



Perception of compliment responses among young adult speakers from Lombardy

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ABSTRACT

Compliment responses (CRs) have been widely investigated in variational and intercultural pragmatics as sociolinguistic norms rooted in different linguistic communities. This study explores how young speakers from Lombardy (Northern Italy) perceive various dispreferred CR strategies – particularly those involving irony, self-discredit, or Discredit of the Complimenter – elicited in Eastern Piedmont (Northern Italy, bordering Lombardy) and Campania (Southern Italy). We assess whether pragmatic cues reveal regional origins in Italian compliments. We addressed three main questions: (1) the relationship between CR strategies and interactants' geographic origin; (2) how regional variation affects perceptions of communicative intent (e.g., irony, sincerity, politeness); (3) the applicability of existing politeness models to Italian regional varieties. Data were collected through an online perception-based questionnaire with 13 authentic dialogic stimuli from the Co.Cor. corpus, representing five CR strategies from Northern and Southern speakers. A total of 122 responses were gathered, including 89 from Lombard respondents, who rated each CR for perceived politeness, sincerity, irony, and social intimacy, hypothesizing speaker's geographic origin. Findings reveal a clear in-group bias: Lombard respondents frequently attributed CRs from other regions to their own, and perceived familiar strategies as local. Regional stereotypes appear weak, as interactional norms seem shaped more by shared generational identity than by geographic origin. Politeness was associated with agreement or playful acceptance strategies, while disagreement was often judged as rude. These findings suggest pragmatic self-referentiality, whereby familiar norms are localized regardless of origin, and align more closely with Arundale's relational model of face than with Brown and Levinson's framework.

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1. Introduction

Holmes's (1988: 485) classic definition describes a compliment as “a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some “good” (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer”. Other scholars have emphasized how compliments are used to set and maintain comity among speakers (Bettoni, 2006: 100), thus acting as a “social lubricant” (Wolfson, 1981: 86).

Early research on compliments focused on a limited number of languages and cultures, but the growing interest in intercultural pragmatics and polio-centric languages has emphasized the need for a more in-depth knowledge of the socio-

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pragmatic variability of speech acts, thus including compliments (Schneider and Barron, 2008). Additionally, recent developments in the neurolinguistics of pragmatics have emphasized that speech act research should address not only production but also perception (Nhung, 2014).

This study focuses on the variability of compliment responses (henceforth, CRs) across Italian regional varieties, with a particular emphasis on the classic Northern vs. Southern varieties opposition (see section 2.2). As is well known, numerous studies have now been dedicated to the typology of responses to compliments. The first differentiation among the many differences they present (and probably also the most significant for the purposes of this work) could be linked to the dual nature of the compliment: as an assessment (verdictive function), the complimenter is providing a positive evaluation of a topic, the preferred response to which is agreement. If considered as an expressive act or a verbal gift (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1987: 15), or a supportive act (supportive function), the preferred response is acceptance. When creating a typology of responses to compliments, therefore, different scholars have chosen to prioritise one aspect over the other, subordinating either the agreement or acceptance component. Most scholars opt for the latter, creating typologies based primarily on the acceptability of a compliment (see, for example, Chen, 1993; Frescura, 1996; Holmes, 1986). The typology adopted in this work follows this approach. Pomerantz (1978) considers agreements and acceptances to be interrelated; however, she also notes that “appreciations over agreements seem to be preferentially selected for accepting compliments” (Pomerantz, 1978: 88). Alfonzetti (2009) follows in Pomerantz’s footsteps, while Golato (2003, 2005) takes up Pomerantz’s typology and articulates the section of responses in-between acceptances and rejections. A smaller number of scholars choose instead to focus on the degree of agreement/disagreement when categorising responses to compliments (e.g., Herbert 1989). Other scholars use even more complex categorizations, which cross multiple parameters (e.g., Fargal and Al Khatib, 2001).

In this work, all responses to compliments were categorized according to the typology of responses to compliments proposed in Castagneto and Ravetto (2015), exemplified in Table 1. Although the chosen typology favours acceptance over agreement as a criterion for classifying responses, we recognise the importance of the agreement factor, and we are aware that a high agreement rate does not necessarily indicate acceptance of a compliment. In the responses investigated, however, the parameters of acceptance and agreement run parallel: as will be seen, Pleased Acceptances (a sub-type of Direct Acceptance) involve full acceptance and optimal agreement, whereas Ironic Acceptances (a sub-type of Limited Acceptance) may contain a mild degree of disagreement, partly hidden by irony. It is no coincidence that all these responses

Table 1
CR classification in Castagneto and Ravetto (2015: 393), with different examples.

Main strategy	Sub-strategy	Example
Direct acceptance	Thanking	A: Nice shirt! B: Thank you.
	Pleased acceptance	A: What a nice skirt you put on today! B: Yes, indeed! I feel fabulous in it!
	Acceptance	A: Wow! that watch looks amazing! B: Yes!
	Non-verbal acceptance Return	e.g. a smile or a small nod A: What a nice dress! B: Yours looks amazing too!
Limited acceptance	Ironic acceptance	A: You look gorgeous today! B: Only today?
	Minimization	A: What a nice haircut you have! B: Yes, until I wash it ...
	Lateral deflection of - Merit - Quality - Topic (explanation/justification)	(Merit) A: Your cake was delicious! B: My mother’s recipe! (Quality) A: You have a very cool sweater today! B: It’s also very warm! (Topic) A: Nice haircut, dear! B: It was really necessary ...
	Reassurance Request	A: Nice dress, honey! B: Do you really like it?
Non acceptance	Reductive Deflection	A: Nice dress! B: It’s too tight on the hips.
	Discredit of the complimentee	A: You’ve wonderful eyes, dear! B: The problem is the rest of the face, I’m afraid ...
	Rejection	A: Your new car looks amazing! B: No, it’s just a piece of trash!
	Discredit of the complimenter	A: You look amazing today? B: Are you sure you don’t need glasses!
Ignoring	Ignoring	(Absence of answer)

are considered polite by the respondents overall. Conversely, the Discredits of the Complimenter, which are characterised as rejections and express disagreement, are perceived as rude.

Drawing on naturally occurring production data collected in the Co.Cor. corpus (www.cocor.eu, [Ravetto and Castagneto, 2020](#)) and related work, we adopt an experimental approach to testing the perception of the appropriateness of different CR strategies in a group of University students from Lombardy, in the North-West of Italy. The main aim was to test how potentially ambiguous CR strategies, such the ones involving irony (see section 2.3), were perceived in terms of politeness, sincerity and joke by the respondents. Furthermore, respondents were asked to identify the potential origin of the speakers of the different speech acts, by basing their answers solely on pragmatic cues (see 3.2 for details on the stimuli). The results of this perceptual study will advance the discussion on intra-language compliment variability, and on the link between production and perception in pragmatic research (section 5).

2. Theoretical remarks

2.1. Compliments as variable speech acts

Compliments are complex speech acts that must satisfy different felicity conditions. If we apply [Searle's \(1969\)](#) scheme to compliments, this speech act has to meet both a sincerity and an essential condition: the Speaker (S) must believe in the propositional content of the compliment, and attribute credits to the Hearer (H) for the complimented good (sincerity condition); moreover, S must be convinced that the compliment will meet H's expectations, so that the compliment will function as an expression of S's appreciation for H, and make H recognize that S appreciates them (essential condition). Therefore, compliments are expressive acts, since the sincerity condition specifies two psychological states, that is appreciation (for H and its goods) and belief. However, this means that the compliment could also be insincere, regarding either the comity among speakers rather than the content of the speech act (like in the case of envy, [Chen, 1993](#)), thus often leading to renegotiation. Another possible source of insincerity of the compliment is the connection between the psychological state and the surface meaning of the compliment. In [Pomerantz's \(1978\)](#) words, compliments are assessments, whose truth value depends on the relevance of the complimented good to the complementee.

The perlocutionary value of compliments has also been emphasized by classical works in the speech act theory framework (e.g., [Levinson, 1983](#); [Holmes, 1988](#)). Works in ethnolinguistics and intercultural pragmatics have also highlighted how compliments work as perlocutionary acts towards the entire community of speakers, by reinforcing socially desirable behaviours. These works have also pointed up compliment (and CR) variability in relation to the topics of the compliment (e.g. natural vs. transient physical attributes, skills and possessions, cf. [Manes, 1983](#)), and the relationship between speaker and hearer. Indeed, an unequal status of S and H should lead to an overlapping with the speech act of praise ([Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2011](#)), or flattery. Therefore, sociolinguistic factors greatly affect the variability in compliment making, their topic, linguistic content and illocutionary force. For instance, it has been emphasized how the topics of compliments are more frequently physical attributes and personal belongings in western cultures, whereas in China and Japan, abilities and competences tend to be more complimented ([Chen, 1993](#); [Cheng, 2003](#)).

2.2. The sociolinguistic variability of Italian compliments

The research on compliments and compliment responses in Italy has focused the attention on the cultural-sensitivity of this speech act, by emphasizing its sociolinguistic variability. Among the previous works on this topic, [Alfonzetti \(2009\)](#) has defined compliments as context-sensitive acts and socially situated acts within a conversational framework. In her works on spontaneous conversation in Sicily, she has also emphasized how Italian compliments often deviate from the classical [Brown and Levinson's \(1987\)](#) politeness model based on the notion of face-threatening vs. face-enhancing acts.

Similar conclusions are explicitly discussed in [Castagneto \(2023\)](#), based on more than a decade of compliment and CR collected across different Italian regional varieties, partially documented in the Co.Cor. corpus (www.cocor.eu). This extensive empirical work has demonstrated systematic regional variation in compliment management, particularly along the macro-opposition between northern varieties (especially Piedmontese and Lombard) and southern varieties (notably Campanian and Molisian), with northern speakers showing significantly higher rates of direct agreement and acceptance strategies ([Castagneto, 2019: 140](#); [Castagneto and Ravetto, 2015: 402–404](#); [Castagneto and Sidraschi, 2020: 61](#)). These findings establish regional/areal variation as a fundamental and indispensable socio-pragmatic variable for explaining compliment and compliment response behaviour in Italian. On the basis of this evidence, [Castagneto \(2023\)](#) proposes distinct politeness models for different Italian varieties, thus treating Italian *de facto* as a policentric language in pragmatic terms.

A comprehensive classification of CRs was proposed by [Castagneto and Ravetto \(2015\)](#) basing on Italian and German data, later collected in Co.Cor. corpus (see also [Ravetto and Castagneto 2020](#)). This classification recognizes four main response strategies, each of them also divided in sub-strategies, as exemplified in [Table 1](#).

In [Castagneto \(forthcoming\)](#), Ironic Acceptance has been distinguished in two sub-types: Ironic acceptance with Praise Upgrade and with Praise Downgrade. The first sub-strategy only appears similar to a Pleased Acceptance, because it formally increases the overall praise conveyed by the speech act, however, it differs in that it does not include an explicit acceptance sequence.

Ironic Acceptances with Praise Upgrades are relatively infrequent. For example, see [Herbert \(1989, p. 13\)](#), claiming that “within the present corpus, there are extremely few instances of Praise Upgrades as a CR type. Such Praise Upgrades

typically have a joking or playful connotation, and they may occur only among close acquaintances". Therefore, they are not even mentioned in most of CRs typologies. In the Co.Cor. corpus they are also relatively rare (see also [Castagneto, forthcoming](#)).

In previous typologies of CRs, this type of response is often categorised just as a Praise Upgrade, i.e. a form of full acceptance, based on its explicit content. For example, see [Tran \(2007: 8\)](#), who labels this type of response "compliment upgrade" at the top of the continuum between acceptance and denial, and [Frescura \(1996\)](#), who labels it "Pleased Acceptance". At first glance, an Irony Acceptances with Praise Upgrade is effectively similar to a Pleased Acceptance, because with this type of response, the person being complimented acknowledges the compliment and amplifies its illocutionary force, as illustrated by the following example from [Tran \(2007\)](#): "A: Nice car! B: Thanks. Brand new". Yet, Irony Acceptance with Praise Upgrade is something different, because it is ironic, so neither the acceptance nor the agreement with the complimenter is total. However, scholars often include responses that require interpretation as playful or ironic in this category as well (cf. [Herbert, 1989](#); [Chen, 1993](#)). Only [Pomerantz \(1978\)](#) categorised the label 'Praise Upgrade' as a 'self-praise avoidance mechanism' rather than an acceptance in itself, and this choice has not been adopted or commented on by other scholars.

In the Co.Cor corpus (Irony Acceptances) in general are relatively infrequent. Indeed, irony represents one of the most challenging phenomena within pragmatic theory due to its inherently indirect nature and its reliance on shared contextual and sociocultural knowledge ([Gibbs, 2000](#); [Wilson and Sperber, 2012](#)). While irony has been extensively studied in relation to politeness, humour, and face-threatening acts ([Attardo, 2020](#); [Dynel, 2014](#)), its role in the specific domain of compliments and compliment responses (CRs) has received comparatively less focused attention. Nevertheless, irony frequently appears in compliment interactional sequences, functioning both as a mitigator of face threats and as a marker of in-group making.

In [Brown and Levinson's \(1987\)](#) face model, compliments are mostly considered as potential FTAs as they might be interpreted as infringements on the rights of the recipient to be left alone. Moreover, in the authors' words, compliments can be seen as expressions of envy or admiration: "S indicates that he likes or would like something of H's" ([Brown and Levinson, 1987: 66](#)), so they put H in the position of protecting himself and the object of the compliment. Yet, sometimes compliments could work as a strategy of positive politeness, as inherently face-enhancing acts, often interpreted as positive politeness strategies. Irony, however, could be used to transform a superficially positive utterance into a negative one, by using extralinguistic cues like prosody or facial expression: in this way, compliments are interpreted as criticism rather than praise ([Colston & O'Brien, 2000](#)). In CRs, irony can be used as a strategy to avoid explicit self-praise, however same ironic statements could also lead to misinterpretation, thus opening new negotiation sequences. [Haugh \(2007\)](#) has highlighted how the pragmatic use of irony in CRs is highly social-dependent and, as a consequence, also highly variable sociolinguistically. Furthermore, ironic CRs could function as a we-code strategy, signalling in-group membership and solidarity, while for outsiders the same utterance may seem mocking or even rude ([Ruhi, 2006](#)).

In the analysis of speech act production and perception, and, in particular, in the case of compliment and CRs, irony could represent a challenge for traditional models of speech act theory, thus requiring a full understanding of social dynamics and of the cultural norms at play.

2.3. Research questions and hypothesis

As presented in the preceding sections, previous analysis on Italian compliments and CRs have highlighted their sociolinguistic variability, especially in relation to the geographic origin of the speakers. Previous studies have focused mainly on compliment production, as collected or elicited through various research methods, ultimately leading to the publication of the already mentioned Co.Cor. corpus. The perception of pragmatic speech acts, and particularly of CRs, has notably been largely neglected. Although there are many studies analysing responses to compliments, presenting various typologies (among others: [Pomerantz, 1978](#); [Holmes, 1986](#); [Frescura, 1996](#); [Fargal and Al-Khatib, 2001](#); [Lorenzo-Dus, 2001](#); [Golato, 2002, 2003](#); [Cheng, 2003](#); [Moustapha, 2004, 2010](#); [Tran, 2007](#)), the perception of compliments has been little investigated, and always and only from the perspective of the recipient. For example, [Herbert \(1989\)](#) focuses on some cases in which "hearers are occasionally suspicious of speakers' motives in uttering compliments. Further, hearers can, again willfully or not, misperceive the speaker's intention" ([Herbert 1989: 27](#)). The perception of the act of complimenting (compliment + response) as a whole by observers who do not take part in the act has received little attention. The observer's perception is necessarily influenced by their own cultural background and model of politeness, and different judgements often reflect the observers' belonging to linguistic communities with different pragmatic norms, even in different geographic areas within the same country. Yet, there is a growing body of research on perception in experimental pragmatics at the interface with neuro- and psycholinguistics (e.g., [Bambini and Bara, 2010](#)).

In this study, we aimed to test in particular how potentially ambiguous CR strategies could be associated to specific Italian varieties, with a particular emphasis on a North vs. South opposition, in line with the findings of previous works on compliment production (e.g., [Castagneto and Sidraschi, 2020](#); [Castagneto, 2023](#)). For this reason, we prepared an online questionnaire with real examples extracted from the Co.Cor. corpus, as shown in the following section. Examples were sometimes slightly modified only by amending areal linguistic features (e.g., the use of morphological forms areally marked as more Southern Italian). Without any areal linguistic markedness, respondents had to rely solely on considerations about the pragmatic management of the act (see section 3.1).

The research questions and hypothesis we aimed to test were as follows:

RQ1. To which geographical area do respondents most frequently associate specific CR strategies?

RQ1-Hypothesis: Speakers from the same geographical area as the origin of the compliment exchange are expected to perceive it as more aligned with their own pragmatic norms. Similar to how a we-code is recognized in contrast to a they-code, certain pragmatic strategies may look familiar and perceived as distinct from those used by out-group speakers. So a Lombard speaker could perceive Piedmontese compliments and CSs as their own, while feeling the responses from Campania as foreign and ‘southern’.

RQ2. How is the communicative intent of the respondent toward the compliment perceived?

RQ2 – Hypothesis: Ironical Acceptance (with Praise Upgrades or Downgrades), Pleased Acceptance, and responses that Discredit either the Complimentee or the Complimenter represent marked (and, therefore, rare) types of CRs. This question aims at investigating which linguistic cues influence the interpretation of responses falling into these nuanced categories.

RQ3. Which politeness model could better interpret the pragmatic strategies of CRs in Italian data?

RQ3 – Hypothesis: In line with the intercultural pragmatic theoretical framework, and based on the evidence of previous studies on compliment production, we believe that classical face-based models of politeness, particularly those based on face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson, 1987) or maxims such as modesty (Leech, 1983), do not adequately explain the relational dynamics observed in the data unless they interact with more recent relational approaches (Arundale, 2006, 2010). This is necessary in order to make sense of the respondents’ complex interpersonal evaluations.

3. Method and data

3.1. The questionnaire

In this study, we aimed to test the perception of CRs as collected in the Co.Cor. Corpus, whose pragmatics vary depending on the area of elicitation of the compliment. We focus on 5 pragmatic categories in Castagneto and Ravetto's (2015) typology (see also point 2.3): Pleased Acceptance, Ironical Acceptance with Praise Upgrade and with Praise Downgrade, Discredit of the Complimentee, and Discredit of the Complimenter. For each category, a compliment-CR sequence was selected for two different recording areas, Piedmont (in Northern Italy) and Campania (in Southern Italy), in order to reflect a major North-South contrast, two very different areas with respect to the pragmatics of compliments (see also Castagneto and Sidraschi, 2020).

The planned 10 stimuli (2 places by 5 categories) were then increased to 13 with the following distribution: 4 stimuli for the strategy Ironical Acceptance with Praise Upgrade (2 from Piedmont, 2 from Campania), 3 for the Discredit of the Complimenter (2 from Piedmont, 1 from Campania), 2 each for the remaining CR strategies, balanced between Piedmontese and Campania compliments. We decided to include two additional compliment exchanges, one from each area, in order to better explore the most vague and ambiguous CR types, that is Ironical Acceptance with Praise Upgrade. We decided to include in our test also another instance of Discredit of the Complimenter (as elicited in Piedmont, Northern Italy), because this CR sub-typology displays different possible degrees of rudeness (see Castagneto and Sidraschi, 2020; Castagneto 2023). Therefore, the total amount of stimuli was 13.

These selected sequences were then standardized in order to avoid regional markers acting as possible cues for identifying speakers’ area of origin. For instance, B’s original answer in compliment C01 was *Eh! Stanno a 320 euro* (am. engl. “Sheesh, they’re like 320 euros!”): the construction *stare a* (lit. “stay at”) was perceived by a preliminary research group as regional Southern Italian because of its formulation, so it was amended as in Table 2.

Table 2

Stimuli selection extracted from the Co.Cor corpus.

Code	Strategy	Origin	Text (Italian)	Translation	Source
P08	Pleased acceptance	Piedmont	A: <i>Che bello il telefono tutto rosa!</i> B: <i>Sì bellissimo, io adoro il rosa ... ho anche l'I-pod rosa</i>	A: <i>How cute is your mobile phone, all pink!</i> B: <i>Yes, it is very cute. I love pink ... I even have a pink I-pod</i>	Co.Cor. – C00436
C10	Pleased acceptance	Campania	A: <i>Il rossetto è troppo bello ... con i brillantini non si è mosso proprio</i> B: <i>Anche a me piace ... È che è finito il problema ... È che non si trova più!</i>	A: <i>This little lipstick is really beautiful ... with glitter, it stayed perfect</i> B: <i>I like it too ... the problem is that it's finished ... and I can't find it anymore</i>	Co.Cor. C00459
P07	Ironical acceptance – Praise upgrade	Piedmont	A: <i>Adri, ma bella alla fine la maglietta che hai messo</i> B: <i>Hai visto quant'è figa?</i>	A: <i>Adri, the shirt you are wearing is very nice at the end</i> B: <i>See how cool it is?</i>	Co.Cor. – C01150

Table 2 (continued)

Code	Strategy	Origin	Text (Italian)	Translation	Source
C01	Ironie acceptance – Praise upgrade	Campania	A: <i>Che belle scarpine!</i> B: <i>Eh! 320 euro ...</i>	A: <i>What lovely little shoes!</i> B: <i>Eh! 320 euros ...</i>	Co.Cor. – C00477 (modified)
C04	Ironie acceptance – Praise upgrade	Campania	A: <i>Che bel cappello!</i> B: <i>Grazie! Se era brutto non me lo compravo.</i>	A: <i>What a beautiful hat!</i> B: <i>Thank you! If it were ugly I wouldn't have bought it</i>	Italiano (2022: 40)
P05	Ironie acceptance – praise Downgrade	Piedmont	A: <i>Avete visto com'è figa 'sta giacchetta?</i> B: <i>Sono tornato negli anni '70 ... Simon Le bon</i>	A: <i>Have you seen how cool this jacket is?</i> B: <i>I'm back in the 70s ... Simon Le Bon</i>	Co.Cor. – C00358
C11	Ironie acceptance – praise Downgrade	Campania	A: <i>Ma come sei sexy con questa maglietta!</i> B: <i>Troppo!</i>	A: <i>How sexy you look in this shirt!</i> B: <i>Too much!</i>	Co.Cor. – C01345
P12	Ironie acceptance – Praise upgrade	Piedmont	A: <i>Ti stanno bene gli occhiali</i> B: <i>No ... sono io che sto bene a loro!</i>	A: <i>The glasses look good on you</i> B: <i>No ... it's me who looks good in them!!</i>	Co.Cor. – C01244
P02	Discredit of the complimentee	Piedmont	A: <i>Hai un bellissimo cappello</i> B: <i>Sì ma è la faccia sotto che non va bene</i>	A: <i>That's a beautiful hat</i> B: <i>Yes but it is the face under it that doesn't work</i>	Co.Cor. – C00710
C09	Discredit of the complimentee	Campania	A: <i>Stasera con questo vestito sei proprio sexy!</i> B: <i>Sexy ... sembro la Befana ... se questo è sexy siamo proprio rovinati, tesoro!</i>	A: <i>Tonight you look so sexy in that outfit!</i> B: <i>Sexy ... I look like the Befana (the Christmas witch) ... if this is sexy, we're doomed, darling!</i>	Co.Cor. – C00641 (modified)
P06	Discredit of the complimenter	Piedmont	A: <i>Devo dirti che hai proprio dei bellissimi orecchini eh</i> B: <i>Ma che scemo!</i>	A: <i>I must say that your earrings are really lovely, eh</i> B: <i>What a dummy!</i>	Co.Cor. C00660 (modified)
P13	Discredit of the complimenter	Piedmont	A: <i>Ti sei fatta un bellissimo completo!</i> B: <i>Non prendermi in giro eh!</i>	A: <i>You got yourself a wonderful suit!</i> B: <i>Don't make fun of me eh!</i>	Co.Cor. – C00703
C03	Discredit of the complimenter	Campania	A: <i>Bella borsa, tesoro!</i> B: <i>Ma zitta che è tutta rotta e devo comprarne una nuova</i>	A: <i>Beautiful bag, my darling!</i> B: <i>Shut up that it's all torn, I need a new one.</i>	(Italiano 2022: 66)

The selected standardized stimuli are presented in Table 2, already divided for pragmatic strategy and origin, and with their English literal translation. The order of presentation mirrors the order of presentation of the stimuli in the online questionnaire, as it will be explained later.

As well as to avoid regional markers, some of the stimuli have been modified to maintain the compliment topic (i.e., objects) and to better clarify the CR category. For instance, stimuli P06 is taken from the Co.Cor. corpus, but the original compliment concerned the eyes (it. *occhi*) rather than the earrings (it. *orecchini*). The CR in stimuli C09 was also modified from the original collected in the corpus by substituting the reference to the *Befana of Benevento* with only a generic *Befana* (i.e., the Christmas witch), whose ugly appearance is part of the shared Italian cultural knowledge. Please note that only the stimuli have been slightly tweaked in order not to introduce undesired 'noise' in the data, while the CRs remain unchanged, and the stimuli are, therefore, completely authentic.

After a preliminary data collection phase, more issues in the stimuli were also pointed out, and modified to better fit the purposes of this experiment and to avoid respondents' confusion. After another round of preliminary testing, the final 13 stimuli were included in a Google module questionnaire for distribution.

In the questionnaire, respondents were asked to read each dialogical sequence, and to rate the CR (i.e. speaker B's answers) on a 7-point Likert scale, according to four different parameters: politeness/rudeness, sincerity/insincerity, serious/playful, and speakers' level of intimacy. It should be noted that the serious/playful scale was deliberately left undefined in the instructions provided to respondents, and it could include also an ironic nuance. Irony is a notoriously ambiguous pragmatic phenomenon, since it is highly context-dependent, socially negotiated, and variably interpreted (Haugh, 2007; Ruhi, 2006). We opted not to impose a stipulative definition, but rather to elicit respondents' emic interpretations of whether a given CR was perceived as playful, teasing, ironic, or sincere. This methodological choice reflects our focus on perceptual variability and aligns with research showing that folk pragmatic categories such as "irony" are inherently fuzzy and shaped by in-group norms and interactional context.

Sometimes, among young people rudeness is not perceived as such, but it is instead an expression of in-groupness. Not in our case, though. Our respondents are not involved in any way (neither sympathetic nor otherwise) with the person giving the compliment, they do not engage in facework and consider the rudeness/politeness of the compliment from an outsider perspective. If they judge a compliment as 'rude', it means that it was somehow inappropriate.

The respondents were also invited to make guesses about the gender, possible age range and place of origin of both speakers in each dialogue. To avoid undesired misunderstanding, it was specified that both speakers in each dialogue share the same age and origin, and a list of predefined answers were provided for selection. After having read each stimuli, respondents were also asked to specify whether, in response to A's compliment, they would have answered in the same way as B or differently, eventually writing down their alternative response to the compliment.

Finally, sociolinguistic characteristics of the respondents were also collected, in particular concerning place of birth, family's origin and place of living.

3.2. Data set

The questionnaire was shared among students of the authors and their colleagues between October 2024 and February 2025. A total of 122 questionnaire responses was collected, with the vast majority of respondents being aged between 18 and 34. Female respondents were also more numerous than males (about 70% of the respondents). Finally, due to the high levels of North-South mobility, especially among young people, many respondents have southern origins but were born and raised in the North.

For this reason, it was decided to create a unified variable for the origin of respondents, and to select only the most numerous group, that is respondents born in Lombardy and living in the same area, for a total of 89 respondents.

4. Analysis

4.1. Speakers' origin

Tables 3 and 4 show the assumptions made by our young respondents from Lombardy about where the two speakers in each compliment were from.

Table 3
Speaker's attributed origin for compliments collected in Piedmont (North Italy).

Compliments from North Italy (Nr.)	Assigned Speakers' Origin						
	Campania	Lombardy	Piedmont	Sardinia	Sicily	Tuscany	Other
P02	5 (5.6%)	54 (60.7%)	16 (18%)	2 (2.2%)	1 (1.1%)	8 (9%)	3 (3.4%)
P05	3 (3.4%)	78 (87.6%)	1 (1.1%)	0	1 (1.1%)	2 (2.2%)	4 (4.5%)
P06	5 (5.6%)	45 (50.6%)	13 (14.6%)	4 (4.5%)	5 (5.6%)	13 (14.6%)	4 (4.5%)
P07	3 (3.4%)	59 (66.3%)	7 (7.9%)	2 (2.2%)	3 (3.4%)	8 (9%)	7 (7.9%)
P08	12 (13.5%)	42 (47.2%)	11 (12.4%)	2 (2.2%)	3 (3.4%)	11 (12.4%)	8 (9%)
P12	10 (11.2%)	41 (46.1%)	13 (14.6%)	5 (5.6%)	2 (2.2%)	10 (11.2%)	8 (9%)
P13	8 (9%)	37 (41.6%)	11 (12.4%)	1 (1.1%)	9 (10.1%)	15 (16.9%)	8 (9%)
Total	46 (7.4%)	356 (57.1%)	72 (11.6%)	16 (2.6%)	24 (3.9%)	67 (10.8%)	42 (6.7%)

Table 4
Speakers attributed origin for compliments collected in Campania (South Italy).

Compliments from South Italy (Nr.)	Assigned Speakers' Origin						
	Campania	Lombardy	Piedmont	Sardinia	Sicily	Tuscany	Other
C01	1 (1.1%)	61 (68.5%)	9 (10.1%)	0	1 (1.1%)	12 (13.5%)	5 (5.6%)
C03	13 (14.6%)	50 (56.2%)	13 (14.6%)	0	3 (3.4%)	7 (7.9%)	3 (3.4%)
C04	25 (28.1%)	29 (32.6%)	8 (9%)	2 (2.2%)	8 (9%)	10 (11.2%)	7 (7.9%)
C09	11 (12.4%)	48 (53.9%)	11 (12.4%)	2 (2.2%)	5 (5.6%)	6 (6.7%)	6 (6.7%)
C10	22 (24.7%)	18 (20.2%)	6 (6.7%)	8 (9%)	22 (24.7%)	8 (9%)	5 (5.6%)
C11	5 (5.6%)	63 (70.8%)	4 (4.5%)	3 (3.4%)	2 (2.2%)	5 (5.6%)	7 (7.9%)
Total	77 (14.4%)	269 (50.4%)	51 (9.6%)	15 (2.8%)	41 (7.7%)	48 (9%)	33 (6.2%)

A particularly noteworthy finding is that our Lombard respondents attributed the vast majority of the compliment exchanges to people from their own region. This is evident in the data reported in Tables 3 and 4, statistically significant, respectively, for $\chi^2(36) = 86.83$, $p < 0.0001$, Cramer's $V = 0.152$ and $\chi^2(30) = 14.638$, $p < 0.0001$, Cramer's $V = 0.233$.

In both cases — compliments attributed to Piedmont (Table 3) and to Campania (Table 4) — the highest percentage for each compliment consistently falls within the *Lombardia* column: this suggests a strong tendency among our Lombard respondents to localise the speech behaviour represented in the data within their own regional context. The only exception is found in C10, which is perceived as originating from Campania or possibly Sicily (24.7% each), thus being broadly associated with southern Italy. One plausible explanation is a subtle morpho-pragmatic cue: the use of the diminutive suffix *-ino*

in *rossettino* (“little lipstick”). In this context, the diminutive does not simply denote small size but conveys a connotation of endearment, an expressive nuance that may have led respondents to associate the utterance with southern varieties of Italian, where, according to the stereotypes, such affective markers are more commonly used in everyday interaction.

It should also be noted that two of the selected compliments from Campania could also have been compatible with Lombard politeness. This is the case of compliments C03 and C11. Compliment C03, which was elicited in Campania, is characterised by directness that may border on rudeness for those accustomed to more indirect forms of politeness. This was how it was perceived by speakers of Molisan origin who recognised it as a compliment from Campania (see [Castagneto, forthcoming](#)). The Lombards also exhibit this directness, which serves to emphasise a high level of intimacy between interlocutors. Compliment C11 ironically expresses disagreement with the compliment’s statement (‘How sexy you look ...’) through the adverbial phrase ‘too much’, which should be interpreted as antiphrastic. This type of irony, which could be misunderstood as bragging if not interpreted correctly, is another trait shared by Lombards and Campanians ([Castagneto, forthcoming](#)). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the respondents considered these compliments to be Lombard.

Some respondents appeared to recognize a distinct “Campanian communicative style”, since the compliments originating from Campania were correctly attributed to their region of origin in 14.4% of cases. This is a significant figure, considering that no other non-Lombard region surpassed 10% for any given compliment (with the exception of Lombardy itself, but it is also significant that Lombard respondents attributed Campanian compliments to their own region in 50.4% of cases). By contrast, compliments originating from Piedmont were perceived as Lombard, that is, as representative of a generic northern Italian style or, at the very least, not associated with the South. When these compliments were not attributed to Lombardy, they are most often assigned to Piedmont (11.6%) or Tuscany (10.8%). No other region exceeded the 10% threshold.

All in all, our young respondents did not appear to be particularly sensitive to regional language stereotypes. Their underlying logic can be summarized as follows: “I could say it; therefore, it must be a Lombard compliment”.

4.2. Politeness/rudeness perception

[Table 5](#) shows the number of responses and the percentage of each CR type on the Likert scale, which measures the degree of politeness on a scale from 1 to 7 (1 = very polite; 7 = very rude; 4 = neutral).

Table 5
Politeness evaluation of CR.

	1 Very polite 1	2 2	3 3	4 4	5 5	6 6	7 Very rude 7
Pleased acceptance (2 stimuli)	55 (30.9%)	67 (37.6%)	32 (18%)	17 (9.6%)	5 (2.8%)	2 (1.1%)	0
Ironie acceptance praise Downgrade (2 stimuli)	13 (7.3%)	39 (21.9%)	44 (24.7%)	53 (29.8%)	18 (10.1%)	9 (5.1%)	2 (1.1%)
Ironie acceptance praise upgrade (4 stimuli)	16 (4.5%)	67 (18.8%)	69 (19.4%)	118 (33.1%)	57 (16%)	22 (6.2%)	7 (2%)
Discredit of the complementee (2 stimuli)	6 (3.4%)	29 (16.3%)	34 (19.1%)	66 (37.1%)	31 (17.4%)	9 (5.1%)	3 (1.7%)
Discredit of the complimenter (3 stimuli)	4 (1.5%)	19 (7.1%)	43 (16.1%)	84 (31.5%)	58 (21.7%)	37 (13.9%)	22 (8.2%)

[Table 5](#) concerns the evaluation of CR in the overall dataset ($\chi^2(24) = 321.169$, $p < 0.0001$, Cramer’s $V = 0.263$). Pleased Acceptance is perceived as more polite, with scores concentrated between 1 (very polite) and 3 (polite) value. Ironie Acceptance responses and Discredit of the Complementee cluster around mid-scale ratings, but closer to the politeness pole. Conversely, and as somehow expected, Discredit of the Complimenter shows a significant tail toward higher rudeness values (e.g., 43.8% of ratings between 5 and 7). This suggests a complex understanding of facework in critical responses (see also the general discussion).

[Tables 6 and 7](#) are constructed using the same criterion of T and present the same data but broken down according to their actual place of elicitation: [Table 6](#) shows the politeness ratings of Piedmontese compliments, while [Table 7](#) presents respondents’ judgements regarding compliments elicited in Campania.

Table 6
Politeness evaluation of CR collected in Piedmont.

	1 Very Polite	2	3	4	5	6	7 Very rude
Pleased acceptance	37 (41.6%)	30 (33.7%)	12 (13.5%)	7 (7.9%)	1 (1.1%)	2 (2.2%)	0
Ironie acceptance	5 (5.6%)	20 (22.5%)	20 (22.5%)	27 (30.3%)	10 (11.2%)	7 (7.9%)	0
Praise Downgrade							
Ironie acceptance	15 (8.4%)	60 (33.7%)	36 (20.2%)	52 (29.2%)	12 (6.7%)	2 (1.1%)	1 (0.6%)
Praise upgrade (2 stimuli)							
Discredit of the Complementee	1 (1.1%)	18 (20.2%)	10 (11.2%)	43 (48.3%)	14 (15.7%)	3 (3.4%)	0
Discredit of the complimenter (2 stimuli)	4 (2.2%)	15 (8.4%)	36 (20.2%)	69 (38.8%)	35 (19.7%)	14 (7.9%)	5 (2.8%)

Table 7
Politeness evaluation of CR collected in Campania.

	1 Very polite	2	3	4	5	6	7 Very rude
Pleased acceptance	18 (20.2%)	37 (41.6%)	20 (22.5%)	10 (11.2%)	4 (4.5%)	0	0
Ironic acceptance	8 (9%)	19 (21.3%)	24 (27%)	26 (29.2%)	8 (9%)	2 (2.2%)	2 (2.2%)
Praise Downgrade							
Ironic acceptance	1 (0.6%)	7 (3.9%)	33 (18.5%)	66 (37.1%)	45 (25.3%)	20 (11.2%)	6 (3.4%)
Praise upgrade (2 stimuli)							
Discredit of the Complimentee	5 (5.6%)	11 (12.4%)	24 (27%)	23 (25.8%)	17 (19.1%)	6 (6.7%)	3 (3.4%)
Discredit of the Complimenter	0	4 (4.5%)	7 (7.9%)	15 (16.9%)	23 (25.8%)	23 (25.8%)	17 (19.1%)

In order to check a possible regional difference on the evaluations, the results were divided in two sub-corpora, including the CRs collected in Piedmont (Table 6) and in Campania (Table 7). Both correlations were proved to be statistically significant for $\chi^2(24) = 216.264$, $p < 0.0001$, Cramer's $V = 0.295$, and $\chi^2(24) = 244.357$, $p < 0.0001$, Cramer's $V = 0.338$, respectively.

On the one hand, in Piedmontese CRs (Table 6), rating peaks between 1 and 3 were recorded for Pleased Acceptance, but Ironic Acceptance strategies were also evaluated as polite, even if with flatter results. Discredit strategies, on the other hand, are judged as more neutral strategies, tending towards a neutral range (score 4), although the Discredit of the Complimenter slightly tend towards rudeness (main rating peaks between values 3 and 5).

Conversely, the Ironic Acceptance with Praise Upgrade in the Campania sub-corpus (Table 7) is perceived as more rude than in the Piedmontese sub-corpus, but not as much as the Discredit of the Complimenter which is perceived as very rude, with 25.8% of score 5 and 6, and even a 19.1% of score 7.

This polarized evaluation of the discredit strategies is particularly interesting, especially in view of a classic face-work. Indeed, while in the Piedmont sub-corpus Discredit of the Complimenter is more neutrally judged, in the Campania sub-corpus the evaluations seem to indicate a very negative view of this strategy (also in slight contrast with the Discredit of the Complimentee).

4.3. Sincerity/insincerity perception

The scores related to the perceived sincerity of the different type of CRs are summarised in Table 8, organised according to the same criteria as Table 5.

Table 8
Sincerity evaluation of CR in the overall corpus.

	1 Very sincere	2	3	4	5	6	7 Very insincere
Pleased acceptance (2 stimuli)	2 (1.1%)	5 (2.8%)	2 (1.1%)	2 (1.1%)	7 (3.9%)	60 (33.7%)	100 (56.2%)
Ironic acceptance	14 (7.9%)	24 (13.5%)	18 (10.1%)	38 (21.3%)	41 (23%)	31 (17.4%)	12 (6.7%)
Praise Downgrade (2 stimuli)							
Ironic acceptance	13 (3.7%)	21 (5.9%)	21 (5.9%)	43 (12.1%)	78 (21.9%)	99 (27.8%)	81 (22.8%)
Praise upgrade (4 stimuli)							
Discredit of the complimentee (2 stimuli)	2 (1.1%)	22 (12.4%)	30 (16.9%)	34 (19.1%)	48 (27%)	26 (14.6%)	16 (9%)
Discredit of the complimenter (3 stimuli)	29 (10.9%)	34 (12.7%)	29 (10.9%)	26 (9.7%)	47 (17.6%)	55 (20.6%)	47 (17.6%)

It appears that Pleased Acceptance and Ironic Acceptance with Praise Upgrade received the highest scores (value 7 in 56.2% and 22.8% of the cases, respectively), thus being judged as insincere. Smoother distributions are shown for the other CR strategies.

The discredit strategies received the most mid-range ratings (scores from 3 to 5), suggesting ambivalence in the judgements with respect to this value, even if the Dicredits of the Complimenter are perceived as a little bit more insincere (main rating peak in 6). A bimodal distribution is notably showed by the Discredit of the Complimenter, with results almost equally divided between the lowest ratings (1–3) and the highest ones (6–7). The correlation is statistically significant for $\chi^2(24) = 311.633$, $p < 0.0001$, Cramer's $V = 0.255$.

Tables 9 and 10 present the same data as Table 8, but broken down by the area in which the compliments were elicited. Table 9 shows how sincere/insincere Piedmontese compliments were considered, and Table 10 shows the same type of assessment for Campanian compliments. As we divided the responses between the compliment recorded in Piedmont (Table 9) and in Campania (Table 10), respondents' answers on the sincerity of CRs appear to show some important differences. Both correlations are statistically significant for $\chi^2(24) = 253.974$, $p < 0.0001$, Cramer's $V = 0.319$, and $\chi^2(24) = 205.175$, $p < 0.0001$, Cramer's $V = 0.296$, respectively.

Table 9

Sincerity evaluation of CR collected in Piedmont.

	1 Very sincere	2	3	4	5	6	7 Very insincere
Pleased acceptance	0	1 (1.1%)	0	1 (1.1%)	3 (3.4%)	22 (24.7%)	62 (69.7%)
Ironic acceptance	2 (2.2%)	13 (14.6%)	5 (5.6%)	16 (18%)	23 (25.8%)	21 (23.6%)	9 (10.1%)
Praise Downgrade							
Ironic acceptance	11 (6.2%)	15 (8.4%)	13 (7.3%)	23 (12.9%)	36 (20.2%)	45 (25.3%)	35 (19.7%)
Praise upgrade (2 stimuli)							
Discredit of the Complimentee	0	13 (14.6%)	17 (19.1%)	15 (16.9%)	23 (25.8%)	12 (13.5%)	9 (10.1%)
Discredit of the complimenter (2 stimuli)	27 (15.2%)	34 (19.1%)	29 (16.3%)	22 (12.4%)	30 (16.9%)	26 (14.6%)	10 (5.6%)

Table 10

Sincerity evaluation of CR collected in Campania.

	1 Very sincere	2	3	4	5	6	7 Very insincere
Pleased acceptance	2 (2.2%)	4 (4.5%)	2 (2.2%)	1 (1.1%)	4 (4.5%)	38 (42.7%)	38 (42.7%)
Ironic acceptance	12 (13.5%)	11 (12.4%)	13 (14.6%)	22 (24.7%)	18 (20.2%)	10 (11.2%)	3 (3.4%)
Praise Downgrade							
Ironic acceptance	2 (1.1%)	6 (3.4%)	8 (4.5%)	20 (11.2%)	42 (23.6%)	54 (30.3%)	46 (25.8%)
Praise upgrade (2 stimuli)							
Discredit of the Complimentee	2 (2.2%)	9 (10.1%)	13 (14.6%)	19 (21.3%)	25 (28.1%)	14 (15.7%)	7 (7.9%)
Discredit of the Complimenter	2 (2.2%)	0	0	4 (4.5%)	17 (19.1%)	29 (32.6%)	37 (41.6%)

In compliments from Piedmont (Table 9), Pleased Acceptance is rated even more insincere than in the total group (69.7% of 7 values score). Strategies involving irony are more evenly spread in this sub-corpus. Finally, the Discredit of the Complimenter receives high sincerity ratings, with the highest concentration between 1 and 3 scores.

Conversely, in the Campania sub-corpus (Table 10), Pleased Acceptance is judged as insincere only in 42.7% of the cases, and the Ironic Acceptance with Praise Upgrade was perceived as insincere CR (with 56.1% of scores between 6 and 7). However, Discredit of the Complimenter is also perceived as highly insincere, with 74.2% of responses receiving a 6 or 7.

4.3.1. Perceived politeness of the stimuli

To investigate the perception of politeness in responses to compliments (see section 5), Table 11 shows the average politeness scores given by respondents on a Likert scale (from 1 to 7) for each response in the test. The stimuli are arranged in order of politeness, from the compliment considered most polite (P08, a Pleased Acceptance) to the compliment considered most rude, a discrediting of the complimenter (C03).

Table 11 shows that the young Lombard respondents generally adhere to an underlying model of politeness and face-work, considering responses to compliments to be mostly polite and acceptable, particularly if they demonstrate agreement and alignment with the interlocutor. For a more detailed analysis, please refer to Section 5, in which the perception of responses to different compliments is discussed for each stimulus separately.

Table 11

Scale of politeness-to-rudeness for each compliment in the test.

Compliment	Type of Response	Mean score
P08	Pleased acceptance	2,00
C10	Pleased acceptance	2,38
P07	Ironic acceptance with praise upgrade	2,72
P12	Ironic acceptance with praise upgrade	3,23
C11	Ironic acceptance with praise Downgrade	3,23
P05	Ironic acceptance with praise Downgrade	3,43
P02	Discredit of the complimentee	3,67
C09	Discredit of the complimentee	3,74
P06	Discredit of the complimenter	3,89
C01	Ironic acceptance with praise upgrade	3,95
P13	Discredit of the complimenter	4,10
C04	Ironic acceptance with praise upgrade	4,64
C03	Discredit of the complimenter	5,18

5. Discussion

The present study was designed to investigate the perceptual dimension of compliment response variation in Italian, building on the substantial body of production data that has established regional/areal differences as a fundamental socio-pragmatic variable in this speech act (Castagneto 2019, 2023; Castagneto and Ravetto 2015; Castagneto and Sidraschi 2020). While production studies have documented systematic differences — particularly along the north–south axis—in CR strategies and their frequency distributions, the question of whether and how these patterns are perceived and recognized by speakers themselves has remained unexplored. The notions of in-groupness, localization, and pragmatic self-referentiality invoked in our interpretation of the findings are meaningful precisely because they connect the perceptual data presented here with the already well-documented production patterns: speakers' attributions of CRs to regional origins, and their judgements of politeness and appropriateness, can only be interpreted against the background of empirically attested variation in actual usage. In what follows, we discuss our findings in light of this production–perception interface.

With this premise in mind, we turn first to the question of how politeness itself is conceptualized and evaluated by our respondents, as this provides the interpretive framework for understanding their regional attributions and in-group biases. To address this question, we need to refer back to Table 11 in Section 4.3.1. Indeed, Table 11 shows the politeness score of each compliment response in the test separately, enabling a more detailed analysis on the politeness level. As shown in Table 11, most of the responses (10 out of 13) fall below the midpoint of 4, indicating that they are perceived as relatively polite or acceptable, even when the form of response involves marked or dispreferred strategies. This pattern is straightforward: our respondents interpret the whole compliment speech act as “supportive actions” (Pomerantz, 1978: 82), and most responses given in the test align with this cooperative intent, so, all in all, they are considered (quite) polite.

This interpretation deviates significantly from Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness, which regards compliments essentially as potentially face-threatening acts, even if they also claim — incidentally — that compliments “pay attention to H's interests, need and wants. Compliments often convey that some wants (goal, object) of H is admirable or interesting to S too” (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 108). In their framework, compliments may endanger the negative face of the addressee by expressing envy or admiration (i.e., the speaker indicates wanting something from the hearer, Brown and Levinson, 1987: 66). In addition, accepting a compliment may risk damaging the speaker's *positive face*, potentially appearing vain or self-satisfied. Moreover, the recipient of a compliment “may feel constrained to compliment the addressee in turn” (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 68).

For the Lombard participants who took part in our experiment, compliments are not perceived as threatening at all. On the contrary, they are understood as acts intended to please the recipient and should therefore be accepted positively. As Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1987: 15) observed, compliments are perceived by our respondents as verbal gifts intended to bring joy to the recipient. Just as with small tokens or gifts, compliments play a role in nurturing and sustaining social relations.

Since this section addresses perceptions of appropriateness in responses to compliments, it is worth shifting the analytical focus to the perspective of the addressee. Given that compliments are supportive actions, and also function as assessments, responses to compliments, conceived as chained actions, tend to follow a preferential structure. Specifically, as Pomerantz (1978: 83–86) points out, preferred responses include acceptances (in reply to the supportive act) and/or agreements (in reply to the assessment).

As also shown in Table 11, forms of Acceptance are generally perceived as more polite than Rejections.

More than any other type of response to a compliment, Pleased Acceptances are considered the most polite responses (rated between 1 and 2 on the politeness Likert scale, see Table 5), but also particularly insincere (rated between 6 and 7 on the sincerity Likert scale, see Table 8). This apparent contradiction stems from the fact that speakers know compliments are primarily offered to please others—that is, out of courtesy—and may therefore be insincere (Alfonzetti 2009: 105). Similarly, a Pleased Acceptance may suggest an excessive desire to seek agreement with the complimenter, even at the expense of sincerity. Yet, in the conflict between courtesy and sincerity, the respondents indirectly sanction the potential insincerity of the act, while preferring to uphold the Principle of Courtesy, which serves the overarching regulatory function of maintaining social equilibrium.

Moreover, responses that align with agreement are consistently rated as more appropriate than those involving disagreement. This trend suggests that, in responding to compliments, our respondents tend to align more closely with the Agreement Maxim (Minimize disagreement between self and other/Maximize agreement between self and other) than with the Modesty Maxim (Minimize praise of self/Maximize dispraise of self - Leech, 1983). When responding to compliments, young speakers of Lombard select Hearer-Supportive formulae (Frescura, 1996: 102), behaving like speakers of American English (following Chen, 1993) rather than adhering to Self-Supportive formulae (e.g. rejecting or dismissing the compliment), as Chinese speakers do. Frescura's findings from 30 years ago suggested that the “major preoccupation of speakers of Italian in responding to compliments is [was] to find suitable compromising strategies between the Agreement and Modesty Maxims” (Frescura, 1996: 105). For this reason, she considered the behaviour of Italian speakers to be a typical example of “conflict culture” (Cheng, 2003: 66) between the two Maxims. This pushed Italian speakers to select conflicting strategies between Speaker-Supportive and Hearer-Supportive strategies (e.g. restricted or opaque acceptances). As far as our respondents are concerned, this conflict appears to have been resolved, and a pragmatic shift toward more direct agreement and acceptance appears to have reached completion. This is hardly surprising, given that the change originated precisely among young women in northern Italy (the majority demographic of our sample) before spreading diastatically to men and

diatopically to southern Italy (see Castagneto, 2019: 140; Castagneto and Ravetto, 2015: 402–404, section 3; Castagneto and Sidraschi, 2018: 61).

The responses perceived as most polite are the two instances of Pleased Acceptance (P08, C10), followed by Ironic Acceptances with Praise Upgrade responses (P07, P12). All four responses are both acceptances and instances of agreement (or more precisely, instances of “optimal agreement”); in P08, for instance, the compliment response includes an intensified second evaluation term: *bello* (“beautiful”) from the original compliment is upgraded to *bellissimo* (“very beautiful”). As Pomerantz (1978: 83) notes, upgrades prevail only in environments where agreement is preferred. Compliments P07 and P12 exemplify this: they both contain a praise upgrade too, but they also contain an ironic/playful component.

Irony is inherently difficult to interpret, as what a speaker says is not always aligned with what he intends to communicate. Understanding irony requires the listener to identify the speaker’s communicative intention, which may diverge significantly from the surface meaning of the utterance. If it were authentic irony, the optimal agreement in certain CRs could not be genuinely as such: instead, the response might signal a dissociative stance toward the content of the original compliment. According to “echoic mention theory” (Wilson and Sperber, 2012), a speaker who uses irony implicitly echoes an utterance while simultaneously expressing disapproval or distance from it.

For this reason, Pomerantz (1978) classifies Praise Upgrade as part of the broader phenomenon of “self-praise avoidance mechanism”. Nevertheless, our respondents tend to interpret Ironic Acceptances with Praise Upgrade as playful rather than genuinely ironic. These responses are understood as jokes, and, crucially, the joke is never perceived as conflictual. In fact, sharing a joke and jointly recognizing the hyperbolic nature of a compliment response serves to reinforce interpersonal closeness. Through humorous bragging in responding to compliments, the interlocutors demonstrate mutual familiarity and signal that their relationship is strong enough to withstand “the social transgression of boasting” (Leech, 1983: 136).

Consider the response in P12 (A: “The glasses look good on you/B: No ... it’s me who looks good in them”): this can be interpreted as a joke, as the statement is anomalous both semantically and pragmatically: it attributes agency to an inanimate object placing it on the same level as the speaker. Since B initiates a playful frame, the disagreement token (*No*) that opens the conversational turn is not interpreted as a breach of the Agreement Maxim, and the compliment response is perceived as polite overall. Notably, this item received the highest score (6.22) on the Likert scale measuring whether the response was perceived as serious or playful. This subtype of Ironic Acceptances with Praise Upgrade (we should more appropriately call them “playful acceptances”) is then perceived as highly polite, only slightly less so than the “non-playful” Pleased Acceptances. The explanation is straightforward: joking involves a slight violation of Grice’s Cooperative Principle, as it leads the hearer to infer the speaker’s intended meaning rather than to follow the flow of the literal content of the utterance. Had responses such as P07 and P12 been interpreted as genuinely ironic (rather than merely playful), they might have received higher scores on the rudeness scale, as a lower degree of perceived agreement would have reduced their overall politeness.

In the politeness summary scale provided in Table 11, after the previous types of responses, we encounter the two instances of Ironic Acceptance with Praise Downgrade (C11, P05), immediately followed by the two examples of Discredit of the Complimentee (P02, C09). Although still considered polite (i.e., with a score below 4), they exhibit slightly higher values, ranging from 3.23 to 3.74. In our view, the similarity in scores between Ironic Acceptances with Praise Downgrade and Discredits of the Complimentee can be attributed to a shared semantic feature: both contain a praise downgrade, either of the complimented topics or of the speaker himself. All four responses are perceived as playful by the respondents, as evidenced by their playfulness ratings (C11: 5.12; P05: 5.96; P02: 5.03; C09: 5.27). The crucial distinction between them, however, is just that only the Ironic Acceptances with Praise Downgrade (C11, P05) are characterized by irony. This adds a layer of interpretative vagueness, as the ironic tone invites alternative readings of the utterance and may signal a degree of dissociation from the literal content. In C11, for example, the adverb *troppo* (‘too much’) subtly encourages an antiphrastic reading of the echoed adjective *sexy*, hinting that the speaker may not fully endorse the compliment.

As for the two Discredits of the Complimentee, the playful tone of the response does not conceal the underlying disagreement with the evaluation expressed in the compliment. In C09, for instance, the speaker’s statement that she looks like the Christmas witch (*la Befana*) in response to being called *sexy*, clearly signals a disagreement with the compliment. In Western cultural contexts, such attempts to minimise self-praise can generate discomfort, as overt agreement with the interlocutor is generally perceived as a cooperative and socially appropriate response; in contrast, self-denigration can also pose a threat to the speaker’s own face (Alfonzetti 2009: 86). This contrasts with cultural frameworks such as the Chinese context, where modesty is a highly valued social virtue, and self-denigration contributes positively to the construction of one’s public image (Chen 1993: 68). As previously noted, our respondents appear to favour responses that align with the Agreement Maxim; it is therefore unsurprising that Discredits of the Complimentee, which involve disagreement and self-denigration, receive higher scores on the politeness–rudeness scale and approach the threshold of perceived impoliteness.

Positioned very close to the rudeness threshold is an instance of Ironic Acceptance with Praise Upgrade (C01 – score: 3.95), where the exchange unfolds as follows (C01 – score 3.95): “A: What lovely little shoes!/B: 320 euros ...”. In this case, the complimentee responds solely by emphasizing the (exaggerated) monetary value of the complimented item, so the response is highly ambiguous; moreover, he mentions an attribute – *being expensive* – not universally seen as positive (his whole act can be interpreted as boasting). Last but not least, the exaggeration could trigger an *off-the-record* face-threatening act to the interlocutor: according to Brown & Levinson, violating the Quality Maxim by overstating corresponds to the 5th strategy available to speakers when performing an indirect face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson 1987: 219–220).

What is the real motivation why this response is perceived as (almost) rude? Because it is uncooperative with the complimenter's project of raising the level of friendship with his interlocutor. Across the various responses analysed so far, a clear pattern emerges: the greater the level of agreement with the compliment, the more polite the response is perceived to be. Conversely, as the level of disagreement increases (whether implicit or explicit), the response is increasingly seen as rude. This interpretation, however, requires further refinement. The responses perceived as rudest are not necessarily those marked by explicit disagreement, but rather those that demonstrate a lack of cooperation in the co-construction of the face of the "complimentee-in-relationship-to-complimenter". In this analysis, we adopt the notion of 'face' as conceptualized in Arundale's Face Constituting Theory (Arundale, 2006, 2010). According to this model, face is not an individual possession but a relational phenomenon, emergent from the interaction between interlocutors. It belongs to the dyad of interactants in a non-summative way, being the conjoint outcome of a single two-person system. Within Arundale's framework, face is co-constructed in the interaction through the progressive interpretation of the evolving interaction; this facework aims to raise, maintain, or modify the degree of "connectedness" or "separateness" between the interactants.

Following Arundale's framework, we observe that compliments are usually explicitly encoded in such a way that they are easily recognizable. This explicit encoding serves a relational function, as the complimenter seeks to enact a *situated shift* towards a greater degree of connectedness with his interlocutor. To achieve this relational goal, the complimenter (Speaker A) designs and produces his utterance in an open and explicit manner, projecting a "provisional interpreting", that is, an anticipatory expectation that the utterance will be understood as a compliment by the second speaker (B). Importantly, A's utterance is not yet a compliment per se; it only acquires this status once B interprets it as such, and confirm A's provisional interpreting with a consistent utterance (e.g. through an appreciation token as *thank you*). It is only through this second move that A's provisional interpreting becomes an operative interpreting, as both speakers retrospectively affirm that the initial utterance was indeed a compliment. In this co-constructed moment, the compliment is fully realized as a relational act, and the interactants' *Connection Face* is thereby reinforced and elevated.

Discredits of the Complimenter are perceived as particularly rude because they disrupt the first speaker's provisional projecting: that is, the projected intention of producing a compliment. In these cases, the second speaker does not respond with either an appreciation/rejection token or an assessment of agreement/disagreement. Instead, they respond with a form of verbal aggression directed at the complimenter. From a Brown and Levinson (1987) perspective, such responses are likely to threaten the positive face of the complimenter by questioning their sincerity, judgement, or communicative intent. However, this face-threat analysis alone does not fully account for the severity with which Discredits are judged by our respondents. This inconsistent response opens up a new range of possible interpretations, forcing both interlocutors to retroactively constrain their interpretations of the first utterance, which ultimately fails to be ratified as a compliment. The result is a breakdown in relational alignment: the first speaker's goal to increase the *Connection Face* of "he-in-relationship-to-the-addressee" is frustrated, while the *Separation Face* between the interactants is reinforced. Indeed, the failure to ratify the compliment and the resulting breakdown of comity is exactly the relational dimension that Arundale's (2006) model captures more effectively than a face-threat framework focused on individual face wants.

That is why Discredits of the Complimenter occupy a closely clustered position at the lower end of the politeness scale. Unsurprisingly, Discredits of the Complimenter are not perceived as a joke, but as serious, as indicated by their scores on the serious/playful scale (C03-3,21; P13-3,8). An exception is P06, where the response "What a dummy!" functions as a ritualised insult conveying intimacy - it is even possible that the complimentee appreciates the compliment. Accordingly, this response is interpreted as playful (score: 5,85).

A clear example of a Discredit of the Complimenter perceived as serious is found in P13 ("don't make fun of me eh!"), which is perceived also as fairly rude (score: 4,10): here, the verbal gift implied in the compliment (Turner and Edgeley, 1974: 1) is rejected by questioning the complimenter's sincerity. In compliment exchanges, the Courtesy Principle should generally take precedence over Grice's Quality Maxim. However, as Alfonzetti (2009: 106) points out, "nei complimenti il contenuto di verità non perde mai del tutto i suoi diritti, pena la non riuscita" (our translation: "in compliments, the truth never completely loses its rights, otherwise they are doomed to failure"). In such cases there is no need to offer a new range of provisional interpreting of the first utterance. The compliment has been rejected, and with it, the attempt to raise the *Connection Face* between the interactants. Nonetheless, the initial utterance continues to be interpreted as a compliment, albeit an unsuccessful one.

The case of C03 presents a distinct scenario. When complimented on her bag, the complimentee responds with an abrupt imperative (*Shut up*) justifying it by pointing out that the bag is old and damaged. Beyond the overt rudeness of her way of addressing the complimenter, the explanation offered by the complimentee prompts respondents in our study to reassess the original utterance. If the situational context confirms that the bag is indeed worn out and broken, can the utterance "beautiful bag, my darling" still be interpreted as a genuine compliment? This raises several questions: What was the first speaker's provisional interpretations? Does she really wish to maintain the comity with the addressee or to strengthen their solidarity? Or was the remark meant ironically, as a form of teasing? Upon processing the complimentee's unexpectedly hostile response, respondents are led to retrospectively constrain their interpreting of the initial utterance. To illustrate the respondents' comment, we quote the case of respondent no. 71, stating that she would not have replied to the compliment if her bag had indeed been old and damaged. In her words: *Se la mia borsa è veramente rovinata e A mi dice così è una presa in giro, e preferisco non rispondere* ("If my bag is really ruined and A tells me so, she is making fun of me and I prefer not to answer"). Consequently, the respondent's evaluation of the entire compliment exchange shifts. Rather than isolating the

compliment response as the impolite element, respondents interpret the full sequence (compliment plus response) as collectively rude. This is reflected in its high placement on the politeness-rudeness scale (score: 5.18).

Similar considerations inform the evaluation of rudeness in response C04 (A: “What a beautiful hat!/B: Thank you! If it were ugly I wouldn’t have bought it”). In this case, the provisional interpreting of the first speaker’s utterance (formulated as a clear and recognisable compliment) is initially confirmed by an acceptance token (*Thank you*). However, the subsequent utterance of the same turn introduces a somewhat unexpected and absolutely uncooperative element: the added comment appears to carry an implicit insinuation, as if the complimenter were surprised by the complimentee’s ability to choose an attractive item. As a result, this response was perceived as rude, with a score of 4.64 on the politeness/rudeness scale. Comments from some of our respondents (e.g. no. 2 and no. 59) reinforce this interpretation. Both noted that *un ringraziamento può bastare* (“saying ‘thank you’ would have been enough”): as respondent no. 79 wrote: *in una situazione simile avrei ringraziato senza fare battute* (“in a similar situation I would have thanked without making any quip”).

6. Conclusions

This study has explored how young Northern Italian speakers perceive various strategies of compliment responses (CRs), particularly those involving irony, self-discredit, or Discredit of the Complimenter. While focused on a specific sociolinguistic context (i.e., students from Lombardy), this work offers both strengths and limitations that should be acknowledged before drawing broader conclusions.

One notable limitation of this research is its geographical and demographic narrowness. The data were drawn from a relatively homogeneous group of university students in Northern Italy, predominantly female and within the 18–34 age range. This inevitably restricts the generalizability of the findings across different age groups, genders, and regional identities (see also Castagneto, 2023; Scivoletto and Alfonzetti, 2025, in this special issue). Furthermore, the study’s reliance on perceptual data, while valuable for capturing metapragmatic awareness, cannot fully account for actual interactional behaviour or production-based nuances. The stimuli themselves, despite being adapted from authentic data, were standardized to minimize dialectal markers: an intervention that, while methodologically necessary, may have inadvertently affected naturalness and ecological validity.

Nonetheless, the study also presents important strengths. First, it fills a notable gap in Italian pragmatics by shifting attention from production to perception, offering insights into how CRs are interpreted across sociolinguistic lines. Second, it applies a robust theoretical triangulation – drawing on both classical politeness models (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983) and more recent relational approaches (Arundale, 2006, 2010) – to make sense of complex interpersonal evaluations. Third, it offers empirically grounded support for the idea that CRs are deeply shaped by regional and cultural norms, and that young speakers display subtle metapragmatic competence in interpreting speech acts.

Despite the limits, the findings presented and discussed so far allow us to answer our research questions. As for RQ1 (To which geographical area do respondents most frequently associate specific CR strategies?), the results suggest that respondents overwhelmingly attributed CRs to their own regional area, (Lombardy), regardless of the actual origin of the stimuli. This points to a form of pragmatic self-referentiality: strategies perceived as familiar or acceptable were projected onto the in-group. Although some Campanian-origin CRs were correctly identified (14.4%, when the attribution to other regions does not surpass 10%), the general trend was that respondents interpreted pragmatically marked utterances through the lens of their own communicative norms. This finding indicates that metapragmatic awareness is shaped more by perceived similarity and shared usage than by awareness of areal origin per se. Crucially, this result does not invalidate the well-established findings of variational pragmatics demonstrating systematic regional differences in CR production (Castagneto 2019, 2023; Castagneto and Ravetto 2015; Castagneto and Sidraschi 2020). Rather, it reveals a disconnect between production patterns (which are objectively differentiated along regional lines) and perception, which in this case is filtered through in-group bias and generational cohesion. Our respondents’ young age and the strong social cohesion of their generational group appear to have led them to interpret unexpected or unfamiliar responses in terms of their own pragmatic norms and facework management strategies, given that they are primarily accustomed to interacting within their peer group. This suggests that perceptual self-referentiality may coexist with (and indeed mask) underlying regional variation that remains detectable in production data.

RQ2 investigated the communicative intent of the respondent toward the compliment perceived. The study showed that irony, particularly when used as praise upgrade or delivered in a playful tone, was not perceived as rude. Ironic responses were often interpreted as humorous and relationally engaging, and they are considered rude only when perceived as non-playful, that is uncooperative with the complimenter. Responses involving a Discredit of the Complimentee are felt as still polite; conversely, the Discredits of the Complimenter are the only CRs perceived as rude, as they show lack of cooperation with the project of the complimenter to increase the “complimenter-in-relationship-to-the complimentee” Connection Face. The communicative intent behind CRs, then, is not judged solely on literal content but is deeply influenced by sociocultural norms that value humor, solidarity, and shared interpretive frames.

Finally, for RQ3 (Which politeness model could better interpret the pragmatic strategies of CRs in Italian data?), the findings suggest that classical face-models of politeness, particularly those based on universal face-threatening acts or maxims such as modesty, do not adequately explain the relational dynamics observed here. The data better align with Arundale’s Face Constituting Theory, which views face as a co-constructed, interactional phenomenon. In this framework, politeness emerges from the degree of alignment or misalignment in the relational project of the interactants. Indeed, our

respondents interpreted CRs as based not on binary politeness/rudeness, but on whether the response contributed to reinforcing the relational frame initiated by the compliment. In this view, agreement and playful reinforcement were favoured over disagreement or ambiguity.

In conclusion, this work offers a valuable contribution to the study of variational pragmatics by demonstrating that perception of politeness, sincerity, and irony in Italian CRs is regionally nuanced and interactionally complex. Future studies should expand the respondent pool to include Central and Southern Italian speakers, allowing for a more balanced comparison across the country. Further attention should also be given to production data, in order to triangulate perceptual findings with actual usage. Finally, interdisciplinary approaches involving sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and interactional pragmatics may offer even deeper insight into how speech acts like compliments and their responses function in real social interactions.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Chiara Meluzzi: Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing - 2.3, 3 (and sub-paragraphs), 4.1, 4.3, and 6. Marina Castagneto: Investigation, Conceptualization, Writing - 1, 2.1, 2.2, 4.2, 4.3.1, 5.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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