

Compliment Sequences in Preferred Environments. Some Evidence from Talk-in-Interaction in Romanian

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Abstract: *The present study is a corpus-based analysis of compliment sequences in preferred environments in Romanian. Using excerpts from naturally occurring conversation, this study explores the speech event of complimenting in terms of adjacency. In other words, it examines the compliment sequence in both first and second pair parts. Starting from the contradictory claim in the literature that compliments can both strengthen (Wolfson, 1983:88) and soften (Holmes 1986: 488; Holmes and Brown, 1987: 532) another speech act, this paper aims to provide a principled account as to how compliments can be interpreted as having both strengthening and mitigating functions. To achieve this end, I propose a conversation analytic approach with the view to demonstrating the interconnectedness of (a) the linguistic form the utterance takes, (b) the sequential context in which it occurs, and (c) the action it is performing. This study demonstrates, with empirical data from Romanian conversational discourse, that the placement of the compliment within the larger sequence and the preference organization are consequential for the action the compliment is performing, since not every utterance having the semantic and syntactic features of a compliment actually performs the action of complimenting. Rather it is the placement of a potential compliment turn in its local sequential context that determines its function.*

With regard to the preference organization, this study examines compliments as first pair parts and second pair parts in preferred environments, demonstrating that in addition to performing the action of complimenting, compliments also perform an additional action that constitutes a preferred action (i.e., a noticing, an expression of gratitude, an alignment with a story, an acceptance, etc.), and it is this preferred action that has a social solidarity building function.

Keywords: *compliment sequence; adjacency; sequential organization; preferred environment; positive politeness;*

1. Introduction

Language users are aware of the communicative function of compliments as “social lubricants” (Wolfson 1983: 89) used to “grease the social wheels” of interaction. Research has shown that compliments exhibit a rather restricted set of morpho-syntactic features and a limited number of adjectives which makes them formulaic expressions (Manes and Wolfson 1981). Given their

wide-spread use, compliments and compliment responses have become the focus of attention in a wide range of studies coming from different fields and from various languages. They have been studied within various theoretical frameworks, using different tools of scientific investigation and methods of data collection including: (a) conversation analysis and discourse analysis (Pomerantz 1978, Wieland 1995, Golato 2004; Hornoiu 2017), (b) field observation (Wolfson and Manes 1980, Herbert and Straight 1989, among others); (c) discourse completion tasks and questionnaires (e.g. Barnlund and Akari 1985; Yuan 1996); (d) role play (Saito and Beecken 1997). These studies have highlighted their formulaic nature in such varieties of English, as American English (Herbert and Straight 1989; Manes and Wolfson 1981; Wolfson 1981), British English (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 1989), South-African English (Herbert 1989; Herbert and Straight 1989), and New-Zealand English (Holmes 1986, 1988; Holmes and Brown 1987). Interestingly enough, however, their formulaic nature is not immediately obvious to language users. Instead what is more obvious is their communicative function as “social lubricants” (Wolfson 1983: 89) used to “grease the social wheels” of interaction. In other words, their most apparent function is to establish and maintain solidarity among interactants, being thus expressions of positive politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987: 103). Manes and Wolfson (1981: 131) account for the connection between the compliment formula, the recognizability of compliments, and social solidarity as follows:

It [the semantic and syntactic regularity of compliments] makes compliments identifiable no matter where in the discourse they occur or what precedes them. Even more important, it makes it possible for people of widely different backgrounds to minimize speech differences which might otherwise interfere with their attempt to create solidarity. . . . Interestingly, the obscurity and the lack of recognition that a formula is involved are required to successfully fulfil the **major** function of compliments: creating or affirming solidarity (emphasis in the original).

Despite their apparent simplicity as formulaic expressions, compliments and compliment responses are multifunctional speech acts. In using them, speakers perform verbal and social actions which are co-produced and negotiated among participants in the talk exchange. They can be used not only as positive politeness strategies, but also, on some occasions, as face-threatening acts, or as negative politeness strategies meant to mitigate the illocutionary force of face-threatening acts. Moreover, apart from such politeness-related interactional functions, they can also play a role

in the sequential organization of a conversation as opening or closing sequences (Wolfson, 1983; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Billmyer, 1990).

This paper argues that it is not the syntactic and semantic properties of an utterance alone that make an utterance unambiguously identifiable as a compliment, nor do they provide the social solidarity building function of compliments. Instead, I show that contextual characteristics are crucial in determining whether an action is intended and interpreted as a compliment. For the purpose of this study, I propose a conversation-analytic account of the speech event of complimenting in terms of adjacency (Schegloff and Sacks 1973; Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974). Thus, complimenting turns and compliment response turns are examined together with a view to demonstrating the interconnectedness of (a) the linguistic form, (b) placement within the extensive sequence, and (c) the action which is performed. The focus of the analysis is on the compliment sequence in preferred environments. Using empirical data from Romanian conversational discourse, I argue that it is the placement of a compliment formula within the extensive sequence in which it is embedded that unravel its pragmatic function and determines the (social solidarity building) function of compliments.

2. Methodology

For the present study, the data have been collected primarily within the framework of Conversation Analysis (CA) which allows for a fine-grained analysis of a phenomenon in its sequential context. CA provides a particularly well-suited framework of analysis for culturally determined speech events since it makes use of video and/or audiotaped samples of non-elicited face-to-face or telephone interactions. However, several data segments have been collected employing an ethnographic approach¹ which is an equally reliable method for collecting data on compliments or any speech acts in everyday naturally occurring conversation. Thus, some compliments were gathered in everyday interactions which I observed or in which I participated. In addition to collecting the compliments and the responses to them, I also gathered information on informants' approximate age, gender and occupation, as well as the relationship holding between speaker and addressee, wherever such information was available. It is my conviction that both CA methodology and the ethnographic approach enable the researcher to collect data which are spontaneous and consequently represent what speakers are actually doing in conversation.

¹ Within this framework of analysis the focus lies on observing people's daily lives. Empirical data are collected through participant observation: the fieldworker asks questions, and writes down what is seen and heard.

Unless otherwise specified, the data analysed in this study are taken from a corpus of 10 hours of non-elicited naturally-occurring conversation, tape recorded in Constanta, Romania. The sample population includes informants living this city as well as in the Constanta metropolitan area². Participants were audiotaped during activities that they would normally engage in. Such activities include dinners, get-togethers over drinks or coffee and cake, and card games. The speakers who contributed data are Romanian men and women ranging in age from 19 – 64 and from a range of occupational and educational backgrounds. The audio-recorded data were transcribed using the transcription conventions proposed by Jefferson (1983; 1985) and Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974).

In order to maintain ethical research standards, all participants were informed of the process prior to the commencement of the recording. Additionally, they were provided with a written guarantee regarding issues of anonymity of transcripts and confidentiality of any personal details concerning any aspect speakers' social identity. Once the recordings were carried out, all participants were requested to complete speaker consent forms granting permission to use the data for linguistic analysis. Following the transcription of the data, the participants were presented with the opportunity to view their transcripts and withdraw, edit or remove any information they feel it might be damaging to their public image. All names are fictionalised to protect participants' identity.

Thus, the methodology used in the present study for data collection has complied with the relevant institutional policies, in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration, and has been approved by the author's institutional bioethics committee.

2. Compliment formula in Romanian

The compliment formula in naturally occurring conversation in Romanian is a complex one exhibiting regularities on at least four levels:

- 1) Morphologically, verbs are found almost invariably in the present tense and adjectives and adverbs tend to be used in the positive degree (rather than in the comparative or superlative);
- 2) On the syntactic level, my data revealed that the majority of compliments are of three basic sentence types:

- NP {a fi /a arăta 'be/look'} (intensifier) Adj *e.g.*, *Ești tare elegantă* ('You look so elegant')

² It may well be that the analysis presented in this paper holds for all varieties of Romanian. However, since the data upon which it is based were collected by and among speakers of the standard variety in and around Constanta, I would not wish to make any claims for the validity of this analysis for **all** Romanian speakers.

- 1st person pronoun {a plăcea ‘like/love’}(intensifier) NP e.g., *Îmi place foarte mult cămașa ta* (‘I simply love your shirt’);
- Demonstrative {a fi ‘be’} (intensifier) Adj. (NP) e.g., *Ăștia sunt foarte frumoși, pantofii* (‘These are really nice (the shoes)’);

3) On the semantic level, a very limited set of positive adjectives and verbs recur repeatedly. The positiveness of the assessable is usually expressed with a limited set of adjectives (*frumos/frumoasă* ‘nice’ or *bun* ‘good’), adverbs (*bine* ‘well’) and verbs (*a plăcea* ‘like/love’). Occasionally an appreciatory sound or an interjection can be used;

4) On the pragmatic level, the function of identifying/indexing the object or person that is complimented is typically served by one of a very small set of deictic elements. This, combined with a general rule that compliments are to be addressed directly to the person being complimented, relates the speech act to the discourse and the overall interaction of which it is a part (Hornoiu 2017).

Unlike other formulaic expressions which are explicitly recognized by members of the speech community and which occupy a specific slot within a conversational sequence compliments can occur in virtually any position both within then turn and the larger sequence. This rule which permits placement of compliments in any position both within a turn and a larger discourse unit, the various communicative functions they perform, all serve to make their formulaic nature less obvious. Interestingly, the obscurity of their formulaic nature and the factors which lead to this obscurity are equally functional. Thus, the use of a formula, the lack of recognition that a formula is involved and the placement within the larger sequence are required to successfully fulfil the *core function* of complimenting: creating or affirming solidarity.

3. The form of an utterance (alone) does not determine its function

The utterance in (1) evinces the features which make a compliment a formulaic expression:

(1)

1 A: e::h ești tare hi hi hi

e::h you’re cool hi hi hi (Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu, ed. 2002:175)

Like many compliments in Romanian, the compliment in (1) has the verb *a fi* (‘to be’) in the present tense, includes one of the typical assessment terms, namely the adjective *tare* (‘cool’), here uttered with slight laugh tokens. When taken out of context, though, it could be argued that this turn cannot necessarily be recognized unambiguously as a compliment. By its design, this particular turn looks like any other positive assessment. Put it differently, with this utterance the speaker could, for instance, be assessing or evaluating

the addressee on a skill, or alternatively, she may be complimenting the addressee on an achievement. As the analysis of excerpt (3) will show, information about the context would clarify whether we are dealing with a compliment or with a general assessment or some other speech act. Although the utterance is clearly addressed to the addressee, such contextual information would be, for example, what the addressee did in order to be described as cool, what the occasion is, what the setting is, etc.

On the other hand, utterances that do not evince the features characteristic of a compliment formula may be interpreted by participants in the interaction as compliments. Thus, it is not its formulaic nature that gives a compliment its function, but rather its placement within a sequence, as the analysis of the following two examples will demonstrate.

The exchange in (2) takes place as A is entering the office and while still in the doorway he utters the assessment in line 1 *miroase a trandafiri* ‘it smells of roses’. His utterance is designed and intended as a description of how the office smells.

(2)

→1 A: *miroase a trandafiri*
it smells of roses

2 B ((smiling and looking at A, who is standing 2 meters away)):
mulțumesc
thanks

((A gazes at B in slight bewilderment))

(3)

3 B: *se SI:mte?*
can you smell it?

4 A: *DA::, FOARte îmbietor*

Yeah, very inviting

5 B ((smiling)) *mulțumesc, e parfumul meu*
thanks

6 A: *FOA:::rte îmbietor foa:::rte îmbietor*

very inviting very inviting

((B is smiling))

At this point, in line 2, B is thanking A. Notice that thanking is a preferred response to the previous turn interpreted as a compliment. Thanking stands to an assessment at least as an unusual response. A relevant response to an assessment is either an acceptance or a disagreement. Hence the slight bewilderment on A’s face. In fact, A’s reaction of slight bewilderment makes it clear that he intended his utterance in line 1 as an assessment, a mere description and receiving thanks is at least weird, or is signaling some sort of

trouble in understanding. This interpretation is also supported by the significant pause following B's thanking. Pauses of this kind generally preface dispreferred turns or repairs dealing with trouble in speaking, hearing or understanding. In line 3, B asks A whether he can actually sense the smell of roses, a question which follows naturally given the contextual details, that is the fact that while delivering his assessment, A is standing in the doorway, two meters away from B. In line 4, A confirms that he can distinctly smell roses and upgrades his assessment by describing the fragrance as very inviting. This second assessment is less objective than the first one and takes on a more subjective note, which blurs the border between (objective) descriptions/assessments and (subjective) compliments. In line 5, B reiterates her thanks and says it is the smell of her perfume. A's response in line 6 which is a repetition of his response in line 4 is unambiguously a compliment on B's perfume rather than a description of the smell in the office. Thus, excerpt (2) demonstrates how the placement of an utterance in a sequence, the contextual details, both linguistic and nonlinguistic (e.g. a pause, higher pitch, lengthened vowels), and participants' local interpretation, all these aspects determine the function of an utterance and not its morpho-syntactic properties alone.

Excerpt (3) is taken from an extended segment of small talk between two friends. Earlier in the conversation, A asked her friend B, a student at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, whether the latter had made any conquests lately. Since B confessed she hadn't made any as she hadn't gone out at all, A asks her in line 1 whether she was feeling stressed, considering the fact that she usually went out more often. In lines 2 and 4, B explains that she has to study a lot since she got a poor weighted average mark for the previous academic year. A express her interest in line 5 by asking details regarding the average mark. Upon getting the answer (line 6), A produces in line 7 the turn that we have looked at in isolation in excerpt³ (1).

(3)

1 A: da' ce-ai pățit TU? ești stresată? CE-AI că TU de obicei ieșeai mai des nu-i așa

what happened to you? are you feeling stressed? what's wrong with you? you used to go out more often didn't you

2 B: am foarte mult de-nvățat ↓() și-mi-

³ The excerpts analyzed in this paper have been transcribed phonetically. Thus, I depart from some of the current spelling rules in Romanian that apply to the letters *î/â* in medial position. I use the letter *â* only in such words as *român/românesc/românește/România*. Similarly, I use two variants for the verbal forms of *a fi* (to be) in first person singular and plural and in the second and third persons plural (*sînt/sunt; sîntem/suntem; sînteți/sunteți; sînt/sunt*) according to how my informants pronounce these forms.

I have a lot to study () and-I-
3 A: o:h ↓
o::h
4 B: tu știi ce medie de toată JEna ↓am scos anu' trecut?
you know what a poor average mark I got last year?
5 A: ce medie ai scos?
what average mark did you get?
6 B: e::h șaptepatrujdoi
h:::h seven forty-two
→7 A: e::h ești tare hi hi hi
e:::h you're cool hi hi hi
8 B: e::h sînt tare! (.) tare (.) PROAstă
e::h I'm cool! (.) very (.) stupid
9 A: CE să mai zic
what can I say
10 B: e medie Mică mă ↓trebuie neapărat să scot și eu un opt și ceva
ca să=
it's a poor average mark I definitely have to get an eight or something
to
11 A:=să se compenseze
to make up for it
12 B: păi ↓ da
well, yeah
→ 13 A: ești pusă pe FAPTE mari
you are dead set on great deeds (Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu, ed. 2002:175)

A is uttering the assessment *ești tare* ('you're cool') laughing. Even if we consider this assessment within its sequential context, it is still rather ambiguous between two interpretations: either as a compliment or an irony arising from A's flouting the Gricean maxim of quality (Grice 1975).

If we take into account that A is a not student and she may not be familiar with the expectations and academic standards students are supposed to meet at that particular university, then in saying *ești tare* ('you're cool') she may be complimenting B on her supposed achievements. The response A gets to this potential compliment (line 8) is a two-unit turn in which B is playing upon the meaning of the lexical item *tare* (adj. 'cool' vs. adv. 'very'). She first repeats the potential compliment, but with verb in the first person singular for self-reference, *e::h sînt tare* ('I'm cool'); then, in the second unit, she overtly contradicts A and uses the lexical item *tare* as an adverb to obtain the superlative form of the adjective *proastă* ('stupid'): *tare (.) PROAstă* ('I'm very stupid'), thus rendering the unit *e::h sînt tare* ('I'm cool') sarcastic. B's sarcasm is also intensified by the emphasis on and the high

pitch of the first syllable of the adjective. Moreover, the dispreferred nature of the response (i.e. a disagreement) is also signalled by the marker *e::h* and the pauses which precede and follow the adverb *tare*. At this point, A's utterance in line 9 *CE să mai zic* ('What can I say') shows her compassion for B by implying that she can think of no words to express her sympathy. Moreover, as the conversation unfolds and B expresses her dissatisfaction with the poor average mark and her hope for a higher one (*trebuie neapărat să scot și eu un opt și ceva* 'I definitely have to get an eight or something'), A designs her turn in line 11 to be syntactically and semantically in continuity and complementarity with B's turn already in progress. In other words, she uses an anticipatory completion in line 11 as a positive politeness strategy to convey sympathy and build common ground by showing that she knows what is on B's mind. Finally, in line 13 A confirms her understanding and compliments B indirectly in the form of a statement about the latter's intentions: *ești pusă pe FAPTE mari* ('you are dead set on great deeds').

In excerpt (3), A and B are performing rather delicate actions which can sometimes be face-threatening in that they are potentially ironic or sarcastic, or even exposing the interlocutor's vulnerability, whereas at other times these actions have face-saving or positive politeness functions as they enhance solidarity by evoking shared knowledge/experiences.

Much more could be said about these excerpts with regard to the participants' alliances, roles, and identities that find their way into the conversation through membership categorization devices (Sacks, 1972), non-verbal behaviour, etc. Space does not allow me to go into detail. However, what I have detailed about these data segments supports the following statements:

1. It is not their formulaic nature that gives compliments their function, but rather their placement within a sequence. In other words, the syntax and semantics of a turn, does not determine unambiguously which action the turn is performing. For the present study, this means that without analyzing the sequential environment of a turn, we cannot determine whether or not we are dealing with some general assessment, or with a compliment – or possibly with a compliment that has an additional and totally different function in the discourse at hand. In order to determine whether or not something is primarily a compliment (i.e. a positive politeness compliment), or is a compliment that has a disaffiliatory function, we need to see the details of the unfolding sequence.

2. Compliments do not always have face-saving or solidarity-building functions. While A can be said to be supporting B in excerpt (3) above, her first compliment served an additional motive in the talk as it was clearly ambiguous and was also used for such face-threatening work as tease or

sarcasm. Thus, the function of a compliment is not categorically tied to establishing or maintaining social solidarity.

The statements above do not mean that compliments never have face-saving or positive politeness functions. They frequently do. I am arguing, however, that even when they do have positive politeness functions it is the sequential position of the compliment turn that accomplishes the face-work. In other words, the placement of compliments and preference organization are intricately intertwined.

When analyzing compliments in terms of their sequential placement, it becomes apparent that many of them occur together with other speech events or take over their functions. This peculiarity is particularly noticeable in preferred environments which are the focus of my analysis in the next section where I discuss compliments in preferred second pair parts and in preferred first pair parts⁴.

4. Compliments in preferred environments

This section addresses the use of compliments in preferred environments⁵, i.e. those environments where compliments occur most frequently. Since this study explores the speech event of complimenting in terms of adjacency, a distinction is drawn between preferred first and second pair parts. My analysis begins with compliments as second pair parts.

4.1. Compliments as parts of preferred second pair parts

According to Pomerantz (1984a), the preferred response to one speaker's **self-deprecation** is a disagreement with that self-deprecation by an interlocutor. Pomerantz (1984a: 85) provides empirical data from American English to demonstrate that compliments are frequently a part of such turns. The excerpt below shows that the same can be said for Romanian. The self-deprecation occurs in lines 1 and 4 (marked with arrow a); and the compliments occur in line 3 and 5 (marked with arrow b):

(4)

1 Adina: ți-am zis o să ne dea afară ↓măturătoare mă duc- mă duc iar la tarabă-n piață

I told you they'll fire use I'll work as a sweeper I'll go- I'll sell goods at the stall in the market

2 Ana: da: da: exact acolo ai să te duci tu

⁴ For a discussion of compliments in dispreferred environments, i.e. in those environments where one might hardly expect a compliment to occur, see Hornoiu (forthcoming).

⁵ It should be pointed out that compliments can also be in certain dispreferred environments to mitigate the interactional achievement of either first or second pair parts, although in such environments their frequency is lower when compared to preferred environments.

yea:h yea:h that's exactly what you'll do
→3 da' de ce mă dacă ești bună la chestia asta?
but why, if you are good at this thing?
4 Adina: cine zice că sînt bună? Tu
who says I'm good? you
→5 Ana: e::h da săraca d-ai-a aveai agenda plină tot timpu'?'
e::h yeah, poor you, that's why your appointment book was always
full?
6 Adina ((laughing)): nu răspund nici la-ntrebarea asta
I don't answer this question either (Hornoiu 2016: 136)

Previously in the conversation, Adina, a beautician, mentions to her client the gloomy possibility that the salon might be closed and that she might get fired. In line 1, she negatively assesses herself by saying that, in that case, she will work as a sweeper, or that she is going to sell goods at her stall in the market, as she once used to; she is thus self-deprecating. In response, her client, Ana, expresses her disbelief in line 2 that such a thing can happen and then reassures Adina that she does a good job by positively assessing her skills (line 3), thereby disagreeing with Adina's original self-deprecation. As Adina, raises doubts on Ana's positive assessment, pointing out that this is Ana's view and implying that it might not be shared by others Ana produces an additional disagreement with Ana's self-deprecation by uttering another positive evaluation in line 5. As can be seen from her response in line 6, Adina also orients to the second assessment as a compliment: she jokingly refuses to comment on the observation that her book with appointments was full, implying that she agrees with Ana's positive assessment. Providing laughter as an agreement token is one of the typical responses to a compliment (Pomerantz 1984a).

Given the sequential position (i.e., after a self-deprecation), Ana's positive evaluations described above clearly function as compliments to Adina, compliments which are produced as part of a preferred second pair part (addressee's disagreement with S's self-deprecation). The compliments in the response turn clearly praise the recipient and stand in contrast to her own negative evaluation of her skills. A compliment paid in such an environment clearly accomplishes affiliatory, face-saving work (see also Heritage 1984; Pomerantz 1984a).

It has been pointed out in the literature that when a speaker produces an **announcement**, a **noticing**, or a **telling**, it is expected of the co-participants to assess what they have been told (Goodwin 1986: 214; Schegloff 2007: 75). Such assessments display how the co-participant has analyzed what the interactants have talked about (Goodwin 1986: 210) and they also signal the addressee's interest in the announcement/telling. It

should come as no surprise that if such tellings, announcements, or noticings include an *achievement* by the teller, co-participants typically respond with a compliment, as the excerpts (5) – (7) show.

Excerpt (5) is part of a larger telling, in which Iulia reports on her experience while shopping for a pair of trousers. Within this larger telling, several data segments are embedded each addressing a distinct but related sub-topic within main the topic, i.e. an experience while shopping for a pair of trousers. At the beginning of the transcript, Iulia mentions the new pair of trousers similar to the one Maria bought foreshadowing, thus, an extending spate of talk, namely a telling about her shopping experience. Iulia's turn elicits a request from Maria who wants to see them. Following lines 6-7 where Iulia is pointing to them, Maria produces her first compliment (line 8) on Iulia's trousers. This first compliment is then followed by a telling elaborating on the quality of the fabric and design which Iulia and Maria jointly produce in a highly collaborative way (lines 9-13) and which supports the Maria's positive assessment, i.e. her compliment in line 8. This telling is then followed by two additional compliments offered by Maria in line 13 *sînt mișto de tot foarte ca lumea sînt* ('they're so cool very cool'). Following five turns addressing details such as price, thickness of the fabric and availability of the product, turns which were omitted from the transcript for time-related constraints, Iulia moves on to telling about another pair of trousers similar to Maria's describing them in detail and pointing out the drawback of the fabric (lines 14-16, 18, 20-22). Notice that this sub-topic within the main topic and the telling it engenders (i.e. a telling about the drawback of Maria's trousers) is embedded in the larger telling. This telling episode about the drawback of the fabric (lines 15-27) is again jointly produced in a highly cooperative way by Iulia and Maria and it shows both speakers as initiating turns that either latch onto or intrude into the other's turn. Put it differently, this telling shows participants as engaging in overlapping talk and anticipatory completions. These violations of the turn-taking rules, however, are not meant to infringe the other speaker's turn and reduce her to silence. Iulia and Maria develop their topic jointly and silence, which is a sign of malfunction in conversation, is absent. The two participants alternate their turns rapidly with no gaps between turns and these instances of slight overlap can be viewed as displays of involvement with the topic and with each other. Again, it is the placement of overlapping talk within the larger sequence and the participants' orientation towards it that determine its social solidarity building function. The entire telling sequence ends with Maria repeatedly complimenting Iulia on her trousers. In this excerpt, the two speakers are clearly aligned with each other, each one assessing the shopping experience in a similar way. Maria's alignment with Iulia is expressed in the form of three compliments with increasing degrees of positiveness (lines 28, 30 and 31).

(5)

1 Iulia: vai mari uite așa avea când mi-am luat [io p-ăia
look mari that's what they had when I bought those

2 Maria: [ia mă ia să mi-i arăți
come on show them to me

3 Iulia: da' nu i-ai văzut?
haven't you seen them?

4 Maria: nu mă nu i-am văzut dacă nu ne-am [mai văzut de-
no I haven't since we haven't seen each other for-

5 Iulia: [nu ne-am mai întâlnit
we haven't met

6 Iulia: uite-i uite-i stai că ăia sînt ai alinei
there they are! wait! those are Alina's

7 sub țoalele mele acolo=
under my clothes, there

→8 Maria: =aha marfă
aha, cool

9 Maria : și sînt d-ăia
and they're that kind

10 Iulia: sînt cu brăduț=
they've got a fir tree (dim.) pattern

11 Maria: =lărguți nu?
loose (dim), aren't they?

12 Iulia : da
yes

→13 Maria : sînt un pic evazați da mă sînt mișto de tot foarte ca
lumea sînt

they're a bit flared yeah they're so cool very cool

[...]

14 Iulia: da băi uite avea și d-ăștia ca ai tăi mari.
yeah, look, they also had like these ones, like yours

15 <da' acumă dacă stau bine și mă gîndes' s-ar putea să nu fi
fost chiar așa materialu'.

<now if I come to think about it' the fabric might have been a bit
different'.

16 <tot cinci sute de mii erau ↓și ăia
they were five hundred thousand as well

17 Maria: io p-ăștia am dat trei sute da' mă-nțeapă înfiorăto:r=
I paid three hundred for these, but they itch terribly

18 Iulia: =și ↑ă:ia erau CIRE:::m]
and those were CREA::M

- 19 Maria: [prin cio]RAP
through stockings
- 20 Iulia: sta- DA:: să-ți spun erau un- nu crem erau un be::j și
aveau ici colo câte un punct roșu
wait YES, let me tell you, they weren't cream, they were beige and
they had red dots here and there
- 21 și câ:nd i-am probat erau- era un material splendid când m-am
îmbrăcat
and when I tried them on, they were- the fabric was great when I
put them on
- 22 va:i înțepeau- înțepau groa:znic=
ay, they itched, they itched terribly
- 23 Maria: =da ca ăștia
yeah like these ones
- 24 Iulia: și am zis nu pot să-mi iau io: așa hhh [cehhva <(să hh
mă::)
and, I said, I can't buy something like this (to hmmm)
- 25 Maria: [deci mă mănâncă hhh
de nu mai pot=
so it's itching me, hhh. I can't stand it
- 26 Maria: =[de nu mai pot
- 27 Iulia: [păcat păcat
→28 Maria: va:i da' ăștia sînt su:per mișto
wow, but these are so cool
- 29 Iulia: îți plac?
do you like them?
- 30 Maria: îmi plac la nebunie vreau și io să-mi iau
I'm crazy about them I wanna buy some too
- 31 Maria: vai ce mișto sînt
wow, they are so cool (Hornoiu 2016: 62-63)

While the preceding excerpt showed compliments in responses to tellings, the following one displays a compliment as a response to an **announcement**. In excerpt (6), two children were told that they should eat the food on their plates.

(6)

- 1 Laura: am terminat
i'm done
→2 Iulia: foarte bine ((nods while saying it))
very good.
3 (.)

4 Laura: mama am terminat pot să?
mother i'm done can i
5 (0.2)
6 Rodica: să ce?
you can do what?
7 Laura: să mă spăl pe mâini
wash my hands

In line 1, Laura announces an accomplishment on her part, namely that she managed to finish eating her food. This announcement is responded to by Alina in form of a compliment, thereby praising the child for her accomplishment. Laura in turn announces the accomplishment to the other adult present in the room and asks for permission to leave the table.

In the following example, the same child (Laura) announces the solution to a problem the two children have had: there was only one bike but both children wanted to ride it.

(7)
1 Laura: sau (.) anca și cu mine facem cu rîndu'
or (.) anca and i are taking turns at
2 cu bicicleta
riding
→3 Rodica: e o idee (.) foarte bună
that is a (.) great idea.
4 Laura: anca mergem?
anna sh[all we?
5 Rodica: [ia ziceți voi două
tell me you two

Upon hearing Laura's solution to the problem, her mother positively assesses the solution, thereby paying Laura a compliment and praising her. In both segments above, it is the **position** of the positive assessment within the sequence, i.e., after an announcement of an accomplishment (having finished one's food and having found a solution to a problem, respectively), that turns the assessment into a compliment. Not providing an assessment in this type of situation would constitute a noticeable absence (Pomerantz 1984b) which would usually lead an interlocutor to draw the inference that the announcement or accomplishment is unworthy of praise (Bilmes 1988: 163). Thus, the compliment turns in the two data segments above clearly show the second speaker's alignment and affiliation with the first.

4.2. Compliments as first pair parts

In the previous section, I discussed compliments that served as expressions of appreciation. These expressions of appreciation were all second pair parts, that is, they were the immediate response to some prior action. However, expressions of appreciation can also occur without being “caused” by an immediately prior action. Put differently, there are a number of instances in my data in which the compliment that expresses appreciation or gratitude is a first pair part and thus starts a new sequence. Below, I will discuss some of these instances.

We have seen that quite often the complimenting function is secondary to some other action. In some sequences, however, complimenting seems to be the only action done with the turn in question. In these instances, a speaker is positively assessing an object or character trait for which the co-participant can take credit with an assessment that seems to come “out of the blue.” This is the case in the following example in which Irina is complimenting Raluca on her shoes.

(8)

1 Irina: aoleo tre să mă fardez

I have to put on my makeup

2 Raluca: îți place cum m-am machiat?

Do you like my makeup?

3 Irina: da ia cu ce te-ai dat cu ce te-ai dat la ochi

yeah what eye shadow did you use

4 Raluca: cu maro maroniu

brown brownish

5 Irina: nu. mă dau mă dau cu: auriu (2)

No. I'll wear golden

6 Irina: fată nu mi se usucă oja să vezi atunci ce mă distrez (5)

my nail polish isn't drying, then it will be fun

→7 da' ce-s ăștia? pantofii tăi noi? sînt superadevărați

what are these? your new shoes? they're supercool

8 Raluca: ↑da::

yea::h

→9 Irina: sînt superbi

they're superb (Hornoiu 2016: 86)

At the beginning of excerpt (8), Irina was pressed for time and she starts putting on her make-up (lines 1-5) as she was getting ready for going to a party. In line 6 she worries about her nail polish not drying. At this point, Irina notices Raluca's shoes and compliments her on them in line 7. This compliment starts a new sequence (a complimenting sequence) and complimenting is the only action accomplished with this turn. This

compliment occurs as a preferred first pair part as it constitutes a **noticing**. Noticings (specifically, noticings-by-others) have been found to be preferred over announcement (specifically, announcements-by-self) (Schegloff 2007). Compliments very regularly serve as noticings: they are ideally suited in that they not only announce that an item has caught the speaker's attention, but also in that they immediately convey the speaker's stance towards the noticed element. Specifically, they convey the speaker's positive stance towards the noticed item. In their function as noticings, compliments frequently occur at the beginning of conversations or, as excerpt (8) shows, they can also occur during the interaction as an isolated sequence unrelated to what went before or after.

Opening sequences

Unlike other formulas such as greetings, thanks or goodbyes, compliments have a much broader function since they often appear as part of, or even in place of, thanks, greetings and goodbyes. Excerpt (9) illustrates the compliment/response sequence at the beginning of conversation, where it replaces the greeting sequence. In excerpt (9), M and D meet for the first time on that particular day. Instead of greeting D, M positively assesses her dress.

(9)

→1 M: ce rochie veselă

what a cheerful dress

2 D: ((smiling)): de vară

for summer

[D kisses M and offers him a present for his birthday wishing M may happy returns of the day]

3 M: mulțumesc frumos! să fim sănătoși!

thank you very much! may we both enjoy good health

4 D: du-l în mașină

take it to the car

[M heads to his car and leaves the present on the backseat]

M designs his utterance in line 1 as a complete turn in itself, as the first pair part of the compliment sequence. Instead of producing the second pair part under the form of, for instance, an acceptance or an expression of gratitude, D chooses to produce a phrase which can be fitted syntactically within the prior turn, within the compliment itself. In other words, M and D collaboratively build one positive assessment which could have been uttered by one speaker and which, in this particular context, functions as a compliment. In orienting herself to such a response which is similar in function to a collaboratively built sentence (*cf.* Sacks 1992), D conveys the

highest degree of social solidarity, showing that they know what is on each other's minds.

Pre-closings to larger sequences

One cannot emphasize strongly enough the multifunctional nature of compliments. On the one hand, we have seen how compliments are powerful positive-politeness strategies with solidarity building function, catering thus for recipients' positive face. On the other hand, they are also used as negative-politeness devices to mitigate a face-threatening act, showing thus concern for recipients' negative face. Elsewhere (Hornoiu forthcoming), I analyzed the entire sequence in (10) for its function in mitigating the face-threatening act of a request. Moreover these two politeness-related functions are not always easily separable as they are displayed at the same time by the same linguistic form.

Apart from the mitigating function, the sequential placement of the compliment within the larger sequence also demonstrates its function in the **overall organization** of an exchange as a *formal signal* which foreshadows the end of the interaction. Consider as an example (10):

(10)

(B is dialing a number)

1 B: aaa (vorbește la telefon) bună ziua. vă rog ↓cu domnu' alexandru ionescu aș putea vorbi↑

aaa (speaking on the phone) hello. good afternoon can I speak to mr. alexandru ionescu, please

2 a plecat ↓ da ↓bine↓ mulțumesc frumos ↓ bună ziua

he left yes ok thank you very much good day

3 (către A) din nefericire a plecat:

(to A) unfortunately, he left

4 A: păi a plecat aCASă bietu' om

well, he's gone home, poor guy

5 B: NU ↓ nu cred c-a plecat acasă↑ că zicea că ajunge pe la cinci jumate șase

no I don't think he went home 'cause he said he would be home around five thirty or six

6 o fi avut vreun business ceva ↑

he would have had some business or something

7 A: iar numărul lor nu-l ai ↓da ↑

and you don't have their home number, do you

8 B: când ajung acasă

when I get home

9 A: [nu mă uita te ro::g=

don't forget about me please
10 B: [nu nu
no no
→ 11A: = o::: ce drăguță brichetă ai ↑
o::: what a beautiful lighter you have
12 B: mulțumesc (.) mai ales ochelarii să nu mi-i uit
thank you (.) I shouldn't forget my glasses though
13 (1)
14 B: la revedere vorbim mai pe seară
bye we'll talk a bit later in the evening
15 A: la revedere mulțumesc
bye thank you
(B is leaving) (Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu, ed. 2002:41-42)

The compliment in line (11) occurs in pre-closing position before the leave-taking sequence in lines 13-14. It fits the description Goffman (1967: 41) provides of farewells: “Farewells sum up the effect of the encounter upon the relationship and show what the participants may expect of one another when they next meet. [. . .] the enthusiasm of farewells compensates the relationship for the harm that is about to be done to it by separation.”

5. Conclusions

It has been argued in the literature that compliments can be used to strengthen or even replace such speech-act formulas as apologies, thanks, and greetings (Wolfson, 1983: 88) or, on the contrary, they can be used to soften a preceding face-threatening act such as a criticism, request or directive (Holmes 1986: 488; Holmes and Brown, 1987: 532). Starting from this contradictory claim that compliments can both *strengthen* and *soften* another speech act, this paper aimed to provide a principled account as to how compliments can be interpreted as having both strengthening and mitigating functions. Thus, to achieve this end, I proposed a conversation analytic approach arguing that the sequential organization in general and the preference organization in particular will determine whether a compliment can have a social-solidarity-building function or can be face-saving or face-maintaining.

I demonstrated, with empirical evidence from Romanian conversational discourse, the interconnectedness of (a) the linguistic form the utterance takes, (b) the sequential context in which it occurs, and (c) the action it is performing. A grammatical, semantic, or pragmatic analysis of single utterances out of their sequential environment will not show for which purposes speakers employ them (Schegloff and Sacks 1973: 313), instead, we need to consider the “relevance of positioning of utterances for determining

the kinds of jobs that they do, and what they oblige people who are dealing with them to do” (Sacks 1992:427).

The main tenet of this paper is that what contributes to the maintenance of social solidarity is the *sequential design of the actions* rather than the morph-syntactic and semantic features alone of compliment formulas. With regard to the preference organization, this study examined compliments as first pair parts and second pair parts in preferred environments, demonstrating that in addition to performing the action of complimenting, compliments also perform an additional action that constitutes a preferred action (i.e., a noticing, an expression of gratitude, an alignment with a story, an acceptance, etc.), and it is this preferred action that has a social solidarity building function. Moreover, some data segments provide evidence for the function compliments have in the *overall organization* of an exchange as formal signals of *openings* where they replace the greeting sequence or as *pre-closings* to foreshadow the end of the interaction. On the other hand, in a previous study, my empirically based analysis also showed compliments as components of dispreferred first and second pair parts. In such environments, compliment sequences serve to delay the dispreferred (or face-threatening) act.

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