

# The Functions of Formulaic and Nonformulaic Compliments in Interactions About Technical Writing

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**Abstract**—Writing tutors are encouraged to use compliments in their interactions with technical writing students. However, the form of compliments strongly influences how they function. Specifically, formulaic compliments like “It’s good” function differently from nonformulaic compliments like “The size is excellent in terms of visually aiding the reader.” A total of 107 compliments were analyzed from 13 interactions between 12 writing tutors and 12 engineering students. About 61% of tutors’ compliments followed one of six formulae, and about 39% were nonformulaic. Formulaic compliments were general and mainly performed a phatic function, filling pauses and avoiding silence, particularly in interaction closings. Nonformulaic compliments were more specific and individualized, and they may, therefore, be more instructive than formulaic compliments. Nonformulaic compliments also performed an exploratory function, allowing participants to renegotiate discourse status. This study points to other avenues of research, particularly research that systemically examines writers’ perceptions of formulaic and nonformulaic feedback, such as compliments.

**Index Terms**—Compliments, engineering students, formulaic language, technical writing, tutors.

**P**EOPLE who work with technical writers—such as tutors working in university settings—want to create friendly interactions. Like editors working with technical writers and subject-matter experts, tutors instinctively understand that one way to generate a sense of solidarity and rapport is to compliment students on their writing and their ideas. During an interview after a tutoring session, one writing tutor noted the importance of using compliments to balance criticism (see Table I for details about this study’s participants):

Tutor 3 *So I think constructive criticism is helpful you know on a few- on the major points or if there aren’t any major problems. Then you can start focusing on the minor things. But too much is overwhelming and that- **It does need to be balanced by some positives as well. Because if all you hear is these are the things you have to fix, you walk away thinking there’s nothing good here. (Laughs). You know-kind of depleted.***

As this tutor’s comment suggests, people who work with writers understand that feedback, especially negative evaluation, can be disheartening and that compliments can mitigate that effect.

Not all compliments, however, function in the same ways. Most compliments—except ones that are used sarcastically or ironically—build solidarity or rapport between those who speak them and those who receive them. All compliments also, by definition, convey positive evaluation. However, depending on the form that they take, compliments vary in their function. Formulaic compliments like *It’s good* may lack other functions performed by nonformulaic compliments like *The size is excellent in terms of visually aiding the reader*.

In this study, I analyze a corpus of compliments used by writing tutors in interactions with engineering students in order to determine the extent to which tutors’ compliments are formulaic. I examine how the form of formulaic compliments influences the functions they carry out and begin a preliminary analysis of how nonformulaic compliments carry out additional functions.

## FUNCTION AND FORMULAICITY OF COMPLIMENTS

Compliments are complex speech acts in that they perform at least two functions simultaneously: solidarity-building and evaluation. As solidarity builders, compliments are what Brown and Levinson call POSITIVE POLITENESS strategies, strategies that indicate the speaker wants what the hearer wants and considers the hearer to be “the same” as he or she is in some way [1, p. 70]. That is, compliments meet a recipient’s POSITIVE FACE need: his or her need for appreciation and approval. Compliments convey

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positive politeness because they express appreciation and approval of the recipient's accomplishment [1, p. 103]. In fact, according to Manes and Wolfson, the "major function of complimenting is to create or reinforce solidarity" [2, p. 130]. So, for example, a tutor who compliments a writer by saying *The controlling idea of this paragraph is clear* has shown approval and appreciation for the writer's work and has, therefore, generated solidarity.

In addition, compliments have an evaluative function. Therefore, when speakers compliment, they assert higher discourse status. The extent to which compliments assert status depends upon the rights and responsibilities afforded by the speaker-recipient relationship and the discourse situation in which they are uttered. For example, the role of high school basketball coach affords people in that role the right and responsibility to compliment players on their performance during practice and during games. In asserting this right and responsibility, coaches reinforce status higher than that of the players in these discourse situations. However, the basketball-coach role does not afford a similar right to compliment other people, such as school administrators or parents, even when those people are sitting in the stands during basketball games. That is, coaches cannot assert discourse status with compliments in interactions with administrators and parents because their relationships with them differ greatly from their relationship with their players. (Tannen analyzes the relativity of linguistic strategies in depth [3].)

However, when compliments are FORMULAIC in their syntactic form (i.e., the order of their words) and their semantic content (i.e., the meaning of their words), their functions may be limited. Formulaic language is defined as "a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other meaning elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use" [4, p. 1]. In other words, compliments like *It's good*, *That's great*, and *You've done a good job* are formulaic in that they appear to be prefabricated and retrieved from memory, as opposed to being created online during the interaction. The main purposes of formulaic compliments like *It's good* are to evaluate and to show a "minimal amount of solidarity" and little else [2, p. 125].

In the field of linguistics, interest in formulaic language—not just compliments—has been recently reinvigorated. During the second half of the 20th century, American linguists primarily were interested in understanding the principles that all languages share. To understand universal principles, they developed theories to explain how all speakers can comprehend and produce novel utterances in their native languages, (i.e., how all people can understand

and say things that have never been said before like the utterance *Dick Cheney walked on Uranus* has likely never been said or written before, yet English speakers readily understand it).

Today, linguists are of course still interested in understanding commonalities of the world's languages, but they now recognize that understanding how people comprehend and produce language also means accounting for sequences of language that people have heard and said many times before, sequences that have "a unique coherence not present in novel utterances" [5, p. 208]. These formulaic sequences of language can be discussed at the word level (*well*), phrase level (*to make a long story short*), and clause level (*I'm happy for you*). That is, researchers are now investigating what language teachers and others have noticed for a long time: people use the same words, phrases, and syntactic patterns over and over again, people do not construct every utterance from scratch online, and people integrate their formulaic language with their novel, or NONFORMULAIC, utterances (e.g., [6]–[9]). Indeed, some research indicates that although people integrate nonformulaic and formulaic language, they use different mental and neurological structures to generate the two (e.g., [10]–[13]).

Formulaic sequences of language, including compliments, function differently from nonformulaic utterances because they are more likely to be interpreted holistically, rather than as the sum of their parts. According to Kecskés, when sequences of language take on a holistic meaning and lose their compositional meaning, they are dominated by their "social function" and lose their referential meaning [14, p. 606]. The more frequently a sequence of words collocates, the more likely it is to retain only its social function [14]–[16]. Under this analysis, formulaic compliments do little else other than state a vague evaluation and generate a minimal amount of solidarity between the speaker of the compliment and its recipient.

In other words, when compliments are formulaic in form, their function may be PHATIC. Phatic language is discourse that fulfills a social need—filler for gaps in conversation and conversational routines (like exchanging pleasantries in the office hallway). Laver says that phatic language defuses "the potential hostility of silence in situations where speech is conventionally anticipated" [17, p. 301]. Phatic talk is the discourse we engage in so that we do not have to endure potentially uncomfortable silences. Although it seems that formulaic compliments tend to be phatic [18, p. 30], it is not necessarily the case that all formulaic compliments are phatic, particularly those uttered in task-oriented interactions like tutoring sessions. That is, tutors who utter compliments like *It's good* may be making a genuine, albeit general,

evaluation of some referent in the text, as opposed to filling in perceived and potential gaps in the talk.

Even so, because formulaic compliments manifest prepatterned syntax and content, they are more likely to indicate the speaker's intention to evaluate and to show minimal solidarity than they are to impart substantive information. These compliments fall into the EVALUATIVE category of Halliday's model of the semantic components of language [19]. The primary purpose of such language is to convey a speaker's attitude and assessment. In contrast, language in Halliday's INFORMATIONAL category states propositions and conveys information. Halliday's model suggests that a compliment like *It's good* will evaluate, but it will not be very informative. For example, it may not provide much specific and individualized feedback.

However, nonformulaic compliments, like *A less developed writer wouldn't notice that*, may perform additional functions, as suggested by Boyle's analysis of IMPLICIT compliments [18]. In contrast to EXPLICIT compliments, which convey positive evaluation overtly, implicit compliments depend on context for their positive evaluative meaning. For example, in many discourse situations, the utterance *You've worked with Elizabeth Taylor!* [18, p. 36] would likely be used and interpreted as a compliment, even though it contains no overtly positive terms like *good*. However, it is possible to imagine a context, such as a divorce proceeding, in which the utterance could be used as an indictment. Implicit compliments are nonformulaic, and nonformulaic compliments are far more likely than formulaic compliments to be implicit [18, p. 30].

Boyle found that implicit compliments and, consequently, nonformulaic compliments, may perform an EXPLORATORY function, as opposed to a phatic function [18], negotiating a change in the relationship between the participants [17, p. 304]. That is, with compliments that serve an exploratory function, people enact and test a shift in the levels of solidarity or status in their relationship. For example, a tutor who says *A less developed writer wouldn't notice that* raises the student's discourse status by conveying the student has achieved a higher level of competency than other student writers whom the tutor has encountered. In doing this, the tutor raises the student's status as a writer, bringing the student's status closer to her own. In addition to this potential function, nonformulaic compliments may be more specific and, therefore, more individualized to a particular student recipient. It may be the case, then, that nonformulaic compliments provide more instructive feedback than formulaic compliments do.

### **The Function of Compliments in Professional Communication**

Researchers in professional communication are interested in positive politeness strategies like compliments, hypothesizing that

positive politeness can counterbalance the detrimental effects of requests or rejections. Morand examined a number of politeness strategies in the requests of people role playing subordinate and superior status in an organization [20]. He examined the effects of both positive politeness strategies and NEGATIVE POLITENESS strategies. Whereas positive politeness generates solidarity, negative politeness mitigates impositions on people's autonomy [1, p. 70]. That is, negative politeness mitigates threats to NEGATIVE FACE, people's need to be independent. Morand found that although positive politeness affected people's judgments of the overall politeness of an interaction, it had less of an effect than negative politeness did. He found that people may see compliments as presumptuous, insinuating familiarity where it did not belong [20, p. 239]. In addition, Morand says that positive politeness strategies like compliments may signal condescension to their recipients [20, p. 244]. Morand's findings make clear that people's status within an organization affects how they perceive compliments from people of different status.

In the realm of written professional communication, research on refusal and rejection letters has examined the adage that bad news ought to be buffered by a paragraph that conveys goodwill and, perhaps, a compliment. (See [21, pp. 34–38] for a list of texts that mention this guideline about buffers.) Regarding positive politeness in general, but not in compliments in particular, Limaye's study of buffers in rejection letters suggests that positive politeness may not alter recipients' perceptions of the quality or tone of the sender [22]. Similarly, Locker found that buffers did not generate more positive responses to refusal letters [21].

However, some research has suggested that buffers can have a positive effect on how recipients perceive senders of bad news [23], [24]. Jablin and Krone found that the 42% of job rejection letters in their corpus that praised applicants' qualifications and accomplishments were perceived as more personal by their recipients [23, pp. 395, 397]. Indeed, Brown suggests in his study of 500 job rejection letters that effective letters are more likely to contain compliments that are not perceived as rote or insincere. In fact, Brown says, in his opinion, rote apologies for the rejection are better than "the apparent insincerity found in form letters that try harder to pat the applicant on the back" [25, p. 773]. He goes on to say that effective letters contain compliments that are individualized: "Praise not personally earned and directed is best left out" [25, p. 774]. These studies suggest that individualized compliments are more likely to signal goodwill and to mitigate confidence-shaking messages like rejections.

**The Effect of Discourse Status on Compliments** As noted before, compliments not only generate

solidarity but also assert a right or a responsibility to evaluate. A speaker may perceive and assert a right to compliment because of higher social status. Indeed, social status differences may underlie the fact that women receive far more compliments than men do [26], [27]. Holmes writes, "One could speculate that because compliments express social approval one might expect more of them to be addressed 'downwards' as socializing devices . . . and that the pattern is thus explained by referring to women's socially subordinate status in society" [26, p. 452]. Contrastive analysis studies suggest that language also plays a role in the frequency and topics of compliments given to men and women, as well as their responses to those compliments (e.g., [28]–[30]). For example, in a study of everyday conversations, Herrero found that American men compliment women on their appearance more often than Costa Rican men compliment women on the same [28]. Findings like this can help to overturn cultural stereotypes as well as broaden our understanding of the functions of compliments and other politeness strategies.

In addition, as the research on compliments in professional communication makes clear, a speaker may perceive and assert a right to compliment because of higher status within an organization. Agar, defining and describing interactions like tutoring sessions, says that institutional interactions involve an institutional representative responsible for diagnosing the needs of the other participant, the institutional client, and then for directing the client in a course of action [30]. In part because of their expertise in the task at hand, institutional representatives are more likely than clients to have the right to compliment. In a study of interactions involving faculty advisors and graduate students, for example, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford noted that compliments are congruent speech acts for advisors because of their institutional role (i.e., their rank, expertise, and familiarity with the university) [31, p. 472].

Relevant to this study is the extent to which institutional role gives people who work with writers, such as editors and tutors, the right (and to some extent, the responsibility) to direct approval downwards to writers. Editors working with subject-matter experts or technical writers, for example, are urged to construct rapport:

If you work diligently to establish a rapport with authors, you'll notice that your work will proceed more smoothly than if you opt for a more adversarial approach. [32, p. 109]

Editors are not necessarily urged to compliment writers, probably because the expertise associated with editors' institutional role may not grant them the status they need to compliment felicitously. For example, an editor working with an engineer on a technical report about thermocouples probably

would not have the expertise needed to compliment the engineer on the report's nuanced discussion of electromagnetic field and temperature. Even if the editor did have such expertise, a compliment like *Your discussion of Seebeck emf is sophisticated* might be perceived as presumptuous.

However, done in accordance with the rights afforded by participants' roles, complimenting can be a valid strategy for building solidarity in the editor-writer relationship (see [33]). As Alley suggests in his handbook, editors can use compliments to cushion threats to negative face, like criticisms:

As mentioned in Chapter 2, acknowledging the strengths of the writing does not translate to giving false praise or to delivering equal amounts of time for strengths as for weaknesses. It simply means providing a context for your criticisms.

[34, p. 76]

According to Alley's advice and prior research, the editor working with the engineer on the thermocouple report might counterbalance a criticism or suggestion with a compliment, for example, about the use of a paragraph-initial sentence that establishes a controlling idea (e.g., *This first sentence summarizes the rest of the paragraph well*) (see [35, pp. 88–89]).

In contrast to editors working with writers, writing tutors who work in colleges and universities are encouraged to compliment writers freely. Indeed, writing center specialists liken the role of a tutor to that of a coach [e.g., [36], [37]], and this role, as mentioned above, affords the right and responsibility to compliment. Handbooks and articles about tutoring enjoin tutors to "find things that [they] can honestly praise and then praise liberally" [38, p. 13], to "find something nice to say about every paper, no matter how hard [they] have to search" [39, p. 3], to "begin with samples of the writers' unevaluated work and praise its strengths" [40, p. 65]. Such advice stems from a need to bolster the confidence of student writers, motivate them, and encourage return visits, as well as build solidarity and rapport during the tutoring interaction.

This advice about complimenting likely stems from the fact that student writers often have little experience with writing. Thus, their confidence in their abilities as writers might be shaky. Even engineering students may lack confidence in their writing ability, as comments they made in post-interaction interviews suggest:

Student 5 *I think I've learned not to like it [writing] . . . I've never really done good in any of my writing classes . . . I'll write something and I'll think it looks good. And I'll look it over before I'll hand it in. Then I'll hand it in and it-it-it won't meet their standards. (Laughs).*

Student 10 *I do not like writing papers . . . I would rather go and do an engineer problem, or a math problem, or a physics problem.*

In addition to a general aversion to writing, engineering students may also lack familiarity with particular conventions and genres of technical writing. Also, some students may be new to the subject matter of their writing. Compliments may be particularly important, therefore, in interactions with students who seek feedback on technical writing (see, for example, [41]).

This study examines how the form of tutors' compliments influences the function of those compliments. Specifically, this study examines the function of formulaic compliments and begins preliminary analysis of the functions of nonformulaic compliments in order to determine the extent to which compliments fulfill their potential to benefit students, such as by bolstering their confidence and perhaps by providing instructive feedback.

## METHODS

**Participants in the Tutoring Interactions** This study examined 13 interactions about engineering writing between 12 writing tutors (5 male, 7 female) who were working with 12 engineering students (9 male, 3 female). Each interaction lasted about 30 minutes and was transcribed in full. The 12 tutors were writing instructors who taught freshman composition at a mid-size, Midwestern university. Five of the instructors also taught advanced writing courses, such as business and science writing, but not the university's engineering writing course. The tutors' teaching experience ranged evenly from one to ten years, averaging 4.58 years. The 12 engineering students were either enrolled in their university's engineering writing course during the time of the study or had completed the course during the past academic year. They brought engineering-related writing to the interactions: technical descriptions, project reports, project proposals, and technical abstracts (see Table I). All of the participants—tutors and engineering students—were paid \$40 for participating in a tutoring interaction and a post-interaction interview.

It is important to note that the limited number of interactions examined in this study does not allow for generalizations to all tutoring interactions about writing. However, the compliments examined here were derived from over 7 hours of tutoring discourse. Also, over 6 hours of post-interaction interviews were examined to understand participants' assessments of their interactions. In addition, participants' written responses to surveys about their interactions in general and about compliments specifically were examined. Therefore, this study's findings are based on triangulated research.

**Procedure for Coding Compliments** A total of 107 tutor compliments were coded according to the definition proposed by Holmes:

A compliment is 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 hearer. ([26, p. 446]; see also [42, p. 186])

To assure the reliability of identifying compliments, inter-rater reliability was checked. Two raters identified compliments in randomly chosen excerpts of transcripts. The excerpts comprised 260 participant turns, or 5,400 words. Raters coded 31 of the same 34 utterances as compliments, suggesting that raters agreed on what constitutes a compliment. The utterances on which raters' coding diverged consisted of two tutors' one-word responses: *Perfect* (used twice) and *Cool*.

The 107 compliments were then classified as either formulaic or nonformulaic according to whether their syntactic structure matched one of the nine SYNTACTIC

TABLE I  
DETAILS ABOUT STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Tutor	Student	Tutor/Student Gender	Tutor's Years of Teaching Experience	Genre and Topic of Student's Paper
1	1	F/M	3	Technical description of pliers
2	2	F/M	7	Proposal of a research project and technical description of a knife
3	3	F/M	5	Proposal of a research project on replacing lead-based soldering at a production plant
4	4	F/M	3	Technical description of a hammer
4	5	F/M		Technical abstract of research article about writing procedures
5	6	F/M	4	Technical abstract of research article about writing procedures
6	7	M/M	9	Technical description of pliers
7	6	M/M	2	Technical description of a Leatherman® tool
8	8	M/M	2	Project status report about building a robotic car
9	9	M/M	7	Project status report about building a prototype of a fishing rod
10	10	F/F	1	Research/ recommendation report about larvae populations of coral reefs
11	11	F/F	2	Project status report for a senior design project on reducing a city's energy use
12	12	M/F	10	Proposal of a research project on hydrogen production

FORMULAE Manes and Wolfson found in their seminal study of naturally occurring compliments [2, pp. 120–121]. A compliment that followed one of the formulae in Manes and Wolfson's study was counted as formulaic, but just six of those nine formulae were found in the data of the present study. A compliment that did not follow one of the formulae was counted as nonformulaic.

Table II lists the compliment formulae that tutors used. Note that parenthetical elements in the formulae were optional. Abbreviated forms of the formulae that are used throughout this article are listed as well. Finally, constructed examples are provided in Table II to illustrate each formula.

The present study diverges slightly from Manes and Wolfson's identification of formulaic compliments. Past tense verbs were counted as formulaic in the present study. These compliments occurred fairly frequently because tutors often complimented students on acts that occurred before the tutoring sessions (e.g., *You did a good job*). In addition, compliments containing words that mitigate the force of a compliment (e.g., *fairly*) rather than increase its force (e.g., *really*) were counted as formulaic as well because these variations maintain the syntactic structure of the formulae (e.g., *You did a pretty good job*, as opposed to *You did a really good job*). This coding procedure maintained limits on the range of syntactic structures counted as formulaic, but it also allowed compliments with semantic force that was somewhat mitigated to be included. If this coding procedure had not been used, a compliment like *You did a pretty terrific job* would not have been counted as a formulaic compliment even though it exhibits prefabricated syntax.

Wray describes the difficulty and importance of setting limits on sequences counted as formulaic [9, pp. 28–33]. The method used in the present study allows for the most important element of determining the extent to which a corpus contains formulae, including compliment formulae (a ratio of formulaic to nonformulaic sequences): "To capture the extent to which a word string is the preferred way of expressing a given idea . . . we need to know not only how often

that form can be found in the sample, but also how often it *could* have occurred" [9, p. 30]. The procedure followed in the present study allows for such a determination.

To summarize, utterances coded as compliments were classified as formulaic or nonformulaic according to whether their syntactic structure matched one of the formulae found in Manes and Wolfson's study. Compliments that adhered to the syntactic formulae but manifested past tense or downgraders were also counted as formulaic compliments. In addition, the formulaic compliments were classified according to the types of syntactic formulae that Manes and Wolfson found in their study.

Compliments manifesting one of the formulaic syntactic structures were then analyzed for patterns in their SEMANTIC FORMULAE—common words like *good* and *nice*—as well. Specifically, they were analyzed to determine whether they carried their positive semantic load in an adjective and whether that adjective matched the semantic formulae that Manes and Wolfson found in their compliment data [2, pp. 116–119].

The data collection method used in this study eliminates a potential problem with the method employed in Manes and Wolfson's study. Manes and Wolfson employed the "notebook method" of gathering compliment data, having data collectors write down the compliments that they received or heard in everyday conversations. They gathered a corpus of 686 compliments using this method. However, the method may have led them to collect salient and explicit compliments readily but overlook some implicit compliments. Because explicit compliments manifest greater formulaicity than implicit compliments, Manes and Wolfson's method may have led them to collect fewer nonformulaic compliments than they would have if they had used a different method of data collection, such as identifying compliments in recorded conversations.

In the present study, entire tutoring sessions were recorded and transcribed, allowing implicit compliments to be more readily identified. This method, as Golato notes, "allows the analyst to

TABLE II  
THE SIX COMPLIMENT FORMULAE

Formula	Abbreviation of the Formula	Constructed Example
noun phrase + <i>is/looks</i> + ( <i>really</i> ) + adjective	NP is ADJ	<i>The introduction is really good.</i>
pronoun <i>is</i> ( <i>really</i> ) a adjective + noun phrase	PRO is a ADJ NP	<i>It is a really good introduction.</i>
<i>You</i> + verb + ( <i>a</i> ) + ( <i>really</i> ) + adjective + noun phrase	<i>You</i> V a ADJ NP	<i>You wrote a really good introduction.</i>
adjective + noun phrase	ADJ NP	<i>Good introduction.</i>
<i>You</i> + verb + (noun phrase) + ( <i>really</i> ) + adverb	<i>You</i> V NP ADV	<i>You organized the introduction really well.</i>
<i>I</i> + ( <i>really</i> ) + <i>like</i> + noun phrase	<i>I</i> like NP	<i>I really like the introduction.</i>

be sure that the instances in a collection truly represent the same features and characteristics" [43, p. 97]. Moreover, Golato notes that deviant or negative cases reveal commonalities in the other, nondeviant cases [42, p. 110], [43, p. 97]. In other words, this method allowed a more reliable ratio of formulaic to nonformulaic compliments to be determined, generating a more reliable analysis of the characteristics of both formulaic and nonformulaic compliments.

## RESULTS

As Table III shows, overall, tutors' compliments tended toward formulaicity. Of the 107 utterances identified as compliments, 65 (60.7%) of them were formulaic.

This finding can be compared to Manes and Wolfson's finding that 97.2% of compliments stated in everyday conversations are formulaic [2, p. 120]. Tutors working with engineering students in interactions about writing used formulaic compliments less often than did the participants in Manes and Wolfson's study. Even given this comparison, though, it is possible to say that tutors used formulaic compliments quite often.

TABLE III  
FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF FORMULAIC  
AND NONFORMULAIC COMPLIMENTS

Compliment	Frequency	Percent
Formulaic	65	60.7
Non-formulaic	42	39.3
Total	107	100.0

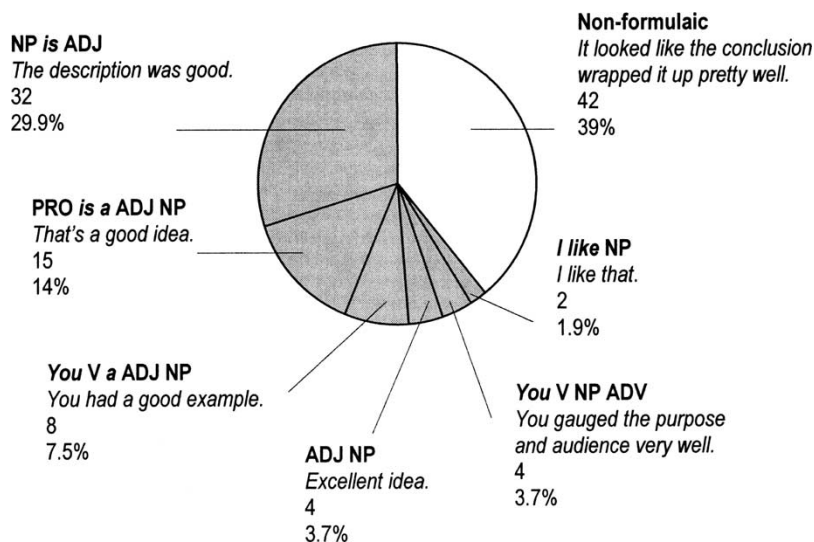


Fig. 1. Examples, frequencies, and percentages of formulaic compliments and nonformulaic compliments.

In addition to using formulaic compliments less frequently than participants in Manes and Wolfson's study, tutors also used a smaller range of compliment formulae. Tutors used six of the nine compliment formulae found in Manes and Wolfson's study [2, pp. 120–121]. In addition, tutors used one of the formulae (*I like NP*) just two times (e.g., *I really like the graphic*) (Table II explains the formulae abbreviations). The difference in the ranges of formulae likely stems from the fact that everyday conversations lend themselves more readily to exclamatory compliments like *What a lovely baby!* than institutional interactions like the tutoring sessions do. Manes and Wolfson found exclamatory compliments like this [2, pp. 120–121], but none were found in the present study.

Fig. 1 shows the six compliment formulae found in this corpus and examples from the corpus that illustrate each formula (the gray segments). It shows each formula's frequency and percentage of occurrence. It also shows the frequency and percentage of the nonformulaic compliments (the white segment). Tutors' nonformulaic compliments are discussed in a later section.

As Fig. 1 shows, the most common compliment formulae were *NP is ADJ*, used in 29.9% of the compliments, and *PRO is a ADJ NP*, used in 14.0% of the compliments. With these formulae, along with *ADJ NP* compliments, context was critical to identifying their referents and, consequently, to interpreting them. In using these formulaic compliments, tutors heavily relied on what Manes and Wolfson call *FRAMING REMARKS* to identify the referent of the noun phrase or pronoun in the subject position of their compliments [2, p. 128]. That is, tutors surrounded their formulaic compliments, which contained deictic elements like demonstrative pronouns, with utterances that identified referents. For example, such framing remarks were especially important in situating *ADJ NP* compliments, which elide the subject:

Student 9 *So we're just kind of building off of- I don't know. And here are a few lists that we made for a client so that they know what we did and that we're doing exactly what they want to do so that can't all of the sudden say you're not doing what we told you to.*

Tutor 9 *Right. Exactly. **Good move.***

Tutor 9's evaluation of how Student 9 has reported his progress to his client—*Good move*—makes little sense without access to the surrounding discourse.

The variety of tutors' compliments, shown in Fig. 1, can be compared to Manes and Wolfson's findings. They found the formula NP *is ADJ* accounted for 53.6% of their corpus [2, p. 120]. That same formula was the one used most often in the present study as well, but it accounted for just 29.9% of tutors' compliments. In addition, Manes and Wolfson found that three formulae accounted for 85% of the compliments in their corpus [2, p. 120]. In comparison, the three formulae used most often by tutors in the present study accounted for just 51.4% of the total compliments. Clearly, tutors demonstrated more variety in their compliments than did the participants in Manes and Wolfson's study of everyday conversations.

The excerpt above also indicates how tutors' formulaic compliments ranged in their semantic content—the meaning of the words they contained. Tutor 9's compliment, *Good move*, is general in its semantic content. That is, there is a substantive difference between compliments that carry their positive semantic load in general adjectives like *good*, as in *The index is good* and compliments that carry their positive semantic load in specific adjectives like *comprehensive*, as in *The index is comprehensive*. The difference between these compliments lies not in their syntactic structure but instead in the specificity of their semantic content.

The semantic content of tutors' compliments was analyzed to determine the extent to which tutors' compliments demonstrated general semantic content, as described by Manes and Wolfson [2, pp. 116–119]. As Manes and Wolfson point out, "What is interesting is that, despite the almost unlimited number of terms which may be chosen, the overwhelming majority of compliments contain one of a highly restricted set of adjectives and verbs" [2, p. 116]. Manes and Wolfson found that *good* accounted for 19.6% of the compliments that carried the positive semantic load in an adjective. They note that *good* and *nice*, the two adjectives used most often in their data, were frequently used even though they carry a weak semantic load, expressing only moderate positive evaluation. Other adjectives are extremely general like *good* and *nice*, but may be stronger in their positive semantic load, like *great* and *fabulous* [2, p. 117].

Of the 59 compliments in the current study that carry their positive semantic load in an adjective, 34 (57.6%) carry that load with the adjective *good*.

Mainly, the semantic content of tutors' formulaic compliments was general. Besides *good*, tutors used *interesting* six times and *great* four times. Thus, three general adjectives account for 74.5% of the adjectives used in formula types that carry their positive semantic load in an adjective. Even compliments with stronger positive semantic load were general, as the following excerpt shows:

Student 7 *Well I guess I don't know what else I could say right now. But maybe I could um just put "as figure one shows it consists of three main parts"—And then get rid of the list. And then they would see the three main parts. And then down here I would maybe describe them.*

Tutor 6 *Mm hmm. **Excellent idea.***

The semantic load of the adjective *excellent* is strong, but its semantic load is general rather than specific. Tutors restricted themselves mainly to general adjectives, even though, as Manes and Wolfson note, "the possible choice of complimentary adjectives is very great" [2, p. 117].

More importantly, compliments carrying a general semantic load may provide less instruction to students because such compliments fail to precisely evaluate students' ideas or elements of students' writing. In a post-interaction survey, Student 1 said that compliments like *It looks good* are "almost too general to concern myself with." He went on to write that "compliments that included a more detailed description made me think [Tutor 1] had a lot to discuss regarding a particular point." Further research is needed to determine whether formulaic compliments, particularly ones with general semantic content, influence the extent to which students attend to them or find them instructive. However, this analysis suggests that formulaic compliments often fail to fulfill their potential to convey targeted and explanatory feedback.

Even with this potential shortcoming, it is clear that tutors' formulaic compliments serve several functions. The next section examines these functions.

## DISCUSSION OF FORMULAIC COMPLIMENTS

Formulaic compliments functioned in several ways simultaneously. With formulaic compliments, tutors counterbalanced the negative face threats of suggestions and criticism, responded instantaneously to student's ideas with positive feedback, and closed their interactions with students. The following section discusses these functions of formulaic compliments, as well as some of the benefits and drawbacks of these functions for tutors and students.

### Counterbalancing Suggestions and Criticism

Researchers studying tutoring interactions have noticed that compliments help to mitigate the face threats that suggestions and criticisms pose (e.g., [35, pp. 88–89], [45, pp. 258, 271]). Authors of handbooks aimed at editors and tutors have also noted this use of compliments [34, p. 76], [38, p. 13]. This study supports their claim that compliments are used in this way and shows that formulaic compliments like the compliment that was used most often, NP is ADJ, seem to be used in this way. For example, Tutor 8 suggests that Student 8 “write a thesis” for his report on a small electric car that he built with other students:

Tutor 8 *I mean I don't know if you can think of like a- I don't know if you've had Comp. Write like a thesis for what you were trying to do? You know. Kind of a topic for the whole thing. I mean-*

This excerpt shows Tutor 8's suggestion to Student 8. The suggestion constitutes a negative face threat, a speech act that imposes upon a hearer's autonomy by directing him in what he should do. Performance of face threats like suggestions usually require some sort of politeness strategy to mitigate them, even in tutoring interactions where tutors' responsibility to give advice validates their suggestions. In this case, after pausing for 43 seconds to read the introduction over again, Tutor 8 compliments Student 8, assuring him that his introduction is “good” as it stands:

Tutor 8 *Well I think **the introduction's good**. It covers kind of everything you go through to make the car.*

In this excerpt, Tutor 8 mitigates the force of his earlier suggestion with a formulaic and rather general compliment. The compliment shows that formulaic compliments, like other compliments, can mitigate threats to face such as suggestions and criticisms.

Post-interaction surveys suggest that students did indeed interpret such compliments as attempts to balance criticism with praise. In fact, one student who had worked as a math tutor recognized the strategy of “sugaring the pill” [42] of criticism with compliments:

Student 2 *... it was always hard to tell someone that they were doing something wrong. But if you had to do it, it was always nice to follow it up with a compliment about how good they were doing about math in general and they just needed to work on the specific thing they were getting wrong. I think this was what she was trying to do: build my confidence back up after she had just pointed out my mistakes.*

Whether or not all students had the same meta-awareness of the functions of writing tutors' compliments, it seems that tutors' compliments did

in fact help to counterbalance confidence-shaking critique.

Formulaic compliments are also used at a discourse level to mitigate multiple face threats, as opposed to a speech act level to mitigate one particular face threat (as the prior example showed). That is, tutors used formulaic compliments at the start of interactions to cushion the advice and criticism that they would give throughout the session. In the excerpt below, Tutor 7 reads Student 6's entire paper, relates an anecdote about his own experience in getting feedback on his writing, and then uses a formulaic compliment to begin his feedback to Student 6:

Tutor 7 *Well what I tell my- my students a lot- I've got a story about being in school and writing a twenty-page paper. And I'm feeling pretty proud of it. And working-working my ass off on it. And having the teacher who is working with me on it return it with EVERY margin filled with writing. And four legal sized sheets attached filled front and back. And the first line of the first legal sheet saying “This essay needs a lot of work.”*

Student 6 *Wow! (Laughs).*

Tutor 7 *So I- The point of that is that- is that- I understand the concept of- of having one's ego injured.*

Student 6 *Yes. (Laughs).*

Tutor 7 *But the- the main point of this is that- is that- **It's really good**.*

This excerpt shows how formulaic compliments, like most compliments, can be used to soften forthcoming criticism and advice. Such compliments indicate that the tutor sees value in the writing, but must carry out his responsibility to advise and evaluate.

**Offering Instantaneous Feedback** Tutors also used formulaic compliments to give immediate, positive feedback to students. The use of compliments to process positive evaluations quickly and easily is evident in the second-most common formula: PRO is ADJ NP. As the following excerpt indicates, tutors used this formula to respond to ideas that students articulated during the interaction, as opposed to ideas that students articulated in their writing. In this excerpt, the student explains why he and his partner have chosen to use chronological ordering in the report:

Student 9 *When I first wrote this I had this as a paragraph and then this- these ones were a paragraph because they talked about that wire. But then when my partner read it he reorganized and said that if we did it by like chronologically- that would that would make more sense. So I said fine because I didn't want to take over the entire project.*

- Tutor 9 *Right.*  
 Student 9 *I figure some of his suggestions should be taken too.*  
 Tutor 9 *No and I think **that's a good idea.** I think **the chronological thing kind of works** especially since they're asking you to go through tasks that are underway and things that are completed. **They sort of lend themselves to chronological ordering which seems to work here.***

Tutor 9 responds to the student's explanation with a formulaic compliment (*That's a good idea*). He also follows that compliment up with two other, nonformulaic compliments. The first compliment he uses allows him to give an immediate positive response, even though it lacks specific semantic content unlike the two nonformulaic compliments that follow. By using the formulaic compliment, the tutor is able to show that he agrees with the student's decision to use chronological ordering (and perhaps also with the student's decision to acknowledge his partner's ideas).

Previous research suggests that formulaic language—which includes but is not limited to compliments—may allow speakers to bypass the difficulties of processing language. Formulaic language shortens speakers' processing time and promotes the fluency of their language output [4, p. 17], [9, pp. 15–18]. This research has also suggested that, unfortunately, speakers' capacity to create nonformulaic utterances, such as *With the table you've created here, the reader can easily compare five years of data*, exceeds their ability to construct them online during their interactions. Limitations on speakers' short-term memory, competition for their attention, and restrictions on their ability to switch their focus of attention generate this shortfall and prompt the use of formulaic language [9, p. 16].

Wray notes that formulaic language will be especially apparent in situations that both hamper processing (such as situations in which the speaker must concentrate and talk simultaneously) and follow interaction routines or scripts (e.g., ordering fast food), as many institutional interactions do [9, p. 17]. Clearly, writing tutors are likely to use formulaic language during a typical tutoring interaction, given the heavy processing load brought on by simultaneously reading and evaluating a text while interacting with a student writer, often within a set appointment schedule. In addition, such formulaic language may seem quite phatic in function, simply filling interaction time until the speaker can process a novel utterance.

**Closing the Interaction** Besides facilitating tutors' language processing, formulaic compliments also helped tutors signal their readiness to finish the

interaction. These compliments may also have boosted students' confidence and motivation and increased the likelihood that they would seek feedback on their writing again. In 10 out of 13 closings of the interactions, the tutor complimented the student at least once. In seven of those ten interaction closings, tutors used at least one formulaic compliment.

That tutors used formulaic compliments to close their interactions makes sense, given Nattinger and DeCarrico's finding that utterances with relatively simple syntactic patterns and a flexible amount of lexical variation are favored for common pragmatic acts, such as interaction closings [46, pp. 17–18]. On the other hand, Manes and Wolfson argue that compliments are not like other common speech acts, such as “thanks, greetings, and goodbyes,” in that compliments “are never absolutely required at certain specific points in an interaction” [2, p. 129]. Indeed, the present study showed that compliments were not required at the closings of interactions, although they were quite common in that position.

When tutors signaled the end of the session with compliments, they tended to use repetition as well, repeating compliment after compliment. These compliments tended to be general, referring to the student's entire paper, as opposed to some specific element. They also tended to counterbalance tutors' closing summary or restatement of their most important advice and evaluations. For example, in the following excerpt, Tutor 1 uses general compliments when she restates the main problem she found in the paper—one section that lacked clarity in its wording:

- Tutor 1 *Yeah I mean I think **it looks nice**, you know? I don't think it's confusing. Only that part. But other than that I think **it looks good**. So the only other thing I noticed is this like- I think- Nope. Never mind. Comma is where it's supposed to be. I don't think I can pick apart this thing anymore. (Laughs.)*  
 Student 1 *(Laughs). Yeah. I know. It's so tough to do.*  
 Tutor 1 *I don't know. I think **it looks good**. I think if you work on wording-*  
 Student 1 *Yeah. And the inches thing. I'll think I'll change too.*  
 Tutor 1 *And this- And like- It's clear to me- So unless you have other questions I don't-*  
 Student 1 *I can't come up with any more.*  
 Tutor 1 *Okay. Well I think we'll just be done.*

In this excerpt, Tutor 1 uses three formulaic compliments to counterbalance her main suggestion that Student 1 should revise a section of the paper. In addition, she makes a point of negating a concern that Student 1 had raised himself earlier on in the session: confusing sentence structure. She says *I don't think it's confusing*. Taken together, these compliments (plus one utterance that was not coded

as a compliment because its tone indicated that the tutor had cut it off: *It's clear to me-*) signal that the tutor cannot think of anything else to contribute to the conversation. That is, these compliments seem phatic in function, filling time until Tutor 1 finally states explicitly *Well I think we'll just be done*. Indeed, Student 1 seemed to pick up on the phatic function of the compliments, writing in his post-interaction survey:

Student 1 *I got the impression that she was out of material to discuss. The broad, "it looks good" statements definitely triggered a sense of closure, especially when they were used several times in a matter of a few sentences.*

This comment suggests that when tutors use repeated, general compliments, students perceive tutors to be wrapping up the interaction.

Besides signaling the end of the session, closing compliments seemed intended to motivate students and build their confidence. The excerpt below, which stands out for its repetition and formulaicity, exemplifies how tutors may have accomplished these outcomes:

Tutor 3 ***That all looks good. So just work with some of the word choice things that we talked about. Working on this table here and adding a little bit more in terms of specifics like we talked about in the- up in this section here. But overall it looks really good. And I think it's a great topic. Really interesting. So hopefully you'll find it interesting as you work on it throughout the semester too and learn a lot from it.***

Student 3 *All right.*

Tutor 3 *All right. Well, thanks [Student 3]. It was nice to meet you.*

This tutor uses repeated compliments to fill time and to show that she has little else to say about the paper. But her compliments serve other functions beyond a phatic one. First, the compliments state positive, albeit general, qualities (*great topic* and *really interesting*); consequently, they help counteract the tutor's summary of her main suggestions for improving the paper. Second, through her repetition of compliments, the tutor emphasizes what the student has already accomplished. This move seems intended to encourage the student to improve the paper even more and to send him off with confidence that he can do just that. In this way, the tutor enacted the role of a coach, a role endorsed by many researchers and administrators (e.g., [36], [37]).

In a post-interaction survey, Student 3 suggested that he sensed these functions in the tutor's compliments. First, he acknowledged that the compliments were likely intended to signal an end to the interaction. He writes, "I know when I'm helping someone with

something, I tend to give compliments when I want to get going." However, he also notes that the tutor's compliments were probably intended to boost his confidence and motivate him to continue working on the paper:

Student 3 *Those ending compliments give the writer a good feeling about their writing, so when they leave the tutoring session, they are feeling high on themselves and that high feeling helps them modify their paper with positive energy.*

This and other student responses indicate that students valued tutors' attempts to bolster students' confidence in themselves as competent writers.

To summarize this section on formulaic compliments, as prior research has pointed out (e.g., [3]), all compliments build solidarity, and formulaic compliments are no exception. The solidarity that formulaic compliments build, however, seems to stem from their phatic function, meaning it is, as Manes and Wolfson write, "a minimal amount of solidarity" [2, p. 125]. In other words, formulaic compliments build solidarity because they fill time and avoid silence. However, this study reinforced earlier research that points out how compliments can counterbalance face threats, such as suggestions and criticisms. They can also help to signal the end of an interaction and, in the process, encourage students as they set off to revise on their own. The next section of this paper begins a preliminary analysis of the 39% of tutors' compliments that were nonformulaic in order to determine the extent to which they served additional functions.

## DISCUSSION OF NONFORMULAIC COMPLIMENTS

As noted earlier, 42 (39.3%) of tutors' 107 compliments were nonformulaic in form. In Manes and Wolfson's study of compliments in everyday conversations, only 2.8% of the compliments were nonformulaic [2, p. 120]. Two possible explanations for this difference seem likely. First, as noted earlier, Manes and Wolfson's procedure for data collection probably led them to overlook implicit compliments. Since implicit compliments break from formulaicity, Manes and Wolfson might have overlooked compliments that did not match one of the nine formulae that they identified. Second, Manes and Wolfson collected compliments that were overheard and given in all sorts of interactions, including short interactions. They write, "The data include compliments given and received by waitresses, cashiers and customers, employers and employees, clergymen, landlords and salesmen, colleagues, friends, neighbors and family members" [2, p. 116]. Some of these participants, especially waitresses and cashiers, probably engaged in short interactions with the data collectors. It may be that the need to acknowledge another person quickly by saying something is stronger in short interactions,

triggering use of formulaic language, including formulaic compliments. It may also be that people engaging in long interactions—like tutors—have more opportunities to generate nonformulaic compliments.

Tutors' nonformulaic compliments differed from their formulaic compliments by demonstrating greater syntactic complexity and semantic variation. These properties suggest that tutors generated them online, rather than retrieving them from memory. Their form, therefore, indicates less likelihood of being phatic in function. The sections that follow examine the functions of nonformulaic compliments.

### Offering Specific and Individualized

**Feedback** Even when tutors' nonformulaic compliments deviated only slightly from the formulae, those deviations generated more individualized feedback. The nonformulaic compliments used a wider range of descriptors—adverbs as well as adjectives—allowing them to describe students' execution of particular tasks, such as *It's nicely done* and *It's described really well*. Tutors' use of adverbs is especially interesting, given that Manes and Wolfson found adverbs like *nicely* and *well* to be "surprisingly rare" [2, p. 118]. Tutors' higher rate of adverb use in nonformulaic compliments like *It's nicely done* suggests that tutors were approaching writing as a process and were focused on students' individual accomplishments in carrying out that process.

In addition, half of tutors' nonformulaic compliments contained semantic content—verbs, adverbs, and adjectives—that were specific and, consequently, individualized for a particular student. For example, they told students that elements in their writing were *injecting a little personality* and that they *wrapped it up pretty well*. Tutor 4, for example, used the adjective *explicit* to describe how Student 4 stated the purpose of his document, a technical description:

Tutor 4 (reads the entire paper) *Okay. You're pretty explicit in what the purpose of it is- used to be- just a description.*

It seems, then, that tutors who used nonformulaic compliments provided more instructive feedback to student writers. That is, the student writers who received specific and individualized compliments that targeted particular features of their writing received more useful feedback. In addition, tutors' individualized compliments gave students what Brown called for after analyzing his collection of 500 job rejection letters: praise directed at the individual [25, p. 774]. Future research could measure whether students learn more from specific and individualized feedback, but previous research suggests that student writers appreciate evaluation during interactions about writing. Walker and Elias, for example, found that writing conferences rated as successful by students were those that focused both on how

students' writing could be improved and how it had succeeded [47, p. 281].

**Focusing on Students as Writers** Recall that the two most common syntactic formulae, with the aid of framing remarks, focused attention on particular elements of students' writing (e.g., *It's really good* or *It is a really good introduction*). In contrast, some nonformulaic compliments focused attention on the students rather than on the writing. In doing this, they also carried out an exploratory function, allowing participant status to be renegotiated. For example, tutors renegotiated student status by favorably comparing the student to other writers that they had encountered in the past. Tutor 7, for example, compares Student 6 to less experienced writers after Student 6 identifies a weakness in his writing:

Student 6 *I have a tendency sometimes to do that to sentences to turn them around just for variety. Maybe a little too much.*

Tutor 7 *A lot of people have that tendency. I have noticed that all writers- Even like- I consider myself a relatively competent writer. I'm- I'm addicted to compound sentences. "Blah blah blah and" comma. Or comma "and blah blah blah." I can look at two pages of writing and it's- Every sentence is a compound sentence like that because I-*

Student 6 *Yeah. Sometimes I need to force myself just to write it straight out instead of being-*

Tutor 7 *Well being- being conscious of it is the- You know that's the- **A less developed writer wouldn't notice that.***

Besides sharing some of his own struggles with Student 6, Tutor 7 implicitly compliments Student 6 on his ability to notice how manipulating sentence structure for effect can potentially decrease readability.

It is also worth noting that Tutor 7's nonformulaic compliment concludes an episode that could be characterized as TROUBLES TALK: complaints or explanations of problems. Tutor 7's first response to Student 6 is one that is typically associated with female speakers rather than male speakers (in American English): instead of offering advice, the expected male response, Tutor 7 reciprocates with his own trouble in writing—using compound sentences. Reciprocating troubles talk is a solidarity-building strategy in and of itself [48, pp. 64–76, 132–133], [49, p. 230], [50, pp. 58–59]. In this case, it is capped off by a compliment, which further promoted amiable relations.

Of course, in this case, it is also important to note that the trouble being discussed—the tendency to create sentences that are too complex—covertly conveys status. That is, when Tutor 7 concludes the troubles

talk episode with a compliment, he raises Student 6's status not only by suggesting that Student 6 has the ability to gauge his own strengths and weaknesses as a writer but also by suggesting that the problem itself is a side effect of skill in writing. Tutor 7 suggests that he sees both himself and Student 6 as writers with quirks, people who must fight the urge to link ideas together into complex syntactic structures. He implies that their idiosyncrasies lead them to go too far at times, generating unwieldy sentences. In suggesting that he and Student 6 share the same challenge as skilled writers, Tutor 7 engages the exploratory function of compliments.

Similarly, Tutor 12 explicitly compares Student 12's ability to punctuate sentences, specifically, to use a semicolon correctly, with other people's capacity to do the same:

Tutor 12 *You're separating two independent clauses okay? With a semicolon. Rather than if you just had a comma there. It would be a comma splice.*

Student 12 *Mm hmm.*

Tutor 12 *All right. And that puts you- **Knowing that puts you ahead of about seventy percent of people that write both on the job and in school.***

Student 12 *It seems to me that it kind of emphasizes like your next point without like breaking it up too much.*

Tutor 12 *Yeah. It's meant to show a relationship between the two clauses.*

Like Tutor 7 with Student 6, Tutor 12 compares Student 12's ability as a writer to other people's—people in school and people in the workforce. Like Tutor 7's compliment on Student 6's ability, Tutor 12's compliment hinges on a comparison to other people, specifically, to less capable writers.

In addition, Tutor 12's nonformulaic compliment allows Student 12 to react to the praise with ease, responding with her reasons for using a semicolon rather than (perhaps) a period by saying *It seems to me that it kind of emphasizes like your next point without like breaking it up too much*. In an early study of compliments and responses to them, Pomerantz noted that recipients of compliments are caught between trying to avoid self-praise and trying to avoid the appearance of disagreement that rejecting the compliment could cause [51, p. 88]. Boyle, too, notes that "it can be difficult to accept a compliment and at the same time appear to be modest" [18, p. 38]. Tutor 12's compliment leaves room for Student 12 to give a substantive response rather than, for example, a self-praising (and phatic) *Thanks* or a disagreeing *No it doesn't*.

**Focusing on Students' Expertise in the Subject Matter** Finally, with nonformulaic compliments, tutors commented positively on a student's

subject-matter expertise, as opposed to some element in the paper. These compliments served an exploratory function as well. For example, in responding to Student 10's idea for adding content to her paper, Tutor 10 implicitly compliments the depth of Student 10's knowledge about her topic (calculating larvae in coral reefs):

Tutor 10 *Where you have a concluding sentence here that almost predicts for your reader what you're going to go onto next. And then this maybe the intro of this sentence here before you just go right into "simulations were conducted" maybe you have another sentence first that ties in somehow- somehow what you've just talked about to this paragraph.*

Student 10 *So maybe like saying at the end up here how they were hypothetical and just like try to tie it all together and then move on and say then these ideas were tested?*

Tutor 10 *Yeah. **See these are the kinds of things that seem really obvious to you-** like do I have to say that to them? But really for your reader even the readers that are on the same level as you are, um it's great to use those kinds of key sentences and words to move your reader along with you. Make sure they understand.*

Tutor 10 compliments Student 10 by noting that certain content elements would be obvious to her because of her knowledge of the topic, but not to most other people, even those in the same field, or on the same level. Compliments about students' subject-matter expertise serve an exploratory function by acknowledging that different varieties of expertise exist (besides expertise in writing) and by indicating that the student has expertise that the tutor and others do not. Consequently, such nonformulaic compliments helped tutors de-emphasize their own institutional status, promote student status, and thus make steps toward interaction equilibrium.

It seems, then, when tutors break from formulaicity, they can engender other, beneficial functions of compliments. They can engage the exploratory function of compliments, renegotiating the student's status, and they can provide more specific and individualized feedback.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, I examined the extent to which writing tutors' compliments to engineering students adhere to formulae first described in Manes and Wolfson's seminal study of compliments in everyday conversation [2]. This study adds to existing research by indicating that formulaic compliments may be less likely in task-oriented, institutional interactions

than they are in everyday conversations. Over 97% of the compliments in Manes and Wolfson's corpus of compliments in everyday conversations were formulaic, but only 61% of tutors' compliments were formulaic.

It may also be the case that formulaic compliments are more likely to occur in short exchanges that generate the need for phatic talk aimed at filling time and avoiding silence rather than exchanging information. Thus, this study points out the need to determine the extent to which social and institutional situations and roles affect formulaicity. It also makes clear that analyzing formulaicity requires recording language data, rather than, or at least in addition to, employing the notebook method that Manes and Wolfson used. Recording allows entire interactions to be analyzed, including lengthy ones like tutoring interactions as well as passing exchanges like the conversations that occur around the photocopier at work. All compliments, including implicit ones like *You've worked with Elizabeth Taylor!* [18, p. 36] can more readily be counted, and a valid ratio of formulaic to nonformulaic compliments can be determined.

This study found that the form of compliments influences their function. Prior research made clear that all compliments serve two main functions: solidarity-building and evaluating. In addition, prior studies showed that compliments are used to mitigate face threats like criticisms and suggestions [35, pp. 88–89], [45, pp. 258, 271]. This study found that compliment form affects these functions and inhibits or generates other functions.

Formulaic compliments often performed a phatic function, even when they simultaneously carried out other functions. Formulaic compliments allowed tutors to provide instantaneous, positive feedback, by retrieving prefabricated language from memory rather than generating novel compliments online during the interaction. That is, compliments like *It's good* let tutors respond quickly, especially to ideas that students generated during the interactions.

Formulaic compliments also signaled the end of interactions and balanced tutors' summaries of their suggestions and criticisms. Even though these compliments were phatic, they indicated tutors' role as a coach, motivating students to continue to work on their writing and bolstering students' confidence about their writing. That is, though these closing compliments lacked specificity and, therefore, instructive value, they seemed to generate worthwhile outcomes. Therefore, any impulse toward cautioning tutors to avoid phatic compliments to close an interaction does not seem worthwhile. In fact, the relative safety of such compliments makes them potential candidates for editors working with subject-matter experts or technical writers. That is, because these compliments are phatic, editors who

use them should be relatively safe from sounding presumptuous or condescending, two potential risks when participant status is relatively equal [20, pp. 239, 244]. Editors may, therefore, want to use one or two of them to close their interactions on a positive note.

In contrast to their formulaic compliments, tutors' nonformulaic compliments were syntactically more complex and semantically more diverse. The more tutors' compliments diverted from formulaicity, the more they seemed to have been generated online instead of being retrieved from memory. That is, the compliment *You obviously felt pretty comfortable with this paragraph* seemed to have been generated on-the-spot during the interaction. Nonformulaic compliments were also more specific in their content. Similar to Limaye's argument that explanations in refusal letters should include specific reasons for the bad news in addition to general and "depersonalized" reasons [52, p. 43], this study indicates that specific compliments indicate that the speaker is attending to the recipient as an individual. In other words, specific compliments showed approval of students' individual efforts.

Nonformulaic compliments appeared to be more instructive than most formulaic compliments because they not only singled out particular elements of the students' writing that were effective but also gave insight into why specific elements or ideas were effective. That is, even a tutor who says *This is good* might be referring to a specific referent, like a bulleted list, but the formula leaves no room for insight into why that specific referent is effective (e.g., executed in perfect parallel structure). It seems, then, that nonformulaic compliments are likely to constitute feedback that better facilitates learning. Further research, however, is needed to test this idea.

In addition, nonformulaic compliments performed an exploratory function. They allowed renegotiation of discourse status by focusing on students' capabilities as writers and subject-matter experts, instead of focusing on the written products that students had produced. When tutors turned their attention from the writing to the writer, they enacted North's decree that tutors should create "better writers, not better writing" [53, p. 438]. North's admonition, now well over 20 years old, may now seem a bit simplistic or even a bit naïve. I believe, however, that his overarching idea applies to compliments: tutors should motivate students and build their confidence by praising particular expertise and accomplishments that are relevant to the task at hand.

This study points to several avenues for further research. First, further research could systematically investigate students' responses to compliments, testing the extent to which students value nonformulaic versus formulaic compliments. In

addition, in a study with a greater number of participants, the relationship between gender and complimenting could be investigated. In terms of editor-writer interactions, further research could explore the role of expertise in complimenting behavior, including the extent to which editors' compliments achieve specificity. Finally, further research could investigate writers' perceptions of formulaic and nonformulaic feedback besides

complimentary feedback, such as criticisms and suggestions. Such a study could indicate the extent to which the feedback that students and other writers receive is instructive rather than phatic. Until then, it is my hope that this study will help tutors and others who work with writers understand how the form of their compliments influences the function of their compliments and, consequently, will help them use compliments consciously and carefully.

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