PRAGMATICS AND ETHNOLINGUISTICS OF COMPLIMENT
Compliment responses in Novara and Grottaglie

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Abstract – This study analyzes differences and apparent similarities between two corpora of compliments elicited in two different Italian towns, Novara and Grottaglie. After a short introduction on the speech act of complimenting, the two corpora are presented. They consist in a total of 104 spontaneous compliment responses (CRs), collected by the author of this work by recording spontaneous conversations. The CRs have been categorized using the typology proposed in Castagneto and Ravetto (in press). Unlike other works in the literature on compliments, the goal of this analysis is not only to compare CRs in two different varieties of a language, but also to point out how a complex speech act like complimenting cannot be understood or interpreted without considering its role and function within the specific culture. In fact, a purely linguistic comparison of the data would not have highlighted important differences between the two groups which, on the other hand, come to the surface when we look at the data with an ethnolinguistic approach. Indeed, in Grottaglie, complimenting is a dangerous act that can cast an evil-eye on the complimentee.

Keywords: pragamatics, ethnolinguistics, compliment responses, Italian.

1. Introduction

The compliment is an expressive act (Searle 1976) used with convivial function (Leech 1983), performed to enforce the comity among speakers (Levinson 1983). In Holmes's words:

> A compliment is a speech act whit explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than speaker, usually the person addressed, for some "good" (possessions, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer. Compliments normally attribute the valued "good" to the addressee, and even when a compliment apparently refers to a third person, it may well be indirectly complimenting the addressee. (Holmes 1986, pp. 485-6)

Scholars generally refer to this definition or to Kerbrat-Orecchioni's.[1]

A pioneer study on compliment responses[2] is Pomerantz (1978). It points out that the compliment has both the function of assessment of a topic, and the function of a supportive action to the comity.[3]

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[1] Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1987, p. 5).

[2] CRs from now.

[3] Wolfson (1983) arguments how compliment is a social lubricant. There is an almost boundless literature about compliments and we would like to quote at least: Frescura (1996), Alfonzetti (2009), Castagneto and Ravetto (in press) for Italian data; Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1987), Wieland (1995) for compliment in French; Golato (2002, 2003, 2005), Ravetto (2012) about German compliment; Manes and Wolfson (1981), Wolfson and Manes (1980), Wolfson (1983), Holmes (1986, 1988) for English pragmatics of compliment. This linguistic act has been investigated in many other languages, especially languages of South-East Asia. See by instance Yuan (2002), Leng (2009), Chen and Yang (2010).

The first work that focused on the topic complimented, the compliment linguistic form, its function and the response it elicits is Knapp, Hopper and Bell (1984).

As for the linguistic form, the reference work is Manes and Wolfson (1981).

In the present study our corpus, consisting of two balanced sub-corpora elicited respectively in Novara (a city between Milan and Turin) and in Grottaglie (a town near Taranto), have been analyzed[4] and typologized according to the typologization proposed by Castagneto and Ravetto (in press).[5]

The two corpora have been analyzed contrastively. If we look at the pragmatics of CRs,[6] quite surprisingly they display more similarities than differences. Yet, a different analysis, carried out on the ethnolinguistic level, shows how the function and the cultural role of the compliment in Grottaglie is deeply different from the pragmatic management of the same act in Novara.[7]

2. Corpus and Methodology

The present study is based on a corpus of 104 compliments and CRs collected in Novara (52) and in Grottaglie (52), to be compared contrastively. This corpus consists entirely of semi-spontaneous data drawn from 40 hours of conversation in face-to-face interactions. If we speak of "semi-spontaneous" data it is because the compliments are voluntary elicited by a speaker. So, the linguistic form, the topic and the socio-linguistic variables like the context of the sample of informants are controlled, but the CRs and the turn management of the following linguistic act are absolutely spontaneous and unpredictable: the people receiving the compliment were completely unaware of the scientific purposes of the dialogue interactions. We use this elicitation method because it is a sort of half-way solution to collecting natural data avoiding the traditional disadvantages of working with a conversation analytic method (CA). As Golato (2002, 2005) pointed out, natural data are rich and reliable, but they are difficult to collect, heterogeneous in their form and meaning and difficult to generalize for scientific purposes, as a result, unfortunately, they are unfit for scientific investigations in most cases. Moreover, collecting absolutely natural-occurring data can take a very long time, and there is the concrete risk that after long hours of registration, a spontaneous conversation will not include the linguistic acts or topics a researcher needs. In addition, in natural conversation sometimes the investigated phenomena are inserted into a very idiosyncratic context, impeding every kind of generalization, which is even worse.

As we decided to collect compliments performed by complimenters who are familiar with complimentees, our method allows us to obtain natural CRs, with all the above-mentioned advantages of authenticity,[8] avoiding the quoted disadvantages in categorizing and analyzing the findings.

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[4] See Section 2.

[5] CRs have been extensively studied. Many works propose different CR typologies set up to compare contrastively the act of compliment in different languages and cultures. See at least: Pomerantz (1978), Holmes (1986), Chen (1993), Golato (2005), Tran (2007).

[6] See Section 3.

[7] See Sections 4-5.

[8] Unlike discourse completion tasks (DCT), from the elicitation of semi-spontaneous data it is possible to analyze different elements belonging to the conversational management of the linguistic act of compliment, such as the sequential ordering of conversational turns, or spoken language features such as the presence of discourse markers or politeness phenomena; unlike role plays (RP), the informants

Since a CR is natural, it "represents how speakers are actually reacting in conversations and what they are actually saying" thus avoiding to centre the analysis on "speakers' intentions, which are not often reliable" (Ravetto 2012, p. 85).

Unfortunately, the adopted method of compliment elicitation worked perfectly for analysis of Novara corpus, but it turned out to be unfit to understand the findings in Grottaglie corpus. As a matter of fact, socio-linguistic analysis was disguised that in Grottaglie a compliment is not a verbal gift to the complimentee, but, on the contrary, it is so dangerous, that it can be perceived as causing any kind of damage to the addressee of a compliment: economic loss, disease, even the death of toddlers. When we started to collect a corpus of compliments for the present investigation, we were not aware that in Grottaglie a compliment could cast the evil-eye on the complimentee, so our investigation followed a consolidated pragmalinguistic protocol (see Aina 2013, Di Francesco 2010), and our sample of informants consisted in young people especially. Yet, this elicitation method obviously is unfit, if the real goal of the investigation was to capture the supposed magic power of compliments.

Participants were young men and women, aged from 18 up to 30 years. All of them hold a secondary-school diploma, but they are actually jobless or they do odd jobs (such as waiters and factory workers). They are in relationships of intimacy,[9] as complimenters and complimentees are all friends or relatives. Interactions took place especially at home, but also in restaurants, streets and shops. All the interactions are in Italian, even if some compliments in the Grottaglie corpus display phenomena of code-switching between Italian and the Grottaglie dialect. The topics of the compliments were: appearance, personal belongings, ability/character. Not a great deal of attention was put towards balancing the number of compliments for each topic in building up the corpus, because this balancing is not present in every-day conversations.[10] Table 1 shows the effective distribution among the topics of compliments:

Topic	Novara	Grottaglie
Appearance	26	13
Personal belongings	9	23
Ability/Character	17	16
Tot.	52	52

Table 1
Distribution of compliments among topics complimented.

Data are analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively using the categorization proposed by Castagneto and Ravetto (in press). A quantitative analysis has been carried out by comparing the frequency of distribution of CRs in the two sub-corpora of Novara and Grottaglie. It is necessary to report a finding in advance: surprisingly the data in the two sub-corpora display strong similarities.

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responding to a compliment are not playing a role, so they perform according to a real pattern of appropriateness.

[9] See Valdés a Pino 1981 for the peculiarity of this social parameter.

[10] See Knapp, Hopper and Bell 1984.

Lingue e Linguaggi

3. CRs: Pragmatic Analysis

Table 2 shows the distribution of CRs acceptance degree in the two sub-corpora following the categorization proposed by Castagneto and Ravetto (in press).

CR types	Novara	Grottaglie
Direct Acceptance	**50%**	**55,8%**
Thanking	9 (17,3%)	5 (9,6%)
Pleased Acceptance	7 (13,5%)	14 (26,9%)
Acceptance	6 (11,5%)	3 (5,8%)
Nonverbal Acceptance	4 (7,7%)	7 (13,5%)
Reassignment	0	0
Limited Acceptance	**40,4%**	**34,5%**
Ironic Acceptance	0	0
Minimization	5 (9,6%)	8 (15,4%)
(a) Lateral Deflection of Merit	2 (3,8)	1 (1,9%)
(b) Lateral Deflection of Quality	1 (1,9%)	2 (3,8)
(c) Lateral Deflection of Topic	5 (9,6%)	1 (1,9%)
Reassurance Request	8 (15,4%)	6 (11,5%)
Non-Acceptance	**7,7%**	**5,8%**
Reductive Deflection	1 (1,9%)	2 (3,8)
Discredit of the Complimenter	0	0
Discredit of the Complimentee	0	0
Rejection	3 (5,8%)	1 (1,9%)
Ignoring	**1,9%**	**3,8%**
Ignoring	1 (1,9%)	2 (3,8)

Table 2
Distribution of CR types in Novara and Grottaglie.

As can be seen from the table, both corpora show a strong preference for the Direct Acceptance forms (50% in Novara, 55.8% in Grottaglie). Limited Acceptances are frequently chosen by speakers too (40.4% in Novara, 34.5% in Grottaglie), while Non Acceptance and Ignoring forms are strongly dispreferred (respectively 7.7% and 1.9% in Novara, 5.8% and 3.8% in Grottaglie). So, looking at the macro-categories on the acceptation scale,[11] no relevant differences can be found in a comparison between the two sub-corpora.[12]

As for the micro-categories, here it is possible to notice some relevant differences, especially in the micro-category of Direct Acceptance. The first is about the micro-category of Thanking, as we find 9 occurrences in Novara and just 5 in Grottaglie. These data are consistent with the findings of Castagneto and Ravetto (in press), showing how the trend to accept a compliment by thanking is well attested among young people in Northern Italy, but is not so evident in Southern Italy corpora. In some cases the Novara sub-corpus shows a peculiar fake aggressive escalation after the acceptance of the compliment by thanking:

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[11] Macro-categories are in bold in the table.

[12] Anyway these data are significatively different from Frescura's (1996), asserting that Italian speakers are inclined to limited acceptance.

I and C are friends.

I01: Scusa la parentesi, come stai bene con questi pantaloni corti!
C02: <sorriso> Grazie!
I03: Niente!
C04: Mi vuoi scopare nel culo?
I05: #<C06><risata> No Sean#
C06: #<I05><risata>#
I07: Non adesso #<C08><risata> magari dopo#
C08: #<I09><risata> Dopo!#[13]

In this conversation I compliments C's shorts.[14] C thanks him but he feels that something is not working adequately: perhaps C is not sure that he is wearing such shorts as to deserve compliment, or maybe he does not feel that his shorts suit him particularly (and so he is potentially questioning his interlocutor's sincerity) well. Or, more simply, C does not think that the comity between him and his friend needs to be reinforced by a compliment. So, he starts a fake aggressive escalation with a change of linguistic register, by using dysphemistic words.

Coming to the micro-category of Acceptance, we have 6 occurrences in Novara and just 3 in Grottaglie. This kind of response generally consists in a short statement of agreement, often performed with a simple "yes" and/or by a partial repetition of an element of the received compliment, typically the adjective qualifying the complimented topic (e.g. I01: What a nice bag! C02: Nice, yes). Although the compliment was always performed with the explicit intention of enforcing the comity with the complimentee, the simple assertion "yes" shows the complimentee agrees with the complimenter evaluation, but does not take it as a verbal gift. This kind of response is more frequently selected in Novara, where the informative function of communication tends to overcome the politeness management of conversation, but it is not the case in Grottaglie.

On the other hand, Non Verbal Acceptance is more frequently selected in Grottaglie, where negotiating the face balancing is far more important. In this socio-cultural context, the attention to protect one's own positive face is stronger than in Novara, where greater attention is instead accorded to the negative face.[15]

Table 2 also shows that occurrences of Pleased Acceptance (In the macro-category of Direct Acceptance) in Grottaglie are double (14 cases out of 52) in comparison with Novara (7 occurrences), but this difference in percentage does not deserve an analytic explanation, because almost half of the occurrences (5 cases out of 7) come from the same informant, characterized by a strongly involved communicative style. Here is an instance of her way of answering a compliment by Pleased Acceptance:

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[13] English translation:
  I 01: By the way, these shorts suit you perfectly!
  C02: <smile> Thank you!
  I03: It was nothing!
  C04: Do you want to screw me in the ass?
  I05: #<C06><laugh> No mate#
  C06: #<I05><laugh>#
  I07: Not now #<C08><laugh> maybe later#
  C08: #<I09><laugh> Later on!#
[14] I is the complimenter and C the complimentee.
[15] See Brown and Levinson (1987).

I and C are sisters. C shows I the gifts she received for Christmas. One of these is a music box projecting images on the wall.

C01: Il proiettore!
I02: Che be<ee>llo!
C03: ['ʃtu:ta][16] la luce!
I04: Ah che bello!
C05: Eh vabbe<h> mo' non si vede bene perché sta ancora un po' di luce. Devi vederlo al buio!
I06: Bellissimo <pb> Sì sì[17]

C wants to underline how the complimented object could be even better than how it appears, exaggerating the praise of it.

Whit reference to Limited Acceptance it is worth focusing on the micro-categories of Lateral Deflection of Topic and Request for Reassurance. We find 5 occurrences of Deflection of Topic in Novara, but just one in Grottaglie: by selecting this kind of response the complementee changes the topic of conversation, shifting the attention of the complimenter onto some peculiar feature of the topic different from the one complimented one or onto some contextual elements. This strategy is strongly evasive, for the complimentee is allowed to deal with the received compliment as a statement, and to reply without accepting or refusing it.

As for the Reassurance Request, it is interesting to notice that some scholars assign this micro-category of CRs to Limited Acceptance, while others consider it a form of scaling down through the Acceptation scale (Tran 2007). Knapp, Hopper and Bell (1984) consider the Reassurance Request an Acceptance with Amendment, while most scholars think that this kind of response is a form of Lateral Shifting (Holmes 1986, Chen 1993, Castagneto and Ravetto in press). Herbert (1990) points out that this kind of CR is a form of Non Agreement because, in this case, it is hard to understand if the complimentee wants to accept or to reject the compliment. On the other hand, Frescura ascribes the Reassurance Request to the macro-category of Non Acceptance, and adds that "after further probing and requests for reassurance, the compliment is accepted".[18] All the above-mentioned scholars, in the end consider this kind of response as a strategy of acceptance or pre-acceptance of a compliment, probably with the function of gaining some extra-time and delaying their response. Yet this CR is ambiguous if we consider that compliments are not only a politeness strategy or a verbal gift, but they are formulated as a statement, and the Reassurance Request allows the complimentee to avoid expressing agreement or disagreement with the complimenter. Other functions of this kind of CR might reveal a doubt about the appropriateness of complimenting an object, questioning the sincerity of the complimenter (Alfonzetti 2009), or, on the contrary, fishing for more compliments (Tran 2007). Regarding this micro-category, the two corpora do not display significant differences from a quantitative point of view (8 occurrences in Novara, 6 in Grottaglie),

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[16] Dialectal form transcribed in IPA.
[17] English translation:
 C01: The projector!
 I02: How beautiful!
 C03: Turn off the light!
 I04: Ah that's beautiful!
 C05: Eh now you can't see it well because there is still some light. You should see this in the dark!
 I06: Wonderful <sp> yes yes
[18] Frescura (1996, p. 100).

but there are qualitative differences regarding the kind of functions that it shows. In 4 occurrences in Novara (but 1 in Grottaglie) the Reassurance Request has the clear function of avoiding the conversational need to answer. In Novara this function is formally expressed by the question *ti piace?* (lit.: do you like it?), performed as a formula, with an uninterrupted prosody. Obviously this question does not work as a real question, but it is just a fast way to induce a turn shift, leaving the floor again to the complimenter. An Evidence of how this conversational strategy works, lies in the conversational structure of this act in Novara, which is articulated in three conversational turns. Once the complimenter has performed his compliment, the complimentee answers by asking this escaping question, which is formally a yes/no question, so eliciting an assertion in the third turn. Therefore the topic is shifted from the object to the tastes of the complimenter, and the complimentee is free from his conversational duty to reply the compliment, as follows:

> *C is the husband of I's sister. C is showing his home to his brother-in-laws.*
>
> I01: Grande, bello, mi#<C02>piace#
> C02: #<I01>Ti piace?#
> I03: Sì[19]

In other cases, compliments including a Reassurance Request are structured in four conversational turns, in which a first adjacency pair,[20] formed by a compliment (turn 1) and the answer to it (turn 4), is interrupted by another inserting adjacency pair (turn 2 and 3) consisting of the Reassurance Request and its answer, as follows (turns I4-C7):

> *I and C are friends (Novara).*
>
> C1: Ciao a tutti!
> I2: Ciao! <pb> Hai cambiato gli occhiali?
> C3: Sì
> I4: Belli ti stanno bene!
> C5: Ti piacciono?
> I6: Sì davvero!
> I7: Grazie![21]

In this typology of Reassurance Request, the complimentee is not trying to escape from the conversational duty to answer the compliment, as in the last conversational turn we do find an answer: here this kind of strategy is related to the politeness strategy to delay the acceptance of the compliment, so reducing the risk for his own positive face.

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[19] English translation:
  I01: Big, nice, I#<C02>like it#
  C02: #<I01>Do you like it?#
  I03: Yes
[20] See Schegloff and Sacks 1973.
[21] English translation:
  C1: Hi!
  I2: Hi! <sp> Did you change your glasses?
  C3: Yes
  I4: Nice. They suit you!
  C5: Do you like them?
  I6: Yes really!
  I7: Thank you!

Only in Novara and just in one occurrence we find a Reassurance Request whose function is to gain specific information before accepting or rejecting the compliment.[22]

4. Two corpora, two linguistic communities

If we limit our investigation to the quantitative aspect and to the analysis of the frequency range of the different CRs, we should say that this linguistic act, and the way to answer it, are not very different in Novara and in Grottaglie. Yet, quantitative data are sometimes a distorting mirror, because the geographical distance between the two towns (more than 1000km), their different historical background,[23] and their different cultural context, do not permit a homogeneous interpretation of the data.

All the interactions of the two sub-corpora are in Italian,[24] in two varieties of the same language which are different in various respects, such as phonetic features, but reciprocally intelligible. The surface form of the CRs in the two sub-corpora are quite similar and sometimes even superimposable, yet the compliment perception in Grottaglie is definitively different from the same linguistic act in Novara.

Grottaglie's and Novara's speakers are not members of the same linguistic community at all, as they don't share the same communicative competence. As is well known in sociolinguistics, the notion of linguistic community is difficult to define, if we exclude the trivializing criterion of a linguistic community based on the common sharing of the linguistic system alone.[25] The author of this work thinks that the members of a linguistic community share a linguistic system, as well as the norms needed for an appropriate use.[26] In other words, they should feel as a *Sprechbund*, rather than a *Sprachbund*, i.e. share the knowledge about norms of encoding and of decoding utterances and linguistic acts (see Hymes 1974, p. 42); this is very important. In Dittmar's words (1989, pp. 112-3), a community of speakers shares pragmatic and interactional features not necessarily included in the linguistic knowledge.

Therefore, Novara's and Grottaglie's speakers are not members of the same linguistic community because they do not share the same communicative competence, that, according to Hymes (1979, p. 223) concerns the competence in linguistic behavior as the evaluation of when it is appropriate to speak and when to be silent, what it is better to say to whom, when, where, how.

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[22] This function of the Reassurance Request is well depicted in Tran (2007).

[23] It is important not to forget that Italy gained its National unity only 152 years ago, while we can speak of a shared unitary spoken language, intended as a system of varieties, only since the last 60 years at most, especially after the diffusion of television in private houses (see De Mauro 1963).

[24] But there are some cases of code-switching in Grottaglie corpus.

[25] This was the idea of the American structuralists, see for instance Bloomfield (1933, p. 49) and Hockett (1958, p. 8), and, later on, of Lyons (1970, p. 448). For a more articulated definition in the same direction see Kloss (1977, p. 225).

[26] See Fishman (1971, pp. 84-5) and Gumperz (1968). Already in 1962 Gumperz said, perhaps in a more accurate way, that a linguistic community is a social group sharing social and interactional patterns that is separated from the neighboring areas because of deficiencies in communication.

5. The compliment in Grottaglie: the ethnolinguistic side of the speech act of compliment

As has been explained in detail, the frequency of distribution of CRs along the scale of macro-categories of Acceptance is very similar in Novara and in Grottaglie. Yet what is actually different in compliment management entirely depends on the perception and the norm of decoding of this linguistic act. In Novara, like in most other areas of Italy and Europe, the compliment is an act devoted to reinforcing social comity. In Grottaglie, it works the other way round: compliments are felt as dangerous because they could cast an evil-eye on the complimentee; they could weaken the social comity as they are potential threats to the addressee. The threat is ineffectual only when the intimacy among interlocutors is so strong as to be sure that the complimenters feel no envy for the complimented object.

As has already been stated, the method of elicitation of compliments adopted is absolutely inadequate to capture the fear of the supposed "magic" power of the compliment, as we complimented young people (aged 18-30 years) belonging to a small and cohesive social group, with strong ties of relationship and friendship. Moreover, the informants have a strong intimacy with the complimenter, an assistant of the author of this work who could be placed in the centre of the interviewed Grottaglie's speakers social net. That is, the informants are the social group least sensitive to the ethnolinguistic variable we are describing: traditions do not appeal to young people, and frequently they refuse them too, because they are perceived as archaic and contrary to a modern world.

Although no evidence in the data adequately shows that compliments in Grottaglie are a dangerous, face-threatening act, the negative perception of the compliment becomes evident in the interviews and in some occurrences in spontaneous conversations collected by the ethnographic method. As for the interviews, the young informants, openly asked to clarify about compliment, declared that performing a compliment is not perceived as very appropriate in Grottaglie, and it could be accepted only among very young girls (i.e. childish people, not fully pragmatically competent). Yet, all our young informants underlined that now the pragmatics is changing in Grottaglie, and the compliments are far more accepted than before.[27] In particular, in the course of the interview, one specific informant (a man aged about 30 years) declared that compliments were perceived as dangerous just by old people, but later on in spontaneous conversation he contradicted himself: when his little daughter was keeping on whining and being naughty, he claimed that her inacceptable behavior was entirely due to the evil-eye casted by compliments to her.[28] Hence, all that can be said about this topic comes from a collection of interviews and stories.[29]

In Grottaglie, than, as soon as a compliment is formulated, a remedial action has to be performed too, and the oldest woman in the family of the complimentee says some

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[27] As a matter of fact, young informants living in Grottaglie are somehow balanced on a knife edge between tradition and modernity, because they are still part of a rural culture, but this culture is not anymore so coherent as it was when their parents were young, consequently they share the old social beliefs (up to a point), though they claim to disassociate from them.

[28] Moreover, these compliments had not been introduced by 'binitica' formula (see after), so the baby was not shielded at all by the evil-eye.

[29] A further step in this research will consist in collecting new data with DCTs and the ethnographic method, with a totally different sample of informants (old people, especially old women with a low degree of instruction).

prayers performing a rite called *'nfascinatura*. An on-line work by Angelo Nacci[30] explains the functions, modalities and goals of this ritual as follows:

> La persona '***n'fascinata***' o meglio '***affascinata***' in genere era una giovane donna o un bambino che subivano l'influsso negativo attraverso complimenti apparentemente positivi che venivano fatti nei loro confronti da persone invidiose.
>
> Infatti in passato, da parte dei parenti, si cercava di evitare di fare affermazioni del tipo '***ce bellu piccinnu!***' o '***comu ste cresce bellu***!' per paura appunto di '***affascinare***' la creatura, preferendo frasi come '***Ce piccinnu! Cu cresce intra 'lla crazia ti lu Signore!***'.
>
> Pertanto '***lu n'fascinu***' si identifica con il '***poter***' che una persona esercita su un'altra, permettendogli di influenzarne la volontà e che in origine era legato a un'idea di magia e di incantesimo.[31]

The rural context of Grottaglie is sufficient to explain why some social categories, such as children and young women, are particularly at risk: children are threatened by the high infant mortality of not so long ago, while young women risk spinsterhood, if they do not get married.

Consequently, we have to face the following questions: why has the compliment, a linguistic act for reinforcing comity, developed such a negative power? Is there any protecting ill-luck formula to perform or to respond to a compliment?

Corroborating what our informants told us, Nacci suggests that the evil-eye lurks in compliments performed by envious people. Therefore, by formulating a compliment the complimenter has to show that he feels no envy: if he is sincere, his compliment will not be potentially dangerous for his addressee. So, in order to reassure his interlocutor about his good intentions, the compliment is introduced or concluded by the formula *binitica*.[32] By doing so, the complimenter invokes God as a witness of his good faith.

Nelson, El Bakari and Al Batal (1996, p. 112), in their research on Egyptian Arabic, say something similar:

> The evil-eye refers to the "belief that someone can project harm by looking at another's property or person"(Maloney 1976). Frequently the evil-eye relates to "envy in the eye of the beholder" and is most dangerous to pregnant women, children, and anyone who is beautiful (Spooner 1976, p. 77). For example, if a person compliments a mother on her child, the compliment, by causing the evil-eye to notice the child, may cause harm to visit the child. To counteract this effect, the giver of the compliment invokes Allah to protect the child, saying, *Allaah yiHfazu* ("May God protect him") or *maa shaa'a Allah* ("What God has willed!"). In a study of pregnant women at the American University in Beirut hospital, Harfouche (1987, p. 87) found that 54.9% believed in the harmful effects of the evil-eye.

Moreover Mursy and Wilson (2001, p. 150) pointed out how compliments are a problematic linguistic act for Egyptian culture:

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[30] Li Vurtagghie: antichi ricordi e vecchie tradizioni. La 'n'fascinatura', in www.grottaglieinrete.it.

[31] The person who is 'n'fascinata', or 'fascinated', generally was a young woman or a child who were casted by the evil influence by "seemingly positive compliments" addressed to them by envious people. In fact in the past, relatives used to avoid statements such as "what a beautiful baby!"(dialectal form in the text, DF from now), or "how he is growing up well!"(DF), frightened by the risk of "fascinating" babies, using instead statements like "what a baby! He could grow up in the grace of God!"(DF). So the "n'fascinu" is the power that a person has on another and which allows him to influence his will. It was ancestrally linked to an idea of magic and charms.

[32] Dialectal form: "God blesses him!".

On a visit to Ireland, Mursy's wife (the first author) felt some discomfort and distress following an Irish woman's compliment on their seven-month old baby as being "a big and healthy boy": the motive behind the wife's distress is that Egyptians, especially women, take these compliments on children's health and physical growth as a sign of envy and believe it may cause harm to the child. This belief is not empty or superstitious; it has a strong foundation in the Quran. The distress would even be greater if such remarks were made by an Egyptian; something which does not often happen nor is expected.[33]

According to some interviews, something similar happens in other southern parts of Italy, such as Calabria and Sicily, as well as in Turkey and Albania. In an interview, it came out that also in Turkey does exist a protecting ill-luck formula similar to *binitica* in its function, *maşallah*. As in Grottaglie and in Egypt, also in Turkey compliment could be dangerous for children and young women, and the potential negative effect of the compliment can involve also other objects or situations, such as the preparation of dishes requiring particular abilities and efforts in cooking.

In particular, compliments performed by envious people can affect the preparation of *baklava* in Albania, a sort of cake covered by very thin flaky pastry which became easily broken, but also the next baklavas that would be prepared in the future by the same cook could break because of the supposed evil power of the compliment just received. Considering the supposed strong evil power of the compliment, in Albania some social strategies are sometimes adopted in order to prevent the misfortune of receiving it: an Albanian informant interviewed on this subject-matter declared that, when he was a child[34] his father used to smear his cheeks with mud, when friends or relatives visited them. This strategy was aimed at deflecting the conversational attention of visiting people onto the dirtiness of the child protecting him from the risk of being complimented for his beauty or good health.

Although the findings on the evil power of compliment are heterogeneous and it is quite hazardous to look for a generalization, at the present stage of this research, there are some constants to focus on. All the quoted countries (South-Eastern Italy, Albania, Turkey, Egypt) share a common geographical context, as they are Mediterranean countries, and they are historically based on a rural economy. By looking at the data, we could suppose the existence of an implicational scale of objects potentially struck by the negative power of compliment. At the top of this scale we find children, just on a lower step we find health, then young women, then alienable possessions; at the bottom of the scale there are personal behaviors and qualities, which are not the object of strong envy (see Table 3):

Evil-eye risk	*Topics complimented*
More	Babies
	Health
	Beauty of young women
	Alienable possessions
Less	Personal qualities

Table 3
Evil-eye risk scale.

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[33] As a matter of fact, without giving too much attention to it, already Brown and Levinson noticed that "compliments may be very strong FTAs in societies where envy is strong and where witchcraft exists as a sanction", see Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 247).
[34] He is currently 27 years old.

This is an implicational scale, so it is not possible to skip intermediate steps on it, that is, if a compliment in a certain culture can cast the evil-eye on personal belongings, this implies necessarily that children and health could undergo the evil-eye of a compliment too. There is a conversational evidence that we are facing a proper implicational scale: when the subject-topic of a compliment is more dangerous (or perceived as such) there is a stronger need to introduce this linguistic act by a protecting ill-luck formula. So, as babies are considered potentially struck by the evil-eye of the compliments in all the above mentioned countries, in all these very same countries babies must be protected by a warding ill-luck formula. Coming down the scale, a warding ill-luck formula appears randomly, totally disappearing in introducing compliments about personal qualities.

Looking at the Grottaglie situation, the interviews show how the *binitica* formula is currently employed only by people aged more than 50 years while speaking dialect, in compliments addressed to the parents about their little children. The interviewed speakers agree on the attribution of this linguistic behavior to an archaic use that is almost in decay. According to them, at this point the selection of *binitica* is only a spur of an ancient cultural system. Yet, compliment is surrounded even now by circumspection, as is evident considering how difficult is to perform this linguistic act even for young people.

Another piece of evidence that this belief has not totally been dismissed comes from the Cosimo Occhibianco (2010) Grottagliese-Italian dictionary, where we find this definition of the compliment:

> complimento, dono, regalo, rinfresco che si offre in occasione di qualche ricorrenza; […] *L'on'a ddà li cumplimiénti!* Gli daranno i rinfreschi![35]

But coming to the secondary acceptation of compliment this dictionary adds:

> In senso figur. Disgrazia, incidente, preoccupazione: *Agghiu vutu stu cumplimiéntu, ca pi ppicca no mmurèa!* Ho avuto questa disgrazia, che per poco non morivo![36]

6. Conclusions

The contrastive comparison between the two corpora of CRs elicited in Novara and in Grottaglie has allowed us to see some relevant differences in the politeness management in these two towns. Even if, from a quantitative point of view, the macrocategories of CRs tend to match, a deeper investigation shows how in Novara young people are inclined to accept by direct thanking, while in the same conditions, Grottaglie's informants prefer a Nonverbal Acceptance. The pragmatic management of compliment in Novara, then, is progressively approaching the pattern of other western countries (USA, Australia) so widely depicted in the scientific literature about this field.[37] Grottaglie's management of compliment, on the other hand, is more conservative (and somehow archaic), as it is evident by the way in which informants manage the face-balancing in this act, protecting cautiously their positive face.

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[35] Compliment, gift, food offered in case of a celebration; […] They will give him compliments, that is They will offer food to him.
[36] Disgrace, accident, worry: I had this compliment it was such that I nearly died!
[37] See at least Manes and Wolfson (1981), Wolfson and Manes (1980), Wolfson (1983), Holmes (1986, 1988).

A strong attention to the politeness management of compliment is widespread throughout different cultures all over the world, but if we really want to understand the source and the weight of this phenomenon in Grottaglie we must turn to data collected by the ethnographic method, such as interviews, storytelling and spontaneous occurrences in natural conversations. These data allowed us to understand that the circumspection deserved to compliment management by Grottaglie's people is grounded in the ancient belief, not completely overcome, that compliment could cast an evil-eye on the complimentee, especially if the compliment is about babies, young women, health or other topics and people potentially struck by the negative power of the compliment.

So, in Grottaglie, compliment is a linguistic act to handle with care.

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