**THANKS FOR THE COMPLIMENT!?**

**EXPLORING CRYPTOSEMIC PRAISE AS A FACE-SAVING STRATEGY**

*Abstract*

*In polite cultures, praise serves as valuable social currency, yet, some compliments can be counter-productive. A cryptosemic compliment is a message in communication that is routinely exchanged on the virtue of its good intentions, while closer semiotic scrutiny reveals another, obscured dimension of meaning that subverts the implied praise, yet goes unperceived or ignored by all parties involved. Cryptosemic compliments are rooted in reified, taken-for-granted notions of what is 'normal' and 'true' and serve as a window into the subtle cultural double-standards operating under the veneer of praise. Drawing on Goffman's concept of 'face-work' as well as Brown and Levinson's framework on politeness, I argue that cryptosemic praise is a 'face-saving' discourse strategy that helps appease the cognitive dissonance of internalizing more than one system of cultural beliefs and demonstrate variations of patterns of cultural value ascription involved in the construction and use of these mixed messages.*

**Introduction**

The world of social interaction is a minefield of continually re-negotiated relationships whose fragile security hangs in the balance of mutually beneficial social co-operation and compromise. Because of the infinite precariousness of our public image and 'face', social participators develop an impressive arsenal of linguistic expressions that allow us to engage in the interaction rituals of daily life while trying to maintain poise and dignity. Politeness is one of the strategic devices we use to navigate social scenes without 'stepping on too many toes' and, hence, safeguarding ourselves from exposing something that can compromise our own social standing. Without considering it dishonest (or being considered dishonest by others), we tell white lies when trying to spare people's feelings, liberally embellish our own histories when trying to gain social approval and rely on euphemisms when attempting to skirt social taboos that may 'ruffle feathers'. From early socialization, we are taught to choose our words wisely – not only for the sake of directness or clarity – but as a social survival strategy that will shield us from potential humiliation and conflict with others.

In this paper, I develop the concept of a particular type of a mixed message in communication: one that disguises itself as praise – to bring order into a social situation perceived to threaten one's 'face'. Compliments are a form of 'positive politeness' (Brown and Levinson 2009) that allow us to connect to other social members through expressing solidarity and empathy. Many of the compliments we employ are quite generic, precisely because of their function as the lightning rod that diffuses social situations and builds bridges to friendly relations. One simply cannot stop and tailor a new, idiosyncratic expression of praise for each individual situation that arises through life – there are too many social situations that call for the use of compliments and we frequently rely on old formulas and scripts to meet that necessity.

But what if some of these handy scripts contain more meaning than 'meets the eye'? What if some of the tired-and-true clichés we employ in complimenting each other are actually wrought with content that undermines the very person being complimented? And is there 'no harm done', if all parties involved only see the positive in the exchange? In this paper, I will address a particular kind of a compliment – a socio-linguistic phenomenon I call the 'cryptoseme' and demonstrate that its presence in our everyday interaction is a response to unspoken, yet, subtly sensed threats to the 'face' of the social actors involved. In outlining this discourse strategy, I rely primarily on Goffman's notion of 'face-work', specifically 'face-saving' (Goffman 1967), predicated on Brown and Levinson's general sociolinguistic framework on politeness (Brown and Levinson 2009). I conclude with posing the question of whether the 'success' of this type of compliment may carry impact on a macro-cultural scale.

*What is a cryptoseme?*

Suppose you find yourself in a conversation with a friend in which you express your frustration about feeling stupid about a work project: you are just spinning your wheels, no new ideas are coming and the pressure is mounting. You express your frustration by lamenting 'being so stupid'. The friend responds with: 'Nonsense, you are such a diligent, hard worker!' Even if you were certain that the friend was sincerely trying to be supportive and comforting, would you be pleased or dismayed by this consolation? On the one hand, one cannot deny that being considered a diligent hard

worker is, indeed, praise of high order. On the other hand, aside from being called a hard worker, there also exists an *unspoken agreement with the speaker's original complaint about feeling 'stupid'*. The proposed 'stupidity' of the complainer is not contested and, in fact, not addressed at all – instead, the focus is redirected into the adjacent topic of diligently applying oneself to the task at hand. The very fact that the friend was compelled to shift the focus of the statement away from the topic of intelligence, lends silent support to the suspicion that she or he is agreeing with your self-appraisal of being 'stupid'. Despite the mixed content of this statement, however, on many occasions, both parties – the sender as well as the receiver of such a message – walk away believing that this was a pure compliment.

The above is an example of a socio-linguistic occurrence I term the 'cryptoseme'. A cryptoseme (pronounced: /krĭp'tə-sēm/, Greek for *kryptos*: 'hidden' / 'secret' and *sêma*: 'sign' / 'meaning') is a type of a mixed message in which 'hidden' meanings can remain undetected by either or both – the sender and the receiver of the message. The hidden meaning comes not from what is articulated in the message, but, rather, from what is left unsaid. Cryptosemes may take a variety of manifestations but they are all characterized by the element of an obscured dimension of meaning that subverts (or, in some way, takes something away from) the topical point being made. The focus of this paper is the cryptosemic compliment and the central question I pose is: why do people deliver these 'backhanded compliments' without realizing that they are 'backhanded' and why do others go along with them as compliments, despite the dubiousness of meaning they communicate?  My explanation is that cryptosemic compliments are a variety of a social strategy Goffman refers as 'face-work' (Goffman 1967: 5-45). These compliments arise out of an unarticulated yet perceived threat to one's 'face' – and they are exchanged on the basis of the mutually face-saving mechanism of social co-operation through praise. This cooperative face-saving is accomplished by the sender of the message tacitly extending the receiver of the message some kind of implicit 'extra credit' to compensate for a perceived deficit of something valuable; on the other end, the receiver accepts the given utterance as praise – as a measure of reciprocal courtesy towards the sender's good intentions. The success of this 'face-saving' exchange is hinged upon all parties involved sharing the same internalized cultural presuppositions. The perceived 'deficiency' that is

being ameliorated with a cryptosemic compliment is only a deficiency because the current cultural codes prescribe it so.

*Cryptosemes Betray Default Cultural Presuppositions.*

Cryptosemic expressions come in a variety of syntactic structures, but they are always constructed in response to a particular social condition – when the target of the utterance (i.e. the receiver of the message) appears to suffer from a perceived *deficit* of some important quality and the speaker (i.e. the sender of the message) is compelled to say something supportive and encouraging to compensate for this lacking quality by turning the attention to a personal quality of equal or higher value that is present. Unlike in our 'stupid / hard worker' example, cryptosemes do not always arise in response to someone's active complaining – they are frequently volunteered by the sender without provocation. For instance, women past their mid-twenties frequently get 'compliments' such as: 'You look amazing for your age!' This is an example of a cryptoseme: the praise component is certainly there ('you look amazing'), but it is built on an unspoken assumption that women past a certain age are expected to look bad. Therefore, credit is given to the receiver not so much for looking objectively 'amazing' (in which case, the sender would simply say: 'You look amazing' – without qualifying it with 'for your age'), but that the receiver is deemed impressive for not 'letting herself go' or not succumbing to the natural degeneration of attractiveness, like the implied majority within her age cohort. Usually, this compliment is genuinely intended as pure praise – and, quite frequently, it is received as such. In a pilot study I conducted to probe people's responses to cryptosemic conversation scenarios, when asked to evaluate the 'You look amazing for your age' praise, the overwhelming majority of respondents indicated the belief that the statement 'looking amazing for one's age' means looking younger than one's actual age number[1]. The phrase 'you look amazing for your age' is qualitatively different than saying 'you look younger than your age' because the latter is a measure of the youthfulness of one's appearance without passing judgment about whether it is a 'good' or a 'bad' thing, whereas the former utterance communicates a negative attitude towards appearing one's own age. Though both utterances may be meant and taken as synonymous with each other and, therefore, interchangeable, 'you look amazing for your

age' is a cryptoseme because, without actually articulating it, it tells you that if you want to look good, you best not look your age.

The fact that the sender feels the necessity to qualify the compliment with 'for your age' illustrates the cryptosemic dynamic of trying to *fill the gap* of something that is perceived to be lacking in one's 'natural state' (in this instance, it is the woman's narrowly defined youth) – with some other virtue that is a consequence of personal effort (e.g.: holding up gracefully against the unmerciful toll of time). The cryptoseme allows for such a seamless and stealthy combination of those elements that both parties are apt to feel great about the exchange – the sender walks away feeling as if she had said something 'nice' and the receiver thinks that she was told that she looks great. But just because meaning goes unnoticed or unaddressed, it does not render it benign. On the contrary, it is this continued avoidance of acknowledgement of mixed meanings in cryptosemes that translates into prolonging the life span of certain reified social themes.

The culprits behind cryptosemes are the *cultural presuppositions* at the bottom of a given value system. In linguistic pragmatics, 'presupposition' is a term that references the unquestioned, taken-for-granted premise behind verbal expression. Meaning of any given utterance is located not so much in the semantic meaning of the words being spoken: the actual point of departure of meaning resides in the speaker's deep-seated, unarticulated assumptions about the world. As Stalnaker summarized it: 'A person's presuppositions are the propositions whose truth he takes for granted, often unconsciously, in a conversation, an inquiry, or a deliberation. They are the background assumptions that may be used without being spoken – sometimes without being noticed…' (Stalnaker 1973: 447) The key element not to be overlooked is the automatic, mindless 'taken-for-granted-ness' of certain knowledge and understanding of the world. Individuals do not have to stop and evaluate every single social situation separately in order to know what to say on a given subject: the internalized system of beliefs shapes the direction in which the person is likely to take a given topic of conversation.

A similar description of the same phenomenon, only from a cognitive disciplinary perspective, is put forth by Hofstadter who talks about mental 'default assumptions': ideas that 'hold true in what you might say is the "simplest" or "most natural" or "most likely" possible model of whatever situation is under discussion.' (Hofstadter 1985: 137).

For instance, he suggests, the reason why people say 'woman engineer' or 'female police officer', is because, despite those terms and social designations being technically gender neutral, the mental image we summon when we hear 'engineer' or 'police officer' are automatically set on 'male' and we must, therefore, provide extra description when speaking of females. These default assumptions not only direct our perceptions but also provide us with a set vocabulary to express these preconceived notions. While some would argue that emphasizing the 'femaleness' of members of these professions is a special marker of exceptionality, and therefore, should be seen as an advantageous distinction, Hofstadter suggests that this necessity to 'mark' betrays the invisibility and 'otherness' of women in these professions – unless otherwise specified.

I synthesize the linguistic notion of presuppositions with Hofstadter's idea of cognitive default assumptions – to talk about internalized *cultural templates* we automatically utilize when constructing social expressions of praise. When it comes to utilization of cryptosemes, the bottom line is that one would not have to reach for euphemisms if there was not a perceived problem (a 'lack' of something important) that had to be masked with attention misdirection and positive words. One would not have to say 'you look wonderful for your age' if age was not considered an effectual boogeyman that snatches away women's youth and good looks, hence robbing them of their primary 'social currency' (Williamson 2002: 20, 42) in life. The logic of cultural presuppositions requires that all involved (the sender as well as the receiver) must subscribe to the same cultural value system in order for the cryptoseme to come across as 'straight-forward'. The 'you look wonderful for your age' compliment can only succeed if both, the sender and the receiver share the belief that a woman's aesthetic, and, hence social appeal is on the decline, age-wise. Departing from this internalized 'fact', one may very well be flattered by such a compliment – and I argue that the halo effect (Thorndike 1920) of the message dwells, in large part, in the face-saving strategy of extending 'extra face' by one speaker to another, subtly slipped into the mix.

**Cryptosemes and Face-Work**

The defining characteristic of cryptosemes is that they arise in social contexts in which the sender of the message feels the necessity to act as an agent of supportiveness,

to *ameliorate* a perceived deficiency in the receiver, by offering a compliment that highlights a different, equivalently valuable trait the person does possess. This is to say that, regardless of whether the receiver had, in any way, provoked this impulse to console, the sender is treating the situation as an *affliction* that calls for an empathetic response. Telling someone that she looks wonderful for her age is to cast aging in the role of an external condition that is attacking the person. In our previous example, telling someone that he is a 'hard worker' is an attempt to veil the implicit assumption that this person's 'stupidity' is a natural and irreversible condition that cannot be helped. And the substitution of the old offending personal quality with the new 'realistic' one is not a random or haphazard process at all: in looking for a suitable, redeeming quality to insert in the place of the old, dysfunctional one, we quite discriminately opt for certain kinds of traits over others – ones that imbue the receiver of the message with *extra credit for effort* to distract from the unpleasant reality of 'being low' on some valuable virtue.

In his monumental work *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-face Behavior*, Goffman introduced the notion of 'face-work' as a set of social strategies enacted to maintain one's own favorable image in social situations. Failure to maintain face results in social embarrassment (Goffman 1967: 97-112) – i.e.: losing face – and not only for a single individual but for all present. Therefore, social co-operation through bolstering not just one's own, but the others' face is a necessary component of any social interaction (27-31). In a given social exchange, all members must help each other maintain poise in order to avoid humiliation and conflict. In *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, Brown and Levinson contend that politeness is a universal social phenomenon that arises in defense to 'face threatening acts' (Brown and Levinson 2009: 65), those acts being a variety of perceived impositions upon one's desires and freedoms.

Drawing upon those two complementary frameworks, I suggest that, in the realm of social interaction, there also exist 'face threatening *themes*' that provoke cryptosemic compliments to emerge in defense. Face threatening themes are 'touchy' subjects that are likely to hurt feelings or provoke judgment, carrying the threat to expose one as insensitive to people's insecurities or be branded as 'politically incorrect' – i.e. being intolerant or close-minded towards social topics and ideologies of the day (let us keep in

mind that being seen as politically incorrect or socially insensitive may spell out an even more dreaded loss of face than being considered a 'jerk' in the contemporary US culture.)

The complex psychology of human interaction demands equally complex expressions to accommodate the nuance of the power dynamics involved. Cryptosemic compliments reflect the tensions and constraints experienced by social actors when confronted with sensitive social subjects that threaten to shatter the precarious tranquility of friendly conversation. The dynamic that takes place in cryptosemic interaction is described by Goffman, when he talks about the face-work of face-work:

> *One common type of tacit cooperation in face-saving is the tact exerted in regard to face-work itself. The person not only defends his own face and protects the face of the others, but also acts so as to make it possible and even easy for the others to employ face-work for themselves and him. He helps them to help themselves and him. (Goffman 1967: 29)*

Cryptosemic compliments function in this very way: the sender, unconsciously[2] perceiving some deficiency in the receiver, feels 'bad' (guilty or outraged over the unfairness of the situation, for example) and, therefore, finds herself in a state that calls for a diffusion of this social uneasiness. It should be emphasized that the object of this 'olive branch of face' – the receiver – need not be initially aware that he is 'deficient' – he only needs to share the same cultural premise on which this deficiency was calculated by the sender. For instance, suppose you are conversing with a person whose pant-fly is open. Even if he is unaware of it throughout the entire conversation, you may still feel embarrassment for him (and, in the chain-reaction of face-work, embarrassed for yourself for witnessing his embarrassment) – possibly more so because his fly is open *and* he does not have enough self-awareness to realize this. What counts is that, upon eventual discovery of this *faux pas*, he becomes retrospectively embarrassed because he subscribes to the same cultural system of meaning as you and sees the occurrence of open pant-fly a loss of face.

The face-work happens when the sender, in her attempt to draw attention away from the 'deficiency', compliments the receiver over a personal quality or a fact that

specifically emphasizes personal control (agency) over his lot. This act can be seen as an extension of face to the object of this sensitive treatment, i.e.: giving him the freedom to recover socially by being grateful for this mine-field-avoiding courtesy.

In the following section, I will talk about the above-described 'face-extending' practice in terms of the sociological conceptions of *ascribed* and *achieved* status in order to illustrate one of the formulas behind the term / fact / theme substitution that happens within the cryptosemic compliment.

*Cryptosemic Face-Saving through Status Progression*

While there are a number of factors contributing to the over-emphasis of 'positivity' in cryptosemic compliments, the essential characteristic relevant to this discussion is the consistent replacement of the 'lacking' trait with a quality that signals *personal achievement* – extending the receiver extra credit for merit or strength of character in the face of some taken-for-granted personal handicap. In sociological parlance, these 'personal quality' categories correspond with designations of 'ascribed' and 'achieved' status. *Ascribed status* describes the social labels individuals are born, and hence, 'stuck' with: these characteristics are socially superimposed on members as an inevitable reality of their social standing (e.g.: one's race, ethnic, national or geographic origins, physical build characteristics, inborn talents and abilities, etc.) This category of social labels lacks any 'extra credit for merit' value because these individual qualities are understood to stem from socio-biological circumstances anteceding one's own choice. Conversely, *achieved status* corresponds with characteristics and values social members are believed to have earned through personal effort – or, failed to earn through the lack of applying oneself (e.g.: one's financial gains and losses, career successes and failures, political affiliations, social connections, etc.) Achieved status carries plenty of 'extra credit for merit' value because the characteristics that fall in this category are considered to be the province of one's own willful decisions and actions.

The first example of a cryptosemic compliment used at the offset of this paper ('you are not stupid – you are a hard worker') provides an excellent illustration of the ascribed-to-achieved status shift described above – because it practically serves as a metaphor for the logic underlying cryptoseme construction in US culture. Diligence and

hard work, in the context of the US cultural climate, are the end-all pillars holding up the highly-prized ideal of merit-based, effort-earned respect. The American Dream prescribes relentless hard work as the singular grand act of 'free will' that separates those who succeed in life from those who do not. And so, faced with a situation in which the sender does not actually believe that the receiver is smart (because if he believed that, he would have no problem saying: 'Nonsense – you are not stupid – you are quite smart!'), he is, instead, compelled to direct the attention of the speaker into the 'hard worker' territory – because, while stupidity is conventionally assumed to be an unfortunate side-effect of god's or nature's lapses of generosity towards its children, being a 'hard worker' is largely perceived to be a character trait one actively cultivates in oneself.  Being 'smart' can be said to require nothing more than a passive acceptance of the hand of cards one is randomly dealt by life, whereas the label of the hard worker is absolutely earned through one's own hard work, frequently, over an extended period of time. And, given that the US culture is first and foremost an ideology of meritocracy (Stark 2006), telling someone that he is a diligent worker can serve to momentarily outshine just about any other character shortcomings. One of the respondents, when discussing his reaction to the 'You're not stupid – you're a diligent, hard worker' cryptosemic praise scenario, articulated this very idea: 'I would rather be perceived as hard working than intelligent. Because intelligence is a gift and hard working, that's from your effort. That's something you have control over.' ('Shumy') From this vantage point, we can see that the face-work goal of the cryptoseme is fulfilled through essentially flattering the receiver with what constitutes extremely high praise in the shared cultural system of meaning, in the hopes that the receiver will, in his face-saving turn, overlook the unfinished business of confronting his implied stupidity and lets it go unaddressed and unchallenged.

In subsequent works, the inquiry into the cultural presuppositions underlying cryptosemic face-work will benefit from a cross-cultural comparison. It is not that the concept of 'hard work' or 'perseverance' is universally understood to be a redeeming fill-in for 'stupidity' – the appropriate substitute is determined by what the cultural value measuring stick is set to. The 'hard worker' cryptosemic compliment would fail to provide redemptive consolation to someone coming from a culture in which being considered lazy is *not* a fate worse than being called stupid. In my native Russia, for

instance, one of the most cherished folktale heroes – Ivan the Fool – is the endless target of mockery and disrespect from his Czar father and allegedly superiorly intelligent brothers. Yet, despite his lack of ostensible intellect, Ivan always triumphs over the cocky siblings, winning the kingdom and a whole lot of booty at the end of each tale – but not via hard work and perseverance. Ivan's victories are usually achieved through industriousness and trickery. Furthermore, quite frequently, Ivan out-sources decision-making to his beautiful and magical consort / bride – Vasilisa the Wise – who tells him to 'sleep on it' and then takes care of everything by the time he wakes up – a problem-solving pattern that suggests that hard work and diligence are not highly prioritized when it comes to overcoming adversity. In the Russian culture, the notions of resourcefulness, an ability to 'think on one's feet' and the willingness to circumvent the system possibly serve as the 'special credit' equivalent of the US 'hard work' ethic: they are seen as an admirable solution to the lack of legitimate means of access to socio-economic capital like money, formal education, titles, etc.

It should be noted that, in the realm of complex, messy social reality, the line between achieved and ascribed status is fuzzy to say the least. Qualities that are conventionally seen as inborn – like 'beauty' – can easily fall on both sides of the nature / nurture divide: one cannot help one's height, pigment coloration or bone structure, but one can achieve a number of aesthetic 'advances' though personal effort – such as exercise, healthy eating or dieting, grooming, accessorizing and cosmetic surgery. The same applies to intelligence: even if people are born with a certain fixed intellectual modality, one can advance her or his knowledge base and erudition through pursuing reading, research, travel and other intellectual exposure that is a matter of individual drive. This caveat, however, does not present any challenges to my theory, since cryptosemic compliments are nuanced enough to implicitly acknowledge the messy nature / nurture overlap in life. This is how cryptosemes such as 'You look healthy and happy' enter the arena of popular compliments. When finding oneself in a social space with an acquaintance one has not seen in a while, who has visibly gained weight, many people attempt to counteract the 'elephant in the room' (the person's weight gain, which, is conventionally understood by most people in US society as an undesirable "downgrade") with offering a compliment to the person whose constitution of bodily

lipids is now cause for sensitive social treatment. The sender of the message is attempting to skirt the uneasy mainstream belief that one cannot be 'fat and beautiful' at once, so she scrambles to come up with a way to emphasize the two aspects of the receiver's personal appearance that indicate that she *is* doing *something* right – 'looking' healthy and happy (presumably, the healthy look is achieved by a healthy-minded lifestyle, while the happy look is gained by working on one's spirituality and life philosophy.) This is a hugely popular piece of cryptosemic praise that is quite a staple in social conversations as well as the arena of mass media – and, though it essentially means: 'You are overweight and unattractive, but your internal qualities achieved through effort more than make up for it', many people consider it quite a positive, and even empowering compliment. To be sure, it would, indeed, be an empowering statement, if it had not been erected on the foundation of a cultural double-standard that favors women's physical appearance above all else (Sontag 1972). And if the standards for female physical beauty had not been so narrowly and unrealistically defined, we would not hear such a 'compliment' in a first place.

*Patterns of Merit-Based Value Ascension in Constructing Cryptosemes*

In the previous section, I suggested that cryptosemic compliments owe much of their face-saving success to extending the receiver the credit for individual control over his or her identity in the face of some lack in other personal qualities deemed unrecoverable and unchangeable. This is because members of the US culture put the highest premium on praise that highlights one's own personal efforts and perseverance. But it is not a 'one-size-fits-all' logic: cryptosemes vary in the degree of 'face-extending' value they offer – depending on the sender's unconscious calculation of how much face-saving the receiver will need. The 'merit value' of the quality being spotlighted by the cryptosemic compliment depends on how much 'compensation' the undesirable characteristic being repressed calls for. In other words, the 'extra credit' will depend on how badly the receiver wants for sympathy and agency in the sender's estimation. Thus far, I have outlined two main structural variations in cryptosemic compliments.

*Variation 1: 'Inborn Quality' Substituted by 'Personal Merit Quality' (i.e.: Ascribed Status Substituted by Achieved Status.)*

This category of cryptosemes corresponds with the above-mentioned examples of 'stupid vs. hard worker' and 'too heavy to be physically attractive vs. healthy and happy' substitutions. When something is perceived to be missing in the person's inborn or 'wired' set of traits such as acumen or physical beauty, the automatic, defensive face-saving response is to reach for a substitute that emphasizes positive human qualities that are achieved through merit. And even though the categories of ascribed and achieved traits have tremendous overlap, in the unconscious process of constructing the cryptosemic compliment, the sender attempts to silence the presumed unpleasant deficiency of the receiver with praising her or his positive character traits that the sender considers to be the most socially valuable, agentically potent characteristics possible. In a different culture, one that values personal achievement less and, say, collectivism and team work more, the cryptosemic compliment would highlight a different category of valued human virtues – one that puts social service and conformity on a pedestal. However, within the confines of the US culture, with its cult of the self-made individual maverick, the cryptoseme gets its rush of positivity from merit- and effort-based praise.

*Variation 2: 'Personal Merit Quality' Supplanted by 'Beating-Social-Odds Quality' (i.e.: Achieved Status Boosted by Social Fact.)*

Sometimes a person's qualities are not deficient per se but, thanks to the less-than-egalitarian social reality, are perceived to suffer from the threat of being overlooked on their own merit alone. This situation arises in social scenarios that call for professional praise of an accomplishment belonging to a member of a historically undermined social minority competing in the field dominated by a historically advantaged majority. Predictably, situations involving interactions between social minorities and majorities, as well as any mixture of socio-economic classes, are rife with face threatening themes that provoke no end of corrective face-work for all the social actors sharing the space. In these cases, we encounter countless cryptosemic 'endorsements' such as: 'she is the *sole* female author included in such-and-such literary anthology,' or 'he is the *only* African-American senator to hail from such-and-such state,' or 'she is the *first* lesbian judge

to…,' etc. In utterances such as these, the unspoken implication beneath the words is that the person at the center of praise, though deserving of full credit for the achievement in question, needs extra help getting the attention he or she deserves due to the unfairness of her or his minority status. Therefore, this individual's achievement must be highlighted by emphasizing how difficult it was for this person to 'come this far'. Again, the 'hard work and perseverance' card is played within the cryptoseme, creating merit value boost to the whole endeavor: knowing that a person had to overcome extra difficult social odds prompts us to be more impressed with her achievement, than had we been unaware of the extraneous obstacles. Furthermore, when we hear that a person is 'the first' or 'one of the very few' to achieve anything, we become subject to what Cialdini calls the 'scarcity principle' – a psychological 'trigger' mechanism that causes us to automatically value more that, which is in short supply (Cialdini 2001: 204-226). And so, a person's achievement does come across as more impressive, when juxtaposed against hardships and social inequalities.

The prevalence of these statements in our social interactions as well as their ubiquity throughout the wide spectrum of the mass media is testament to the power of situating a personal story in a context of macro-level social forces: viewed against the backdrop of unfair social realities, individuals seem more unique and their achievements, more awe inspiring and deserving of respect. Although, at first glance, there may appear to be nothing problematic about this form of praise, in the next section, I will argue that, while there may, indeed, be appropriate occasions in which making light of one's minority status serves as a necessary step in showcasing a person's achievement, there are plenty of other instances in which such dwelling on social adversity *undermines* the very individual in question – by focusing everyone's attention on the person's shared social journey rather than idiosyncratic individual accomplishment.

## Discussion

*The Pitfalls of Cryptosemic Communication*

In applying critical scrutiny to cryptosemic compliments, I did not intend to suggest that these are conscious acts of malicious intent on behalf of the sender to covertly bamboozle the unsuspecting receiver into mistaking an insult for a compliment.

Even though there are obscured dimensions of meanings built into the structure of cryptosemes, much of the construction of our linguistic expressions happens mindlessly and automatically, without deliberately making sense of every nook and cranny of psychological complexity involved (Langer 1989). Speakers of American English rely on complimenting quite heavily as a strategy for creating and bolstering positive social relationships with people (Wolfson and Manes 1980) and the examples of cryptosemic praise I have provided in this paper, are, more often than not, delivered in earnest. Cryptosemes are a form of culture-based politeness – a universal phenomenon that spares no one. However, just because all parties walk away from a cryptoseme-filled conversation with the satisfaction of saving or maintaining face, it does not mean that the less obvious meanings within the message did not find their target. Not too long ago, it was normal for a man to tell a female associate that she is 'impressively logical for a woman' and, given the beliefs dominating the time period, she may have been genuinely pleased by such a compliment. However, with historical hindsight, we can see that the mutual acceptance of this exchange as 'positive' and complimentary represents the dynamic of the patronizing pseudo-compliment of an oppressor being met with the 'false consciousness' of the oppressed. Goffman references this skewed power dynamic when he mentions the tendency of the powerful to take it upon themselves to save face of those they deem powerless, as the powerless, in return, respond with gratitude for this kindness, even when it does them no real favor. 'Thus one accounts for the *noblesse oblige* through which those of high status are expected to curb their power of embarrassing their lessers, as well as the fact that the handicapped often accept courtesies that they can manage better without.' (Goffman 1967: 28-29) From this point of view, the cryptosemic compliment 'you look amazing for your age' is an apple that fell from the same tree of embracing the hegemonic social order that lends itself to such 'compliments' despite it being quite unfavorable to oneself. It is not in any woman's best interest to accept the conventional two-tiered maxim that her physical appearance and, conversely, social worth, sharply decline past a 'certain age'. And, yet, how many of us can claim to not be, at least in part, a product of this logic?

Being a 'product' of cultural double-standards and default assumptions lies at the heart of communicating in cryptosemes. For this reason, we should not judge ourselves or

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others too harshly for cryptosemic slip-ups, if we acknowledge that the basis for the renegotiation and overcompensation of social values performed by the cryptosemic compliment is actually a manifestation of the 'double-bind' (Bateson 2000: 206-212) – or the speaker's own cognitive dissonance (Plous 1993: 22-30) – in reference to social values of one's own belief systems. Elsewhere in my dissertation, I offer an in-depth discussion of cryptosemic communication in the context of Wilson's notion of the 'adaptive unconscious' (Wilson 2002). Wilson believes there is a rift between what we unconsciously take for granted as 'natural' and 'true' with what we deliberately believe (or wish to believe) to be 'normal' or 'true'. I utilize Wilson's framework to make the argument that not only ideas, but *culture* resides in at least two realms of the mind – conscious thought (what we chose to believe) and the adaptive unconscious (beliefs we automatically internalized through early socialization as well as the aggregate personal experiences of our lives) – and that those beliefs are in no way guaranteed to be the same and, furthermore, according to Wilson's theory, the unconscious culture and the conscious culture do not intersect, and therefore, do not come into conflict, with each other as they occupy separate parts of the mind with no bridge of communication in-between. As the result, one can hold contradictory beliefs about the same thing without realizing it. And the cryptoseme provides an outlet for those parallel but conflicting beliefs to be expressed without challenging either the sender's or the receiver's sense of order and logic. This way, when one tells a woman that, now that she has gained weight she 'looks happy and healthy' (as opposed to 'beautiful') one is expressing the internal struggle to reconcile two separate belief systems: one that cannot imagine 'fat' and 'beautiful' in the same sentence, but also, another that holds the previous statement false and wishes to believe that 'fat' and 'beautiful' are not mutually exclusive terms. The result is a cryptosemic statement that combines 'looking' (an external feature) with 'healthy and happy' (an internal state): this way, you have technically told a person that she looks good – but made sure not to utilize the word 'beautiful', as not to be too dishonest with oneself.

## *Micro-Level Problem: Cryptosemic Compliments are Condescending*

The sincere positive intentions of the sender and the favorable interpretation by the receiver do not render cryptosemic praise exchanges innocuous and, in fact, this mutual acceptance of one meaning while silencing another is precisely the problem. It has been said (and the quote has been attributed to a number of controversial historical figures) that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Well-meaning extension of status and 'extra credit' to someone through cryptosemic flattery may come from a 'good place' but is, ultimately, a deceptive practice, even if both, the sender and the receiver are not conscious of this false note within the interaction. In the case of the type of cryptoseme described in Variation 1, refusing to address the person's intelligence and re-focusing instead on his other, supposedly merit-based virtues is to refuse to challenge the rigid definitions of the concept of 'intellect', just as telling people who have gained weight that they look 'healthy and happy' is emblematic of a cultural myopia surrounding generic conventions of beauty.

In the same vein, cryptosemic structures from Variation 2 are problematic because giving people 'extra credit' for defying unfavorable social odds under the guise of a compliment to their personal qualities or achievements actually *takes attention away from the objective merit of the achievement being praised*. Introducing the honoree at an awards ceremony with: 'She is the first black woman to achieve this or that' may, in fact, be a well deserved acknowledgement of the struggles one has to overcome as a black woman in a society dominated by white males. However, the unarticulated meaning within the same utterance implies that all are expected to be impressed by the mere fact that this black woman could compete on par with her white male counterparts – which is, in fact, a condescending thing to suggest, betraying low expectations automatically applied to the entire social group this person has been involuntarily cast to represent. A statement that shines the light on the macro-level social inequality of this person's circumstance serves to diminish the micro-level individual contribution she is making to her profession. To try to boost personal merit by confusing it with larger social reality reduces the person to a mere social category and speaks nothing of him or her as an individual.

One must question the roots of the psychic gratification that comes with dealing out cryptosemic compliments. The double-standards built into the cultural presuppositions underlying cryptosemic praise lend themselves to a certain self-congratulatory satisfaction for the sender, which blinds her to the hypocrisy of her own speech act. One would not feel the need to extend someone that boost of 'extra credit' from the juxtaposition against unfavorable social odds if one was not assuming those unfavorable odds against this person as natural or inevitable in the first place. Extra credit in the classroom is generally offered to students who are already struggling to stay on par with the rest of the class. Extra credit is a form of help. Help is frequently volunteered (and, at times, forced) by those in position of authority and superiority upon those who are seen as 'disadvantaged'. If the sender of the cryptoseme did not depart from a self-assumed position of advantage over whomever they are speaking about, he or she would not necessarily think to extend this 'extra credit' to someone viewed as equal in the first place. This is the symptom of the 'noblesse oblige' Goffman was talking about. The need to justify and 'prop up' someone else's achievement with linguistic expressions laced with merit-based value boost signals the sender's own low expectations towards the members of the minority group being addressed – even if the sender is a member of that minority group him / herself.

Furthermore, it can be asserted that the practice of face-work, no matter how co-operative, is a reflexively driven measure of self-protection – and defensive behavior is known to be a powerful but, by far, not the most fruitful means of communication. Though it is seen and intended to be a device of diplomacy and peace-making, ironically, politeness is also responsible for much miscommunication and misunderstanding among social actors on a regular basis. Brown and Levinson are the first to point out that '[i]n the case of *linguistic pragmatics* a great deal of the mismatch between what is "said" and what is "implicated" can be attributed to politeness,' (Brown and Levinson 2009:2) while Gibson, in addressing the ritual constraints involved in face-work in social interaction, quips that 'it is a marvel that people are able to accomplish anything in conversation.' (Gibson 2000:374)

And so, cryptosemic praise can be said to be a handy way to save face in socially threatening situations (and, perhaps, temporarily appease one's own 'crisis of cultural

conscience') but cannot be claimed to facilitate clear communication. And yet, unclear means of communication can carry powerful influence on our cognitive faculties. In her essay 'What's Wrong with This Picture? Enhancing Communication Through Distortion,' Cerulo suggests that, contrary to traditional postulates, non-normative devices in messaging – ones that communicate through distorting information and knowledge, rather than being direct and precise – can be used to enhance getting a point across, if only on a subliminal level, which is why communication distortion is so popular in the marketing industry (Cerulo 1988: 93-101). It is possible, then, that the hidden dimension of meaning nested in double-standards may register on an unconscious, yet quite active, mental level and will, ultimately contribute to a decline of a person's self-esteem (Kilbourne 1999).

*Macro-Level Problem: Cryptosemes Perpetuate the 'Spiral of Silence'*

On the micro-level of individual interactions, cryptosemes are problematic because the halo effect of special 'extra credit for personal merit' (coupled with the sincerely positive tone of the message) only masks people's presumed 'trouble spots' from themselves, rather than expose them as problems or address the reason why they are considered so problematic in the first place that they must be covered up with other virtues. Cryptosemes are, after all, a kind of an unconscious euphemism, and one does not reach for a euphemism unless there is a taboo topic to be handled with care (Rawson 1981; Allan and Burridge 2006). But a bigger concern is the potential macro-social 'fallout' of trading compliments that are rooted in taken-for-granted cultural double-standards. By engaging in cryptosemic communication, are we not prolonging the presence of those deep-seated, reified cultural prejudices?

In terms of locating the responsibility for affecting social processes such as culture, the 'structure vs. agency' debate has been claimed by a variety of sociological perspectives and I am most partial to the social constructionist definition provided by Berger and Luckmann who assert that the relationship between structure and agency lies in a *dialectical* inter-dependency between the two; that meanings social actors assign to the world are then institutionalized into the fabric of the social order, which, in turn, precipitates the internalization of those meanings into larger macro-cultural belief

systems perused by those very same individuals (and their successors) (Berger and Luckmann 1967). This creates a catch-22 of sorts, in which individual and social meanings and perceptions are looped into an infinite cycle of mutual reinforcement. Therefore, in participating in meaning making, we are simultaneously acting as free agents as well as conformists to social structures we ourselves helped erect.

This is all to suggest that we are both the products and the shapers of our culture – the inventors and the benefactors as well as the perpetrators and the victims of our belief systems. The problem with conducting face-work by relying on cryptosemic compliments is that they serve as devices of silencing inconvenient and unpleasant sides of social reality, instead of exposing or debunking them. Human history offers too many examples of how social silence begets more social silence, having the potential to create mass-scale denial of social injustices happening in plain sight. Collective avoidance of social problems has been known to lead to dire societal and psychological consequences, sometimes for generations to come (Zerubavel 2006; Bauman 2000). Collective silence about 'loaded', anxiety-provoking social themes signals an un-readiness to tackle the social issue in question, lending more legitimacy to internalized cultural prejudices. In a study conducted by Blinde and Taub on homophobia in women's sports, the authors assert that, due to pressures of patriarchal, heterosexist cultural expectations dominating athletic institutions, the members of female sports teams face constant accusations of homosexuality (i.e.: their 'femininity' is questioned thanks to the 'masculine' nature of their sport) – and the anxiety these accusations breed is shrouded in absolute silence. Blinde and Taub contend that this compliance in collective muteness on the topic of lesbianism in sports creates a number of problems: it forces athletes to go out of their ways to 'prove' their heterosexuality to avoid stigma and rumors, it creates awkward, alienating rifts amongst team members on the basis of the implied divide in their sexual orientations and, finally, *it reinforces the pejorative connotations associated with lesbianism in general* (Blinde and Taub 1992). 'Conspiracies of silence' nurture the status quo of social structures and systems of meaning they are designed to conceal (Zerubavel 2006: 77). It follows that collective denial of social problems carries the potential to influence cultural changes on macro-cultural scale.

*Future Considerations*

It is worth following up on the question of whether unacknowledged meanings built into cryptosemes fade into the cognitive obscurity of unregistered small talk or – as I assert – carry latent impact that does not manifest itself immediatly but subtly and quietly *reaffirms* social prejudices, biases and reified preconceptions individuals internalize through culture. In order to understand cryptosemes and their potential effects on social systems of meaning, the topic is best pursued through an interdisciplinary inquiry, involving semiotic and linguistic analysis, cross-cultural comparisons, exploring cognitive mechanisms responsible for the construction and maintenance of cryptosemes and a thorough look at socio-psychological factors such as intentions, perception and 'decoding' practices (Hall 1991) of the social actors involved. Gender differences are tremendously important in studying compliments, since social courtesies are so strictly divided amongst genders (Tannen 1986, 2007). Finally, in subsequent works, I will develop the notion of the cryptosemic insults – the nega-twin of the cryptosemic compliment – to illustrate the 'positive asymmetry' (Cerulo 2006) we exercise when cognitively navigating criticism as opposed to praise.

Studying cryptosemes allows us to inductively isolate and expose deeply ingrained cultural double-standards dominating our social understandings and relationships. By challenging our taken-for-granted 'truths' and 'norms' and by breaking the spiral of silence, we uncover additional puzzle pieces to help construct the 'big picture' of our cultural foundations.

**ENDNOTES**

1 Not 100 per cent of respondents talked about what the sentence 'looking amazing for one's age' means, but almost all (but one) of those who did talk about it, indicated the belief that it means appearing younger than one's age. Originally, the interview schedule did not include this question, but so many respondents either took it for granted or vocalized the belief that this phrase references *looking younger*, that it became a follow up question approximately halfway through the study. The formal results of the study titled 'Positive? Negative? Mixed? Exploring "Decoding" Practices in Cryptosemic Conversational Exchanges' are forthcoming in my dissertation.

2 Here and elsewhere in my work, when I use the term 'unconscious' in reference to the usage of cryptosemes, I do not mean it in the Freudian sense (i.e.: a murky, mysterious mental space holding our repressed desires) but in the sense Wilson uses it – to describe the 'adaptive unconscious': an un-consciously-accounted-for processing faculty within the mental apparatus that calculates probability outcomes based on aggregated experience – a completely different process from our conscious decision making which involves deliberating about specific circumstances and coming to individually-tailored solutions (Wilson 2002).

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