

# What makes a good Linguistics critical review?

## Commentary on Review

### 1. Analysing the topic

Notice how the topic is asking students to do two things - to **summarise** the text and to **evaluate** it. When reading a text, keep these two points in mind:

- What is the text saying? (summary)
- What do I think about what it's saying? (evaluation)

### 2. The text being reviewed

Always commence your review by including the full bibliographic details of the work under review.

### 3. Introduction

The opening sentence of the review should be relevant to the broad issues of the topic, without resorting to cliché.

### 4. Summarising the text

A good summary will do the following:

- accurately represent the idea in the original text
- focus on the more important ideas
- be perfectly comprehensible to someone who has not read the original text

### 5. Summarising the text -

#### A) Introducing the text

This review gives an overview of the text by introducing:

- the text and its author
- the main content covered in the text
- the author's main argument

The most important of these is the main argument - what is the author saying?

### 6. Summarising the text -

#### B) Summarising the supporting evidence

Many academic texts present:

- a main argument
- evidence to support that argument

When reading a text to be reviewed, think about the connection between the main argument and the evidence, and how well this connection has been established.

## Topic

Write a critical review of Wolfson's article, 'Compliments in Cross-Cultural Perspective'. In your review you should **summarise** the text and then **evaluate** it (800 words)

## Sample review

Wolfson, N. (1981). Compliments in Cross-Cultural Perspective. *TESOL Quarterly*, 15(2), Jun, 117-124.

Teaching how to communicate effectively is now seen as a major goal of language teachers, both those teaching ESL (English as a Second Language) and second-language learning in general. The differences in norms of interaction between cultures, as explored in Hymes' work on the ethnography of speaking (1962), have since been highlighted through further sociolinguistic work. Such work includes an investigation into the formal instruction of the speech acts of giving and responding to compliments (Ishihara, 2004) and an examination of inductive and deductive approaches for teaching compliments and compliment responses (Rose & Kwai-fong, 2001).

In the article *Compliments in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Wolfson explores the speech act of complimenting, specifically in regards to its utility for second-language learners of English, through analysis of the semantic and syntactic structures of compliments. With her colleague, Joan Manes, Wolfson analysed complimenting behaviour in American English, and has, in addition, constructed a corpus of compliments used by non-native speakers in interactions with members of their own speech communities. With this data, Wolfson has concluded that speech acts, and compliments in particular, may often vary considerably across cultures, and there may not be consensus, conscious or otherwise, about what is classed as a compliment even within the same language community.

In order to support this contention, Wolfson presents translated examples of compliments from speakers of languages other than English, to illustrate the linguistic and pragmatic differences between the complimenting behaviour of speakers of American English and non-Americans. She states that, in Indonesian, for example, mentioning a friend's purchase of a sewing machine or recent completion of grocery shopping functions as complimenting an addressee, as one is showing approval of the addressee's accomplishments. In contrast, a similar compliment given to an American may not be construed as it is intended, as a compliment. Wolfson subsequently advises against being too hasty in concluding that the speech acts of complimenting are identical in Japanese and American societies, due to the similarities in their complimenting behaviours. Wolfson adds that miscomprehension often works in both directions, in that non-Americans may construe compliments in American English as being insulting rather than flattering.

A contrast between the use of compliments in American English, Persian and Arabic, for example, shows that speakers of the latter two languages often employ proverbs or precoded ritualised phrases for complimenting. Americans do not generally use proverbs in this manner for complimenting, and in fact rely on a very restricted group of lexical and syntactic structures, the majority (80%) of which, are adjectival in nature. Of the 72 adjectives identified in the corpus, five - *nice, good, beautiful, pretty* and *great* - account for around two-thirds of all the adjectival compliments. In regards to verbs, *like* and *love* occurred in 86% of compliments where there was a semantically positive verb. Wolfson analysed the data and found that 53.6% of the corpus made use of a single syntactic pattern:

## Academic Style and Conventions

### References

The references in this review conform to the APA style of referencing

### Citations

Citations are used to indicate any additional texts you have referred to. Full bibliographical information for these texts is provided in a list of references at the end.

### Paragraphs

Organise your review into paragraphs. All paragraphs should be around 4-5 sentences long, and arranged according to themes.

### Italics 1

Use italics for the titles of any texts.

### Referring to the author(s)

In a review, you will need to refer to the author(s) frequently - to make it clear that these are *their* ideas, not *yours*. In making these references, you can use the author's name(s), nouns (*the authors, writers*) or pronouns (*he, she, they* etc.).

### Reporting expressions

You will need to use a variety of expressions to introduce an author's ideas, as well as to indicate what they do in their text, eg.

- *Wolfson advises...*
- *the authors explore the question...*
- *they postulate that...*
- *the article demonstrates that...*
- *the author adds that...*

### Italics 2

Use italics for emphasising important words or forms taken from the text.

**7. Summarising the text - C) Rounding off**  
 The conclusion of your summary will often reflect the concluding material that you find in the original text. In this case, it is what the authors see as the implications of their arguments. Remember that in all of the summary section, you are presenting the ideas of the author(s), not your own - this comes in the evaluation section

**8. Evaluating the text**  
 The other main argument of a critical review is to provide an **evaluation** of the original text. You will notice that the remainder of the review is concerned with this. The purpose of the evaluation is broadly for you to say what you think about the text - its strengths and weaknesses; what is interesting about it, what not so; how much you are persuaded by it; how much it has contributed to your understanding etc.

**9. Evaluating the text - i) negative comments**  
 You will notice that this student reviewer has chosen to focus on certain problems identified in the text. However, note that being 'critical' in a university context does not necessarily mean being 'negative'.  
  
 This student has focussed on several criteria:  
 - broad criticisms of ethnographic studies;  
 - use of formulaic responses which are context-dependent;  
 - lack of information regarding subjects and methodology.

**10. Evaluating the text - ii) positive comments**  
 Unless you feel that a text has no redeeming features at all, it is always good to show some balance in your commentary. Notice that the criterion applied here is that of the text being instrumental in opening up an area of research. It is always a good idea to be able to give an overall impression of a text. Before writing the review, try to decide whether your impression is a favourable or unfavourable one, and the organise your material accordingly.

Wolfson identified another two syntactic patterns, which accounted for another 16.1% and 14.9% of the data, respectively:

NP            [is ]            (really)        ADJ  
                  [looks]

I                (really)        [like ]            NP  
    [love]

PRO    is        (really)        (a)        ADJ        NP

From a corpus of 700 responses, Wolfson found that 85% of the compliments conformed to one of the 3 patterns above. From this, Wolfson concluded that the use of these patterns in ESL classrooms would be advantageous to students, who would then have knowledge of the form, as well as the function, of syntactic patterns as used by native speakers.

Leaving aside the positive developments which Wolfson's study added to our knowledge of compliments and complimenting behaviour, there are several criticisms which can be levelled at this work. First of all, a shortcoming of Wolfson's study that has also been levelled against other ethnographic studies, regards the method of data collection. This method is referred to as 'reduced', as it collapses rich and varied data into utterances that can be easily written down in a notebook (Nelson, Al Batal & El Bakary, 2002:45).

Another key criticism of this study is that compliments tend to be context-dependent, as Jiang (2006:39) states. For this reason, the use of formulaic responses will have limited utility, unless the English learner has an understanding, at the pragmatic level as well as linguistic, of the factors of the nature of the interaction and the relationship between the speaker and the hearer.

In addition, Wolfson supplies virtually no sociocontextual information regarding how and where the subjects acquired their tokens of complimenting behaviour, nor on the subjects themselves.

Finally, Wolfson is criticised for the use of 'explicit' comments, which, related to the first point regarding data collection, focuses on the formulaic compliments at the expense of 'implicit' ones, missing "those [compliments] in which the value judgement is presupposed and/or implicated by Gricean maxims" (Boyle, 2000:28). In other words, the methodology of her research has therefore limited the type of data which is examined.

Despite the above criticisms, Wolfson's study has been instrumental in exploring compliments as an area of linguistic and pragmatic research, particularly in regards to their utility for the instruction of learners of English.

**References**  
 Boyle, R. (2000). 'You've Worked with Elizabeth Taylor!': Phatic Functions and Implicit Compliments. *Applied Linguistics*, 21, 1, 26-46.  
 Hymes, D. (1962). The ethnography of speaking. In T Gladwin and W. C. Sturtevant (eds.) *Anthropology and human behaviour*. Washington, D.C.: Anthropological Society of Washington.  
 Ishihara, N. (2004) *Formal Instruction on the Speech Act of Giving and Responding to Compliments*. <http://www.paaljapan.org/resources/proceedings/PAAL7/pdfs/06noriko.pdf> (Accessed 22-7-07).  
 Jiang, X. (2006). Suggestions: What should ESL students know? *System*, 34, 36-54.  
 Nelson, G. L., Al Batal, M. & El Bakary, W. (2002). Directness vs. indirectness: Egyptian Arabic and US English communication style. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 26, 39-57.  
 Rose, K. R. & Kwai-fong, C. N. (2001). *Inductive and deductive approaches to teaching compliments and compliment responses*. <http://sunzi1.lib.hku.hk/hkjo/view/10/1000160.pdf> (Accessed 22-8-07).

**Tables**  
 When using tables that are presented in a text, ensure that they are a faithful reproduction of the original, with the correct information present.

**Signalling the shift to evaluation**  
 It is very important to signal when the **summary** of the text has stopped, and when the **evaluation** has begun.

**Signalling the type of evaluation**  
 It is important to make the nature of the evaluation clear - whether your comments are favourable or not. Notice the range of words and expressions used to signal a negative response to material, such as:  
 - a shortcoming of Wolfson's study...  
 - Wolfson is criticised for...  
 - Another key criticism of this study is...

**Quoting**  
 When you quote from a text, you need to use quotation marks and indicate the exact page numbers from which the quote originates. But avoid using too many quotes - instead opt for paraphrasing, and save quotes for important ideas.

**References**  
 Only list the additional texts you have cited in the review, not texts you have only read.

**11. Structure of the review**  
 The sample review is structured in a very conventional way, with a clear division of:  
 - **summary** of the text  
 - **evaluation** of the text  
    - negative  
    - positive  
 There are other possibilities, such as summarising the first part of a text and then evaluating it, before moving on to the second section.