

Oskorblimenty (Оскорблimentы):
Linguistic Patterns in Backhanded Compliments

WLL 499: Capstone Project

Aliya Daulet

Capstone Adviser: Eva-Marie Dubuisson

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A. INTRODUCTION

A1. BACKGROUND

The distinction between genuine positive expression and negativity in communication is often blurred. This is because individuals, as members of society, strive to cultivate and uphold a particular public image. Brown and Levinson (1987) refer to this public image as "face." Societal norms encourage people to maintain a favorable public persona. Politeness is one of the key attributes people aim to embody in their public image. To appear polite—and to avoid being seen as impolite—individuals often resort to a strategic approach to word choice and phrasing. The use of indirect language and off-record communication, as noted by Brown and Levinson (1987), is one of such strategic politeness strategies. In social discourse, as a result, there is frequently a mismatch between what people intend to say, what they actually say, and how others perceive their words. Consequently, hearers are increasingly prompted to question the meanings conveyed by the words they encounter in discourse.

My capstone project seeks to investigate the understudied phenomenon of backhanded compliments, — a complex interplay of words that seemingly praise all the while subtly conveying some underlying negative meaning. People in the Russian-speaking community gave this phenomenon the name *оскорблiment* [*oskorbliment*], which is a blend of Russian words *оскорбление* (“insult”) and *комплимент* (“compliment”). Such compliments are different from regular compliments in the sense that when people receive backhanded compliments, they can not easily and instantly read them as straightforward compliments with purely positive meaning in them, as they do with traditional compliments. Holmes (1986) defines: “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’ which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer” (p. 485). The expression

“You look good,” for example, neatly matches the definition of a compliment: the speaker gives credit to the hearer for their good appearance, and appearance is commonly positively valued in any society. Moreover, the speaker’s positive intention is obvious and the recipient’s liking towards the flatterer is increased (Sezer, 2019). Now, if the speaker adds only a couple of words to this expression and says: “You look good for a brown girl,” the expression will get more complex than a regular compliment and the hearer will possibly have a different reaction. This kind of compliment has some dual essence to it, as you can find not only positive commentary in it but also negative one. Through the example above “You look good for a brown girl,” the hearer is positively complimented for their appearance, for “looking good.” However, what we also can find in this comment is “for a brown girl,” which is a group-qualified commentary (Garcia, 2006), negatively evaluating the group of “brown girls.” This example already deviates from the traditional definition of a compliment, as not only ‘good’ is mentioned. A less salient negative undertone can be seen in a backhanded compliment “You *actually* look very good,” where “the additional and technically unnecessary word “actually” conveys a kind of surprise or expectancy violation” (Sezer, 2019, p. 40). This kind of vague compliment triggers a chain of thoughts in the hearers, making them question the state of their appearance, intelligence, personality, or whatever they were “complimented” for. Such nuances distinctly differentiate backhanded compliments from traditional compliments, elevating them to a separate category within speech acts.

I propose that “oskorbliments” exhibit distinct linguistic markers that turn them from traditional compliments (“compliment”) to backhanded ones (“compliment + insult”). Contrary to Loor’s (2019) stance that implicit insults (which backhanded compliments are) often lack a fixed linguistic structure, are highly context-dependent and are challenging to categorize and analyze, I believe that there are several distinct patterns in the phrasing of

backhanded compliments and in reactions of hearers. Although I second the argument that backhanded compliments as implicit insults have unclear and double essence. Malyk (2014) introduces the concept of "cryptosemes" (from Greek *kruptos* "hidden" and *sêma* 'sign'), defining them as communication elements that superficially appear straightforward but have deeper, obscured meanings that can undermine the apparent intentions of the speaker. Cryptosemes, Malyk (2014) argues, serve as a polite discourse strategy (Goffman, 1967; Brown & Levinson, 1987) to manage social relations and avoid overt conflict.

A2. CONTRIBUTION

The objective of this research is to comprehensively examine the linguistic essence of backhanded compliments. I am aiming to find distinctive patterns in the linguistic phrasing of backhanded compliments, and patterns in the reactions of hearers, as well as to analyze the potential intentions of speakers in using backhanded compliments in discourse. Hopefully, this study will contribute to the existing research on the yet-understudied phenomenon of backhanded compliments and, particularly, their function in modern social discourse among the English-speaking community.

A3. MAIN ANALYTIC FOCUS

A3.1. FACE: FACE-THREATENING AND FACE-ENHANCING ACTS

To study linguistic phenomena surrounding backhanded compliments in social interactions, it is first crucial to address the broader theoretical framework of im/politeness in the study of which Brown and Levinson (1987) define a central to this framework term *face* as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself [/herself], consisting in two related aspects: negative face - the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction freedom of action, freedom from imposition; [and] positive face - the positive consistent image of personality claimed by interactants" (p. 311). The face is highly vulnerable. Depending on the behavioural and linguistic context, it can

be enhanced, maintained, threatened, and even lost (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Failure to maintain face leads to negative outcomes in the form of unpleasant emotions for at least one of the interactors' such as humiliation, embarrassment, or discomfort. Subsequently, it may also negatively affect the future of the relationship between the interlocutors. Thus, the social need to constantly work on maintaining the public image of self and the others around has become nearly intrinsic and universal for all.

A positive face denotes the inherent need for approval, recognition, and affirmation of one's self-image and one's wants. To exemplify it in the social context, positive face wants might be expressed in one's desire to be liked or admired by others. Giving compliments is one of the most straightforward and clearest strategies for a speaker to enhance their own and the other party's (hearer's) positive face. By saying "You are so smart!" to a person who studies hard and wants to be perceived as "smart," one can significantly enhance the person's positive face, all the while enhancing their own positive face as a kind and appreciative person. Whereas, threatening a person's positive face could be done through an act that would conflict with the interlocutor's wants and/or their own view of themselves. For example, by disagreeing with a person on certain topics, a speaker not only demonstrates that their wants and views are not shared, but also that the speaker might be underestimating the hearer's judgment, intelligence, etc. In Russian and Kazakh, addressing the elderly without second-person polite address forms *Bbi* and *Ci3* is also an example of a positive face-threatening act, as it denotes that a speaker does not care about the elders' want to be addressed with respect markers.

A negative face, in turn, encapsulates one's desire for independence, autonomy of their choices and actions, and freedom from imposition or intrusion (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Interactions that may potentially impinge upon the hearer's negative-face wants vary: from orders and requests that directly implore a hearer to perform/abstain from a future

action (e.g., "Please complete this task by the end of the day" or "Could you refrain from using your phone during the meeting?"), to suggestions, reminders, and advice where a speaker subtly hints what a hearer should do without explicitly commanding (e.g., "You might want to reconsider your approach") (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 313). Enhancement or maintenance of negative face can be performed through various linguistic politeness strategies, most of which have to do with going off-record (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 316), i.e. using indirect language. Circumlocution, for instance, would involve using roundabout ways to convey a message, providing the hearer with more space and freedom to interpret or respond (e.g., "Could we possibly explore other alternatives?" instead of a direct command). Similarly, hedging involves employing cautious language or qualifiers to mitigate the force of an utterance (e.g., "Perhaps it might be better to consider a different approach").

There also are more complex expressions that are both face-enhancing and face-threatening. One instance can be a positive framing of requests or instructions: "Participating in this training session will greatly contribute to your professional development." Here, the hearer might be restricted in their freedom of action and pressured to perform certain acts, which is a negative-face threatening act, but they are also being informed about positive aspects of the act which coincide with the hearer's personal wants to develop professionally. Another example could be the incorporation of gratitude or acknowledgement of the hearer's efforts. A speech act "Thank you for your hard work. When you have a moment, could you please review these documents?" simultaneously enhances one's positive face by appraising the efforts and diligence, and threatens the negative one by asking to do something.

Backhanded compliments also fall under this type of expressions that have a mix of face-enhancing and face-threatening elements to them. In the cases described above,

different types of faces (Brown & Levinson, 1987) are affected: positively framed requests (incorporating benefits for the hearer, gratitude, acknowledgement, etc.) enhance the positive face and threaten the negative face. All the while, in backhanded compliments, the face enhancement and threat are both directed at the hearer's positive face, the image that the hearer claims, wants, values, and wants to pertain. Through a backhanded compliment "You look good for your size" one praises the hearer's overall appearance and thus enhances their positive face, i.e. accords with the hearer's wants to be perceived as good-looking, and at the same time also insults and negatively evaluates the hearer's appearance and namely their size (which might be, for example, "too big" or "too small") and thus threatens their positive face.

A3.2. FUZZINESS

Backhanded compliments, thanks to their vague, cryptosemic essence, do work a shield, one of the mitigating mechanisms introduced by Caffi (1999, 2007), which is a mechanism that reduces one's self-ascription to their own words. Such a shield-like nature of the backhanded compliments reduces the precision of one's words, thus increasing the degree of politeness and decreasing the degree of imposition (Sezer, 2019). Due to their fuzziness (Lakoff, 1972), backhanded compliments leave a room for the speaker, when confronted with a negative response to their backhanded compliment, to protect themselves with a shield such as "I did not mean anything mean! I was just complimenting you!"

A4. LITERATURE REVIEW

A4.1. THEORY ON SPEECH ACTS AND IM/POLITENESS

Betty Birner's "Speech Acts" (2013) explores the theoretical landscape of all speech acts, their performative nature as locutionary acts, categorizing them into direct and indirect speech acts. She connects them to the notions of face and politeness. She begins by differentiating constatives from performatives, highlighting their illocutionary forces via

examples such as apologies and promises, which are intrinsically explicit in their performative function, e.g. as “I apologize” is a speech act “performing” verbally one’s feeling of guilt/apology. Further, she discusses the Performative Hypothesis suggesting the performative nature of all speech acts even without explicitly stated performative verbs (“I apologize”, “I swear”, etc.), since any utterance can be started with expressions such as “I tell you”, “I command you”, etc., as in “I tell you, I went there”, where a constative “I went there” becomes a performative. This, however, challenges truth conditions evaluation of utterances, as the part “I tell you” might be true, whereas “I went there” can be not true. She concludes that all speech acts can be deemed performative, as delivering certain intended messages is also a performance - a locutionary act. Birner also emphasizes felicity conditions, noting contextual and intentional requisites for successful speech acts, classified into misfire and abuse. The former means violation of felicity conditions of appropriateness, when the speech act “does not go through” (Birner, 2013, p. 185), as in the example the author gives: random pronouncing of two young students in class husband and wife. The latter is referred to a speech act that is perfectly appropriate, but insincere. An example can be saying sorry (when you indeed did something wrong) all the while you are not sorry at all. This insincerity can apply to backhanded compliments, as it might be that the positive part of such compliment might be not sincere at all, and uttered only to maintain a positive face. For example, one might say: “You look so nice with make up on,” while not really meaning to compliment the addressee, but rather to express the underlying idea that he/she looks “not so nice” without make up on. She also explains the distinctions among locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, detailing how an utterance's meaning, intention, and effect shape the act. Direct and indirect speech acts are dissected as well, revealing linguistic forms and intended meanings, exemplifying how a single utterance can be interpreted diversely.

Brown & Levinson (1987) also address the discourse on the face, politeness, and acknowledgement of positive and negative face tensions, aligned with communication strategies. This comprehensive understanding of speech acts serves my research on backhanded compliments by unravelling the layered messages within indirect speech acts, off-record strategies (indirect speech) and related face-enhancing, face-threatening strategies. Understanding these subtleties allows the identification of compliments verging into indirect territory, discerning nuanced meanings within backhanded compliments. "You speak so well for someone with no experience" does simultaneously enhance one's positive face by acknowledging speaking skills, all the while threatening it by calling the person inexperienced. This is done by employing an off-record redressive act, which does not directly and solely call the person inexperienced. This message is "hidden" by being positioned behind a layer of an on-record direct positive compliment.

A4.2. LOCUTIONARY ACTS: ILLOCUTION AND PERLOCUTION

It is important to note that the effect brought up by a speech act and the intended effect or meaning of this act might not always coincide. Birner (2013) defines two end components of locutionary (i.e. speech) acts: illocutionary force, which is the intended meaning put into the speech act by speakers, and perlocutionary effect, which is "an effect that the speech act has on the thoughts, feelings, or actions of the addressee or others" (p. 187). The components can be visualized as two ends of the very same speech act. which do not necessarily align (Figure 1).

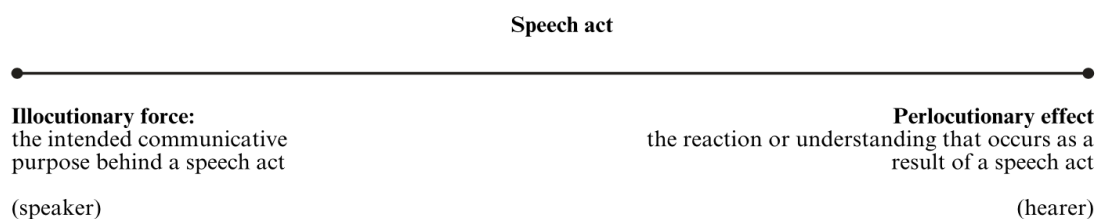


Figure 1

In my research, decomposing data entries into two “illocutionary force” and “perlocutionary effect” components enable me to perform a close qualitative analysis of each instance and to further identify sociolinguistic patterns. One highly expected challenge and restriction is that precise intentions behind backhanded compliments can only be perfectly known to the speakers themselves, and thus I will refer to the previous studies to analyze the illocutionary force behind backhanded compliments. The perlocutionary effect, on the other hand, can be examined through an analysis of reactions, among which confusion or offense are expected to be most popular.

A4.3. BUILDING UP ON EXISTING RESEARCH: BACKHANDED COMPLIMENTS AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS

Archer (2015) discusses linguistic expressions of slurs, insults, and backhanded compliments based on his analytical and theoretical review of Goffman (1967), Brown and Levinson (1987), Culpeper (2005, 2011) and on the exemplary cases from television show dialogues, historical speeches, and everyday discourse. He extends the understanding of how speakers use terms like slurs to show affection or inadvertently cause offence employing strategies like plausible deniability to subtly manage perceptions without being overtly impolite. Archer author also provides insights into strategies such as plausible deniability and differentiation of intentional offences - face-threatening is the primary goal of the speaker and is recognised by the hearer, and incidental offences - face-threatening is not the primary goal of the speaker but is recognised by both the speaker and the hearer. Archer's discussion of linguistic expressions like slurs, insults, and backhanded compliments explores how all these types of utterances operate within the spectrum of communication, from positive (compliments) to negative (insults) speech acts. Archer positions backhanded compliments in the middle of the positive-negative spectrum. Within

the category of backhanded compliments, another continuum might exist depending on the phrasing or context in which backhanded compliments were uttered.

The classification of linguistic behaviours offers insights into the mechanisms employed in backhanded compliments. It also explains why recipients often don't counter such remarks and why speakers seemingly evade consequences. Archer also addresses questions about why individuals use backhanded compliments and how these disguised remarks affect both the speaker and the recipient.

Malyk (2014) studies mixed messages in cryptosemes - (from Greek *kruptos* "hidden" and *sēma* 'sign') communication elements that superficially appear straightforward but have deeper, obscured meanings that can undermine the apparent intentions of the speaker, their tight connection with cultural norms and the neurocognitive complexities of self-expression. He examines the semiotic, social, and cognitive aspects of speakers' use of ambiguous and mixed linguistic forms in delivering 'hidden' meanings. The study uses experiments as the main method and gives participants three hypothetical conversation scenarios, each containing a cryptosemic compliment, that is, comments laden with contradictory meanings – positive superficially but with potentially negative implications. Respondents reacted to these scenarios as 'positive', 'negative', or 'mixed', followed by elaboration. Diverse interpretations and reactions were recorded. Furthermore, communication practices and concerns about unintentional offence were also studied. The study's qualitative approach aimed to unravel meaning-making processes enabling an understanding of sociocultural priorities, and discourse strategies, and discovering unconscious biases within subtle language patterns. It is also seen how power, rituals, and silence come into play in social interactions and affect the interpretation of meanings.

The study addresses how society links "thinness" to "beauty" and "fatness" to "ugliness," and how people "speak" it in their language. According to the author,

cryptosemic messages related to body image unveil a complex communication strategy deeply ingrained in societal perceptions. One such instance is the response to concerns about weight gain with "You look healthy and happy." Here, distress over weight-gain cites feelings of ugliness or unattractiveness associated with it, whereas "comforting" responses avoid directly addressing the issue of weight by redirecting attention to positive attributes like health and happiness. However, it fails to contradict the initial concern about weight and beauty, instead perpetuating rigid societal associations of thinness with attractiveness. The dichotomy between "fat" and "thin" in discussions certainly reveals a pertaining appearance prejudice. This societal bias toward slimness as a symbol of beauty and success, juxtaposed with the negativity associated with fatness, ingrains false consciousness. Consequently, individuals tend to accept cryptosemic compliments due to social conditioning and implicit attitudes. The author also claims that cryptosemic messages often emerge as automatic responses aiming to balance conflicting impulses: offering positive reinforcement while navigating societal beauty standards. Commercial advertising leverages cryptosemic strategies. Malyk exemplifies it through the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty, which manipulates the notion of "inner beauty" as a consolation for not fitting mainstream physical standards. Regarding the decoding of messages, Malyk highlights the human tendency to focus on the positive aspects of a message, often downplaying its negative intent coming from an innate mental inclination toward optimistic interpretations. As such, cryptosemes continue to aid the ideologies about beauty and the rise of fat stigma and inequality.

This study will be of extreme help to me in my research, as it provides a framework for understanding how cryptosemes/backhanded utterances reinforce social inequalities. Most importantly, the author's research topic aligns with my research topic. In my study, I was going to attempt to answer questions: what is the motivation or intrinsic, unconscious

reason behind people saying disguised insults; what patterns in reactions to such ambiguous cryptosemes there are; in discussing what topics such remarks take place most often, etc. And the author (either comprehensively or briefly) touches upon most, if not all, questions I was looking at. For instance, Malyk traced a pattern in recipients' responses to cryptosemic messages: most have to "double take" the message, and they have mixed reactions upon reflection (p. 91). This pattern is expected to be seen in my study as well, as online users, if not prosodically, do show signs of confusion in their use of ellipses, question marks, and emojis with confused, sad, complex expressions. The study also has a huge focus on the topic of beauty and body image, which are also expected to be a central part of my project.

A5. PREVIEW. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

RQ 1. Are there any linguistic patterns within backhanded compliments and/or within reactions in hearers to them?

The study hypothesizes that some backhanded compliments are very similar to each other in structure and there are clear linguistic patterns within the locutionary acts, i.e. the verbal formulation of backhanded compliments. Studies by Sezer (2019) and Garcia (2006) demonstrate that compliments formulated in a way comparing the addressee to a broader group of people elicit negative reactions and are rated as insults.

The study also expects that the reactions to or perlocutionary effects in hearers to backhanded compliments also show resemblance to each other. When the reaction to regular compliments is clearly positive most of the time and the reaction to negative comments or insults is clearly negative most of the time, the reaction to backhanded compliments is unclear. The recipients must have complex reactions to backhanded compliments as their linguistic essence is confusing, and it is unclear whether one was complimented or insulted.

RQ 2. Why do recipients of backhanded compliments refrain from retaliation, compared to the reactions to direct insults, and speakers often escape accountability for their backhanded remarks?

The disguised nature of backhanded compliments complicates confrontation. Recipients, by reacting defensively or calling out the disguised insult, risk being labeled as oversensitive or accused of misconstruing the speaker's intentions. Thus, it threatens their positive face. On top of that, compliments in general belong to negative face face-threatening acts, as they impose the hearer to positively react to a compliment - to express gratitude, to compliment back, and generally to accept the compliment (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Meanwhile, speakers (almost always) can defend themselves by asserting that their statement was genuinely intended as a compliment, with no underlying negative connotation, and there is nearly no way to prove otherwise. This dynamic allows speakers to evade accountability, leaving the hearer in a vulnerable position.

RQ 3. What are the prevalent topics of backhanded compliments?

By putting forward this question, I aim to identify any interesting patterns in topic choice among backhanded compliments found online that were shared by the English-speaking online community as part of their personal experience. It is expected that most of such compliments will be focused on external characteristics such as appearance, style, and weight as well as it is expected to see some number of compliments targeting one's intelligence and personality, but in a smaller amount.

B. METHOD

B1. SUBJECTS. DATA. SOURCES

The research involved online commentators as research subjects. I collected the data from comments posted under forums and threads on TikTok, Reddit, and X/Twitter where users were prompted to share the instances of backhanded compliments they ever received

or to share the most backhanded compliment they ever received (Figure 1). This approach enabled the collection of self-reported examples of backhanded compliments, with the act of people posting comments in these discussions directly suggesting that they recognized and acknowledged these compliments as backhanded at the time they were received. Furthermore, these self-reported examples often include additional explanatory data adjacent to the verbal expression itself, such as the recipient's reactions, which may be succinctly expressed in a few words or through prosodic use of symbols and emojis. This enriches the dataset with insights into the perlocutionary effects on the recipients.

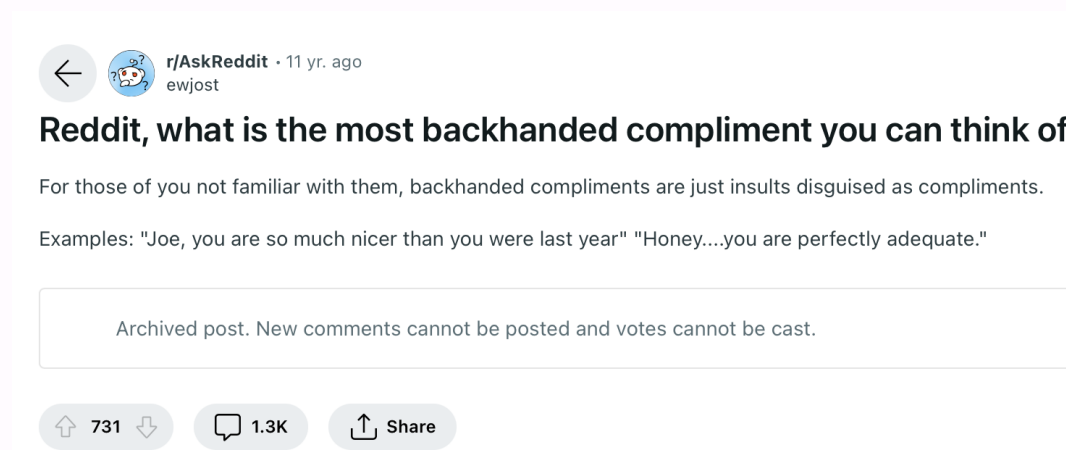


Figure 2

Subjects:	English-speaking online community
Data	Forum and video-forum replies under posts prompting people to share backhanded compliments they received (might be both online and offline experience)
Social Media	Reddit, X/Twitter
Data Extraction Time	November 2023-January 2024
Corpus	62 data entries

<p>Links to the source forums/video-forums</p>	<p>TikTok</p> <p>https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMMpEe4f9/</p> <p>https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMMpK4HQh/</p> <p>https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMMpoykpt/</p> <p>X/Twitter</p> <p>https://x.com/docatcdi/status/1722184692663754882?s=46</p> <p>Reddit</p> <p>https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/14wqcw/reddit_what_is_the_most_backhanded_compliment_you/</p>
<p>Link to the screenshots of comments</p>	<p>https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1OgVri2-byWQj7XISzwBIjiTqbcY20jkc?usp=share_link</p>
<p>Link to the corpus</p>	<p>https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1OgVri2-byWQj7XISzwBIjiTqbcY20jkc?usp=share_link</p>

Table 1

The online data collection method and these particular online social media were chosen for a broader representation of language use among the young English-speaking community as these platforms are most popular among young people (Auxier, 2021). 70% of TikTok users are aged 18-34; 44% of Reddit users are aged 18-29; 55,9% of X/Twitter users are aged 18-34 (Statista, 2024). Another beneficial point of using these social media as sources for data collection is the advanced functionality of the algorithms in these platforms, which bring out the most viewed and liked posts on the top of the search and most liked comments on the top of the comment sections. This fact facilitated the access to

the most popular and relevant responses. This is of a particular value since like count of the replies is equivalent to the number of people relating to one's experience of receiving a certain backhanded compliment and/or agreeing with their interpretation of the compliment as backhanded. Any comments that had humoristic undertone (created by the commenter themselves) where genuineness was at question were not included in the dataset. Thus, the research strategy involved a balanced approach, combining deliberate searching in forums, active engagement in social media comment sections, to gather a comprehensive dataset of backhanded compliments across diverse platforms.

B2. CORPUS AND DATA-ENCODING

In order to facilitate a structured analysis of the collected data, I created a comprehensive Excel spreadsheet (see Table 1 for the link) designed to code various elements associated with self-reported backhanded compliment instance that would be crucial for critical analysis. Moreover, the systematic aggregation of data is essential for further identification of recurring patterns in the cryptosemic linguistic expressions and reactions to them.

IDs of data entries were recorded for referencing specific data entries throughout the analysis and facilitating integrity. Next, the speech acts of backhanded compliments themselves were recorded, capturing the actual wording of the compliments. Coding of social networking site (among the three aforementioned) where the comment was posted might be of a help in future research to analyze the platform-specific dynamics of language use; all the while within this study, the distinction is not considered in the analysis and the coding for now is needed for the exact reference and information about the source. Coding the target semantic topics of the compliment is necessary for the quantitative analysis of the most wide-spread topics of backhanded compliments.

Target topic	Reference to	Example (ID)
appearance	general appearance	You look nice today (26)
appearance-weight	weight, size, fatness/thinness	You're a lot lighter than you look (56)
appearance-style	style, clothing	you're so brave! (1)
intelligence	academic intelligence, skills	You've done so much better than we thought you would (12)
race	skin color, ethnicity	you're pretty for a black girl (38)
personality	negative personality traits	youre actually nice in person
age	age	you look good, for your age

Table 2

The metrics of views, likes, likes to view ratio provide insights into the popularity and reception of the comment. Like count offers a measure of the relative approval and agreement from the community. Coding for reply count, positive reply count, and negative reply count also helps examine the community's reaction and the degree of agreement or disagreement with the comment. Date and file name codings are used to enable navigate through the data easily and to have screenshots with profile names and photos storage securely in a cloud with restricted access (see Table 1 for the link). Additional notes or contextual information code was included in case any elaboratory information is required

for better understanding of the context. The Full comment code is central for this study as it is representative of recipients' reactions, i.e. the perlocutionary effect caused by a respective backhanded compliment.

Upon the completion of the comprehensive coding of each data entry, specific codes proved instrumental and more meaningful in identifying patterns. The primary foundation for my analysis was formed by the data on the speech acts ("backhanded compliment" code), their semantic target topics ("target" code), and the entire contents of the comments ("full comment" code). I examined linguistic structures within the "backhanded compliments" column to identify recurring linguistic patterns in their phrasing: certain linguistic markers and qualifiers. The "full comment" column aided in finding patterns in recipients' reactions, i.e. perlocutionary effect: the use of question marks, question words, and emojis indicating confusion and sadness. Lastly, the quantitative prevalence of particular topics became apparent through a review of the "target" column. Whereas, certain codes emerged as less pertinent to my study. The influence of the specific social media platform type (TikTok, Reddit, or X/Twitter) on the topic or phrasing of the comments did not demonstrate significant variance. Additionally, the metrics related to engagement (except "likes count")—such as likes-to-views ratio, total reply to a comment count, counts of positive and negative replies—were found to be widely dispersed and statistically insignificant. Consequently, these indicators did not provide reliable data for inclusion in the analysis.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

C1. THE PREVALENT TOPICS OF BACKHANDED COMPLIMENTS

Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of topics targeted in backhanded compliments. The dataset, comprising 62 entries, reveals a total of 124 occurrences of different themes, due to some entries containing multiple topics. For instance, data entry number 50: "You

speak English so well for a foreigner. I didn't know foreigners had the capacity to learn English this well," simultaneously addresses both "race" and "intelligence."

The topic "appearance" occurs 27 times (21,8%), followed by "appearance-weight" which appears 16 times (12,9%), and "intelligence" with 11 occurrences (8.8%). Noteworthy that cumulatively, all appearance related topics ("appearance", "appearance-style," "appearance-weight") summed up, they total in 50 occurrences, which comprises 40,3% - nearly a half of all the occurrences of all topics. This quantitative analysis indicates a significant focus of speakers on physical attributes in the context of backhanded compliments.

Apart from appearance related topics, "intelligence" is often mentioned, touched upon in backhanded compliments. Additionally, "race," "age" and "personality" are less frequently the subjects of these comments, but their presence in the dataset highlights the diverse range of attributes that can be targeted.

This analysis finds the predominance of appearance-related comments and shows societal emphasis on physical aesthetics and tendency to evaluate it. The findings second Malyk's (2014) argument that appearance and body image are the most discussed topics within backhanded compliments. The inclusion of intelligence and race points to deeper socio-cultural dynamics that these remarks can invoke. Such insights are invaluable for understanding the influence of backhanded compliments on the perception and propagation of societal norms.

No. of occurrences vs. Target topic

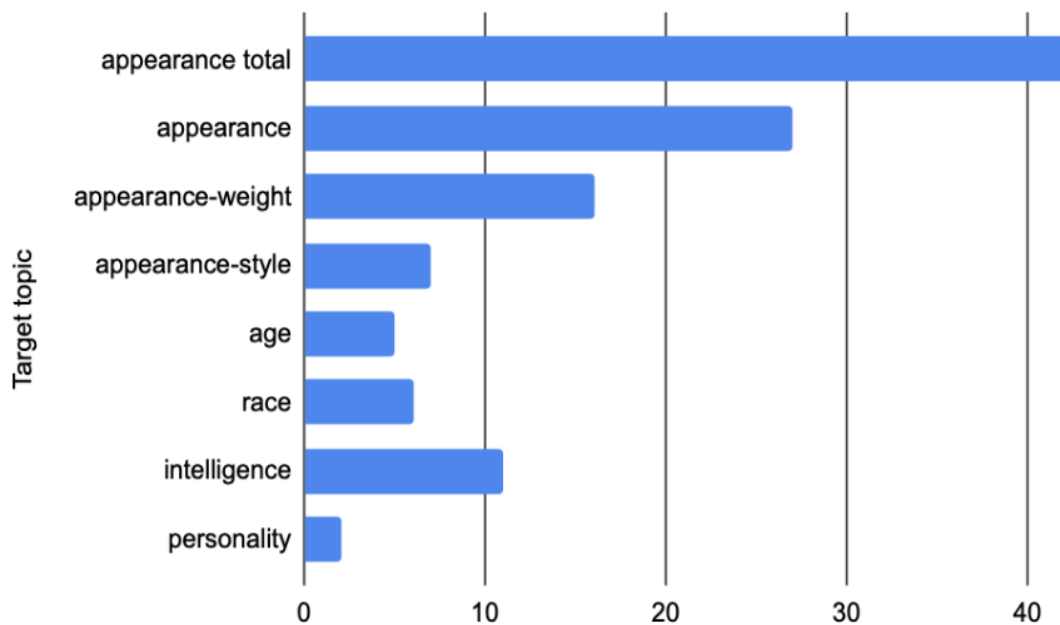


Figure 3

C2. LINGUISTIC FEATURES

One of my main hypotheses was that despite the inherently ambiguous and dual nature of backhanded compliments/cryptosemes, it is feasible to identify and categorize a substantial subset based on their distinct linguistic characteristics.. These recurring features can be seen: (a) in the word choice or phrasing of the oskorbliments with certain linguistic markers and qualifiers, i.e. lexical or syntactic units that uniquely signify backhanded compliments and distinguish them from conventional praise; (b) in the perlocutionary effect caused in the hearers evidenced by a frequent use of question marks, interrogative words, and emojis denoting confusion,; (c) in the illocutionary force, or intentions, theorized by Sezer (2019) as common intentions of the speakers to appraise and enhance the hearers' face but at the same time giving a subtle put down that would threaten the hearer's face without threatening their own (as speakers) face.

In the following subsections I will break down patterns in each of the three components of speech acts: patterns in linguistic phrasing, i.e. within speech acts themselves; patterns in

perlocutionary effects; and theoretically proposed patterns in the illocutionary force put into the backhanded compliments.

C2.1. FEATURES OF SPEECH ACTS

C2.1.1. TEMPORAL MARKERS

One type of markers that appeared several times with the corpus is markers of time. Such markers downgrade the positive component of the compliment in a way that they apply the “good” only to a certain period of time. “Today,” “now,” and “recently,” are all what I define as temporal markers that make it seem for the hearer that the positive statements are applicable only to the person’s state at the given/current period of time, all the while denoting that *usually* or *before* the positive statements were not (so) applicable to one’s state:

- a. You actually look pretty today

Full comment: *"You actually look pretty today!" Oh.*

Source: TikTok comment-reply to a video “when the compliment feels more like an insult”

No. of likes: 3 721

No. of total replies: 5

No. of agreeing replies: 5

Data entry No.: 9

- b. You're so pretty now

Full comment: *"You're so pretty now" literally kills your sOUL-*

Source: TikTok comment-reply to a video "the treatment after losing weight is crazy" [1,4M views, 293K likes, 1065 replies]

No. of likes: 5350

No. of total replies: 20

No. of agreeing replies: 20

Data entry No.: 43

c. why u actually kinda fine now

Full comment: *"why u actually kinda fine now"*

Source: TikTok comment-reply to a video "the treatment after losing weight is crazy" [1,4M views, 293K likes, 1065 replies]

No. of likes: 7

No. of total replies: 1

No. of agreeing replies: 1

Data entry No.: 45

Such markers in compliments seem to trigger the hearers to think that the compliment is addressed to them only in the current state, and current time, but not addressed to their appearance generally. Saying "You look pretty today" can be understood by the hearer as "You do not look *this* pretty usually," or even worse: "You do not look pretty (*at all*) usually." "Why you kinda fine now" is another example where the explicit pragmatic marker "now" indicates that the compliment is addressed to the hearer right now, right in this state, but not to the addressee in general. The perlocutionary effect might follow pure formal logic, where pointing out that someone "looks fine now" with a stress on the temporal deictic marker "now" immediately implies that the person looks "not fine" at other times than "today" or before "now," "lately."

The use of temporal markers was recorded in 8 entries out of 62 (12,9%). The total number of likes for the entries containing temporal markers is 11 374, making data entries containing temporal markers the entries with the largest cumulative sum of “likes” code.

C2.1.2. EXCLUSIVITY MARKERS

The exclusivity marker found in corpus is the marker “for.” Speakers use it in backhanded compliments as a way to separate a person from a broader group or category they are part of, and to compliment, enhance the hearer’s face on individual level while also insulting, threatening their face by negative evaluation of a broader group or category they belong to. Backhanded compliments containing exclusivity markers follow a consistent structure:

YOU ARE + [POSITIVE COMPLIMENT] + FOR
+ [A BROADER GROUP/CHARACTERISTIC]

Such linguistic structure was found in 45,7% of the corpus data, clearly indicating that this is a distinct linguistic feature characteristic to backhanded compliment speech.

Another exclusivity marker with a varying structure is:

I USUALLY DON’T LIKE + [A BROADER
GROUP/CHARACTERISTIC] + BUT + [POSITIVE COMPLIMENT]

Examples from the corpus:

- a. I typically don't find black women attractive, but you're so beautiful

Full comment: *One time a man looked me dead in my face and said " I typically don't find black women attractive, but you're so beautiful huhhh?!????*

Source: Twitter/X reply to a thread “what's your favorite backhanded compliment”

No. of likes: 4

Data entry No.: 39

b. You're pretty athletic for a short guy

Full comment: *You're pretty athletic for a short guy*

Source: Twitter/X reply to a thread “what's your favorite backhanded compliment”

No. of likes: 1

Data entry No.: 19

c. You're pretty for a fat girl

Full comment: You're pretty for a fat girl

Source: Twitter/X reply to a thread “what's your favorite backhanded compliment”

No. of likes: 11

Data entry No: 31

Such phrases create a framework that suggests the compliment is contingent on certain conditions or exceptions. The use of "for" in backhanded compliments introduces an element of exclusivity, implying that the person's positive trait (attractiveness, intelligence, nice personality, etc.) is an exception within the broader category. For example, in the compliment “You are pretty for a brown girl,” the addressee is complimented for their attractiveness which the speaker thinks is uncommon to the category of "brown girls." The positive interpretation may be that the individual is perceived as attractive irrespective of stereotypical expectations associated with their ethnic background. However, the negative undertones become apparent when considering the implicit comparison – the suggestion that attractiveness is an exception among brown girls, hinting a perceived norm of lower attractiveness within this group.

The phrase "I don't usually like..." or "I'm not into..." also serves as an exclusivity marker in backhanded compliments. For instance, saying, "I don't usually like short hair, but on you, it works," implies that the person deviates from the speaker's typical preferences. While the positive aspect acknowledges the individual's ability to transcend the speaker's usual standards, the negative aspect lies in the underlying suggestion that short hair is *generally* less attractive.

Thus, these exclusivity markers in backhanded compliments might genuinely intend to praise the person for standing out positively within a perceived norm or expectation, acknowledging their unique qualities. However, they might also be indicative of the addressee falling out of their preference spectrum or a general norm, standard. Referring to a general standard, for example, would sound like "People don't usually like ... but I think ..." and would make the compliment sound even more confusing or offensive because it would indicate the hearer's potential absence of an appeal to the general public.

Another aspect making such compliments face-threatening is related to Intergroup Emotions Theory (Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000) stating that individuals perceive compliments and insults which are directed not at them individually but at the broader group they belong to as emotionally and positively and negatively (respectively) as when they are addressed to them on an individual level. "People experience group-based emotions— not only events that impinge on them specifically as an individual" (Garcia, 2006, p. 320), and thus also they are complimented for good looks individually, they are also insulted as a representative and member of a broader group (of brown girls, of larger size people, short guys, etc.).

C2.1.3. SURPRISE AND COMPARISON TO EXPECTATION

Expressions such as "wow," "oh," "actually" are indicative of the speakers surprise by the "good" point of the hearer – appearance, style, intelligence. Such markers hint the

hearer that there is some sort of discrepancy with the expectations. The speaker expects less/worse or expects nothing from the hearer, e.g. “You look like you’re really thick, but you’re actually very clever” (Data entry No. 2). Although the hearer is positively praised, and their positive face is in a way enhanced, their so-called “past face,” “expected face,” “previously perceived face” is threatened. Expression “actually” is “technically unnecessary and conveys a kind of surprise or expectancy violation” (Sezer, 2019, p. 40).

C2.2. PATTERNS IN PERLOCUTIONARY EFFECT

The dataset was completely self-reported which allowed me to look at the elaboratory commentary provided by the recipients of backhanded compliments and analyze the perlocutionary effect of backhanded compliments on the hearers. On the perlocution side, there is a clear pattern of confusion which was marked by the hearers’ (i.e. recipients of backhanded compliments retelling their experience) frequent use of either question words, or interrogative marks, or emojis to reflect their emotional state upon hearing the oskorbliments.

C2.2.1. QUESTION WORDS AND/OR PUNCTUATION:

- a. it's such a backhanded compliment when someone tells me that i look prettier with straight hair than i do with my natural curly hair, like wym by that. [standing girl emoji]

Source: Twitter/X reply to a thread “what's your favorite backhanded compliment”

No. of likes: 16

Data entry No: 3

- b. "U weren't fat ur were beautiful" bro what

Source: TikTok comment-reply to a video "the treatment after losing weight is crazy" [1,4M views, 293K likes, 1065 replies]

No. of likes: 13

Data entry No.: 49

- c. One time a man looked me dead in my face and said " I typically don't find black women attractive, but you're so beautiful huhhh?!????

Source: TikTok comment-reply to a video "the treatment after losing weight is crazy" [1,4M views, 293K likes, 1065 replies]

No. of likes: 4

Data entry No.: 39

In the above examples, there is a sense of confusion evident through the use of question marks and expressions “bro what”, “wym by that”. People question the intention behind the backhanded comments since their content seems ambiguous and dual in essence.

- d. You look nice today! Uhhh, thanks, I guess.

Source: Twitter/X reply to a thread “what's your favorite backhanded compliment”

No. of likes: 1

Data entry No: 28

- e. Youve lost weight, you look so good" erm ok..?

Source: TikTok comment-reply to a video "the treatment after losing weight is crazy" [1,4M views, 293K likes, 1065 replies]

No. of likes: 4





Data entry No.: 50

In examples (d) and (e) we can see a confusion not only in the way the hearers are questioning the meaning of the compliments they received (as in examples a-c), but also in

the way they do not know how exactly they should react to such “compliments.” Expressions such as “erm ok...?” and “thanks, I guess” demonstrate that they do not really know what response is expected from them, so they just choose to express their confusion and uncertainty.

C2.2.2.THE USE OF EMOJIS

When sharing their experience of receiving backhanded compliments, people sometimes use emojis that help better visualize their emotional stance/reaction when they received those compliments. In the corpus analysis, several emojis have been identified, each carrying distinct connotations that deepen the understanding of the emotional impact of backhanded compliments:

- (1) melting emoji - feeling distraught, hurt and sad; 
- (2) sad emoji - feeling hurt and sad; 
- (3) an emoji of a girl standing upright – feeling confused, not knowing what to do 
- (4) eye roll emoji - feeling angry and irritated (the individual not recognizes the insincerity of the compliment and reacts with a level of frustration or annoyance) 

C2.3. PATTERNS IN ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE.

One of the major limitations of this study is that the illocutionary force cannot be qualitatively and quantitatively examined as, first of all, no directed participants are involved in the study and I cannot assume intentions. No data is there on the actual speakers who uttered the cryptosemes that I collected in my corpus Secondly, the fuzziness of the cryptosemes make it difficult anyway to understand the real illocutionary forces behind them. The degree of sincerity and spontaneity and intentions of backhanded compliments cannot be evaluated linguistically only - requires psychological study, e.g. public speeches are mostly strategic as we know them; interviews - are spontaneous (Gribanova &

Gaidukova, 2019) but with backhanded compliments it is not really clear what is the genuine intention.

A few glimpses of a better understanding of the illocutionary force or intention of the speakers can be retrieved from the literature review Sezer (2019) based on a theoretical review, suggests that speakers, by employing backhanded compliments, are speakers attempting to elicit both liking and status through a subtle “put down” element in a backhanded compliment. Traditional compliments indeed enhance the faces of both the speaker and the hearer. However, as Sezer (2019) states, the speakers believe that in fact traditional compliments do also degrade the speakers’ faces, as they themselves did not deserve a compliment for example, or they feel that by putting the hearer “up,” they are put “down” automatically. And through backhanded compliments, they want to balance out the enhancement of the hearer’s face by the threat to their face (Table 3).

	face-enhancing (H)	face-threatening (H)	elicited result
Traditional compliments	+	0	liking
Backhanded compliments	+	-	liking, status

Table 3

C3. REFRAINING FROM RETALIATION

The third research question was “Why do recipients of backhanded compliments refrain from retaliation, compared to the reactions to direct insults?” Two answers to this question were found based on literature review. First, it has something to do an innate mental inclination of the hearers toward optimistic interpretations (Malyk, 2014). Second, more complex answer is that it is due to the fuzziness (Lakoff, 1972) of backhanded compliments which works as a shield, a mitigating mechanism (Caffi, 1999, 2007) masking impoliteness. Thanks to such a vague nature, backhanded compliments allow the speakers to pertain a

lower ascription to their own words and leave a vast room for interpretation for the hearers. In case of a negative interpretation of a backhanded compliment and in case of an emotional and rather aggressive reaction by the hearer, the speaker can protect themselves with a “shield”: “I did not mean anything mean! I was just complimenting you!” The phrase “You are overreacting” is often adjacent in such cases. As a result, the speaker’s face is successfully maintained and even if it was an intentional case of impoliteness, such impoliteness is veiled and masked thanks to plausible deniability (Malyk, 2014), which an ability to cancel the responsibility for own words. The only side having their face threatened here is the hearer’s side now that the hearer is perceived as “overreacting,” “overly emotional,” “hysterical,” etc. which are negative traits and images that one does not want to claim for themselves.

C4. FURTHER DISCUSSION AND EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS

Based on my preliminary results, I suspected that there would be a correlation between the perceived meaning of phrases, and the type of reaction by hearers. Different phrasing (without exclusivity markers, or with exclusivity markers) would result in different reactions of hearers (feeling more or less offended). To test this secondary hypothesis, toward the end of my research period, I conducted an informal completely anonymous survey of my peers aged 18-25 at the Nazarbayev University, to gauge their general reaction to different types of backhanded compliments. 154 participants took the survey, and the following graph was modelled to comprehensively illustrate all of the answers:

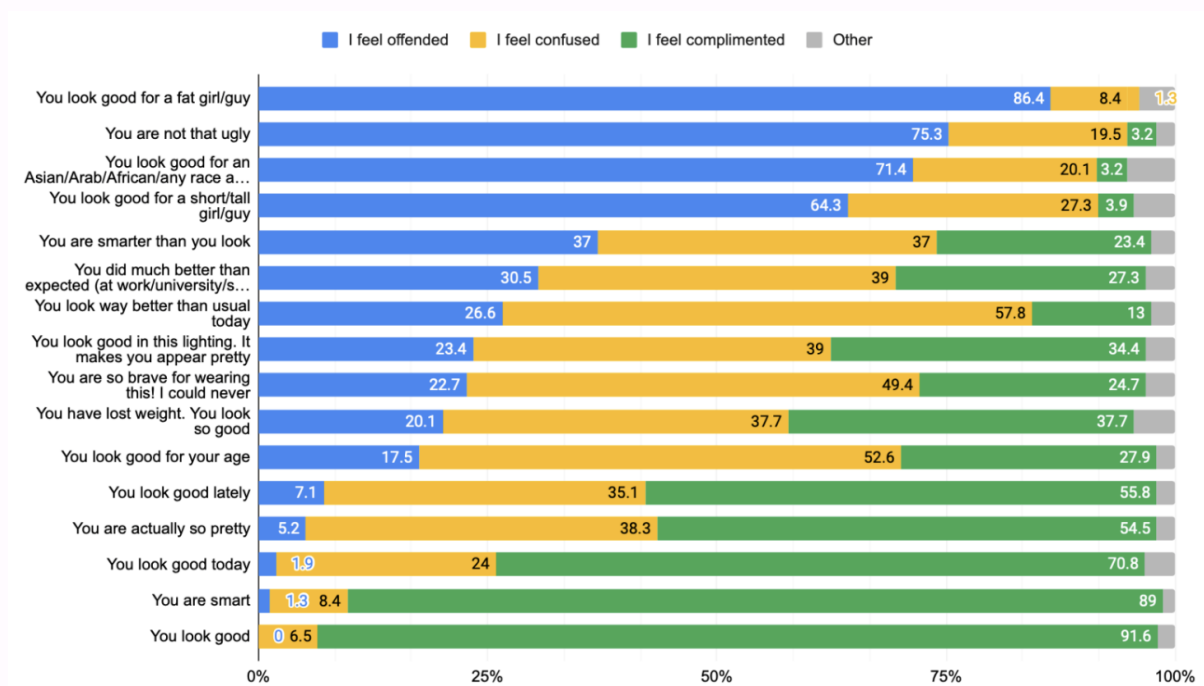


Figure 4

From the chart, we can see that the expressions that caused most of the “offense” reaction in the participants are the phrases that contain semantically strong content words that blatantly call the recipient “fat,” “ugly,” or “short”/“tall.” These are the characteristics that conventionally are not desired to be claimed by members of society and they certainly contradict with their positive face wants. Thus, such phrases are evaluated as straight-up face-threatening. This holds despite the positive commentary, appraise, and circumlocution “not that ugly” being included.

The most positively perceived type of compliments (except “You are smart” and “You look good” which were used as filler stimuli) are “You look good today” and “You look good lately” which clearly demonstrates the comparatively high plausibility and positive valuation of this commentary.

These and many other patterns could be further identified. Conducting a comprehensive human subject surveys study evaluating emotional responses would be a great avenue for further research on this topic, and the study of perlocutionary effect in more detail. As we saw from the reaction to “strong” content words, the dimension of semantic scale is also a good

direction to go in future studies. Particularly, incorporating the examination of scalar implicatures and their cancelability would help to build the plausibility continuum on the side of perlocution. For instance, “You look beautiful today” is a cancellable implicature, because one can say “You look good every day but today you look exceptionally beautiful.” Whereas the negative implicature in “You look good” cannot be cancelled in such a way, as “good” has a much weaker semantic meaning compared to “beautiful,” and there is no further way to easily cancel it.

D. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, my study has revealed several crucial linguistic attributes surrounding the speech act of backhanded compliment basing the analysis on the use of term of “face,” defined by Brown and Levinson (1987) as individuals’ wants to claim certain image for themselves. The study identified that the most popular topic of backhanded compliments is appearance, which aligns with Malyk’s (2014) findings. The locutionary acts of backhanded compliments have characteristic to them temporal, surprise, and exclusivity linguistic markers, which contrary to Looor’s (2019) argument proves that backhanded compliments do have some surface distinct characteristics that allow us to group them separately from traditional compliments which are on-record politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The common reaction to backhanded compliments (in written form) is the use of question marks, question words, emojis of confusion, indicating the mixed reaction of hearers. Moreover, the act of “liking” online indicates the feeling of shared experience or shared attitude towards certain phrasings, which indicate that people have common reactions to certain backhanded compliments. According to Culperer (2005) it is enough for the hearer to perceive behavior as intentionally face-attacking for the behavior (a speech act in this case) to be considered as a manifestation of impoliteness. The shared reactions show that certain backhanded compliments are clearly unconsciously classified by many as insults.

The possible intentions or illocutionary force of backhanded compliments is the desire by the speakers to maintain own status, own face by giving a put down to the receiver - by threatening their face (Sezer, 2019). It was discussed that the hearers usually refrain from retaliation in response to backhanded compliments because of, inclination to optimistic interpretation and/or willingness to avoid the positive face-threat in a form of attaining an image of a hypersensitive and hysteric person.

Limitations of my project are that the dataset in the corpus is relatively small and has an unbalanced selection (of topics, media source, etc.). In the future, more of quantitative analysis would help to statistically and credibly back up my findings. On the example of my exploratory analysis, it is evident that lots of trends and patterns can be identified with the help of quantitative examination of data. Study of perlocutionary effect (reaction) alone or illocutionary force alone can also be performed with human subjects that would shed light on psycholinguistic aspects of backhanded compliment. Plausibility continuum: most/least “tolerable” cryptosemess (topics, formulation, content words, scalar implicatures and cancelability) could be studied further.

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