to respond to compliments with rejection. This assumption is supported by Rahmayani (2020) who conducted a study on compliment responses using data from an Indonesian talk-show. The results show that two most frequent strategies employed by Indonesian guests in the talk show were no acknowledgement (31.03) and disagreement (24.13%) (p. 390). The author explains that the use of the two strategies is a typical way of Eastern cultures like Indonesia in responding to compliments (p. 394). A related explanation - especially in the context of culture in Java, Indonesia - can be found in Putrihapsari and Dimiyati (2021). They explain several concepts in Javanese culture, one of which is the *andhap-asor* concept that requires people to be humble including in responding to compliments (p. 2064). In the global context, the assumption for Indonesian culture is in line with the research by Rong Chen in 1993 (cited in Chen, 2010, p. 86) that determined rejection as the most frequent responses of compliments used by Chinese. However, in the Flores et al.'s (2019) study on compliment responses, it was found that accepting was used quite often as compliment responses (p. 62). The respondents were family members from Minangkabau culture (p. 59), so the relationship was very close to each other. The nature of close relationship is also found in the interaction between respondents in the study by Mukminatien and Patriana (2005, p. 177). Here lies the critical point to question the assumption of rejecting as the most frequent compliment response in Indonesia.

Rather than perceiving rejection as the most typical compliment response in Indonesia, the writer proposes that the issue regarding compliment responses might be more related to the social distance between participants. In Rahmayani's (2020) study, the objects of the observation were popular people who might not be very close with the host of the talk show, so their responses to compliments were in the form of rejection. Alternatively, the popular people felt the necessity to maintain their image by following the expectation for people to be humble in interaction. In contrast, respondents in the research by Mukminatien and Patriana (2005) and Flores et al. (2019), the objects of observation were people with close relationship, so social distance is not an issue. In these two studies, the nature of interaction is very informal, so that accepting compliments were highly likely to be considered normal. This is a significant gap for further researches of compliments in Indonesian cultures. More evidences are needed to prove that the current theory that rejection is the most typical Indonesian compliment responses is too simplified. Future explanation and theories about Indonesian compliments need to be based on data from various social contexts.

The study by Kamsinah et al. (2022) brings a special nuance in the researches about compliment in Indonesian cultural contexts. Starting from the data of the research, further studies can compare how Indonesian learners perform compliments when they use the target languages they learn (Arabic and English in this case) and when they use their native language (Bahasa Indonesia or other local languages in Indonesia). The findings will provide an understanding of the characteristics of language learners in Indonesia.

Finally, for researchers in English Language Teaching, there will be a necessity to formulate the ways in teaching compliments in EFL/ESL classes. Akhyar (2015) has proposed three methods: conversation completion, performance method, and direct interaction with native speakers. More research on the efficiency of the methods can bring benefits to teachers and learners.

## 5 Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

It can be concluded that studies about complimenting in Indonesia culture have attracted Indonesian scholars. However, further studies are still needed. Firstly, more researches are necessary to develop a complete description about the patterns of Indonesian compliments, in both syntactic level and discourse level that consider the influence of social variations. The complete description is expected to become a part of theories about Indonesian language. Secondly, considering that Indonesia is a multicultural country, it becomes an important demand for language researchers to conduct studies that are specified for certain ethnic groups. Specific studies will be very helpful to build a comprehensive perspective about compliments in various cultures within Indonesia; and more importantly to provide evidences about multiculturalism in Indonesia.

## References

- Akhyar, S.: Constructing Compliment in English and Bahasa Indonesia: A Comparative Study. *Mabasan*, 9(2), 142-149 (2015).
- Chen, R.: Compliment and Compliment Response Research: A Cross Cultural Survey. In: Trosborg, A. (ed) *Pragmatic Across Languages and Cultures*, pp. 79–102. De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin (2010).
- Dwinita, A., Yassi, H.A., Makka, M.: The Socio-pragmatic Dimension of Complimenting in Maros Buginese Culture. *Journal Program Pascasarjana Universitas Hasanuddin*, (2013).
- Flores, A., Marnita, R., Lindawati: Responses to Compliments within Minangkabau Families in Pauh, Indonesia. *SALINGKA, Majalah Ilmiah Bahasa dan Sastra*, 16(1), 57–70 (2019).
- Grasmik, K.: *Responding to Compliments in German and American English*. GRIN Verlag, Munich (2013).
- Handayani, S.: Patterns and Strategies of Responses to Compliments: A Case Study on Post-graduate Students of One State University in Indonesia. *English Journal*, 9(1), 19-28 (2015).
- Indah, R. N.: Compliments across Gender and Power Relation among Indonesian EFL Learners. *Arab World English Journal*, 8(2), 132-144 (2017).
- Kamsinah, K., Sain, Y., Aliah, N. Natsir, N.: Comparison of How Arabic and English Foreign Language Learners Compliment and Respond to Praises. *REILA, Journal of Research and Innovation in Language*, 4(2), 158-169 (2022).

- Kedutaan Besar Republik Indonesia di Canberra Australia, <https://kemlu.go.id/canberra/id/read/indonesia/2186/etc-menu#:~:text=Indonesia%20merupakan%20negara%20kepulauan%20terbesar,lebih%20dari%20360%20suku%20bangsa>, last accessed 2022/12/05.
- Mukminatien, N., Patriana, A. W.: Respon Pujian dalam Bahasa Indonesia oleh Dwibahasawan Indonesia-Inggris. *Bahasa dan Seni*, 33(2), 165-179 (2005).
- Putrihhapsari, R., Dimiyati.: Penanaman Sikap Sopan Santun dalam Budaya Jawa pada Anak Usia Dini. *Jurnal Obsesi: Jurnal Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*, 5(2), 2059–2070 (2021).
- Rachman, A. K., Kinanti, K. P.: Respon Pujian oleh Mahasiswa Multikultural (Studi Kasus dengan Tinjauan Sosiopragmatik). *Belajar Bahasa, Jurnal Ilmiah Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia*, 3(1), 12-22 (2018).
- Rahmayani, F. A.: Cross cultural pragmatics: compliment response strategy used on the British and Indonesian talk show. *Ideas Journal of English Language Teaching & Learning Linguistics and Literature*, 8(2), 384-397 (2020).
- Solodka, A., Perea, L.: The Speech Act of Complimenting as Part of the Ukrainian, Russian and English-Speaking Communities: Ukraine and the USA. *Arab World English Journal*, 9(4), 39-55 (2018).
- Yousefvand, E., Yousofi, N., Abasi, M.: The Study of Compliment Speech Act Responses: A Study Based on Status and Gender in Persian. *J. Appl. Environ. Biol. Sci.*, 4(3), 182-196 (2014).

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

