

De geschiedenis van het genre 'compliment'

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4. Compliments in the past

Compliments have undergone changes in the history of English, and semantically the scope of the term has narrowed. Historically, the term "compliment" had a much wider application. The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition opens a window to the historical perspective. According to this source a "compliment" is

a ceremonial act or expression as a tribute of courtesy, 'usually understood to mean less than it declares' (J.); now, esp. a neatly-turned remark addressed to any one, implying or involving praise; but, also applied to a polite expression of praise or commendation in speaking of a person, or to any act taken as equivalent thereto. (*OED*, "compliment")

This is in accordance with Old German in which the term "compliment" "is a far more comprehensive term embracing oral, written and even non-verbal interaction rituals

for everyday and ceremonious communication situations" (Beetz 1999: 142).⁹ Speech acts like greetings and farewells, congratulations and condolences, and even requests and thanks, are included in compliments.¹⁰ Beetz extends the term to "all forms of initiating and maintaining contact such as introducing oneself and others, regards, recommendations, invitations, announcements, invitations to dance, good wishes, promises, offers of service, presentations, apologies; even 'reprimand compliments' are not considered to be a contradiction in terms" (see also Beetz 1990: 14–21, 109–115). The same applies to the semantic history of the English word "compliment". It is a general term including other speech acts in the early periods. Evidence can be found e.g. in the following uses of the word in English literature (extracts 6 and 7) and early English newspapers (extracts 8 and 9).

- (6) they paid each other the common Compliment of a Good-morrow, and then went to breakfast (Davies, Mary, *The Reformed Coquet*, 1724–25)
- (7) This Girl, notwithstanding her Country-Simplicity, knew a Compliment was expected from her on this Occasion (Lennox, Charlotte, *The Female Quixote*, 1752)
- (8) The 3d Instant the Queen of Spain began to receive the Compliments of Condoleance for the Death of the late King. (ZEN, 1701, lgz0366)
- (9) Cardinal Gabrieli, is by the intercession of the Popes Sister, dispensed with from his journey to his Residency, for which favour he has paid his Compliments, and is now Treating for the Purchase of the Lands of Fiano, belonging to Prince Ludovisio. (ZEN, 1671, lgz0052)

The compliment in (6) consists of a polite and perhaps somewhat formal greeting. In (7) a polite response is designated as a compliment, and the formulation makes it clear that, according to the writer, there is a certain contrast between country simplicity and the formality of a compliment. It is noteworthy if a simple girl from the country knows when a compliment is required.

The use of the term "compliment" in early newspapers likewise highlights the formal and indeed diplomatic aspect of this speech act. In the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, the term "compliment", as it is used in ZEN, referred exclusively to acts of diplomacy. Compliments were an important part of international politics. Representatives of a state paid appropriate compliments to the dignitaries of another state. Royals, the Pope, or other members of the nobility were often the recipients of

9. The German term *Komplimentierkunst* 'the art of complimenting' refers to compliments in this wider sense. In fact, *Komplimentierkunst* may be seen as equivalent to polite and courtly behavior in general, which can be traced back to the Renaissance period (cf. Beetz 1990, 1999).

10. The meaning 'regards, greetings' is still current. In our material we have comments like "How are you? Compliments to the young lady..." (Baring-Gould, Sabine, *In the Roar of the Sea* 1892, p. 36.) And in Portuguese, for instance, the cognate verb *cumprimentar* means both 'to compliment' and 'to greet' (Lachlan Mackenzie p.c.).

compliments. From the examples it can be deduced that these compliments were always an expression of good wishes and good intentions. Particularly frequent were compliments on the coronation of a new king or the accession of a dignitary to a high office. Welcome compliments were also frequent, as were compliments of condolence.

The modern conception that compliments are often not entirely true, and that some doubt is present, is found in some early examples as well.

- (10) Did he like your pronunciation? Yes Sir, but I believe it was but by way of Complement (EEBO: *The True Advancement of the French Tongue*, 1653: 178)

In all, examples of this type are numerous in our material (see below). A quotation from an English etiquette book, *The Academy of Complements* (1650: 320–321) makes the point about the inclusiveness of the term and ties compliments to the norms of the upper classes. It is evident that the speech community sharing the rules for conduct and interpretation displayed in these handbooks was the small elite at the top of the social hierarchy:

Complements are a short collation of Sweetmeats, to banquet and please the daintiest taste; they are the quintessence of wit, the refiners of speech, and fit the mind better then the apparel doth the body [sic, for body]: for the cloaths may be too strait, or point device; but complements are the minds free exercise. ...the moral of which is, That Wit and Women are fraile things, gilded hypocrites, specious out-sides; to which Complements, like feathers to small birds, make a proportion, though the body itself be but little. They are multiplying-glasses, and flattering Mirrors, that conceal age and wrinkles ... A complementive Submission, is the Flatterers and Politicians Key to open the most secret Cabinets of Princes breasts with...; The preface to a Complement is the motion of the body; the grace of it, the disposing of the countenance;... Complements are the language of Gallants (the meltings of their language) the musical ravishings of their perswasive tongues, the odours of their perfumed breaths; loving sighs, and the business of their afternoons...

(EEBO: *The Academy of Complements* 1650: 320–321.)

Etiquette books in Early Modern English contain model dialogues giving advice on how to approach people of high rank, the King, the Queen, noblemen, how to initiate polite requests, and how to behave in polite society. These dialogues were probably learned by heart, and model answers are also given.¹¹ Compliments belonged to the social practices of people of high rank. Ways of engaging in those activities had to be taught, and how these social activities became part of polite behavior lower down on the social scale must have been related to increasing literacy and growing prosperity among the middle classes.

11. Letter writing manuals are sometimes included in the same volumes. They give model address formulae and signature lines, but according to recent studies the advice was followed less frequently than earlier expected. Compliments could be learned in the same way from these manuals. Our material shows that a set of conventional compliments existed (see below).

Genres that build on compliments and related speech acts are found in the written form in the history of English, and the speech act of complimenting can be traced in the written culture of past periods from the late medieval period onwards. According to genre theory, new genres of writing are created to meet the cultural needs of discourse communities. In Early Modern culture, metatextual genres like prefaces and epilogues became important as they were addressed to patrons on whose benevolence the authors of the texts had to rely for their source of livelihood. Prefaces are already found in some medieval texts, but they grow in volume and importance in the sixteenth century, and it became customary to address the patron and the readers in separate prefaces. Addresses to the patron build on compliments and humiliative speech acts in classical styles, as defined by *ars dictaminis* as appropriate for addressing people of high rank. In the early material, the rhetorical eloquence of compliments follows the models of the French courtly practices with highly formulaic patterns. Speech act sequences are of interest here. In addition to the compliment phrases with praise and flattery, they contain self-humiliative expressions as part of the formula. Examples of this pattern can be found even earlier in the literature. The genre of complaint poetry is perhaps the outmost development of the tradition with its elaborate address in which face enhancing acts are accompanied by humiliative speech formulae (cf. example (3) above). Chaucer transferred this genre into courtly poetry in English.

- (11) Humblest o herte, highest of reverence,
 Benygne flour, coroune of virtues
 alle,
 Sheweth unto youre rial excellence/ Your servaunt, yf I durste me so calle...
 (*The Complaint unto Pity*, lines 57–60, *The Riverside Chaucer*).