

# Social Distance in Speakers of Nigerian English Compliment Behaviour

Abolaji S. Mustapha

Lagos State University, Nigeria

## Abstract

*Studies have shown that common daily speech functions such as greetings, invitations, requests, compliments, commiserations among others often serve as rich sources for understanding how interactants negotiate social relationships within the social distance continuum among themselves. However, conflicting patternings have been reported on how these negotiations play out in quantitative and qualitative representations. While some studies indicate a pattern which suggests "commonalities between the speech behaviour of friends and strangers", other studies indicate commonalities between intimates and strangers (the bulge theory). Thus, in this study, the compliment behaviour of speakers of Nigerian English arrived at through quantitative analysis of 1200 compliment exchanges collected in a fieldwork (largely) in Lagos, Nigeria, is used to investigate how participants place one another within the social distance continuum and determine the pattern that is played out. Our findings tend to confirm Wolfson's bulge model although we found certain cultural peculiarities that might be idiosyncratic to our subjects.*

**Keywords:** Social distance, compliments, bulge theory

## Introduction

Wolfson's bulge theory has been found useful in interpreting patterns in the speech behaviour of many communities. However, there are other studies that have shown that the theory does not fit the pattern in the findings of their studies and that the bulge theory might be misleading based on some of its limitations and shortcomings. Thus, conflicting patterns among interactants in speech behaviours have emerged from the literature. However, considering the insights that bulge theory offers the study of speech functions and the dearth of literature among non-native users of English in the sub-Saharan, this study aims to fill this gap by using the compliment data of speakers of Nigerian English in Nigeria to test out the application of Wolfson's bulge theory among dyads.

## Background

Wolfson's proposed bulge theory emerged from a number of sociolinguistic studies of interactions (Beebe, Takkahasko and Uliss-Weltz, 1985; Cordella & Pardo, 1995; Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986; Holmes, 1988; Wolfson, 1983; 1988) that indicate social distance mechanics among interactants i.e. how dyads negotiate social relationships in daily speech events. The bulge model represents interactants' speech behaviour that tends to negotiate the social distance between their interactional partners. Wolfson, (1989, p.11) illustrated the theory thus: "...although compliments in the United States are exchanged between intimates and between total strangers, the great majority (the bulge) takes place within interactions between speakers who are neither intimates nor strangers". In other words, the level of frequency and length of interactions between interactants are dependent on the scale on which they place each other on the social distance continuum. This observation suggests both quantitative and qualitative differences.

Thus in Wolfson (1988, p.33) it is reported that there is qualitative difference between the speech behaviour that middle-class Americans use to intimates, status equals, and strangers on the one hand and to non-intimates, status non-equals, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances on the other hand. The major reason for these differences that has been reported in the literature is the relative certainty of the relationships between intimates, status equals, and strangers and the instability of the relationships between non-intimates, status non-equals, friends, co-workers, and acquaintance.

Gass and Selinker (2001, p.247) paraphrase the theory thus:

The basic idea is that when speech events are considered in relation to the social relationships of speakers, one finds many similarities between the two extremes of social distance i.e. those who are intimates (minimum social distance) and those who are strangers (maximum social distance). The term bulge comes from the frequency of responses and the way these are plotted on a diagram: the two extremes show similar low amounts of speech whereas the centre has a bulge. The bulge group is comprised of non-intimates, status-equal friends, co-workers, and acquaintance. The explanation for the similarities/differences between these groupings lies in the certainty of the relationships.

Boxer (1993, p.103) maintains that "most solidarity-establishing speech behaviour takes place among status-equal friends and acquaintances" thus confirming the validity of bulge theory has been supported by the findings of other studies on speech behaviour of interlocutors (D'Amico-Reisner, 1985; Holmes, 1990; Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1985; Eisenstein and Bodman 1986; Kreutel, 2007).

However, some studies (Boxer, 1993; Das, 2010; Holmes, 1990; Sarcella, 1979 among others) that have shown that the bulge in social interactions among interlocutors may not always pattern to indicate bulge among friends in the social distance continuum. Boxer (1993, p.103) indicates that "the way in which indirect complaints and commiserative responses pattern out along the social distance continuum indicates that the characteristic bulge is not in the middle (among friends and acquaintances) but is always skewed towards one end of the continuum (strangers) or the other (intimates). In other words, the social strategies underlying the use of indirect complaints among middle class American society indicate another way in which indirect complaints, and commiserations that are said to be another speech forms that users implore for establishing solidarity with their speech partners patterns out. Contrary to Wolfson's claim "that those at the extremes of the continuum, strangers and intimates, have in common is the relative certainty of their relationships, and due to this certainty very little solidarity-establishing speech behaviour is evidenced at either end of the continuum. Boxers found that her subjects' solidarity-establishing strategies pattern differently. It is toward the middle of the continuum, particularly among interlocutors of equal status, that much of the give and take that is characteristic of the negotiation of relationships takes place" (Boxer 1993, p.104,105). Boxer (1993, p.105,106) reported that from her qualitative and quantitative analysis of indirect complaints indicate some instances where there are more "more commonalities between the speech behaviour of friends and strangers than between intimates and strangers".

In fact, it has been reported that Wolfson's bulge theory opposes Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness because the latter claims that greater social distance between interlocutors brings about greater indirectness (Dogancay-Aktuna and Kamisli, 2001).

Thus Boxer (1993) argued that Wolfson's attempt to integrate evidence from data on other speech act studies in support of her theory might have been impressionistic on how the plotting was carried out. According to Boxer, (1993, p.105), "the theory, along with its supporting evidence, was not based on any quantification of the social distribution of these speech acts on a scale of social distance. Boxer's study work that is both quantitative and qualitative was based on social distributions. The findings suggest that regarding the variable of social distance, the data for indirect complaint behaviour of her subjects indicates that strangers and intimates exhibit quite disparate behaviour for both IC theme and IC response. The Bulge is always skewed toward one end of the continuum or the other. For IC theme, it is skewed towards strangers for self ICs and type B situation ICs and towards intimates for other ICs and type A situation ICs. For IC commiserative responses, the give and take of negotiation described by Wolfson as characteristic of speech behaviour among friends and acquaintance shows the Bulge to be skewed toward the stranger end of social distance. Rapport-inspiring responses are almost equally frequent for strangers as for friends and acquaintances" (Boxer 1993, p.124) (see Boxer 1993:122, for a comparison of Wolfson's bulge and Boxer's study).

Boxer captures the essential difference between her findings and that of Wolfson's bulge thus: "while Wolfson's Bulge appears in the middle of the continuum, the bulge for IC commiserative responses appears nearer to the stranger end of the continuum.

Three main reasons were given for the difference between Wolfson's bulge and Boxer's findings. One, Boxer (1993, p.121) noted that "first and foremost is the fact that up until this time data from studies on invitations and compliments have not been quantified and plotted out along the social distance continuum in order to account for the way in which social distance constrains the occurrence of these behaviours". Thus there is a need for quantitative studies. Two, according to Boxers, native speakers' intuition suggests that there might be differences in social distribution between complimenting and inviting, on the one hand, and indirect complaining; on the other hand....and that these differ-

ences may be due to the extent to which they are construed as face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson 1978). To Boxer (1993, p.123) "it appears that ICs are less face threatening as conversational openers with strangers than are invitations or even compliments".

Boxers further cited Holmes' (1990) study on apologizing that tends to confirm her findings as the latter's findings "have a distribution across social distance that is more similar to the distribution for ICs than compliments or invitations.

The third difference is anchored on the concept of social distance which Boxer (1993) argued might have been inappropriately applied in Wolfson's (1988) bulge proposal. An earlier work established a dichotomy of -distance/+ distance whereby the social distance is perceived in a kind of binary variable - dyads are either in close relationship (-distance) or are far apart (+distance) Van-Ek (1976). According to Boxer (1993, p.105) social distance might be viewed at two levels, at least:

Whereas relative status is viewed primarily in a vertical sense of higher or lower status, social distance differs from this concept in that it refers to the horizontal relationship between participants in a speech sequence. While the former has to do with one's social position in a community owing to age, occupation or level or power, the latter has to do with the level of friendship/intimacy between interlocutors. These are two separate variables having the potential of interacting and/or overriding each other, depending on the context of the interaction.

Although, Brown and Levinson (1978, p.77) define social distance as an important part of the assessment of D (social distance) that will usually be measures of social distance based on stable social attitudes. The reflex of social closeness is, generally, the reciprocal giving and receiving of positive face" She alludes that Wolfson's Bulge model might have been erroneously woven around a view of social distance that is in a vertical sense (top-bottom- social position in a community owing to age, occupation or level of power), whereas it would have fit well into "horizontal relationship" between interactional speech partners.

Based on these observations on the major differences between Wolfson's Bulge theory and the findings of Boxer's (1993), this study seeks to validate or do otherwise the claims of both postulators. The points raised against Wolfson's study are addressed in the methodology and analysis of this study. Thus quantitative tools shall be used on compliments exchanged on the bases of the two dimensions of social distance continuum (intimates, casuals and strangers) from subjects.

## Methods

Ethnographic method of data collection was used. The data that comprise of compliments and responses were analysed quantitatively to arrive at frequency of compliment exchanged between dyads.

### Data

Over 70% of the compliment exchanges used for the study was collected largely through re-call protocol (most recently received or given compliments) and on-site compliments (that were observed and recorded). In addition, compliments found in popular fictions - Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to Blame*, Zainab Alkali's *The Stillborn* complemented our corpus to make 1200 compliment exchanges. Sites included offices, places of worship, recreation centre, social gatherings, schools, shop centres within the city. Females and males from the upper-class, middle class and low-class were represented. The assumption is that speakers of Nigerian English occupy the low and middle class groups in the country. The fieldwork was carried out in Lagos, a cosmopolitan city that afford a fair representation of nearly all the ethnic groups in Nigeria - Yorubas, Igbos, Hausas, Fulanis, Efiks, Ibibios, Nupes, Tivs, Itsekiris, Gwaris, Kanuris, Edos, and the others. In addition, the data sites afforded a rich representational corpus of compliments.

Observed, recalled and reported compliments were recorded as they were heard or given to the fieldworkers. Other ethno-linguistic information, such as the sex of dyads, age, ethnic groups, socio-economic status (equals, non-equals, educational status, levels of intimacy (intimate, casual acquaintance strangers) between interlocutors were requested and recorded in addition to the context where the compliment exchanges took place. In order to align our data with the three main points of social distance continuum in the literature, we collapsed compliments exchanged between acquaintances with those of casuals to arrive at casuals' data. It is noted that during the fieldwork (data collection) most of our subjects were more comfortable with the use of intimate, casual and strangers to describe the point of their social distance than distinguishing between casuals and acquaintances. Thus they

had difficulties with classifying their interactional partners as acquaintances. However, some of our subjects identified some of their interactional partners as acquaintances.

One common way that dyads used to describe the level of their relationships - are very close for family members, distant relations, spouses, some of their friends, neighbours; close was used for casual friends, colleagues at work or in school, neighbours in their immediate communities, and club/society members) and not close for strangers.

The exchanges (compliments and responses) are mainly in Nigerian English. Speakers of Nigerian English are largely those who have, at least, secondary education and can read, write, and speak in intelligible English across their ethnic boundaries. Their varieties of Nigerian English (Yoruba Nigerian English, Hausa Nigerian English, Igbo Nigerian English among others) have common cores that characterise their second language variety of English with its local colourings that though distinct from other national varieties of English yet ensures mutual intelligibility among other world users of English (International English). Samples of Nigerian English in our data include *I don't mind this your shirt o*. Some exchanges are in mixed codes (Nigerian English and local languages/Nigerian Pidgin (code-mixing), for example, *Mo je dodo cap e yi {}* meaning I really like your hat.

### Analysis

Quantitative analysis of frequencies of exchanges recorded between dyads was done based on: (i) degrees of age, (top-bottom - vertical social distance); (ii) levels of social status and (iii) degrees of intimacy. Economic status in terms of occupation, income, possessions, and rank at workplace was used to classify dyads as equals and non-equals. Age gap was also used to classify dyads into equals and non-equals. However, degrees of intimacy were used to classify dyads into intimates, casuals and strangers. The interplay between the frequency of compliments exchanged and degrees of intimacy, economic status and age groupings claimed by participants formed the basis of the analysis. We used equals and non-equals to classify the participants into different economic status and age groups. Dyads that are within the age brackets of 20-30, 30-40, 40-50, and 50-60 are each classified as equals whereas age gap of twenty years or more is used to mark non-equals for dyads. The reported information about the occupation of dyads and other relationships were used to classify them into economic groups.

Table 1: Frequency of compliments among equals and non-equal by social status (vertical relationship adapted from Boxer (1993, p.105))

Status of dyads	Frequency of compliment exchanges	%
Equals	1105	92
Non-equals	95	8
Total	1200	100

Table 1 shows that social status equals exchanged far more compliments (95%) than non-equals (8%). This indicates that compliment exchanges between non-equals are less-desired whereas they are rife among equals.

Table 2: Frequency of compliments among equals and non-equals by age (vertical relationship adapted from Boxer (1993:105))

Age of dyads	Frequency of compliment exchanges	%
Equals	1108	92
Non-equals	92	8
Total	1200	100

Table 2 shows that dyads that are equal in age exchanged far more compliments than nonequals. This, again, indicates that ubiquitous complimenting acts are to be found among equals in age whereas the wider the age gap the lesser the compliment exchanged between non-equals.

Table 3: Frequency of compliment exchange by social distance (horizontal relationship adapted from Boxer (1993:105))

Dyads degrees of intimacy	Frequency of compliment exchanges	%
Intimates	152	12.6
Casuals	946	78.8
Strangers	102	8.5
Total	1200	99.9

Table 3 shows that casuals exchange far more compliments among themselves (78.8%) than intimates (12.6%) and strangers (8.5%) do. Although intimates have more compliments recorded (12.6%) than strangers (8.5%), the figures suggest that they might be sharing similar compliment behaviour - nondesirability of compliment exchange among the two groups.

### Summary of findings

Our quantitative analysis of compliment exchange that was recorded following the social distance continuum among other socio-ethnographic information of our subjects indicates desirability and ripeness of compliments exchange among equals. This is not the case among non-equals (whether in age or in social status). In other words, there is bulge among equals - dyads that might be said to be in vertical relationship, using Boxer's (1993) specifications, on the one hand and on the other hand, interactants in horizontal relationship (which "has to do with the level of friendship/intimacy between interlocutors") indicate that ubiquitous compliment exchanges are expected among casuals than among intimates and strangers.

### Discussion of findings

In the light of our findings, the patterns among dyads in both horizontal and vertical social relationships tend to support Wolfson's bulge model. It is interesting that this is the case considering that we accommodated the issues of qualitative method, dimensions of social distance and degrees of social distance raised against the Wolfson's bulge theory in our methodology in this study. The wide range of interlocutors/dyads in our corpus and the amount of compliments collected together with our method of analysis tend to satisfy the quantitative demand.

Two, the use of three major points on social distance continuum that has been used to discredit Wolfson's proposed Bulge was addressed in our study. Our subjects description of the degree of intimacy which falls under three degrees - intimate, casual and stranger take care of this criteria. It is noted that, to avoid discrepancy with earlier studies, we had collapsed two positions on the continuum - acquaintance and casuals into one - casuals, leaving us with three major degrees of intimacy which are maintained in our data collection process and analysis. It is interesting that our findings still support the Bulge among equals and casuals.

The third issue which has to do with the interesting distinction between vertical and horizontal relationships that Boxer (1993) identified and insightfully expatiated on was taken care of in our investigation. Our data collection exercise accommodated both vertical relationship in the social distance continuum (higher and lower status in social position in the community based on age and occupation or other levels of power or powerlessness). In addition, horizontal relationship of social distance that identifies major degrees of intimacies - intimates (very close), casuals (close), and strangers (not close) was addressed in the study. Interestingly, results of our analysis at both levels of relationship indicate the bulge at the reported points - among casuals and equals that Wolfson proposed and had been supported by other studies.

However, it is noted that the concept and application of intimate relationships are slightly different between Nigerians and Americans. Nigerians claim intimate relationship with some of their neighbours with whom they have lived in the same neighbourhood for a long time, e.g., childhood friends, those in constant contact and members of the same ethnic groups. Using Knapp's *et al* (1984) description of intimate relationship among Americans, those that Nigerians classify as intimates might be in casual relationship. Whereas Americans tend to enjoy casual relationship more than intimate relationships because they tend to live in a mobile society and tend to move more frequently and give up friendship much more easily and less stressfully than people in many other cultures. In contrast, Nigerians tend

to enjoy intimate relationships more than casual because of their relatively stable life. Thus a Nigerian living in the United States of America might have difficulty developing an intimate relationship with his/her host in America or might take a casual relationship for an intimate relationship. Just as an American who has been maintaining a casual relationship with a Nigerian might be puzzled should the relationship be taken too far - or treated as intimate. This observation explains the high (higher than strangers') frequency of compliments among intimates among our subjects.

However, our findings tend to support the explanation that between equals whether in age or in economic status, ubiquitous compliment exchange is expected or is the norm as they are far less face threatening whereas between non-equals they are less because of their potential face threatening imports. Compliments directed upwards are often interpreted as flatteries meant to obtain favour. For example, the compliment from a subordinate (the driver of the boss) to his boss below illustrates this point where the boss's response indicates that the driver's compliment is less-desired.

Driver: This carpet fits the sitting-room well.

Boss: Is that what I have asked you to come and do?

It has also been observed that compliments directed downwards (from the superior to the subordinate) are used to encourage desirable actions and deeds from the lowly placed. For example, a mum's compliment to her dutiful daughter illustrates this point.

Mum: Your room looks neat?

Daughter: Thank you, mum.

Thus Wolfson's bulge theory of speech functions tend to hold among speakers of Nigerian English compliment behaviour.

## Further discussion

One important point that Boxer (1993) raised that tends to neutralise the differences between compliments, invitations on the one hand and direct and indirect complaints on the other hand might require further clarification. It is undeniable that speech functions are multi-functional and due consideration for the speech event where they occur might be helpful in determining their contextual function. Thus, on a general note, compliments, invitations, complaints may function as solidarity establishing and face-threatening speech functions. For example, the literature on compliments confirm that the speech act could be face threatening, solidarity establishing, or could be used to ameliorate face threatening acts. The finding that indirect complaints could also be used to establish solidarity among strangers and therefore are rife among them (strangers) might be very problematic. In fact, it might be more problematic to pitch indirect complaints with compliments as solidarity establishing speech functions without due analysis of the context and the sincerity of speakers. Thus it might easier to report the use of indirect complaints between strangers as speech used for fishing for either sympathy (sharing in the harm caused) or consolation for one's action of dissatisfaction with what the other person had caused than as solidarity tools.

For example, one could be put off by the served meal on board in a plane and inwardly felt offended whereas the other person appreciating the richness of the same meal might have ignored the coldness. To win the sympathy and solidarity of others, the offended person might voice his indirect complaints only for the other person out of politeness or the need to show co-cooperativeness in interactions might be compelled to acknowledge the coldness though the comments of the offended person might actually be face-threatening. Therefore among people who cherish cooperativeness and agreement with one's interactional partners even when one does not agree with the addressor, the use of indirect complaints as solidarity-establishment tools might be faulted.

In fact, the sincerity of the addressee's agreement with the complaint might need to be established before the act can be said to be solidarity-establishing speech strategy. This sincerity criterion has been discussed in the literature leading to debate on distinguishing between sincere compliments and flatteries on the one hand and compliments and other forms of praise on the other hand. According to Barnlund, *et al* (1985, p.12), Americans regard compliments as authentic expressions of admiration without manipulative intent. Thus sincerity has been identified as one of the conditions for sincere compliments (sincerity condition - the speaker must approve of the attribute, state or event being mentioned), proposed for compliments in Jacob *et al* (1993). One other way to establish sincere compliments is to use the giver and the receiver of compliments. Thus some scholars have suggested the native speaker's intuition.

Nevertheless, reliance on native speaker's intuition on what conversational partners do in speech functions is less-reliable considering the findings of studies that indicate that native speakers' intuition many contradicts actual language practices. Therefore to rely on native speaker intuition might be unsafe.

## Conclusion

From the foregoing, it appears that the Bulge theory which maintains that solidarity-establishing speech behaviour takes far more exchanges among status-equals, friends, and acquaintances tend to hold among speakers of Nigerian English especially in their compliment behaviour. In other words, the compliment behaviour of speakers of Nigerian English tends to support Wolfson's bulge theory. It is interesting that this appears to be the case having addressed the issues of quantitative methodology, social distance continuum and the two major dimensions of social distance that tend to discredit the proposal of Wolfson's bulge model. However, it might be necessary to await counterevidence from other studies that will examine other solidarity-establishing speech behaviour incorporating the major points in the social distance continuum and quantitative orientated analysis. Also it might be difficult to use our findings to indicate common grounds between American speech behaviour and Nigerian speech behaviour especially as part of our findings indicates that intimate relationship does not work out perfectly the same way in both cultures. However, that our findings support Wolfson proposed bulge model suggests tendency toward speech behaviour universal in solidarity-establishing speech functions that be tested out in under-researched communities.

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## Appendix

### Sample of speakers of Nigerian English compliments

1. A: I like your person.  
B: Thank you.  
A: Your answer is too short.  
B: What else? [Male/Female]
2. A: Brother Gab, where are you coming from this morning? You look cute.  
B: Hi, it's not easy, my brother. We thank God. [Male/Male]
3. A: You're all assets to this company.  
B: Thank you, Sir. We've enjoyed working here. [Male/Female]
4. A: You are hard to offend.  
B: You've not seen the other side of me. [Male/Female]
5. A: Sir, a nice car you've just bought.  
B: Oh! Thanks, my dear. [Female/Male]
6. A: This your rug, Sir, fits your parlour.  
B: Thank you. Is that what I said you should come and say this morning? [Male/Male]
7. A: You look fine in this uniform.  
B: (Smiles) [Female/Male]
8. A: Your dress looks good on you.  
B: Thank you.[Male/Female]
9. A: I like your suit, can you give me to wear?  
B: Thanks for the compliment. I will give you later. [Male/Male]
10. A: You look so young and beautiful, grandma.  
B: Do you mean it? All thanks to my God. (smiles). Thank you, my grandson.  
[Male/Female]
11. A: You have done a good job. The rug looks new again.  
B: Thank you very much. It is my pleasure.[Female/Male]