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**Compliments, Self-Praise, and Self-Denigration among Nonnative
English Users in an Online Setting**

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Abstract

In this study, we examined the use of compliments, self-praise, and self-denigration, as exchanged among nonnative English users. This was part of participation in an online cross-cultural exchange project (Ibunka 2019), which involved learners from six countries (Algeria, Brazil, Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan, and the Netherlands). The aim of the study was two-fold: first, to contribute to the burgeoning research on the three speech acts in online settings; second, to unravel how the project participants – as nonnative users – managed to build and sustain rapport/comity via these social acts, despite their assumed linguistic deficiency. The study's data were extracted from a corpus of 2055 posts and comments (≈ 368654 words) and analysed in terms of: distribution (1105, 301, and 361 tokens were identified, respectively), topics (core vs. peripheral), sequential organisation (vertical vs. horizontal), and rapport/comity building potential. The findings were extensively discussed in light of the existing literature, especially relative to social networking sites. Some of these findings are of a particular interest to English language teachers, namely: using linguistic proficiency and incompetence as topics for the three speech acts and the latter deployment as metacomments and message openers/closers as well as for the management of relational work.

Keywords: *compliments, self-praise, self-denigration/deprecation, Ibunka, English as a lingua franca/ELF, sequential organisation, rapport/comity building*

The present study sought to contribute to the burgeoning area of internet pragmatics, as it studied compliments, self-praise[1] and self-deprecation in Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) [2]. To this end, it studied these speech acts (SAs), as used by nonnative English users (NNEUs), while taking part in a cross-cultural exchange project (known as Ibunka 2019, see below). The significance of the present study lied in its examination of the three SAs, which had been

investigated separately in various platforms and across diverse linguacultures before (see a short review below). Therefore, this study was undertaken in order to gain new insights regarding these three SAs both individually and with respect to their use by the project participants concomitantly.

Moreover, given that we dealt with NNEUs in the present study, it is important to understand how they achieved “satisfactory rapport [comity = friendly/courteous relations]” in communication, well beyond the observed deviation from the native English users’ (NEUs) norms of correctness (Aston, 1993, p. 277). Despite this early call from scholars like Faerch and Kasper (1989) and Aston (1993), little has been done in this regard. Today, with the rise of English as a lingua franca (ELF, e.g. Pitzl & Osimk-Teasdale, 2016; Walkinshaw, 2020), this issue is much debated and research along these lines is much encouraged. The present study intends to make a contribution in this direction too. Disregarding their linguistic realisations, the potential of compliments as rapport/comity building strategies is indubitable. This will make it very interesting to delve into how this is made possible thanks to the exchange of not only compliments but also self-praise and self-denigration. The present study will then seek to answer the following research questions:

1. How often did the project participants use each of the SAs in the corpus examined?
2. What were the topics of the three SAs?
3. Where these three SAs were positioned within the message in which they are generated?
4. How could the three SAs contribute in building rapport/comity among the project participants?

The present paper is structured as follows. This first section has introduced the aim and significance of the study; the second one will provide a bird’s eye view of the related literature and define certain key terms and analytical categories. A ‘research methods’ section will present the Ibunka project, participants, and the corpus studied as well as the approach adopted in spotting the three SAs. The ‘results’ section will report the findings and answer the research questions. As for the ‘discussion’ section, it will be devoted to summarizing the results and interpreting them in light of the existing literature, besides a succinct discussion of limitations, pedagogical implications, and suggestions for further research. The ‘conclusion’ section will restate the study’s significance and bring the paper to close. Please note that throughout the paper (and also in figures and tables) the three SAs will be presented in this order consistently: compliments, self-praise, then self-denigration.

Theoretical Background

In this section, we will define some analytical categories and technical terms. Dealing with the positioning of the three SAs is meant to study, in technical terms, their “sequential organisation.” This analytical category is borrowed from conversation analysis, wherein it is defined – in general terms – as “any kind of organization which concerns the relative positioning of utterances or actions [the three SAs in our case]” (Schegloff, 2007, p. 2). It is also imperative to define each of the SAs under examination. First, in a widely cited definition in compliment research, Holmes (1988, p. 210) saw a compliment as “a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some ‘good’ (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer.” The conveyance of the positive assessment of something can be achieved via nonverbal means in TMC, for example, hitting the ‘like’ and the ‘love’ buttons or inserting a suggestive emoticon (Placencia & Lower, 2017). Second, as for self-praise, it is considered as one of the means of self-presentation, whereby speakers utter positive words about themselves, in a bid to claim an appreciable self-image in front of others (based on Butler et al., 1995; Tice, 1995, cited in Ren & Guo, 2020). Third, self-denigration, in line

with Zhou and Kádár (2020), is any expression by which the speakers put themselves in an inferior position relative to their counterpart interlocutors, for the sake of showing modesty, seeking support, or for some other motive. Please, note that in the literature the labels self-denigration (e.g., Kádár & Zhou, 2020) and self-deprecation (e.g., Burch, 2017; Speer, 2019) are used as synonymous, and it is the case in the present study.

The three SAs under study were often studied separately.[3] Compliments and compliment responses have received greater attention comparatively, both in face-to-face (FTF) communication and in TMC; for self-praise and self-denigration, only a handful of studies could be found to date. It is worth mentioning that the response to the three SAs is beyond the scope of the present study. Starting with compliments, they have been researched extensively in FTF communication (for a review see, inter alia, Chen, 2010; Derakhshan et al., 2020; Strubel-Burgdorf, 2018) and TMC (for a comprehensive updated review, see Derakhshan et al., 2020; Placencia & Lower, 2017). Among others, the following studies (e.g., Eslami et al., 2019; Maíz-Arévalo & García-Gómez, 2013; Placencia, 2019; Placencia & Lower, 2013; Placencia, Lower, & Powell, 2016; Yusof & Hoon, 2014) on various linguacultures and digital platforms are worth consulting. A recently published edited volume has come at an opportune moment and added to the literature on compliments (and compliment responses), with a few papers touching on self-praise in social media and online platforms (Placencia & Eslami, 2020).

This bulk of research informed us about trends of netizens[4] in complimenting across various online settings (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Renren, LinkedIn, blogs, virtual worlds) and linguacultures (e.g., American English, British English, English as a lingua franca, Chinese, Ecuadorian Spanish, Peninsular Spanish, Persian, Polish). Researchers have targeted aspects like linguistic/syntactic structures, internal/external modification, topics, pragmatic functions, medium-specific resources (e.g., emojis, ‘like’ button, images), and the influence of factors like mother culture, gender, social distance, and age.

As for self-praise, it has been studied from social psychological and pragmatic perspectives. In pragmatics, only a handful of studies have dealt with it, both in FTF communication (Dayter, 2021; Kim, 2017; Speer, 2012; Underwood, 2011; Wu, 2011) and TMC (Dayter, 2014, 2018; Matley, 2018; Ren & Guo, 2020; Tobback, 2019). Previous research on digital platforms have gone beyond the depiction of self-praise in FTF communication as an undesirable social act and have distinguished between positive self-presentaion (desirable self-praise) and bragging (undesirable self-praise) (e.g., Dayter, 2014). It investigated this social act in relation to modification strategies, linguistic structures, pragmatic functions, and the relevance of tags and hashtags in its performance.

Among the three SAs, self-deprecation appeared to be the least researched in the literature. To date, only a few studies can be found, both in FTF communication (e.g., Burch, 2017; Gu, 1990; Speer, 2019; Walkinshaw et al., 2019) and TMC (Kádár & Zhou, 2020). Kádár and Zhou (2020) examined self-denigration as used by Chinese netizens. The researchers categorised instances of self-denigration into conventional (including deferential use like when addressed from a younger to an older user), semi-conventional (for seeking solidarity and comfort), and unconventional (used for expressing humour and showing off).

In this study, Ibunkers can be approached as an emerging “community of practice” (CofP), which is defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in the area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4). In this context, the primary concerns of this CofP include learning the English language, passing the exams, and getting a job and their major problems include lack of

proficiency in this language, the school/university challenges (e.g., making friends, doing well in school activities), and achieving one’s ambitious.

Research Methods

The data of the present study consist of all the messages produced while taking part in the Ibunka2019 Project; *Ibunka* means ‘different cultures’ in Japanese. It is a cross-cultural exchange email-based project that has been initiated and moderated, since 2000, by Masahito Watanabe, from Yokohama National University, Japan (see, e.g., Watanabe, 2006, for further details on the project). The project was based on an asynchronous communication mode that takes place via the Web Bulletin Board (WBB), in English among students/teachers from six countries (see Table 1). The participants in the project are of mixed proficiency levels, and they are on average between 15-25 years old – most of them between 18-20 years old.

Table 1. Nationality and Gender of Project Participants

| Nationality | <i>N</i> | Female | Male |
|------------------------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| Algerian/ALG | 66 | 61 | 5 |
| Brazilian/BRA | 16 | 11 | 5 |
| Indonesian/INA | 122 | 100 | 22 |
| Japanese/JPN | 38 | 09 | 29 |
| Taiwanese/TWN | 36 | 31 | 05 |
| Dutch/NED (=The Netherlands) | 7 | 6 | 1 |
| Total | 285 | 218 | 67 |

The project took place from the beginning of September 2019 to late December 2019. The participants were required to write posts, comment on the others’ posts, and encourage the other participants to comment on their posts, to increase their score for the ‘outbound’ and ‘inbound’ messages. During the three phases, the participants had to introduce themselves and talk about their school (e.g., school life/routine/system), aspects of their own culture (e.g., food, music, traditional weddings, tourist attractions), and social issues (e.g., wars and conflicts, crimes, health, diseases). These participants will be sometimes referred to as *Ibunkers* in this paper.

The examples from the participants’ messages will be reported without editing them for linguistic issues, and they will be accompanied with information like the country and gender of the sender/recipient, number in the corpus, the exact time/date the message was posted and so on. For ethical concerns, the participants’ identity will be concealed; that is, family names, school/university names, and locations will not be given; only the participants’ first or nicknames will be revealed. The analysis of data (2055 posts, ≈ 368,654 words), was facilitated by the use of NVivo software (Version 10).

As far as the identification of the SAs under study in the corpus is concerned, we opted for a functional rather than a linguistic approach. For example, we did not search for certain

adjectives/structures so as to spot compliments (e.g., good, nice, gorgeous). Rather, adopting a functional approach allowed us to capture not only the formulaic/explicit realisations, but also the non-formulaic/creative/implicit ones, which would have gone unnoticed if a purely linguistic approach adopted (cf. the approach of Ren and Guo (2020) and Kádár and Zhou (2020), who studied self-praise and self-denigration, respectively).

Results

Distribution of the Three SAs

Relative to our first research question, the distribution of the three SAs is tallied in Figure 1. We can see that compliments (1105 tokens) were used extensively by the project participants as compared to self-praise (301 tokens) and self-denigration (361 tokens). This gives the ratio of 3.6 and 3.06 compliments to every single self-praise and self-denigration token, respectively.

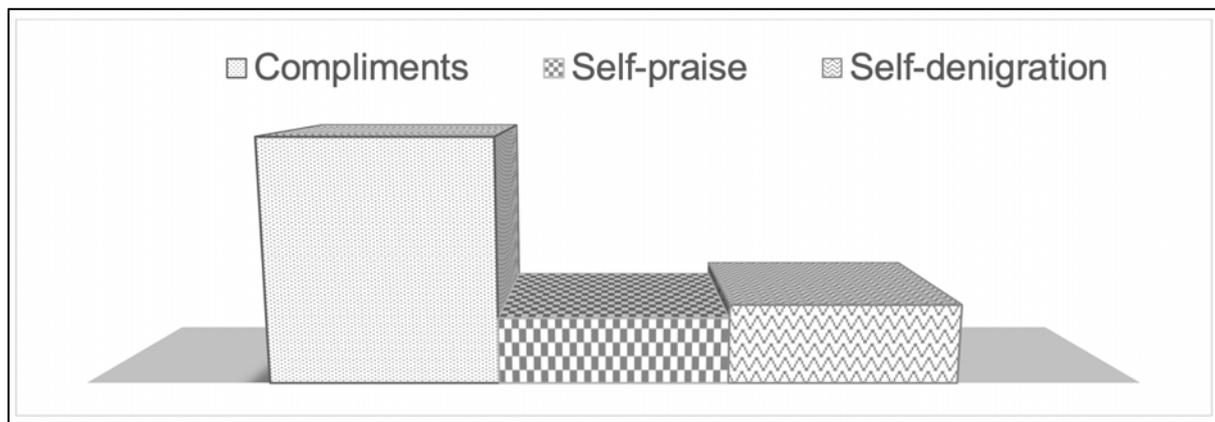


Figure 1. Distribution of Three SAs

Table 2 displays the distribution of the three SAs across the participants' nationality.

Table 2. Distribution of Three SAs across Participants' Nationality

| Nationality | Compliments | | Self-Praise | | Self-Denigration | |
|--------------|-------------|-------|-------------|---------------|------------------|------------|
| | <i>N</i> | % | <i>N</i> | % | <i>N</i> | % |
| ALG | 160 | 14.48 | 43 | 14.29 | 22 | 6.09 |
| BRA | 3 | 0.27 | 2 | 0.66 | 8 | 2.21 |
| INA | 610 | 55.20 | 205 | 68.11 | 198 | 54.84 |
| JPN | 253 | 22.90 | 18 | 5.98 | 73 | 20.22 |
| TWN | 56 | 5.07 | 26 | 8.64 | 39 | 10.80 |
| NED | 23 | 2.08 | 7 | 2.33 | 21 | 5.81 |
| Total | 1105 | | 100 | 100.00 | 361 | 100 |

The three SAs were exchanged not only among the interactants from different countries but also among the same nationals. This is particularly noticeable in the performance of Indonesian and Algerian participants who tended to compliment their compatriots as well. As for the case of Indonesians, many of them are in the beginning of their first year in university/vocational school and thus they are not very acquainted with their classmates, which is why, arguably, they deployed these three SAs as ice-breaking strategies *nationally* as well as *internationally*. The following examples show self-denigration directed either at a foreigner or a compatriot.

Example 1 (Self-denigration addressed to a foreigner)

Aulia (INA-F) to Amel (ALG-F)
Hallo Amel (453)
142 words 2019/10/15 21:59:24

Yeah, that's right Amel! My grammar is still problem. But I don't make excuses to stop studying. I like challenges, and for your comment about my grammar. I became more enthusiastic about learning English better...

Amel, I'm very shy because there might be a lot of grammar mistakes as I write this.

Example 2 (Self-denigration addressed to a compatriot)

Nina (INA-F) to Pira (INA-F)
To Piraaa ____ (477)
94 words 2019/10/16 11:31:35

Actually I lazy to comment on your story but because of debt I commenting ha ha ha ha. You are the one who likes everywhere with me. The story is very interesting and I feel the same way.

Topics of the Three SAs

Relative to our second research question, Figure 2 displays the topics of the three SAs.



Figure 2. Topics of Three SAs.

Overall, the project participants appeared to target the same topics in the realisation of the three SAs. What is likely to vary then is the frequency of these topics. Examining the topics of compliments revealed that Ibunkers tended to compliment what is made accessible to them from reading the others' posts. It is the reason why compliments on appearance, for instance, are very limited, if compared to results of previous research on FTF (e.g., Holmes, 1988; Rees-Miller, 2011) and online (e.g., Maíz-Arévalo & García-Gómez, 2013; Placencia, 2019; Placencia & Lower, 2017; Yusof & Hoon, 2014) settings. Meanwhile, the noticeable presence of 'personality' and 'skills' as topics of compliment is in line with previous studies, on Facebook (e.g., Maíz-Arévalo & García-Gómez, 2013) and Twitter (e.g., Yusof & Hoon, 2014).

It is interesting that the posts themselves (e.g., well written, tackling a well-chosen/interesting/funny topic, informative, concise, making one aware of a good novel/film) and linguistic/English proficiency became sometimes the assessable in the participants' compliments. In this context, the compliment may be said to function as a signal of admiration of the addressee (Yusof & Hoon, 2014). In the first phase of the project where the participants had to introduce themselves and their school life, they further raised certain points, which became topics for compliments: aspects of their personality and character (e.g., making many friends, time management skills, decision making, interest in sports and games), school (e.g., library, teachers, music/sport clubs, events, dorm, school system, subjects of the curriculum), skills (e.g., dancing, riding, practising sports, playing musical instruments, cooking, playing games like Sudoku, excelling in certain subjects like chemistry), linguistic/English proficiency (e.g., getting a good mark, being praised by a teacher), family (e.g., going out to eat, family members), experience (e.g., reading a novel, celebrating birthdays), and hardworking and achievement (e.g., practising hobbies, doing extracurricular activities). In the second phase of the project, the participants were required to talk about their own country/culture, and thus they received praise on the tackled aspects (e.g., dishes, tourist attractions, cities, national football team, traditions, traditional musical instruments/clothes/sports, ancestors' values, special celebrations like Eid/Christmas/Chinese New Year). For space constraints, only some frequent categories are illustrated below:

Example 3 (Complimenting the post)

Kouichiro (JPN-M) to Rananda (INA-F)
Characteristics of education in each country. (380)
176 words 2019/10/15 13:44:50

Thank you for your posting. **Reading your idea, It is very interesting that their nationality involved in differences of their ways of studying such as, the age at which one begins to go to school or amount of homework.**

Example 4 (Complimenting an aspect of other's country)

Shotaro (JPN-M) to Manel (ALG-F)
Good education system in Algeria (363)
181 words 2019/10/15 0:54:42

Actually, I don't know about Algeria well but **I just know Algeria's national football team and some players. I know Riyad Mahrez. He controls a ball as if he's a magician. So, at first, huge congratulations to Algeria on winning African Nations Cup.**

As for self-praise, the project participants tended to mainly praise their personality and character (e.g., cute/kind-hearted/funny/devoted, adjusting to changes, developing positive attitudes), school achievements/situation (e.g., being punctual, membership in clubs, successful participation in events, being admitted to a reputed/good university/school, good grades, praised by teachers, riding to school), skills (sports, traditional sports/music/dance/cooking), linguistic proficiency (e.g., good English, interest in languages, choosing the English programme, ability to write one's name in Japanese), and personal achievements (e.g., walking up the hill, posting in Instagram, winning a competition, applying to police, efficient method for self-development). Below, two categories are illustrated:

Example 5 (Self-praise one's personality)

Irma (INA-F) to Farah (INA-F)
Dear Farah (1939)
103 words 2019/11/29 0:17:21

Hi Farah. you definitely know who I am, I am your friend irma. **Although there are 3 irmas you can definitely distinguish me from the others I am the calm Irma wkwkkk**

Example 6 (Self-praise one's skills)

Minou (NED-F) to All participants
Hockey in the Netherlands (774)
476 words 2019/10/23 20:03:10

Since last season **I'm also training and coaching the U12 girls team at HCSO. Last year they were a U10 team, but they now play like the adults.** I really enjoy training and coaching them as all the kids are really enthusiastic and fun to work with. **They respect me**, but are also in for a joke and are just fools overall!

As for self-denigration, it was quite obvious that Ibunkers negative self-disclosure centred on their personality and character (e.g., unable to make friends, unsociable, shy, lazy), linguistic/English proficiency (e.g., poor English, quality of one's post, unfamiliarity with other languages like Korean, Latin, French), school-related issues (e.g., not taking the school seriously, doing bad in certain subjects like maths, failing at school, being the only boy in the class, adapting to the new school, horrible gym), skills (e.g., poor performance in cooking traditional dishes, sports like swimming, losing a sport competition, (traditional) dancing like Jaipong (from INA), gaming like video-games and Sudoku, playing traditional musical instruments, playing piano, using chopsticks, climbing, wearing make-up), post/story/comment (e.g., boring, difficult to understand, confusing, containing inaccurate information, tackling irrelevant topics). Self-denigration may also be about lack of knowledge relative to one's country (e.g., knowing little about a given historical site, the local language, inability to understand traditional songs or a local language, difficulty to write in a national language like traditional Chinese, ignorance about national festivals, lack of interest in traditional food) or the country of the other (e.g., lack of knowledge about famous sports, traditional dishes or inability to try them, perceiving one's language (e.g., Arabic) as hard), among other topics (e.g., inability to achieve certain tasks, appearance/beauty, personal experiences). Below, the reader can find some examples representative of the frequent topics:

Example 7 (Self-denigration on linguistic proficiency)

Bertus (NED-M) to All participants
Life at _____ (22)
655 words 2019/09/29 20:57:06

I think Chemistry and PE [Physical Education] are my favorite subjects, I like languages too **but unfortunately I'm not that good at it. My English isn't too well and my Dutch is even worse, which is quite funny in my opinion.**

Example 8 (Self-denigration on skills)

Tasya (INA-F) to Manggie (TWN-F)

Keep spirit Manggie! (577)

156 words 2019/10/17 16:15:12

Is playing volleyball difficult at first? **I once tried playing volleyball but my hand get injured, maybe because I have no talent playing volleyball :(**

It appears that the topics of the three SAs are dictated by the online community's priorities. That is, the interactants are nonnative speakers of the language in which they are interacting and they are university/college students, so it should come as no surprise that they favour certain topics over others. Thus, these topics can be seen as *core*: post/comment, English/linguistic proficiency, school-related issues, besides personality, while the remaining can be classified as *peripheral*: skills, country-related, appearance/beauty, achievement, family, etc. See Figure 3 below (the circle represents the core topics).

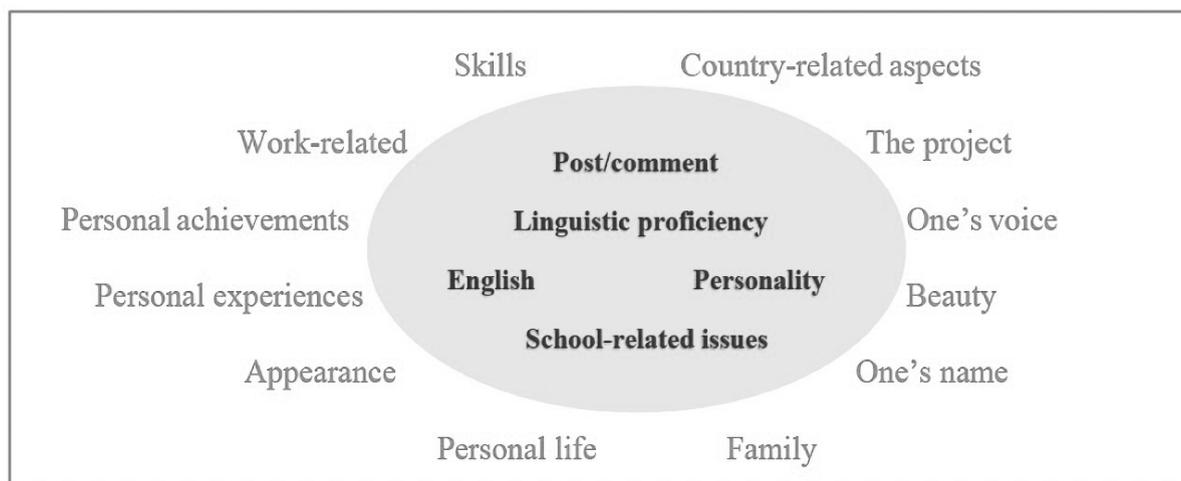


Figure 3. Core vs. Peripheral Topics for Three SAs.

Sequential Organisation of the Three SAs

Relative to our third research question, we will tackle the three SAs' sequential organisation at two axes: vertical and horizontal. By the vertical sequential organisation, we mean where in the post a SA may occur; four positions are identified: the subject space, opening, body, and the closing of the message. Meanwhile, at the horizontal level, we will examine what other actions each of the SAs can co-occur with (e.g., greetings, thanks, requests). Vertically, as can be seen from Figure 4, the three SAs can be found virtually in all the positions mentioned.

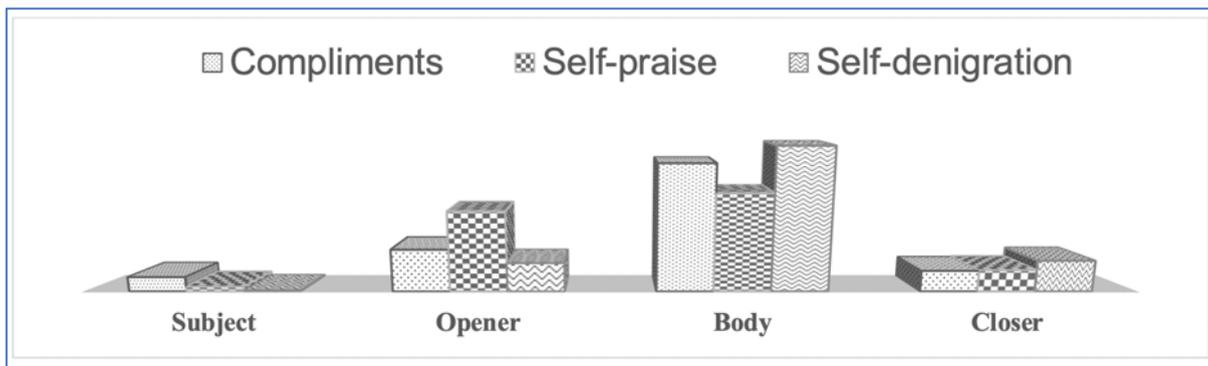


Figure 4. Sequential Organisation of Three SAs (Vertical)

Starting with compliments, they were used as conversation openers (or in near opening position), closers (or in near closing position), and attention grabbers; thus, they may be considered as an essential ‘metalanguage’ in TMC. This is in line with the findings of Hoffmann (2013) and Yusof and Hoon (2014) (on Blog comments and Twitter, respectively) suggesting that compliments can be attention-getters and conversation starters, but also, as revealed by our data, a good solution for conversation closing as well. Very often, they appear in the body of the message, intertwined into the participants’ narratives, and combined with other SAs (Example 11/19). Positioning the compliment in the subject of the message is meant as attention-getter, but also as a means for strengthening addressivity (see the discussion on addressivity in, e.g., Cirillo, 2012; Dayter, 2018), which is likely to encourage the addressee to find out what is included in the body and, hopefully, replying to it (Example 9).

As for self-praise, it is recurrent in the body of the message and as an opener (Example 10) and a closer to a lesser degree, while hardly ever in the subject space. Like compliments, self-praise is also reported to be encountered in thread titles in the literature (Rudolf von Rohr & Locher, 2020). As far as self-denigration is concerned, it follows almost a similar pattern as those of compliments and self-praise. That is, it is expected mainly in the body of the message (Example 11) and in (near) opening position, sometimes in (near) closing position (Example 12), but very rarely in the subject space. The following examples, which represent the three SAs, display the four positions:

Example 9 (Compliment in the subject position)

 Amira (ALG-F) to Dewi (INA-F)
Political lady??! (1323)
 167 words 2019/11/17 8:08:58

 Hi! My friend Dewi (...)

Example 10 (Self-praise as opener)

 Fadila (INA-F) to Farah (INA-F)
 To my friend who is always sleepy (1531)
 111 words 2019/11/21 20:38:58

 Hai Assalamualaikum Farhah _____ my friend who always sleepy in the class like me, **I’m Lala the most cute girl in the world hahahaha.**

Example 11 (Compliment + self-denigration in the body of the message)

 From Shuya (JPN-M) to Anzalna (INA-F)
 Leaning and working (137)
 159 words 2019/10/09 12:53:48

(...) At first, **I think you are so strong woman because you always beat your difficult. If I were you, I could not bear the life, or I would give up learning or working.**

Example 12 (Self-denigration as closer)

 From Nessrine (ALG-F) to Bruno (BRA-M)
 More about myself and my college (290)
 356 words 2019/10/12 12:35:30

If you find something ambiguous please tell me and I will be glad to make it clear for you. I hope you will enjoy reading my message.

See you Bruno,
 Nessrine

At the horizontal level, Figure 5 displays the sequential organisation of the three SAs, which appeared often as intertwined with the participants’ narratives. It is also noted that each of them could combine with other ones – disregarding the position (opening, body, or closing).



Figure 5. Sequential Organisation of Three SAs (Horizontal).

When they appear in the narratives, participants use the compliments to comment on a point from others’ posts and praise it (Example 13). We call this type *commentary compliments*, as they interrupt the main idea of the message. Similarly, Rudolf von Rohr and Locher (2020) revealed that compliments are intertwined with the assessment move in replies to problem letters by therapists. When positioned in the (near) closing position, they can be meant, in line with Yusof and Hoon (2014), to replace the speech act of thanking, greeting or leave-taking; in our case, compliments are likely to enforce these acts more than replace them (Example 14). Moreover, compliments are also expected as responses to others’ compliments/self-denigration/complaints as well as to mitigate presumably delicate situations (cf. Pano Alamán, 2020; Yusof & Hoon, 2014) like when

requesting, apologising, and advising/recommending. This trend is in tune with research on compliments in FTF contexts, suggesting that compliments can be used as replies to prior compliments and self-denigration (e.g., Burch, 2017; Pomerantz, 1978; Speer, 2019), as well as manipulatively in case where information about the assessable is sought (e.g., Jaworski, 1995).

In fact, in our data, even when requests are used adjacent to compliments, it does not always mean that these compliments are intended as mitigative. The requests themselves can play a rapport-enhancing role, especially when they are addressed to a foreigner (e.g., requesting someone to teach you a certain skill like cooking or dancing, Example 16). That is, it can be used to show interest in what the other has written about and convey the praise worthiness (e.g., cooking, dancing, playing music). Compliments tended to also aggravate face-enhancing acts like greeting, thanking, wishing, and congratulating (cf. Pano Alamán, 2020). As for the use of compliments with self-denigration and self-praise, we would argue, this communicative practice is likely to generate what we call a *mutual effect*. It means, when Ibunkers compliment the other and dispraise self, they aggravate the illocutionary force of the compliment and simultaneously mitigate the self-denigration, hoping that the compliment would generate another compliment and the self-denigration would generate a disagreement from the part of the addressee. As for complimenting with self-praise, the user mitigates the self-praise and reveals that *I compliment you and I compliment myself too, so the score is equal*. In tune with research in FTF contexts, compliments can also be deployed as replies to prior compliments and self-denigration (e.g., Burch, 2017; Pomerantz, 1978; Speer, 2019), as well as manipulatively in case where requests (cf. e.g., Jaworski, 1995), reassurance, or correction are sought.

Turning to self-praise, it was encountered in the participants' narratives as a commentary – like in compliments. In this regard, Dayter (2018) concluded that “personal narrative provides an ideal setting for impression management, and the speaker frequently engages in positive self-presentation with elaborate detailing of his[/her] laudable attributes,” but also his/her reprehensible ones as well (as we will see with self-denigration). Outside this position, self-praise was co-present with greetings (Example 15), often in the opening of the message. Elsewhere, it could appear adjacent to self-denigration (Example 17), thanks, compliments (co-occurrence of self-praise with compliments has already been discussed above; see Example 14), and rarely with requests. Unlike previous studies (Dayter, 2014, p. 98; Matley, 2018), self-praise here co-occurred with greetings, compliments, self-denigration, and thanks as “compensatory act[s]” rather than with apologies. As for the co-presence of self-praise with self-denigration, this company is noticeable in self-praise literature, where the latter is taken as a mitigating device for the former (e.g., Dayter, 2014, 2018; Matley, 2018). It constructs what we would call *contradictory discourse*. This is in line with “double discourse,” discussed in Matley (2018, p. 8) and illustrated in Ren and Guo (2020, p. 184), where a positive self-presentation (via self-praise) is performed and then conceded (via self-denigration). We argue that the effect generated here by the producer is congruent to humblebragging: mitigated self-praise via, for example, complaints (e.g., Dayter, 2018; Luo & Hancock, 2020; Matley, 2018).

As for self-denigration, it was – like the other two SAs – encountered in the participant's narratives as a meta-comment on one's text or on a certain point raised in the recipient's previous message. (The co-presence of self-denigration with both compliments and self-praise has already been tackled above). As for self-denigration and apologies, it should be born in mind that the former is sometimes realised by apologies (e.g., “I'm sorry if there are words that are less pleasing and if there are errors in typing sentences, please forgive,” by Dita-INA). Moreover, self-denigration could other times appear adjacent to thanks, requests (Example 16), greetings, wishes,

advice/recommendations, and rarely in replies to other SAs (compliment, self-denigration). The following are representative examples to the three SAs:

Example 13 (Commentary compliment in the body of the message)

Sachi (JPN-F) to Messaouda (ALG-F)
Our traditional clothing Yukata (1347)
240 words 2019/11/17 21:10:33

(...) **Naili** [Algerian tradition outfit] **looks really beautiful and the accessories Skhab and Jbin go well with Naili.** I think the accessories are expensive **but it makes every girl shine and feel happy, so it's worth much.** Every girl in your region must have the best memories of their bride.

Example 14 (Compliment with self-praise)

Chia (TWN-F) to Devina (INA-F)
reply (451)
101 words 2019/10/15 21:32:38

Hello Devina ____, how are you?

According to your reply, your friends said that you were attractive, kind, and not proud, so I believe you are must a easy-going girl! I am glad to see that you finally made good friends. Although we are the same people who are shy and not sociable, however, it is not a bad thing. After others know us, they will be surprised as a result of our personalities. It is a little interesting, right?

Example 15 (Self-praise with greeting)

Vira (INA-F) to Nina (INA-F)
to sableng friend (360)
112 words 2019/10/14 23:56:01

halooooo nina i'm vira the cute and beautiful friend. do you know i actually 15 years old. but i not arrogant so i'm admit i'm 18 years old, and i will married in the next year and you must know MY BIRTHDAY IS PRESENTLY. i will waiting for your surprice wkwk.

Example 16 (Self-denigration with a request)

Shuya (JPN-M) to Maggie (TWN-F)
I love Taiwan (644)
151 words 2019/10/18 15:56:44

I am very happy to read your posting because I like dance too. However, **I can't dance well, so I hope you will teach me dance someday.**

Example 17 (Self-denigration with self-praise)

From Chia (TWN-F) to All participants

I am so shy that I am not a outgoing person, so I can't fit in new surroundings quickly. But I am good at listening and like to help others. If someone would like to chat with me, I will be concentrated.

To conclude this section, we reiterate that the positioning of the three SAs can be approached from two angles (vertical and horizontal), as depicted in Figure 6.

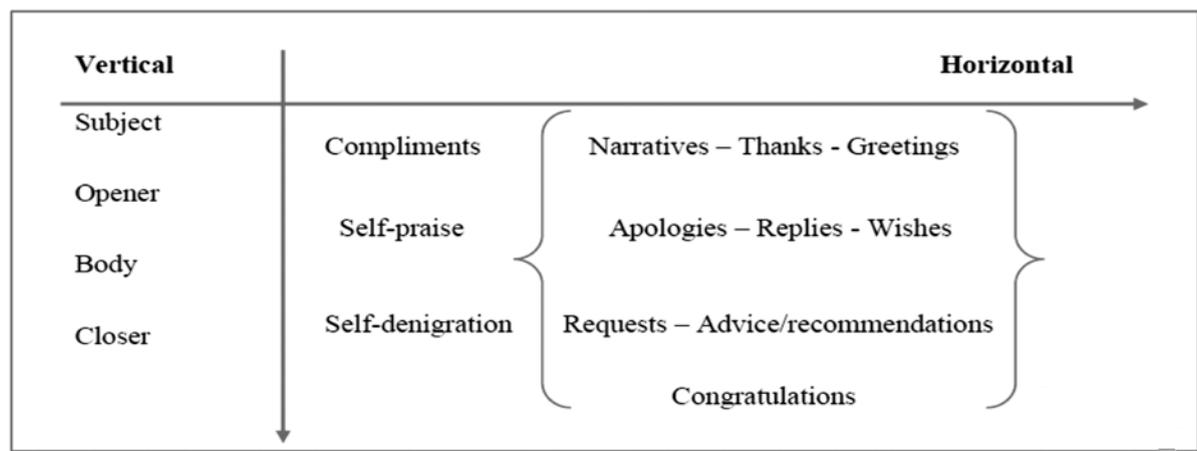


Figure 6. Vertical vs. Horizontal Sequential Organisation of Three SAs.

Interpersonal Functions of the Three SAs: Focus on rapport/comity

In relation to our fourth research question, initiating and sustaining communication was an essential requirement in the Ibunka project, where the participants were encouraged to ‘fish’ for comments so as to increase their ‘inbound message’ score. In this context, the three SAs could be the ideal means to achieve this interpersonal requirement. Starting with compliments, they were used with face-enhancing acts for the other (e.g., thanks, wishes, greetings, self-denigration) and as mitigating devices to the face-threatening ones (e.g., requests, apologies, replies to complaints/self-denigration). When they co-occurred with compliments, requests contributed in enhancing comity, as they were meant to signal interest in the other’s content rather than a *bona fide* asking-for-favour (especially when addressed to a foreigner). Moreover, the rapport building potential of compliments was clearly manifested in the trend that giving and receiving compliments was sustained throughout the project phases. To have an illustration, in Example 18, Milad complimented Fuji’s previous message and her hard work, showing admiration of her personality as a person who chose to work hard rather than complain about the situation. Milad’s compliment was intertwined with prayers and wishes of success. On her part, Fiji received this message positively (Example 2018 in the corpus). In this context, see also other examples that feature compliments: 3, 4, 9, 11, 13, and 14.

Example 18

 Milad (ALG-F) to Fuji (INA-F)
 Dear Fuji (286)
 243 words 2019/10/12 8:42:57

I really like what you have written. I really appreciate your efforts and what you are trying

to do in your life because not all people work hard to get what they want, most of them complain about the lack of some requirements. I hope that you never give up, and work hard to get what you wish, and make your dreams come true, and to become a famous business women. I wish that you will make your parents proud because they have a girl like you.

While the rapport building potential of compliments is indubitable, the other two SAs should not be undermined as rapport building strategies on equal terms. Indeed, self-disclosure, via self-praise/denigration, was influential to social relations, in our context, as it could be taken as an invitation to the other to get closer and discover more about one's private life. In Example 19, Angela praised herself as an easy-going person who liked to make friends, try delicacies, cook food, and travel around the world. She also liked her English classes and was so enthusiastic to learn more. She presented herself as a self-satisfied person despite the tiring life at the new school. This was not received negatively by the other participants; on the contrary, her self-promotion was welcomed, interpreted as motivational rather than boastful, and generated a compliment and admiration, as can be read in the reply from Okumura (Example 20). Okumura complimented Angela on her motivation to learn English and expressed admiration ("I really respect you very much") and set Angela as a role model for him; he also aligned with her hobbies, expressing a like-mindedness on issues of cooking and traveling around the world (see Dayter, 2018, p. 187, on "opinion conformity" as a strategy for self-promotion). For the one thing he seemed reluctant to align with Angela about (i.e., trying delicacies), he turned his misalignment into a need to get more information about them rather than an assertive disagreement ("Are they really good?"). In this context, see also the above examples on self-praise, namely 5, 6, 10, 14, 15, and 17.

Example 19

Angela (TWN-F) to All participants
Self-introduction & School Life (635)
184 words 2019/10/18 11:45:01

Hello everyone, I am Angela (...) **I'm an easygoing person. I love to chat with people around me to share interesting things in my life. I also love to try delicacies and cook all kinds of food.** If I have some chances, I would like to travel around the world. (...)

(...) I start my new school life this semester (...) The teachers teach well and the students are enthusiastic. (...) **I can learn many useful skills to make my teaching more interesting. (...) Although my new school life is tiring and busy, I am satisfied with everything that I encountered in my life.**

Example 20

From Okumura (JPN-M) to Angela (TWN-F)
I respect you (970)
152 words 2019/11/06 13:37:57

I really respect you very much, because I don't like speaking English, studying in college, and my school life. **I think that you are good since you enjoy your life. I want to do like you (...)** I often cook foods so I sympathize you but I can't sympathize to try delicacies. **Are they really good? If I have chances to have delicacies, I will eat them. And I like travel, too.**

As for self-denigration, it could be used to fulfil many interpersonal functions, of which showing respect to the other is a prototype (Zhou and Kádár, 2020). We see that in Example 21, the self-denigration produced by Chia was about something related to her country, the food that is perceived as disgusting by the foreigners. She presented this with a sense of humour (“If they don’t like, I can help to finish it, it’s a good idea, haha!”). Among the replies Chia received, the one from Kheira is worth considering (Example 22). Though from her cultural/religious perspective, some foods mentioned by Chia cannot be eaten by Muslims (e.g., pig’s blood cake), but she did not hesitate to compliment the delicious Taiwanese food and express her willingness to try some – or all of them – if she ever had the chance to visit Taiwan. It is further noted that when praising the food, Kheira avoided mentioning the types that might be taken as disgusting by the foreigners and sufficed with mentioning pancakes only. This speaks eloquently of the empathy and the eagerness to build rapport and maintain it among the project’s participants – whether they are from different or one same country. These examples are also representative of this trend in using self-denigration: 1, 2, 7, 8, 11, 12, 16, and 17.

Example 21

_____ ***** _____
Chia (TWN-F) to All participants
Taiwanese food (1209)
310 words 2019/11/15 2:52:40
_____ ***** _____

However, some snacks are voted the most disgusting foods for foreigners like stinky tofu, pig’s blood cake, and century eggs. But in many Taiwanese’s eyes, they are mouth-watering, too. For me, I love pig’s blood cake. Although its name made a lot of foreigners scared, I must recommend my foreign friends to eat it. If they don’t like, I can help to finish it, it’s a good idea, haha!

Example 22

_____ ***** _____
From Kheira (ALG-F) to Chia (TWN-F)
To Chia _____ (1211)
187 words 2019/11/15 6:05:49
_____ ***** _____

(...) I want to say thank you for your posting which is about Taiwan’s food and also for sharing **such great information that fascinated me in deed. So, I really like your countries food and especially the night markets that serve a very delicious dishes as you have mentioned for example pancakes and a lot of other food that you have mentioned before. I want to try one of them if God wills or maybe I will try everyone of them. I mean “All”. finally, if I have a chance to travel anywhere. I will choose Taiwan thanks to it’s delicious and fascinating food. Not only food, but also because it has a beautiful nature.**

Discussion

Summary of findings

This study examines the production of three SAs: compliments, self-praise, and self-denigration, used among NNEUs as part of their participation in a cross-cultural exchange project (Ibunka 2019). The data of the study consist of all the messages/comments produced by the participants (most of them are learners of English) from six countries (Algeria, Brazil, Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan, and the

Netherlands). These SAs were analysed in terms of their distribution, topics, sequential organisation, and rapport-building potential.

The findings show that compliments are by far more prevalent than self-praise and self-denigration, while the other two SAs are close in frequency. Regarding the topics of the three SAs, the post/comment/story can be a topic of complimenting and self-denigration rather than a topic of self-praise, given that the participants adopted a modest attitude on their writing/English. In a similar vein, linguistic proficiency is likely to be a topic of self-denigration (and sometimes of other-compliment) rather than a topic of self-praise. Moreover, appearance/beauty is unlikely to be a topic of complimenting as it is not accessible to the project participants (only few of them uploaded their profile picture or described themselves in details), but it can be a topic for self-praise. As for the skills category, it is a topic of self-denigration and, less frequently, self-praise rather than a topic of complimenting. Given the themes of the first and second phases of the project, school-related issues, personality/character, and country-related aspects are also prevalent topics in the expression of compliments, self-praise, and self-denigration. The first two are likely to be topics of self-praise/denigration rather than topics of compliments. Meanwhile, the third is among the recurrent topics for other-compliment rather than for self-praise/denigration. As for appearance, which is reported to be a dominant topic of complimenting in previous research especially among female interlocutors, it is neither accessible to the Ibunkers nor is it relevant here (except for self-praise sometimes).

As for the sequential organisation of the studied SAs, we approach this aspect from two dimensions (vertical and horizontal). Vertically, the three SAs can appear virtually in the four positions (subject space, opening, body, and closing). Horizontally, the three SAs are intertwined into the participants' narratives and can occur as replies to other SAs (e.g., complaints, compliments, self-denigration). We would argue that the Ibunkers tend to integrate these SAs into their narrative as, in Speer's (2019) words, "meta-comments" on their/other "current [or previous] talk [text] or actions." Both compliments and self-praise are likely to occur as openers rather than closers, while "self-deprecatory metacommentary" (Speer, 2019, p. 806) are almost equally employed as openers and closers. But compliments are more frequent as subject to the message than the other two SAs. Moreover, the three are likely to occur adjacent to each as duo, but rarely as trio, and co-occur with other SAs too. We come then across patterns like compliments with requests/self-denigration, self-praise with greetings/compliments/self-denigration, and self-denigration with apologies/thanks. It is thus concluded that when the three SAs are used in this online setting, they do not only follow the same sequential organisation but also address the same topics; they are employed as if they are one and the same SA. Turning to the interpersonal effect of the three SAs, they appear to have an excellent potential as a comity/rapport building strategy in the online community examined, which allow the NNEUs involved to initiate and sustain communication, well beyond their assumed linguistic deficiency.

Limitations

It is important to explicitly reckon that discussing our findings in light of the previous research on the three SAs in social media mainly necessitates the acknowledgement of some limitations. First, comparability between studies is not always an easy task. That is, studies differ in the corpus/medium studied as well as the categorisation of strategies (read the discussion in Placencia & Lower, 2017, p. 9/16). Second, Ibunka's WBB may not be considered as a social networking site in the strict sense, like Facebook and Instagram (read the discussion in Placencia & Lower, 2017, [1]). However, the Ibunkers use the same medium (PC, smartphone, Tablet) and they are under – to a large extent – the same conditions and constraints (e.g., communicating with people from all over the world, using media-specific resources like emoticons), while noting that the social networking

sites are richer than the WBB in terms of multimodality (e.g., the WBB does not provide a ‘like’ option) and they are open to the general public unlike the Ibunka’s platform. In fact, our study context resembles virtual environments, where users interact for learning purposes (cf. e.g., Cirillo, 2012, who analysed data from Second Life). On another point, we should admit that the approach adopted in our study is predominantly an etic one, which should have been enriched had we sought retrospective data on the motives behind the use and the combination of the three SAs by the project participants.

Interpretations

Starting with the frequency of the three SAs, the prevalence of compliments may be attributed to the fact that communication within the Ibunka project is among peers (i.e., learners of English); such mediated encounters are shown to be more open to social actions like compliments and self-praise as compared to communication among professionals: therapists (Rudolf von Rohr & Locher, 2020) and politicians (Danziger & Kampf, 2020). Another explanation could be the gender of the participants; female participants outnumber the male ones from the six nationalities. Previous research showed that female individuals tend to receive and give more compliments than their male counterparts, both in FTF encounters (e.g., Rees-Miller, 2011; Wolfson, 1983) and in TMC (e.g., Placencia & Lower, 2013, 2017; Yusof & Hoon, 2014). Nonetheless, like in any other social networking site, for example, Instagram (Matley, 2018), WhatsApp (Dayter, 2018), LinkedIn (Tobback, 2019), and Chinese Weibo (Ren & Guo, 2020), the Ibunkers are inclined to positive self-disclosure (via self-praise). They invested in self-praise as a practice aiming for in-group creation and solidarity (Rudolf von Rohr & Locher, 2020). In a similar vein, it appears that self-denigration is an aspect of the medium that can be deployed for both interpersonal and discourse functions (Kádár & Zhou, 2020). In fact, self-praise and self-deprecation are often intertwined or appear in proximity to each other. In this regard, Schlenker and Leary (cited in Matley, 2018, p. 4/8) suggest that a positive self-presentation online requires a tactful display of “self-enhancement [via self-praise], accuracy, and humility [via self-denigration]”, so as to negotiate “an appropriate level of self-praise online.” The presence of these two SAs reflects the interactants’ concern about two conflicting needs: modesty and positive self-presentation.

On the issue of topics, some of the topics are considered core (e.g., personality, post/comment, English/linguistic proficiency) and others are peripheral ones (e.g., appearance, family, the project) in the digital CofP studied. It is our contention that this distinction can be useful to interpret findings, for example on topics of compliments in online contexts, from other studies too (e.g., Baczkowska, 2020; Pano Alamán, 2020; Rudolf von Rohr & Locher, 2020). To illustrate, interactants on fitness/life-style/dieting issues are likely to address appearance and achievement (e.g., to build a fit body) more than other topics (Baczkowska, 2020), while a community of smoking quitters tends to prioritise achievement (e.g., ability to stay smoking-free for two weeks) (Rudolf von Rohr & Locher, 2020).

As important topics for the three SAs during Ibunka2019 project, linguistic and English language proficiency deserve to stop at them here for further discussion. In tune with Aston (1993), we would argue that the Ibunkers’ deployment of compliments (to praise others’ good English) and self-denigration (on one’s poor English, Example 1/7) can be said to act as strategies for negotiating common attitudes on a common concern, in the absence of a shared culture to lay back on. Participants of this CofP are in their early stage of communicating with NNEUs; as such, it may not be surprising that this “language-focused” group still assumes an English as a foreign language (EFL) learner identity and thus admits openly their lack of proficiency (Ehrenreich, 2017). Indeed, taking linguistic proficiency as a topic for the three SAs stands to display “shared beliefs” and “similar speaker identifications” that are likely to contribute in the shaping of “a shared sense of

membership” (Ehrenreich, 2017, p. 48; see also Rudolf von Rohr & Locher, 2020). Similarly, admitting one’s incompetence by NNEUs (e.g., English, foreign languages, sports, playing musical instruments, dancing, understanding certain subjects like maths) can be regarded along the same lines. In this context, Aston (1993, p. 241) suggested that “[i]ncompetence may also give grounds for sharing attitudes supportively vis-à-vis the discourse itself, by providing for the appreciable nature of one or other participant’s contributions” (e.g., Example 8), and this is not done without redressing the balance. This may be supported by the fact that self-denigration is often irony-coated (see Dayter, 2018) (accompanied by transcribed laughter (Example 2/21)/emojis (Example 8), or presented as a funny fact, Example 7). (See Ren & Guo (2020) and Kádár & Zhou (2020) on the association between humour and self-praise/self-denigration respectively). In a similar vein, self-denigration relative to aspects of one’s country (e.g., food in Example 21) is in line with distancing oneself from his/her country’s stereotypes, which is reported to act as a main comity-building strategy in nonnative discourse (Aston, 1993).

In tune with studies like Placencia and Lower (2013) and Eslami et al. (2019) – who examined compliments in Facebook – we note that communication under the Ibunka conditions is not only guided by transactional purposes, where the participants have to convey information about their school system, university, country, culture, etc. Participants have to also engage in a great deal of relational and face work. Indeed, the utilization of these SAs is one of the consequential strategies in establishing phatic communication. Quite obvious compliments are prototype of those SAs that are very crucial in establishing rapport and enhancing it (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) among interactants, and creating in-group membership and solidarity (Baczkowska, 2020; Rudolf von Rohr & Locher, 2020). They are exemplary of those strategies that convey positive politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Compliments tend to be employed to sustain communication and strength relationships (Placencia & Lower, 2013) as well as express admiration and establish solidarity (Baczkowska, 2020; Yusof & Hoon, 2014) in TMC. In a similar vein, self-praise when meant as positive self-disclosure (rather than bragging) can contribute to the solidarity-building efforts, especially among “communities with special interests” (Dayter, 2014, p. 94) like the Ibunkers. The latter deployed self-praise beyond its depiction as a face-threatening act and lack of modesty in FTF communication (Speer, 2012). Self-promotion via self-praise is a tactful means for balancing prestige and modesty and thus for impression management as it contributes in constructing an image of someone who is competent and likeable (Luo & Hancock, 2020); the self-praise initiator may then be perceived as a worth communicating with individual. Moreover, for this language-focused CofP, praising oneself on achievement may not be taken as an attempt to elevate oneself upon the others, but rather perceived as a case of *if I can do it, so you can too*. This is in agreement with the findings on self-praise used as a motivational strategy rather than a bragging (Rudolf von Rohr and Locher, 2020), a practice which signals “solidarity by inclusivity” (Dayter, cited in Rudolf von Rohr & Locher, 2020, p. 201). The Ibunkers are partners in the journey to speak/write English proficiently, survive the university/college life, get good grades to pass, etc. In line with Zhou and Kádár (2020), showing respect to others is considered conventional to self-denigration; besides, it can be a discourse strategy for seeking solidarity and comfort from one’s interlocutor. For the authors, the rapport enhancing (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) potential of this action lies in its very nature: speakers put themselves in a position inferior to that of their interlocutors, which renders them into support-deserving individuals. This support can be conveyed by compliments (see “hooking” for compliments in Kádár & Zhou, 2020) or disagreements (cf. eg., Golato, 2005). Moreover, self-denigration can also be used to create a humorous effect (e.g., on one’s skills/country, see Example 8/21) (Kádár and Zhou, 2020; Walkinshaw et al., 2019) and in complaining (Kádár and Zhou, 2020) (e.g., about a school-related issue) .

Suggestions for Future Research

Further research should widen our understanding on the three SAs as utilized in TMC and the interrelation among them. Particularly, self-denigration deserves much attention by the researchers. Moreover, the core-periphery and vertical-horizontal innovative dichotomies presented in this research need further data-driven support in the future.

Pedagogical Implications

Congruent with our findings, we strongly encourage English language teachers to open their eyes to the affordances of virtual environments and the ELF perspective as instructional means. Indulging in how NNEUs manage to establish rapport – despite their observed deviations from NEUs’ norms – is meant to approach communication in Ibunka2019, in Faerch & Kasper’s (1989, p. 246) words, from a “difference” rather than a “deficit hypothesis.” This is in tune with the current research on pragmatic competence in ELF and ELF-informed pedagogy (see, e.g., Sifakis & Tsantila, 2018; Tajeddin & Alemi, 2020; Walkinshaw, 2020), which seeks to counterbalance the native-speaker as the one and only benchmark against which learners of English are instructed and assessed. A research/pedagogical strand that attempts to enable EFL learners and free them from the native speaker complex. Our findings are thus of a particular interest to English language teachers. Particularly, unravelling how the three SAs could be used for discourse (metacomments, openers, closers) and relational purposes (to build rapport) as well as exploring the users’ assumed identity while participating in communication using English (e.g., being apologetic about their linguistic performance) can be but a real eye-opener for English language teachers. In addition, data and findings from this study can be useful in designing awareness-raising activities on the intricate patterns of communication among NNEUs.

Conclusions

The present study enjoys many merits. First, it focuses the three SAs at once, unlike most of the previous studies that have dealt with them individually. Second, it introduces two innovative dichotomies (core-periphery and vertical-horizontal) that are, arguably, useful for studying the topics and sequential organisation, respectively, of the three SAs in future research. Third, our study context and findings lay support to the current research on ELF and ELF-informed pedagogy which seeks to enable EFL learners to become confident users and engage in authentic communication (with both native and nonnative users).

Notes

[1] On the fuzzy boundary between ‘compliment’ and ‘praise’, one can read the discussion in the introductory chapter in Placencia and Eslami (2020). [[back](#)]

[2] In studies dealing with social media, the term Technology-mediated Communication (TMC) can be more accurate than Computer-mediated Communication (CMC), given that the use of devices like smartphones and tablets is by far more prevalent than computers nowadays (Placencia & Eslami, 2020). In this study, we favour the use of TMC. [[back](#)]

[3] Rudolf von Rohr and Locher (2020) stands as an exception in this regard, as they studied both compliments and self-praise and the interaction between the two. [[back](#)]

[4] ‘Internet’ + ‘citizen’ (citizen of the net): someone who is a frequent user of the internet (Wikipedia). [[back](#)]

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