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## **POLITENESS AND COMPLIMENTING WITHIN AN ALGERIAN CONTEXT -A SOCIO-PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS-**

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### **Abstract**

*Complimenting is the speech act that reflects some politeness strategies in every day's life. Its main characteristic is expressing positive appraisal in order to build up new relationships or reinforce current relationships and give them support. It is commonly used or found in various circumstances and within different moods i.e. in happy and sad events and temperaments. Actually, the satisfaction which generally results from receiving a compliment may lead to the conviction that the person who uses compliment is in a way or another is polite and friendly or at least tries to make the addressee feels more relaxed. The research at hand aims at investigating the way Algerians make, receive, accept and reject compliments. The methodology followed is based on two main tools namely; participant observation and questionnaire tool so as to be able to capture the phenomenon as it occurs. The results shows that complimenting in Algeria may result in either accepting or rejecting as it can lead to the employment of some religious terms so as to avoid the happening of bad incident.*

### **Keywords**

Politeness, Speech Acts, Accepting and Rejecting Compliments

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## **1. Introduction**

Politeness is one of the most paramount codes needed to preserve the social order of a given speech community. Nevertheless, if individuals do not follow the norms of language usage, they will be considered as being impolite and insolent as they may provoke impolite reactions which demand some remedial strategies such as apologizing. Certainly, apologizing in addition to complimenting are two speech acts which aid people to fulfill desirable actions through polite utterances and help to keep the balance and respect in the group. Indeed, making a compliment is considered as a suitable speech act which mirrors the admirable and acceptable manners in a culture. In fact, complimenting is an instrument for establishing good relationships and a social strategy that it is able to consolidate ties of solidarity. It is thus a significant social action in that it functions as a starting point for a conversation and allows social interaction to go on easily and adequately. Complimenting in Algeria however, proves different from the one employed in other countries, since Algerian men usually do not compliment, and do not like much to receive compliments. This attitude is justified by the structure of the society where there are strong attempts to keep males and females separate in many circumstances and activities. One should mention that these attempts are per se dictated by Islamic principles. Consequently, men complimenting women or vice versa can rarely be found in the Algerian speech community and if it happens it will be very exceptional. Another factor which limits the use of compliments in the Algerian society is the fact that these belong to the feminine world rather than the masculine one. Moreover, this negative attitude towards the use of compliments has to do with Algerian stereotype and ideology; in other words, the widespread and deeply rooted belief among Algerians in the evil-eye. This belief is sustained by the Holy Koran; this is why the majority of the population believes in it and links it to any physical, social or professional harm. Thus, with regard to what have previously been mentioned the following research questions are raised: is complimenting used to show deference and politeness within Algerians and how can Algerians face the dilemma of expecting, accepting or rejecting compliments?

Expecting such problems, Algerians avoid using compliments in order to avoid being considered as a potential source of causing harm to the others. Nevertheless, the absence of compliments, particularly if expected by the interlocutor who shows his new car for instance, may create an embarrassing situation for both the speaker and the interlocutor as it can be interpreted as a sign of disapproval, jealousy or envy. Yet, the inappropriate use of compliments may cause embarrassment and even offense.

## **2. Politeness**

In the long run, good verbal habits, manners and deference indicate that the person is courteous, gentle and polite. This type of person constantly tries to respect the others and follow the prominent social guidelines that exist in his culture and society. Admittedly, politeness is the most admired characteristic in someone's personality, as it provides him with a sort of magnetism that enables him to sway anyone. This aspect is most of the time revealed through language use as the principal paradigm to judge and notice the person's objectives. Accordingly, Ide (1989) Quoted in Fernández et al (2012) explains the act of being polite as follows:

[...] the language usage associated with smooth communication realized 1) through the speaker's use of intentional strategies to allow his or her message to be received favourably by the addressee, and 2) through the speaker's choice of expressions to conform to the expected and /or prescribed norms of speech appropriate to the contextual situation in individual speech communities.

Absolutely, politeness as a social variable is indeed required to keep social order, groups' equilibrium, and distance between members of a speech community and for these reasons people usually behave in a way that keeps and conserves their public self-image/esteem and face. On this subject, Lakoff (1989) says that: "Politeness can be defined as a means of minimizing confrontation in discourse - both the possibility of confrontation occurring at all, and the possibility that a confrontation will be perceived as threatening." Meanwhile, a person who doesn't care about his behaviour and speech will probably impinge his self-image in addition to the one of the targeted persons. Face is a sociological notion put forward by Goffman in order to refer to politeness and all its components, namely; reputation, prestige, and self-esteem. Goffman (1967) explains the concept of face as follows: "Face means: the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self -delineated in terms of approved social attribute". Thus, face with regard to politeness, represents the reciprocal and the desired respect which is supposed to pervade a public conversation and any disrespectful act containing insults, swear words, obscene expletives or critiques will be considered as a face threatening act (FTA) and needs another strategy to soften the threat, this is called face saving act (FSA). Hereof, Brown and Levinson (1987) approach politeness standing on Goffman's idea of face and distinguish between positive and negative face, as they propose the following definition cited in Bowe and Martin (2007):

Positive face: the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants.

Negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction- that is, to freedom of action and freedom from imposition."

Further, Brown and Levinson (1987) continue in their work on politeness and give us more details about face threatening acts and classify them into four categories they state that:

- Act threatening to the Hearer's Negative Face (freedom of action): e.g. ordering, advising, threatening, and warning.
- Acts threatening to the Hearer's Positive Face (self-image) e.g. complaining, criticizing, disagreeing, and raising taboo topics.
- Acts threatening to the Speaker's Negative Face (freedom of action) e.g. accepting an offer, accepting thanks.
- Acts threatening to the Speaker's Positive Face (self-image): e.g. apologizing, accepting a compliment, and confessing.

The above types of FTAs according to Brown and Levinson (ibid) rely on three sociological variables in order to assess their degree of seriousness."

**D-** The social distance between the speaker and the hearer i.e. the degree of formality and solidarity they share, or might be thought to share; (a symmetric relation).

**P-** The relative power of the speaker with respect to the hearer (i.e. the degree to which the speaker can impose on the hearer; (an asymmetric relation).

**R-** The absolute ranking of the imposition in a particular culture (both in terms of (1) the expenditure of goods and/or services by the hearer, (2) the right of the speaker to perform the act; and (3) the degree to which the hearer welcomes the imposition.

Respectively, social distance (D) as a congruent criterion considers the kind of the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, taking into account the existing similarities and differences. It also considers the degree of interaction or familiarity which makes them feel either close or distant to each other and which favours or disfavours the occurrence of an act. Relative Power (P) of the speaker as regards to the hearer is an unstable social aspect i.e. the extent to which the speaker monopolizes the talk and tries to impose his ideas on the listener. Absolute Ranking (R) of imposition involves the ways through which an

authoritative ordering/ imposition is handled in a given culture. In this case, face impositions are classified in terms of payment of goods or services by the hearer (such as devoting a period of his time to listen to other persons) in addition to the priority of the speaker to give information and instructions and finally to how the speaker deals with such an act of imposition.

Put it in a nutshell, positive politeness is reflected by the person who shows usually his sympathy, enthusiasm and motives to behave in a covetable manner. In other words, he cares about his relationships and also to the ways of establishing and maintaining them. Moreover, respect is a salient benchmark of positive politeness since it is required to keep up contact's order between people and to enhance the degree of the person's self-esteem. Withal, negative politeness refers to the desire of an individual to feel free in his speech and deeds. Indirect speech acts, giving an opinion, refusal, apology and asking for something you want (a request) are part and parcel of negative politeness whose main target is to show deference and imposition as opposed to direct speech acts, jokes and compliments which represent positive politeness whose major aim is to avoid offense and to be amicable.

Politeness is best expressed through good manners. Its user often aims at making the others more relaxed and comfortable. Besides, it is always linked with the idea that all people have an attribute which is called 'face'. A sociological notion to account for politeness in behaviour, borrowed by the British social anthropologists Brown and Levinson from the work of the sociologist Goffman is worth mentioning. First, Goffman (1955, 1967) states in this respect:

Face means: the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self-delineated in terms of approved social attributes...

Similarly, Brown and Levinson (1978) identify two kinds of politeness, deriving from Goffman's concept of face. They argue that "politeness strategies are developed in order to save the hearer's face". Face in term of politeness, refers to the respect that an individual has for him or herself, and maintaining that self-esteem in public or private situations. It is deemed as a basic want which every member knows and desires.

Moreover, they distinguish between two types of politeness, positive and negative politeness. Both types involve maintaining positive or negative face, where positive face is defined as "the addressee's perennial desire that his wants...should be thought of as desirable", and negative face as the addressee's "want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded" Brown and Levinson (ibid).

Thus, positive politeness refers to the want of each individual that his interests and intentions will be covetable to the others, that is, the person who chooses to use positive politeness aims at establishing a good relationship between parties and demonstrating closeness and affiliation, as he respects the person's need to be liked and understood; direct speech acts, and compliments are parts of positive politeness.

Negative politeness however, designates the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions will be unimpeded by others. For instance making requests less infringing allows people to act freely. In other words, it has to do with deference, distance, formality and the use of speech acts indirectly.

So, face means self-esteem, social standing, public self -image, which every individual claims and wants others to respect. Usually, we try to avoid embarrassing the other persons, or making them feel uncomfortable. Nevertheless, Face Threatening Acts (FTA's) are acts which lead to the infringements of the hearers' need to maintain their self-esteem, and respect.

Consequently, acts that menace the addressee's positive face are acts in which a speaker demonstrates that he does not support the addressee's positive face or self-image, e.g. complaints, accusations, or taboo utterances. And acts that threaten an addressee's negative face include instances in which the addressee is pressured to accept or to reject a future act of the speaker, e.g. offers or requests.

According to Brown and Levinson, politeness strategies are developed for the main purpose of dealing with these FTA's, and in order to avoid an immediate breakdown of communication, FTA requires a mitigating statement or some verbal repair. To sum, positive politeness strategies are intended to avoid giving offense, try to be friendly with the targets by using compliments, jokes, or nicknames, whereas negative politeness strategies are intended to avoid giving offense by showing deference, e.g. ,giving an opinion.

So, politeness plays a significant role in all societies since it founds the basis for a respectful interaction between human beings and for successful conversations. However, this does not imply that people behave correctly all the time; they may be impolite on certain occasions.

### **3. Complimenting**

Compliments are the eloquent speech formulations linked all most the time with the establishment of politeness strategies. They are universal speech acts found in the majority of cultures and languages. This aspect of universality however, is not a reference to their similarities. That is to say, a variety of differences is found among compliments throughout the world where significant discrepancies in what concerns their forms and the responses

given after hearing a compliment can be found. Complimenting and compliment responding are instruments for establishing and maintaining congenial relationships and social strategies. They also lead people to strengthen the link of solidarity and create harmonious atmospheres. Holmes (1986) clarifies the use of this strategy in the following quote:

As a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speakers, usually the person addressed, for some “good” (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker or the hearer.

Accordingly, a compliment is an expression which reveals the admiration of some peculiar aspects of a person or to the things or belongings of that person as well. For instance: ‘oh! You look so beautiful’ or ‘what a great choice have you done’ are compliments addressed to someone who is either close to us or to a stranger whom we met recently as Lewis (2004) assert that “compliments can serve as a method to open and sustain a conversation with a new acquaintance”. They play the role of favourable signs of sharing similar interests and tastes. Over and above, the main topics of complimenting turn around the appearances, possessions, and realizations of someone. Nevertheless, unlike other speech acts the occurrence of compliments is somehow sensitive. In other terms, uncountable situations where compliments are expected but they do not occur or vice –versa can be coincided. As far as the first case is concerned i.e. the absence of an expected compliment may create an embarrassing atmosphere for the interlocutor and the listener. It is generally deciphered as disapproval, jealousy or envy of a person who makes a new look for example or a favour that really deserves to be appraised or a well-presented food and, so on. At any rate, an inadequate use of compliments can provoke embarrassment and even offense. Whereas in the second case i.e. the occurrence of a compliment when nobody expects it. In this case many interpretations can be delivered; it can be a kind of sarcasm when people say something to mean the opposite or to aim at approaching important personalities in order to boost the relationship and sometimes to achieve certain purposes or vested interests. In this vein, Olshtain and Cohen (1991) contend that “the speech act of complimenting is intrinsically courteous and enables the speaker to make use of available opportunities to express and interest the hearer”. Thus, compliments can function as a starting point to break the obstacles of how to begin a talk and facilitate the flow of the communication as well.

Acknowledgment, positive effects and satisfaction are significant outcomes that ordinarily succeed complimenting. Nonetheless, if a compliment is conceived unsympathetically especially if it is erroneous, insincere or meant to insinuate jealousy and, sometimes directed ironically to limit a conversation, the fallout on interpersonal relations

will undoubtedly be negative. Likewise, an immediate response is obviously foreseen by the recipient so as to complete the speech act of complimenting as a whole. As a matter of fact, complimenting responding can be embodied either in the confirmation or acceptance of what is said as in “that’s kind of you” or by rejecting the offered compliment sometimes impolitely or arrogantly as in ‘I know that already’ or ‘ thank you’ but with an artificial smile.

Yet, compliment responses are variable and often create what is called according to Pomerantz (1978) cited in Spencer-Oatey (2000) “dilemma”. Pomerantz (idem) the first researcher who studies compliment responses argues that the complimentee usually finds himself under the pressure of accepting the compliment and feeling so proud or avoiding self-praise and looking for modesty. The normal response of a compliment is supposed to be positive but there is a “prevalence of rejections and disagreements” as it is suggested by Pomerantz (ibid) quoted in Cheng (2003). Pomerantz (1978) and Holmes (1995) cited in Spencer-Oatey (ibid) agree on a similar classification of compliments as they divide it into three broad categories which are (a) acceptance, (b) rejection/deflection, and (c) evasion/ self-praise avoidance. This division is well clarified by the taxonomy of compliment responses provided by Pomerantz (idem) in Cheng (ibid) and presented in the following table:

**Table 1: Pomerantz Compliments Responses**

Source: Cheng (ibid)

| <b>Response Type</b>  | <b>Example</b>  |
|---|---|
| I- Acceptances<br>1- Appreciation Token<br><br>2- Agreement   | A- That’s beautiful<br>B- Thank you<br><br>A- Oh it was just beautiful.<br>B- Well than you, I thought it was quite nice. |
| II- Rejections<br>1- Disagreement   | A- You did a great job cleaning the house<br>B- Well, I guess you haven’t seen the kid’s room                             |
| III- Self-praise/Avoidance Mechanism<br>1- Praise Downgrades<br>a- agreement<br><br>b- disagreement | A- That’s beautiful<br>B- Isn’t it pretty?  |



|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>2- Referent Shifts</p> <p style="padding-left: 20px;">a- Reassignment</p><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><p style="padding-left: 20px;">b- Return</p> | <p>A- Good shot</p> <p>B- Not very solid through</p><br><br><br><p>A- You're a good rower, honey.</p> <p>B- These are very easy to row. Very light.</p> <p>A- Ya' sound really nice.</p> <p>B- Yeah, you soun' real good too</p> |
|--|--|

This classification of acceptance, rejection and evasion can also be found in the Arab world in general and Algeria in particular. However, complementing in Algeria has other worth mentioning particularities which can be linked to several criteria, namely, culture, stereotypes, manhood, fear of rejecting it, shame and so forth.

#### 4. Methods of Data Collections

For the sake of investigating the way Algerians complement each other and the way they behave in their daily life in addition to the main expressions that the majority of them use, we have prepared a questionnaire. The latter was given to 50 persons from different ages, as it aims at searching the main strategies that Algerians use to show deference and courtesy. Participant observation was the second employed instrument in this research and its chief ail was to collect commonly used compliments in Algeria.

#### 5. Analysis of Data

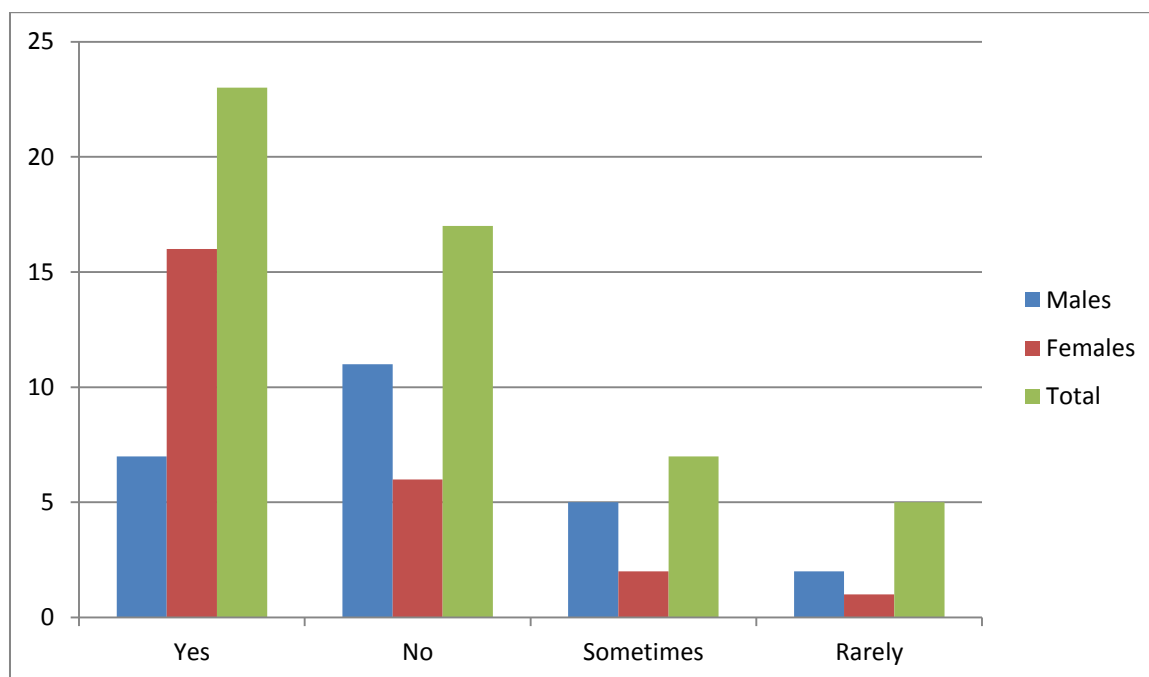
##### 5.1 Questionnaire

1- Do you compliment people in your daily life?

Yes       No       Sometimes       Rarely

**Table 2: Scores of Complimenting in Algeria**

| Suggestions  | Males     | Females   | Total     |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Yes          | 7         | 16        | 23        |
| No           | 11        | 6         | 17        |
| Sometimes    | 5         | 2         | 7         |
| Rarely       | 2         | 1         | 3         |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>25</b> | <b>25</b> | <b>50</b> |



**Figure 1:** Scores of Complimenting in Algeria

The above table and diagram show that males use compliment less than females do. This can be due to the nature of women who are keen on fashion and pay much attention to their daily look whereas men even if they do so, it is not with the same equivalence. In addition to this, there is a general consent that woman is supposed to talk softly, politely and convivially not the man who is asked to behave respectfully more than speaking adroitly. Henceforth, as the speech acts of compliments mirror the refined and skillful formulations that are used in order to construct cordiale and sympathetic ties, they are generally attributed to women rather than men.

**2- If yes, who are the persons that you generally compliment?**

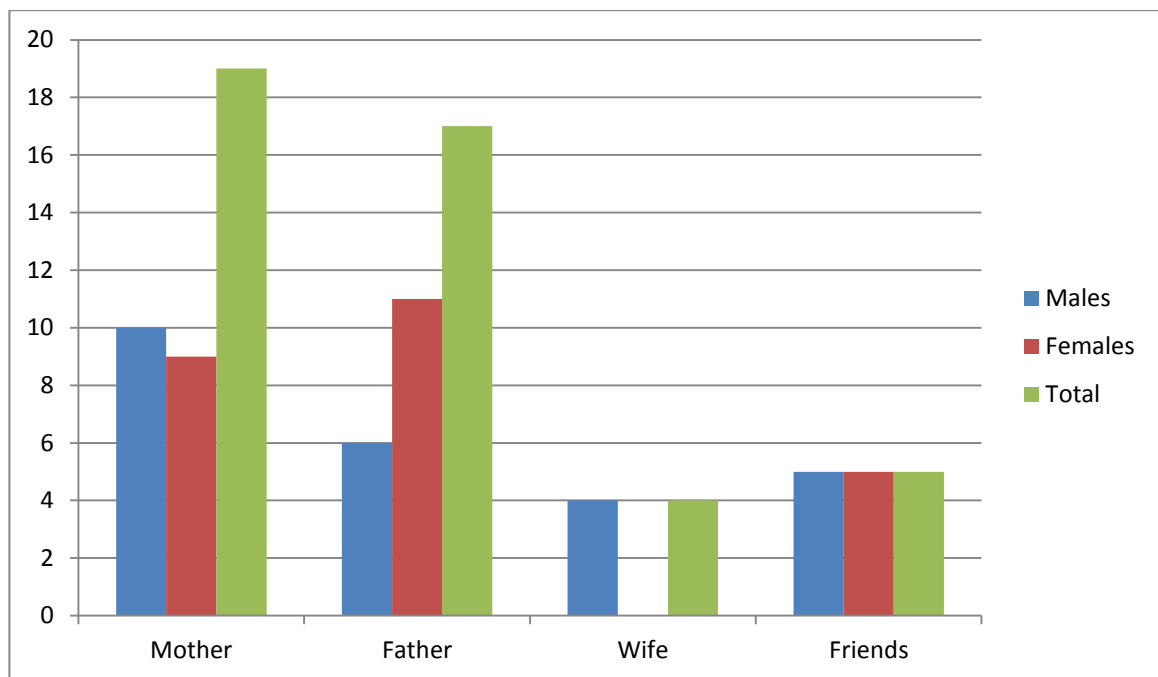
Mother       father       wife       friends

Others .....

**Table 3:** Scores of the Complimented Persons

| Suggestions | Males | Females | Total |
|-------------|-------|---------|-------|
| Mother      | 10    | 9       | 19    |
| Father      | 6     | 11      | 17    |
| Wife        | 4     | 0       | 4     |
| Friends     | 5     | 5       | 10    |

|       |    |    |    |
|-------|----|----|----|
| Total | 25 | 25 | 50 |
|-------|----|----|----|



**Figure 2:** Scores of the Complimented Persons

In Algeria, there exist some particularities in using compliments. First, we notice in the results provided in the table and the diagram that the persons who may hear compliments in the are the parents. Second, the wife and friends come with few percentages. The respondents have also been asked to suggest others. Their answers were as follows: some tradesmen claimed that they always compliment their clients and students said that they complement their teachers.

## 6. What are the main words that you employ to compliment people?

The majority agree on that compliments are chiefly employed for the sake of attaining good manners and contacts. The following question has provided us with the main compliments used by Algerians. Their answers show that each individual try to choose the suitable speech and compliments as they take into consideration the setting and the persons in order to avoid clashes in communication. Actually, compliments are indicators of pleasant hints of common interests and tastes. Generally, the pervasive topics of complimenting talk about appearances, possessions, and achievements of someone.

-/rak chbeb lyoum are used to tell somebody that 'he/she is handsome or beautiful'

- 'rak mnawer' signifies 'you are shining'

- 'rak for bezaf sahbi' means that 'you look extremely amazing'

- 'n'ta makanch kifek' stands for 'you are unique'

- 'maandi ma n'goul fik' implies that 'no words can express your personality, beauty, kindness and so forth.

Another aspect of the Algerian use of language in general and compliments in particular is the inclusion of French words. This fact results from the long period of the French colonialism. Consequently, any stranger may hear Algerian saying a whole utterance which is not deprived of at least one French word. Thus, the following compliments can illustrate the situation.

- 'tu est adorable l'yum' you look adorable today

- 'dert le bon choix', 'dert' is Algerian Arabic word which signifies 'you made' and 'le bon choix' are French words which mean the best choice. This expression stands for 'you made the best choice'.

- 'ntaya gentile bezaf' means you are very kind.

### **6.1 Participant Observation**

Genuinely, Algerian males often avoid giving a compliment especially with their sisters or wives. This is due to the entourage where they have been raised and which insists on avoiding delicate formulas of speech for men and also to preserve what is known as '⇒◆□○☞' between the two sexes. That is to say, the supposed respect and appreciation required in the Arab society as a compulsory paradigm to keep both sexes separated. This principle is per se dictated by the Islamic religion and has become rooted in all families so as it is very difficult to change it or deviate from it. These are the major reasons why men do not compliment women especially in front of members of their family. This concerns complimenting between the different sexes, but in what concerns compliments among the same sexes we can say it has become so pervasive nowadays than it was in previous times. 'rak chbeb lyum' 'you look handsome toady' 'tinissa taak fort bezaf' 'you sport shoes are so nice', 'bentek cheba' 'your daughter is adorable/ beautiful', 'weldek mochtahid' 'your son is a good pupil' are commonly used expressions by the Algerians. Nevertheless, there is another factor which can be as an obstacle to complimenting in the Algerian communities and may lead to rejection or evasion of the compliment. Put it differently, all most all of the Algerians believe in the evil eye that refers to "the belief that someone can project harm by looking at another's property or person" as reported by Maloney (1976). On the one side, the evil eye

relates to the occurrence of bad things or harms concerning health, pregnant woman, beauty of somebody or someone, or profession i.e. everything which can attract the attention or the admiration of people. This ideology is not only related to the Algerian culture and stereotypes but also to the Islamic religion that supports this belief in many verses of the Holy Koran and Hadith. Consequently, people are regularly afraid of the envy of the beholder and try to avoid meeting him especially if a bad incident has happened to them after meeting him. Now, viewed from the addressee's angle, the situation following a compliment is also more uncomfortable and in order to protect the object of compliment; usually an individual uses religious elements, whereas in the absence of the guest or the friend, the following expression or spell is used: [khamsa f aaynik] "Five in your eyes" often produced with the presentation of the speaker's hand with its five fingers.

On the other side, this negative attitude towards the use of compliments especially in the Arab world and Algerian speech communities conducts their population to avoid employing them in any case. This behaviour is adapted firstly, to escape potential infringement in communication and, secondly to stay away the fact of being considered as a potential source of causing harm to the others. In such cases, the speaker feels culpable and starts to look for other alternatives to keep away from likely occurring troubles and for some repair mechanisms in order to ameliorate the situation. These repair strategies are religious expression such as 'machallah': 'what God has willed' 't'barekalah': "God gives prosperity" and are sometimes uttered immediately after or before complimenting as counteracts by the giver of compliments to lessen the compliment's bad outcomes and, the corresponding ordinary answers are 'allah yahafdek' or 'allah y'selmak': "God bless you".

## **7. Conclusion**

To conclude we can say that politeness tackles the way relations between people are established in terms of face. On the one hand, it focuses on positive face as a tool to establish close and acceptable relationships between groups or friends and to show respect to the addressees. Negative face on the other hand, emphasizes deference and formality. In a nutshell, face refers to the ways followed by people in order to preserve their self-esteem and image. Yet, complimenting can be considered as a courteous speech act which enables any researcher to know what is highly valued and cherished in a given speech community. It is also an indicator which expresses or shows interest towards the addressee. Two main instruments have been employed i.e. a questionnaire which is analyzed quantitatively in addition to participant observation which per se analyzed qualitatively. Thus, it is generally agreed that different forms of speech are used in order to communicate and preserve our

social relationships. For this reason, people try to show their deference through the use of formal and polite speech including speech acts as a means of expressing certain attitudes. The study also tackles the way Algerians deal with complimenting as it can be accepted and expected if it is uttered by liked persons or it can be merely rejected if uttered by a person who is reputed by his wickedness.

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