

SEMANTIC PATTERNS IN COMPLIMENTING BEHAVIOR BY TALK SHOW HOSTS

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ABSTRACT: *Complimenting is a sophisticated speech act that enhances relationships. In the context of talk shows, hosts use compliments as a tool to engage both guests and the audience. This study explored the semantic patterns of complimenting behavior exhibited by talk show hosts. Through pragmatic analysis of selected talk show episodes, recurrent patterns were identified. The findings revealed that the semantic choices in the hosts' compliments to guests were predominantly adjectival and effectively acknowledged guests' appearances, professional skills, possessions, and personality traits. Additionally, adverbial choices along with other semantic elements, such as noun phrases, were also observed. These results provide insights into the interplay between language and social dynamics, extending to the fields of pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and intercultural communication, and highlighting the role of compliments in social contexts.*

Keywords: complimenting behavior; semantic patterns; pragmatic analysis; sociolinguistics

1. INTRODUCTION

In talk-in-interactions, such as those occurring in talk shows, the conversation between the host and the guest plays a pivotal role in shaping the tone and dynamics of the show [1]. A key element of these interactions is the use of compliments, which serve as speech acts that help foster a friendly atmosphere, establish rapport, and build relationships. Speech acts, a subfield of pragmatics, are the basic communicative units that make up larger discourses within speech events [2, 3, 4]. Building on Austin's foundational work, Elsewhere [5] introduced a taxonomy of speech acts based on their functions within specific social contexts. Among these, expressive—such as complimenting, thanking, welcoming, and congratulating—are used to convey the speaker's emotions about a situation. Compliments are among the most commonly used speech acts in social interactions. As [6] notes, a compliment "explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, typically for a positive trait, accomplishment, or characteristic that is, valued by both the speaker and the hearer."

Similarly, others argued that compliments function as a "social lubricant," helping to "grease the social wheels" [7]. Complimenting is a frequent conversational tool in interpersonal relationships. In the media context, talk show hosts—who are prominent public figures—strategically employ compliments to engage both their guests and their audience. Compliments are often used to highlight achievements, reinforce positive behavior, or introduce humor into the conversation [8].

The specific semantic choices involved in complimenting—such as the type of compliment, its framing, and the language used—are critical to understanding the nuanced role of compliments in communication. Although a wide range of words can be used for complimenting, the lexical items selected are typically limited. For instance [9] found that American English speakers often use adjectives like "nice," "good," "beautiful," "pretty," and "great," while verbs such as "like" and "love" were employed by 90% of speakers. These semantic choices can be categorized into adjectival and verbal compliments. In a replication of Manes and Wolfson's study, Holmes [10], identified six frequently used adjectival compliments, which accounted for about two-thirds of all adjectives mentioned in the earlier study.

While existing research has thoroughly explored the use of compliments in everyday social interactions, there is a gap in studies that examine how these semantic patterns manifest in the compliments given by hosts to their guests on celebrity talk shows. This study aims to fill that gap by investigating the semantic choices and patterns in compliments within the talk show. Ultimately, this research will contribute to the broader field of discourse analysis by examining the intersection of pragmatics, semantics, and talk-in-interaction.

This study utilized a qualitative research approach to examine the compliments made by talk show hosts to their guests, focusing on their semantic choices, in particular. The primary data sources comprised four episodes: two American celebrity talk shows—*The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*—and two Filipino celebrity talk shows—*Tonight with Boy Abunda* and *Tonight with Arnold Clavio*. This selection was made with the study's pedagogical implications in mind, particularly for teaching communication skills in intercultural contexts. One episode from each show was selected, all sourced from YouTube, a publicly accessible platform. These episodes were transcribed using Jefferson's [11] transcription notation. The episodes were chosen based on their recency and availability. To ensure ethical research practices, the study adhered to appropriate guidelines for responsible scholarly conduct. The data used were publicly available on YouTube, where numerous videos are freely broadcast and accessible for public viewing and download. Therefore, explicit consent was not required to access the selected videos. Since the data involved internationally recognized talk show hosts and celebrity guests, there was no need to conceal their identities.

Previous studies on the discourse and pragmatics of celebrity talk shows, such as those analyzing *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* [12], *The Jay Leno Show*, and *The Jonathan Ross Show* [13], as well as the interaction between Ellen DeGeneres and Malala Yousafzai [14], were readily accessible online. This study also focused on the lexical choices made by talk show hosts when offering compliments, categorizing them according to the two main types of compliments proposed by [9]: adjectival compliments and verbal compliments. A frequency count was conducted to identify the most commonly used semantic choices by the hosts in delivering compliments to their guests.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 The compliments of the talk show hosts were examined in terms of their semantic content or lexical choices using [9] categories. The distinguishing lexical choices are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Semantic/Lexical Choices in the Talk Show Hosts' SAs of Complimenting

Semantic/Lexical Choice	Celebrity Talk Show				TOTAL
	Jimmy Fallon	Ellen DeGeneres	Boy Abunda	Arnold Clavio	
Adjectival	5	4	1	4	14
Verbal	0	0	1	1	2
Semantic choices not found in Manes and Wolfson's (1981) categories					
Adverbial	3	2	0	1	6
Noun			1		1
Noun phrase (NP)				1	1
TOTAL	8	6	3	7	24

Table 1 demonstrates that adjectival complements (14 occurrences) represent the predominant semantic/lexical choices in the talk show hosts' speech acts of complimenting, in line with the categories proposed by [9]. Verbal compliments (2 occurrences) also align with these proposed categories. Adjectival compliments consist of adjectives in various forms used by hosts to compliment guests on aspects such as personality traits, possessions, physical appearance, or achievements. In contrast, verbal compliments involve positive verbs used by hosts to express admiration toward their guests. Interestingly, additional semantic choices were observed that differ from those proposed by Manes and Wolfson. These included adverbial choices (6 occurrences), where adverbs of various types were employed by hosts to intensify or elevate the adjectives, and noun and noun phrase choices (1 occurrence each), where nouns in different forms were used by hosts to describe the guest's social position.

Figure 1 below presents a graphical summary of the frequency of these semantic/lexical choices in the selected celebrity talk show episodes.

The following extracts illustrate the lexical and semantic choices in the speech acts of compliments made by talk show hosts.

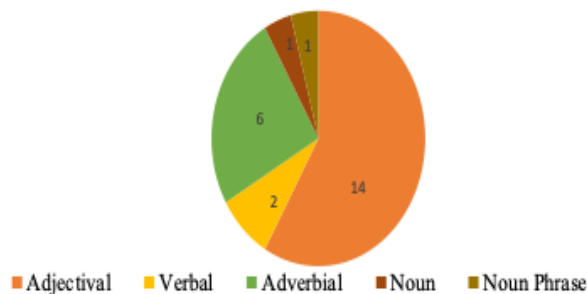


Figure 1. Semantic/Lexical Choices of Talk Show Hosts in their SAs of Compliments

Extracts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 from *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, *Tonight with Boy Abunda*, and *Tonight with Arnold Clavio* exemplify the adjectival lexical choices identified in [9].

Extracts 1 and 2, from *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, feature adjectival compliments such as "great," "gorgeous," "best," "talented," and "beautiful." These extracts demonstrate that even when the same speaker delivers compliments, the choice of words varies. Simple, descriptive adjectives like "great," "gorgeous," "best," "talented," and "beautiful" form the core of these compliments. The adjectives "great" and "beautiful" align with the findings of [10] and [7], who examined lexical choices in compliments by American and New Zealand speakers. In addition to "great" and "beautiful," adjectives like "nice," "good," "lovely," and "pretty" were commonly used by these speakers.

Extracts 3 and 4, from *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, showcase another set of adjectival choices, including "good," "entertaining," "hilarious," and "great."

Extract 1

...Fallon: ... "Raindrops" is such a **great** way to open the record.

Fallon: It is just **GORGEOUS!**

Fallon: ... This is the **best**.

Fallon: ... you're so **talented**....

Extract 2

Fallon: That is **beautiful**.

Extract 3

Ellen: ...the movie last night...was...very very **good**, very **entertaining**.

Ellen: ...you're **hilarious**.

Extract

Ellen: That's so **great**.

In Extracts 3 and 4 above, the adjectival compliments "good," "entertaining," "hilarious," and "great" serve to describe the guest's performance, specifically in the movie. In the first compliment, the adjectives "good" and "entertaining" highlight the guest's job well done. In the second compliment, "hilarious" refers to the actor's or guest's performance, emphasizing a high degree of humor. The adjective "hilarious" is closely tied to the initial compliment's tone of praise. The third adjective, "great," is a commonly used word to describe something positively and is frequently employed by American speakers [10]. These findings align with those of [15], who observed that Sarah Sechan, as the host of her talk show, often used adjectives to compliment her guests. Also, [16] and [17] found that adjectives were widely utilized in talk show settings.

Extract 7 from the *Tonight With Boy Abunda* episode features another adjectival compliment: "well-loved."

Extract 7

...Boy: ...you are one of the most **well-loved**...

In the previous extract, the host uses the adjective "well-loved" to describe the guest as being highly regarded by many fans or as very popular in the industry. This type of compliment is not found in the adjectival compliment categories presented by [9] and [18]. It seems that such an adjectival compliment is more fitting for celebrity talk shows, where

hosts compliment celebrity guests who have a large following and enjoy widespread popularity and approval.

Extracts 5 and 6 from the episode of *Tonight With Arnold Clavio* feature a different set of adjectival compliments, including "requested," "fantasized," "mobbed," and "many."

tract 5

Arnold: **FANTASIZED and MOBBED**...our friend, Derek Ramsay

Extract 8

Arnold: ...the most **requested** leading man, Derek Ramsay.

Extract 6

...Arnold: **Many** people wanted to work with you

Arnold: ...the most **requested** leading man, Derek Ramsay.

Extract 6

Arnold: **Many** people wanted to work with you

The analysis of semantic choices in compliments from the *Tonight With Arnold Clavio* episode revealed that most compliments with adjectival lexical choices occurred when the host introduced the guest or resumed the conversation after a short break. These lexical choices served to emphasize the beginning of their interactions. In this context, the adjectives "fantasized," "mobbed," and "requested" are used as participial adjectives to describe the guests, conveying a sense of equal prominence in their qualities. They suggest that the guest is well-known for both their acting skills and appealing personality.

Also, in Extract 6, the host uses the quantitative adjective "many" preceding the noun "people." This adjectival choice could signal the start of an indirect expression. Based on the context, it can be inferred that the compliment indirectly credits the guest for being desired by a large number of people, likely due to their charisma and impressive acting skills.

Regarding the verbal lexical choices in [9]'s categories, Extract 9 highlights the use of the verb "tells," which appeared only in *Abunda's* and *Clavio's* shows. The following extract illustrates this.

Extract 7 from *Tonight With Boy Abunda* contains a verbal lexical choice.

Extract 7

Boy: ... that **tells** a lot of who you are,

...The above extract highlights a distinctive feature of compliments used by the Filipino host: the use of the verbal compliment "tells." This verb reflects a person's traits. Its usage, however, differs from the findings of [18, 9], and [19]. According to [10, 9], American English speakers typically use semantically positive verbs such as "like" and "love" when complimenting. On the other hand, [19] noted that Filipino speakers rarely used verbs for compliments, instead opting for intensifiers and simple adjectives. In the cited episode of the celebrity talk show, the host specifically chose a verb over a complimentary adjective in the compliment utterance.

Another verbal lexical choice, "wanted," is found in Extract 6 from the *Tonight With Arnold Clavio* episode, as presented earlier.

Extract 6

Arnold: any people **wanted** to work with you?

Extract 6 from this episode demonstrates notable semantic choices, including the positive verb "wanted." This lexical

item is typically associated with the show business or movie industry.

In addition to the verbal lexical choice found in the *Tonight With Arnold Clavio* episode, Extract 6 also includes a noun phrase semantic choice: "leading man." This phrase informs both the guest and the audience that Derek is well-known for portraying lead roles in various genres within the entertainment industry.

The following extracts illustrate semantic/lexical choices in the speech acts of compliments made by the talk show hosts that do not align with the categories proposed by [9].

Adverbial choices are present in Extracts 1 (just), 3 (very), 4 (so), and 8 (most), observed in *Fallon's*, *Degenere's*, *Abunda's*, and *Clavio's* shows.

For example, Extract 1 from *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* contains two adverbial choices: "just" and "so."

Extract 1

Fallon: ... "Raindrops" is **such** a great way to open the record.

Fallon: It is **just** GORGEOUS!

Fallon: ... you're **so** talented....

In the above extract, the first compliment, "It is just GORGEOUS," contains the verb "is" (be verb), "just" (adverb), and "gorgeous" (adjective). In this case, "just" functions as a modifier to the adjective "gorgeous."

Similarly, the second compliment, "You're so talented," includes the verb "are" (be verb), "so" (adverb), and "talented" (adjective). Here, "so" acts as an intensifier, adding emotional emphasis to the adjective "talented." This semantic structure helps minimize the likelihood of the compliment being misinterpreted [20].

These observations also align with the findings of [21], who discovered that intensifiers are frequently used by TV personalities in social conversations.

Another set of adverbial lexical choices is found in Extracts 3 (very) and 27 (so) from *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, as presented below.

Extract 3

Ellen: ...the movie ... **very very** good, **very** entertaining.

Extract 4

Ellen: That's **so** great.

It is worth noting that in Extract 3, which contains the first compliment, the host used the adverb "very" as an intensifier for the adjectives "good" and "entertaining." Both adjectives emphasize the exceptionally high quality of the guest's performance. While the use of "very" may seem redundant, it serves to provide a more explicit and expressive compliment. In Extract 4, where the complement is "That's so great," the host employed the adverb "so" as an intensifier for the superlative adjective "great." The adverb "so" strengthens the impact of the compliment. [22], in her study on the use of "so" as an intensifier in social conversations, highlighted that it is a commonly used adverb to modify adjectives.

Below is another extract containing an adverbial choice ("most") from the *Tonight With Arnold Clavio* episode.

Extract 8

Arnold: ...the **most** requested leading man, Derek Ramsay.

This noun phrase lexical choice informs both the guest and the audience that Derek became famous for his roles as a lead character in various genres of show business. It is a term

commonly used in the industry to describe someone as sensational.

Extract 10 features this noun choice from the *Tonight With Boy Abunda* episode.

Extract 10

Boy: = I'm a **fan** of your tandem

In the aforementioned Extract 10, the host uses the noun "fan" to express strong enthusiasm and support for his guest. This is a notable instance in the celebrity talk show episodes where the host employs a different semantic formula—using a noun ("fan")—while other hosts typically rely on adjectives, verbs, and adverbs to compliment their guests. The use of "fan" in this complement contributes to the broader conversational goal of making the hearer feel good [23, 24].

Overall, adjectival choices predominated in the semantic choices used in the speech acts of compliments by the hosts to their guests in the celebrity talk shows. This was followed by adverbial choices. In addition to the adjectival and verbal compliments proposed by [9], other semantic choices—such as adverbial, noun, and noun phrase choices—were also observed. This represents an interesting finding in the study of the semantic/lexical choices in speech acts of complimenting, which may be unique to the speech situation of celebrity talk shows.

3. CONCLUSION

The analysis of complimenting behavior by talk show hosts toward their guests, within the context of selected American and Filipino celebrity talk shows, revealed recurring semantic patterns unique to the semi-institutional nature of these shows. The study identified two main types of compliments: adjectival compliments—adjectives in various forms that praise guests for their personality traits, possessions, physical appearance, or achievements—and verbal compliments—positive verbs expressing admiration for the guests.

In addition to these, the analysis uncovered semantic choices that diverged from those proposed by Manes and Wolfson, such as adverbial choices (adverbs used to intensify or enhance adjectives) and noun/noun phrase choices (nouns describing the social status of guests). Among these lexical choices, adjectives were most commonly used, serving to affirm guests' skills and accomplishments.

The implications of these findings underscore the importance of strategic complimenting in language classroom settings, where teachers can adopt similar semantic patterns to foster student engagement, motivation, and confidence.

4. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to thank the *Negros Oriental State University*, through the *Rural Engineering and Technology Center*, for partially supporting this research.

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