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**SUMMARY OF  
THE DOCTORAL THESIS**

**„THE CURRENT ROMANIAN  
COMPLIMENT”**

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# THE CURRENT ROMANIAN COMPLIMENT

**1. Our research objective** is focused on the *Romanian language performances* regarding the elaboration of compliments transmitted in different ways towards the people. We refer to the individual's ability to place appreciative words in a suitable way, according to the context, but also to the receiver's ability to decode the actual intentions of the compliment sender, transmitted within the structure of the official statement, emotional apparent or real, etc. The explanation is valid also for the compliments examples translated from other languages, since these translations emphasize – in other circumstances, of course, the Romanian language resources.

The study on compliment offers us the possibility to analyze this subject from different points of view, and mainly: grammatically, semantically, pragmatically and socially (of the relations that the analyzed participants have with each other). The theories of J.L. Austin and J.R. Searle regarding the *speech acts* have been a starting point in the analysis that we have begun. Among the three fundamental types of speech acts mentioned by Austin, we focus the locutionary act, insofar as we identify the appreciative statement with a certain assertion. But, since this is internally strong marked – as purpose of communication, but also externally – as communicational strategy, our attention was mainly drawn upon the illocutionary force and the perlocutionary reflexes of the compliment-statements<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, we shall make a profound analysis according to J.R. Searle<sup>2</sup>'s twelve dimensions perspective that differentiates the illocutionary acts.

This thesis investigates the ways of expression used by an individual at the moment when, stimulated by certain aspects, verbally marks their appreciative attitude. First of all, we are interested in an applied analysis of the nowadays communication, which we made from the pragmatic perspective; a perspective that entails an interpretative view upon communication, in general, and especially upon the compliment. The pragmatic analysis is focused on the language "in development", the interpreter's perspective (of the one who is interested in the sent message and who analyzes it), the sender and the receiver.

The subject we intend to observe in this thesis pages is interesting also because this verbal expression represents a communication by which, in many cases, certain additional intentions are

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<sup>1</sup> Acc. J. L. Austin, 2003, p. 92 – 98.

<sup>2</sup> Acc. J. R. Searle, 1970, p. 33 – 36.

disguised, intentions that go beyond the frame of honest and unselfish attitudes, which a clever receiver can easily decode, but a regular individual ignores.

We started from the *premise* that a compliment is an extremely interesting case of "polite talk". On the one hand, it is included in the category of ritual speech acts, required by the social – cultural context, which means that there is certain standardization in its internal and external structures. On the other hand, the compliment must be the result of honest, spontaneous, strong emotional marked observations, which is equivalent to the internal impulse of its elaboration in the most expressive way. A certain balance is achieved by making a compliment, a synthesis between the expressiveness of an observation - meaning of a cognitive process - and the most suggestive verbal expression of the observation's result. Consequently, a compliment includes, in its profound and superficial structures, information about the mentality and language of the speaker's community (but also of the receiver's ones). Analyzed with the means of the linguistic pragmatics, of the descriptive grammar, and especially of the semantic and structural one, of the social linguistic and psycho-linguistic one, the compliment can emphasize the aspects provided by the ethno-linguistic context and the values of the speakers who belong to that specific environment. Even if not all the selected examples were elaborated in the Romanian language, some of them being translated from different foreign sources, they all wear the outfit of the Romanian language, as we previously mentioned. Therefore we can expect that, at the end of our analysis, we achieve at least an imaginary boundary between the Romanian identity specific and the human thinking universals regarding the ability to observe and the generosity to emphasize the peers' qualities; a boundary between the internal genius of the Romanian language, in our case in the Humboldtian sense, and the people speech universals.

2. Regarding the **researches status**, although compliments are structures used since the oldest times, and in certain periods they were frequently encountered (Baroque Age)<sup>3</sup>, they didn't represent a major interest center for this field researchers. At the level of the specialized Romanian literature, the compliment is not a subject that has drawn the attention of specialists, at least in older writings regarding this concept. In the last decades this subject has been more researched, when speech acts have aroused the pragmatists' curiosity. The compliment appears, as expected, in practical papers that belong to the public relations field.

Among specialized studies of the compliment we refer to the paper of Răzvan Săftoiu "How do you respond to a compliment?", a much more applied study, oriented upon the pragmatic values of the appreciative statement. But we have to mention that, as we can observe

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<sup>3</sup> In this times compliments were very appreciated. They offered the possibility to benefit from certain advantages, acc. G. Beck, 2011, p. 56.

from its title, this study focuses on the answers to compliments and the way how receivers understand this kind of speech acts<sup>4</sup>.

A rigorous analysis of this type of expressive statement is made also by Anda Rădulescu. The author of the paper “L’échange complimenteur en roumain et en français: Les marqueurs verbaux” analyzes the structure of the compliments excerpted from the book “*The Black Chest of Drawers*” by George Călinescu, translated into French and classified according to certain criteria (the presence/absence of the addressee; the number of receivers that understand the appreciative statement; the internal structure of the compliment). Moreover, the reactions that emerge from receiving an appreciative statement are also classified.

This subject has been relatively approached from a systematic point of view by many researchers of foreign specialized literature. The most recent and applied study is the paper of Gloria Beck entitled “*Compliments – a small handbook of using compliments*”, that we previously quoted from. The book has two parts: the first one is focused on the compliment’s development, the peculiarities of this speech act in different cultural areas and according to its classification, and the second part is a guide for a correct use of compliments.

C. Kerbrat-Orecchioni is one of the researchers who, in her fundamental studies dedicated to the speech acts, place the compliment on a quite important level. The author focuses on the pragmatic influence that this concept has upon the interpersonal conversations and has defined it as “*a verbal gift, an offering by which we reward the speaker*”<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, the same author considers that the appreciative speech act can be also “*an entrance to the other’s business*”<sup>6</sup>.

**3.** Our research is based on a **corpus of texts** relatively substantial in compliments or, in any case, on the structure of speech acts trying to decode the intentionality, as well as other specific features of the compliment. We refer to a number of more than 300 items – verbal exchanges that can illustrate the psycho-linguistic and social linguistic phenomenon that we analyze.

Our main source for the excerpt of compliments was the everyday speaking, by the direct investigation, using the empirical record of some verbal exchanges that we considered suitable for the linguistic pragmatic frame of the compliment, and the record of some answers to the questionnaires filled in by individuals from a certain age and professional category (pupils and students). From these records derived inherent differences of marking, especially for the paratext.

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<sup>4</sup> R. Săftoiu, 2003, pp. 597-603.

<sup>5</sup> C. Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1990-1993, p. 228.

<sup>6</sup> C. Kerbrat-Orecchioni states that the compliment-statement is a speech act with a high risk for the sender of the compliment as well as for the appreciated person. Ibidem, 2005a, p.77-227.

Generally, both types of collation were achieved according to the social linguistic methods of Fr. Singly, A.-M. Arborio and P. Fournier, adapted forms according to the ethno methodology research methods. Actually, we focused on the detailed record of the real context of the collection of small oral texts, even if afterwards we didn't completely use these observations in order to restore what in pragmatics it is called "the context of communication" or "additional educational information". In the same line we observed, where it was necessary, the paralinguistic and metalinguistic details – gestures, expressions, general attitude, previous relationships between participants, etc.

In the same category of "selected texts" we included the expressive speech acts from the category of cinema and television recorded compliments, which were observed with more detailed definitions of the direct source.

Another source of examples, more reduced, is formed of literary texts, selected from the Romanian polite literature, but also some of the universal literature. In these last cases (although very rare), we used the fact that in the Romanian professional translation, in the texts that we selected, the Romanian language virtues are emphasized in order to illustrate the pragmatic performances of the selected exchange of replies. Therefore, we consider that we didn't deviate too much from our objective: the analysis of the compliments performance in the Romanian language.

4. Regarding the **analysis methods** that we use, especially for the study of the compliment, taking into account its specific as communicative mechanism based on the politeness principle, we chose to use the pragmatic analysis method as main working method. In its American version imposed by J. L. Austin and J. R. Searle, this focuses on the "success" or "failure" of a statement, an appreciative one in our analyzed discourse.

We are completely aware of the fact that our research must include also the semantic, linguistic and stylistic inherent dimensions for a correct interpretation.

As it can be understood from the various definitions of the compliment, this is situated at the junction of more research fields of human relationships: language, communication, sociology, psychology, etc. So that, beyond the fact that the pragmatic approach includes data of these sciences, our study uses, in some cases, working tools or principles of these sciences. Moreover, *social linguistic elements* are necessary when we talk about the social distance between the participants exchange of replies regarding the "compliment" type, or about the social professional status of the participants; likewise, *psycho-linguistic elements* are appealed in the impact analysis of the selected statements – the compliment itself, the answer, the decoding of the intentions from the connotations, etc.

The *theories of everyday ritual interactions*, as well as those regarding the *cultural identities* provide us with other working tools for our approach. On the other hand, the decoding of such extra linguistic implications is made by investigation of the verbal structures, using the known tools of the descriptive, semantic grammar, etc, as well as using grids of stylistic and statistic interpretation of statements and of every word/syntagm, phrase of the construction of speech acts that form a complete set of the compliment. In some cases, we emphasize a certain predominant type of approach, with a properly entitled subchapter/paragraph. But mainly these perspectives are synthetically emphasized, in a uniform view, despite the complexity of the analyzed phenomenon.

5. In order to **define the used concept**, we already excerpted all the features that the pragmatic – linguistic analysis emphasizes, in the case of making a compliment, in the chapters of working methods presentation from the introductory chapter of this paper, therefore, we shall not detail again these aspects. An important issue is to emphasize the fact that linguistic pragmatics reunites, in an interdisciplinary and intra-disciplinary view, the unilateral researches results made from various perspectives, previously mentioned: logical, sociological, psychological, grammatical (descriptive, semantic, structural), stylistic, ethical, intercultural, etc.

Therefore, our entire approach is based on the following comprehension of the concept we analyze:

The compliment is a *verbal interaction* from the *expressive speech acts* category, made of *at least two effective statements*, performed by a *speaker and a receiver situated face to face*, in a *specific context*, that ensures the mutual validation of the honest and truth conditions, an interaction dominated by the *politeness principle* and focused on a *purely discursive purpose*, with the purpose of providing cooperation by promoting the self esteem of the interlocutor.

6. Regarding the **compliments typology**, the profound structures, as well as the superficial ones, offer consistency and validate a compliment, being strongly connected to each other; together they initiate the development from locutionary to illocutionary and perlocutionary.

The detail elements, of great subtlety among the three basic series of structures: a) lexical grammatical and stylistic; b) compositional; c) logical semantic, sociological and psychological, individualize the compliment from the rich field of expressive speech acts, also emphasizing the common elements, junctions, mutual determination regarding the encouragement and promotion strategies, the compliments from parents and chiefs, professional evaluations, presentations, greeting, toast, congratulations, love statements, etc.

The validation of this status is not possible without a verbal or nonverbal reply, which confirms our hypothesis that a compliment is a complex speech act, an action link<sup>7</sup>, with several preferred or non preferred sequences<sup>8</sup>.

7. As well as the appreciative formula, the **answer** to a compliment is a mark of politeness. Reduced to the minimal interactional scheme, the compliment is part of a *paradigm of two basic terms: Appreciation and Reply*, and the last one is the element that completes a communicative ritual framed in a wider context, validating its compliment quality. As well as greeting, compliment must receive an answer. The difference refers to the fact that a greeting receives a greeting (quite uniform), meanwhile for a compliment the speaker expresses, in their own way that usually is much more different than the first speaker's way, the agreement or disagreement towards the received compliment.

According to these oppositions, researchers of the new generation establish the polarity based on a certain specific of the answer: *the unmarked answer* is the "expected" one, pursuant to usual social conventions, and consequently elaborated in recurrent expressions, relatively standardized, *marked answer*, meaning "unexpected", elaborated in various linguistic structures, adapted to the sender's personality<sup>9</sup>. Each of these is subdivided into several specific categories and classes.

8. Specific formulas of positive politeness, as well as **the way or context of usage, can vary from one language to another, from one civilization to another**. We could observe these differences in the linguistic structure of the compliments and answers, as well as in the pragmatic value of these statements. We noticed that certain cultures frequently use appreciative statements at conversational level, but we observed that also Asians verbally express their skepticism towards compliments, rejecting the received compliment. It is more than certain that these differences emerge due to the interpretation they give to the compliment according to a certain set of rules established by the society they belong to.

These differences of behavior and verbal expression of attitudes pertain to what we call "cultural identity" of those communities. We are facing serious issues of the communication specific, as fundamental element in defining the cultural identity and understanding the cultural diversity<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, we refer to the differences culturally induced in the communication styles

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<sup>7</sup> A. Pomerantz, 1978, pp. 79-112.

<sup>8</sup> W. Edmondson, 1981, p. 7-14.

<sup>9</sup> R. Săftoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 598.

<sup>10</sup> Regarding all the debated issues, see A. Wierzbicka, 1985, "Different cultures, different languages, different speech acts", in: *Journal of Pragmatics*, 9, p. 145-178. Acc. Andra Vasilescu, 2007, p. 28-46 and p. 47-206.

of speakers' communities, at the level of discourse, explicit and implicit significations (determined by local mentalities) as well as verbal interactions<sup>11</sup>.

9. Our conclusions after this approach are the following:

1. This paper was oriented upon the compliment as an expressive speech act, strongly charged with all the communicative performance attributes. It is a speech act because it represents a *statement actually performed* by a speaker, in a *specific context* and is focused on a *specific purpose* (create, in an unselfish way, a comfortable feeling of the receiver). In pragmatists' classifications, the compliment is a linguistic speech act which is sometimes related and linked to gratification, congratulation, love statement, etc. In the case of interpersonal conversations, compliment is a mark of positive politeness, which emphasizes a polite attitude towards the interlocutor, its objectives being to maintain conversation, contribute to emphasize the appreciative feelings and to strengthen interpersonal relationships. Taking into account this defining complexity, we chose to approach this concept mainly through the pragmatic method.

2. The main benefit of using the working tools of linguistic pragmatics is the possibility that offer us to approach the subject from several perspectives related to the appreciative statements complexity. Therefore, we followed several aspects; among we mention the linguistic, pragmatic, lexical, semantic, morphological, syntactic, stylistic, onomasiological, including the paraverbal and nonverbal extensions, etc. On the other hand, the complimentary phenomenon, by its essence and speech acts generation context, entails the elements of the psycho-linguistic, social linguistic, statistical partial analysis etc. We mention that in order to perform a correct decoding of the message we took into account the inter-conditionality of these aspects and we tried to approach them from a perspective that integrates the characteristic elements of the enumerated fields.

3. In the analysis of compliments we focused on the performance way, as well as the way of receiving. In other words, we evaluated the pragmatic effect, the performance, according to the type of answers to the compliment, taking into consideration the theories of J. L. Austin and J. R. Searle regarding the speech acts components: locution, illocution, perlocution. In the locution's component we noticed the frequent usage of the qualifying adjective "*beautiful*", accompanied or unaccompanied by comparison, or adjectives that, by their semantic structure, do not accept comparison (because they already express the idea of maximum intensity), such as: *extraordinary*, *fantastic*, *formidable*, etc., or adverbs: *good*, *wonderful*, etc., or nouns: *of gold*, *intelligence*, *kindness*, etc, and or verbs: *I am fascinated*, *I am delighted*, *I like*, etc.

4. Analyzed from a pragmatic perspective, which entails the integration view previously

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<sup>11</sup> Acc. Andra Șerbănescu, 2007, p. 199-255.



mentioned, the recurrent words from usual formulas (some of them standardized) of the compliments provide us information regarding the social status of the senders, the temperament types of the participants, etc. Therefore, the evaluative epithet used by a great part of the young people of age 35, is situated in the *cool* series, not to mention the slang: *cool*, *trendy*, *boss*, *crackerjack*. A certain type of senders (probably that belong to the choleric temperament) have an obvious propensity for the previous superlative formulas, but not always accepted as such, by the addressee with a different temperament, who perceives a level of exaggeration from the positive evaluation they receive and express a skeptic attitude towards them.

On the other hand, fatiguing formulas, the specific of politeness personal pronouns used in the addressing formulas, emphasize the social distance between speakers and the geographical, social professional interaction of the speakers. We selected from our examples corpus, texts where the terms such as *heigh*, *hey*, *dame*, do not have the pejorative connotation value, that is not approved by the normative grammars and etiquette and protocol handbooks since they are part of the usual vocabulary of the rural people from certain ethno linguistic regions of the country, where their usage can be a sign of linguistic marked politeness.

All these aspects (and much more similar ones) prove us how close is the connection between strictly linguistic factors of the compliments structure and the extra linguistic ones, and how strong is the interrelation dynamic between profound and superficial layers of the construction of such verbal exchanges.

5. The effects produced by appreciative words are the most various ones. We observe that answers to compliments depend on the addressee's personality features (age, sex, education, and social status), as well as the linguistic system they have, which is in a close connection to the respondent's personality. Generally, we noticed that the feed-back is based on the performative verb "to thank" or the interjection "thanks", followed or not followed by a comment (which modifies the evaluation in a positive or negative way).

Some simple unmarked answers are accompanied by hypocoristic terms such as the following example: "*Thanks dear!*" or a positive evaluation "*Thanks, you are sweet!*". Some persons bring information, additional aspects, arguments regarding the received compliment: "*It was a gift from my parents*", meanwhile others respond by a compliment: "*Thank you, you are also kind*". There are also participants that, by their answer, make a direct reference to the conversation partner's speech act: "*Wow, what a compliment! Do you see us so graceful?*" Interrogative structures addressed by many receivers reduce the compliment's effect, and at the same time, are used with the purpose of receiving a confirmation of the appreciation: "*Do you really think that?*".

Often addressees accept the appreciative message by a verbal structure “*thank you*” or “*thanks a lot*”, and then, they introduce a comment preceded by an adversative conjunction “*but*”, which marks the fact that the receiver disagrees the words of the sender (“*Thank you, but kindness is not an asset*”) or that they expect other appreciation: “*Thanks, but don’t you think that this haircut is actually lightening my face?*”. Some of the analyzed participants do not verbally respond to compliments, but through nonverbal elements. They express their gratitude by a gesture, a smile or a slight leaning of the head, etc.

The answers typology is much more generous from the point of view of the content that reflects the addressee’s attitude, and eventually the success or failure of performing the initial speech act. From the confirmation answers, with different expression levels (overbid, self compliment, total or moderated acceptance) to more or less formal reduction or rejection, then to neutral attitudes, ignorance, and then to ironic, sarcastic replies, or to the complete rejection of the appreciated qualities, of the honesty of the initial statement launch. These last reactions of formal and total rejection of the sender’s message actually invalidate the compliment status of the message. This is why we reached the conclusion that by “compliment” we must understand *the entire exchange of ritual replies* that take place in a favorable context, positively and emphatically marked.

6. Compliments enclose a certain illocutionary force that may interfere with the perception of the appreciative structure and with the message itself. This is the component that determines a correct interpretation of the compliment, but also the one who provides expressiveness to the message. The illocutionary force is also intensified by the imperative of exclamation and interjection. These elements emphasize admiration, amazement or respect towards the speaker. Moreover, the adverbs used for the expression of absolute superlative “*very*”, “*most*”, have the purpose to underline the appreciative feelings of the sender and to provide illocutionary force to the compliment-message.

7. We tried to underline, in a special subchapter, some of the functions that the compliment can achieve during an exchange of replies. Taking into account that the appreciative statement is an evaluative and expressive speech act, it can maintain conversation (communicative function), it can act upon the psyche of both participants, it can provide them with a good feeling or can generate a certain psychological discomfort (psychological function) and/or it can allow a strengthening of the social relationships between speakers (social function).

8. In this study we noticed that, in order to achieve communicative performances, the compliment sender uses stylistic structures, of a great diversity, placed in appreciative statements. The compliments’ poetizing procedure must be very well managed because if the appreciation is

accepted, the sender has the confirmation of the communicative ability, and in case of rejection, the communicative strategy fails the overbid of the form, in prejudice of the content's honesty, which can be one of the failure's causes. The senders use stylistic expressive elements in order to protect the conversation partner's ego and to emphasize the positive aspect. Moreover, the expressive elements have an impact upon the appreciated person's psyche; they reduce the social distance and confirm the communicative ability of the sender.

9. The purpose of a compliment, as well as the reactions it generates, can be easier observed in the *context* where they were made. The fundamental condition the sender must take into account, in performing this speech act, is to be honest; otherwise the appreciation risks failing, being rejected and the receiver will have a skeptic attitude towards the sender and their words. Our corpus is mainly formed of compliments without context that have lost their effect in writing. Consequently, we made a detailed record only of gestures and expressions, voice inflections of the analyzed participants. Nevertheless, in some cases, we noticed also the nonverbal and paraverbal elements. Using this element one can easily observe ironic, sarcastic, perfidious attitudes, or can notice the objectivity of the opinions issued by the sender of the compliment.

10. The linguistic structure of the appreciative statements, as well as the way and context where they are addressed, vary from one culture to another. In the chapter *Cultural linguistic peculiarities of the compliments* we demonstrated that French speakers, for instance, often use appreciative structures in communication, meanwhile Asian people are skeptic regarding this type of speech act.

Moreover, we noticed that Muslim women cannot receive a compliment in the absence of their husband, since this attitude is seen as an offence; and Spanish people feel obliged to offer, in exchange, the admired object. Therefore, the same logical verbal structure, generally human, can be interpreted in different ways according to the cultural identity of the speakers.

From our study on the compliments corpus, we noticed that the analyzed participants address compliments according to their interests and desires. Oftentimes the focus is on clothes and physical features, personal objects and on moral and intellectual qualities of the interlocutor, independent of language specific and educational level, or identity cultural determinations. The syntactic logical profound structures also confirm the fundamental universalism of these speech acts. Mainly, any language is based on three basic structures in the construction of a compliment that can be reduced to the verbs: *to be*, *to have* and *to make*, since everywhere in the world people are appreciated for what they are, what they achieved and what they do for themselves and their peers.

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This means that a compliment is a generally human value by itself, it is a speech act that favors the positive aspect of interpersonal relationships, by honesty and truthful observations; on the one hand by the exploitation of the linguistic, stylistic and pragmatic availabilities, and on the other hand, being what philosophers call “a joy of the spirit”.