Compliments in Audiovisual Translation – issues in character identity

Elogios em tradução audiovisual- questões acerca da identidade da personagem

Isabel Fernandes Silva[*]

Jane Rodrigues Duarte[†]

RESUMO: Nas últimas décadas, a área da tradução audiovisual tornou-se cada vez mais relevante, quer no âmbito dos Estudos de Tradução, quer como tema interdisciplinar. Embora a literatura sobre aspectos comunicativos da tradução seja ampla, a tradução de elogios só recentemente tem sido objecto de análise. O presente estudo irá focar estas duas áreas sob uma perspectiva multimodal e pragmática, realçando as relações entre os dois campos. Esta abordagem multidisciplinar colocará ainda em evidência a natureza polisemiótica do processo de tradução. Dado que na tradução audiovisual há um diálogo entre texto e imagem, a tradução do discurso produzido pelas personagens pode omitir (porque presente em termos visuais) ou reiterar a informação expressa oralmente. Com base numa selecção dos elogios trocados entre diversas personagens no filme *What Women Want*, analisaremos legendas em que a tradução do elogio expresso no texto original não foi bem conseguida devido, nomeadamente, a diferenças no registo de língua utilizado, assim como diferenças na tradução de repetições e de *Culture-Specific Items*. Como consequência, o espectador tem uma diferente interpretação/percepção da identidade da personagem principal na versão em inglês (banda sonora original) e nas versões com legendas em português e italiano.

Palavras-chave: elogios, multimodalidade, tradução audiovisual

ABSTRACT: Over the last decades, audiovisual translation has gained increased significance in Translation Studies as well as an interdisciplinary subject within other fields (media, cinema studies etc). Although many articles have been published on communicative aspects of translation such as politeness, only recently have scholars taken an interest in the translation of compliments. This study will focus on both these areas from a multimodal and pragmatic perspective, emphasizing the links between these fields and how this multidisciplinary approach will evidence the polysemiotic nature of the translation process. In Audiovisual Translation both text and image are at play, therefore, the translation of speech produced by the characters may either omit (because it is provided by visual-gestual signs) or it may emphasize information. A selection was made of the compliments present in the film *What Women Want*, our focus being on subtitles which did not successfully convey the compliment expressed in the source text, as well as analyze the reasons for this, namely difference in register, Culture Specific Items and repetitions. These differences lead to a different portrayal/identity/perception of the main character in the English version (original soundtrack) and subtitled versions in Portuguese and Italian.

Keywords: compliments, multimodality, Audiovisual Translation (AVT)

---

[*] Presidente do Centro de Estudos Linguísticos, Comparados e Multimédia (CELCT/UAL)
[†] Assessora da Direcção do Departamento de Línguas e Literaturas Modernas, Tradução e Interpretação (UAL)

INTRODUCTION

Audiovisual translation has gradually acquired a more prominent role both within Translation Studies and as an interdisciplinary subject. The translation of compliments, on the other hand, has only recently become a focal point of research although articles have been published on other communicative aspects of translation such as politeness, discourse markers, register, etc. This paper aims to study compliments within audiovisual translation (AVT), specifically in subtitling, from a multimodal and pragmatic perspective, evidencing the polysemiotic nature of the translation process by means of this multidisciplinary approach.

A selection was made of the compliments exchanged between characters in the film *What Women Want* considering whether the visual signals were stressed or omitted in the subtitles. We will focus on subtitles which do not successfully convey the compliment expressed in the source text (ST) and analyze why this occurs, namely due to difference in language usage (register, translation of Culture Specific Items (CSIs) and repetitions). Additionally, we aim to demonstrate that these differences imply a change in the identity of the main character. After analyzing how the compliments are rendered in the Portuguese and Italian translations, we will compare them with the English subtitles. This study will include all elements which interact to convey meaning.

> Multimodal analysis includes the analysis of communication in all its forms, but is particularly concerned with texts which contain the interaction and integration of two or more semiotic resources - or 'modes' of communication - in order to achieve the communicative functions of the text. (O'HALLORAN & SMITH, 2011, p. 2)

1. LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

"Identity" has been a thought-provoking, challenging and controversial topic at the core of innumerous studies and theories in different fields of study since the 1990s. It has been approached by anthropologists, linguists, sociolinguists, philosophers, psychologists and more recently by ethnographers, who have all provided different yet valid definitions of the concept. This study does not aim to provide a further contribution to this discussion but rather present our perspective of identity in order to validate this study's findings and conclusions.

Identity may be defined as the result of our individual traits, our sense of self and what makes us unique in relation to other individuals. However, these traits are also shared

with those from the groups we belong to (class, ethnicity, nation, religion, gender, language, etc.) (EDWARDS, 2009) Within the scope of this study, we would like to argue that one of the defining components of an individual's identity is his/her use of language. Although language is deeply rooted in an individual's social and group context, it is also highly marked by one's use of words and phrases, style and register, intonation and ostensive behavior i.e., non-verbal forms of communication.

In its pure sense, language may be viewed simply as a means of communication, but as Carmen Llamas (2010, p. 9) states, the potential of language transcends the mere communicative objective and reveals one's background, origin, level of education, trustworthiness and aspirations. Above all, it is highly representative of one's identity. This study aims to demonstrate how compliments - as a form of personal and individualized language use - contribute to the construction of the characters' identity in the film *What Women Want*.

2. COMPLIMENTS

Compliments are speech-acts that are a natural part of everyone's daily interactions: in verbal communication between people, paying appropriate compliments and providing the adequate response is an important part of an individual's communicative competence.

The functions of compliments include expressing admiration or approval of someone's work, appearance or taste; establishing, maintaining or confirming solidarity; replacing greetings, gratitude, apologies, and congratulations; softening face-threatening acts such as apologies, requests and criticism; opening and sustaining conversation; and negotiating social identities and realities. As Goffman (1967) indicates, they are primarily aimed at maintaining, enhancing or supporting the addressee's face and are subject to sociolinguistic and cultural variations (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

As a universal phenomenon, compliments pay a pivotal role in communication, considering that breakdowns in cross-cultural communication may occur if there is a mismatch between the intention envisaged by the speaker and the one interpreted by the hearer. As an individual phenomenon, on the other hand, they help to define the social relationship between speakers and the interpersonal meaning established between them as well as the speaker's intentions. On the whole, language and the speakers' use of language - in this case, compliments - are indicators of the speakers' identity

2.1. Compliments and Culture Specific Items (CSIs)

A commonly used expression within Translation Studies is CSI used to refer to *Culture Specific Items*, presented by Javier Franco Aixelá. The author does not limit this notion only to items that are specifically linked to arbitrary areas of the linguistic system of a particular culture such as local institutions, streets, historical features, place or personal names but instead, the author provides a deeper and more complete definition:

> Those textually actualized items whose function and connotations in a source text involve a translation problem in their transference to a target text, whenever this problem is a product of the non-existence of the referred item or of its different intertextual status in the cultural system of the readers of the target text. (FRANCO AIXELÁ, 1996, p. 58)

Although Aixela's expression may be used as an umbrella term for expressions that represent not only linguistic and cultural obstacles for translators in the translation process, due to the multimodal approach of this study, we will choose to use CSI as the generic term for these phenomena.

Considering that compliments are often independent from the linguistic environment in which they occur and that they function very close to metaphors or other expressions that may have no evident semantic connection to the topic of the context in which the utterance is presented, the majority of compliments may be defined as CSIs.

2.2. Compliments and AVT

The communicative potential and complexity of apparently simple linguistic formulae such as compliments are many times taken for granted. This is made even more evident in the case of translation and in particular audiovisual translation.

If compliments are perceived as CSIs, then the translator will have to understand ST compliments within the norms and conventions that are operative in the source language and cultures. This means taking into account how much will they vary from one culture to another and whether the same compliments render the same type of interpersonal functions as well as the same cognitive effects for both audiences. The first step of the translator's task implies being aware of both source language (SL) and target language (TL) cultures *the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular*

language as its means of expression (NEWMARK, 1998, p. 94). In a second step, when rendering the compliment into another language, rather than simply focusing on literal equivalence, the translator must consider all the semiotic features of the scene in order to create a similar effect (of compliment) in the subtitles. If that does not occur, then the viewer will have more difficulty understanding the connection between the image and the text and it may give rise to misunderstandings. The final and overall effect will be, on the one hand, that the scene does not fulfill its intended purpose and the identity of the character is lost in the translation process; on the other hand, viewers fail to understand and enjoy what is presented to them.

Besides the referred constraints and the technical limitations inherent to subtitling, the translator has the additional difficulty of having to maintain the "color" and natural flavor of speech that are part of these particular speech acts. This leads us to another question which is that of the nature of the dialogue. Up to what point may film dialogue be considered an "authentic" speech act? Characters on screen interact with each other as if they were real but we cannot forget that there is a script writer and/or director who is creating these dialogues with a premeditated intention of provoking a specific effect on a target audience, in this case the cinema viewer. Hence, the translator/subtitler has a three-fold task: to preserve the communication that the scriptwriter intended to convey to his/her audience, to preserve the communication established between addressees on screen, as well as to maintain the relation between speech/text and image and, as a result, provoke the same effect on viewers from the TL:

> Standard written translation is neither addictive, nor synchronous, nor transient, nor polysemiotic. Thus it would seem clear that strategies for subtitling must differ from those for other forms of translation, particularly due to the fact that subtitled discourse *adds* something to the source text, and the fact that it is polysemiotic (or multimodal). (TAYLOR, 2004, p. 158)

3. MULTIMODALITY AND AVT

As mentioned previously in this paper, communication is not about language itself, language is just a part of it and is far from being its central part. (BACKOWSKA & KIÉS, 2011) As such, analyzing subtitles (text) implies analyzing paralinguistic elements and

assessing whether the text in the subtitles is in accordance with the spoken text as well as the visual message provided:

> (...) subtitle translation involves a multiplicity of semiotic modes which give shape to the film text and the subtitled film text. (...) different specialized meanings produced by the semiotic modes that appear in the film text have to be included in dealing with subtitle translation. (CHUANG, 2006, p. 372)

As Gambier declares "No *text* is, strictly speaking, monomodal." (GAMBIER, 2006, p. 6) However, for many decades, AVT theory and practice, particularly subtitling, was limited to a monomodal perspective. In other words, language was at the core of communication, it was viewed as able to provide it on its own. However, significant shifts in paradigms have led both scholars and professionals to consider that the communication resulting from any type of media product implies several semiotic modes, two of which are evident: image and sound.

So, how does a multimodal approach contribute to the analysis of audiovisual translation? Considering that in AVT both text and image are at play, the translation of speech produced by the characters may either ignore information because it is provided by visual-gestual signs or it may reinforce that exact information. In other words, the communicative meaning of the compliment does not derive from the purely linguistic rendering of the expression but from the combination of verbal interaction, ostensive behavior and context:

> New trends in studies in AVT are now to be found in a close focus on the multi-functional, multilayered polymorphic nature of audiovisual texts in general and in the complexities that derive both from context and reception. (DÍAZ-CINTAS, 2010, p. 13)

4. ANALYSIS OF COMPLIMENTS IN SUBTITLES

What Women Want is a 2000 film by Nancy Meyers portraying a middle-aged, elegant yet chauvinistic advertising executive played by Mel Gibson, whose (expected) promotion is given to a thirty-something highly respected female advertising professional played by Helen Hunt. The whole plot revolves around these two educated, modern, urban individuals whose relationship progresses from animosity to love. Their language throughout the film as well as that those around them, reflects the very same features. In our analysis, we

will focus on the compliments to or by Nick Marshall, how these are subtitled and how the subtitles may alter the viewers' perception of the character. As mentioned earlier, the majority of the compliments selected evidence some misinterpretations by the translator which then lead to a misrepresentation of the dialogue in the SL, in particular regarding repetitions, CSIs and register. Ultimately, the changes introduced by the translators lead to a different perception of the character's identity.

4.1. Culture Specific Item – "Babe"

In the beginning of the film, Nick Marshall, the character played by Mel Gibson, wakes up as the cleaning lady is beginning to tidy his room. He sits in bed and asks her to give him a lighter and calls her "babe". On the one hand, it evidences that he does not know the name of the cleaning lady and, as he needs to address her, he uses this generic somewhat endearing name. On the other, when uttered with the intonation and ostensiveness used by Marshall, the term "babe" takes on a pejorative connotation, one of chauvinistic superiority over the insignificance of the weaker sex. This is pivotal in characterizing Nick Marshall at the beginning of the story. He is known and portrayed as a thoughtless womanizer who has no consideration for women. The irritated response of the cleaning lady makes it clear that she was offended by the term. As she is hierarchically below him (she is working for him), she cannot place herself on the "same level" and provide a response that would be equally offensive. As a result, she creates a pun with the term "babe" as it was applied by Marshall and additionally uses the reference as the name of the well-known character from the 1995 film about a pig called *Babe* who is raised by sheepdogs.

Table 1.
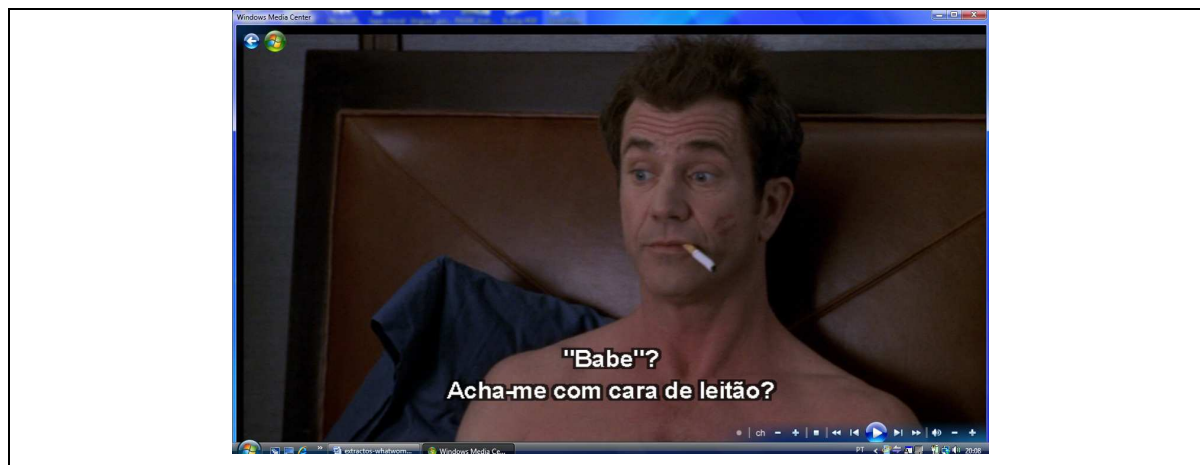
English	BT PT-EN	Italian	BT IT-EN
- Give me a lighter, babe. - Babe, what am I, a little pig?	- Throw me the lighter, Babe… - Babe? Do I look like a piglet?	- Mi tiri l'accendino, "micia" ? - Micia?! Con me "non attacca".	- Give me a lighter, kitten. - Kitten? You "don't scratch" me.

As he asks for the lighter, the image focuses Nick, making it clear that the cleaning lady is a very unimportant character, a point made even more obvious when her answer is given while, on screen, viewers have a close-up of Nick - we hear her voice in the background and we see her in the film but her role is secondary. Her response indicates that she understands the term "Babe" as referring to the little pig and not as a term of endearment.

In the Portuguese subtitles, the word "Babe" remains as well as the reference to the film. As a Culture Specific Item of Anglo-American culture, it is easily understood by English-speaking (SL) viewers. Yet, this reference is not as easily understood by Portuguese viewers. Firstly, not all Portuguese viewers are aware of the negative pragmatic effects that the term "babe" conveys in Anglo American culture when uttered by either gender, male or female. Secondly, the main character of the film "Babe" in Portuguese was "O porquinho Babe" (the little pig Babe) and in *What Women Want*, the translator uses the word "leitão", which means "piglet". Thus, the allusion to the film "Babe" is lost as well as the somewhat endearing connotation that the word "babe" may convey. Instead, the sentence becomes an insult - "leitão" is a word sometimes used to refer to people who are overweight.

In the Italian version, the play on words is maintained but the CSI is replaced by one that is part of Italian culture - the kitten. "Micia" is a term of endearment commonly used, the referent is no longer a little pig but a little cat, which leads to a different response by the cleaning lady. Nevertheless, the term "micia" maintains the disparaging and offensive tone and connotation as well as the informal/slangy register. As Weatherall (2002) declares, "(...) language not only reflects and perpetuates gender but language constitutes gender and produces sexism as a social reality."

4.2. Register – "Lucky"

In this scene, Nick is already at the agency and is talking about his latest one-night-stand: the night before, he and his colleague went out and Nick managed to take some woman to bed. While they were all in the bar, though, the same woman had rejected Nick's colleague

saying that she had to go home early. However, Nick, confirming his ability to attract women, had managed to seduce her. Besides, on this particular morning, he is counting on being promoted and his cocky attitude evidences his confidence in that promotion and his professional success.

Table 2.

English	BT PT-EN	Italian	BT IT-EN
– What can I tell you. I'm blessed.	- What can I tell you, I'm lucky (old-fashioned)	Ah, vado alla grande!	- I'm really lucky.

Nick's colleague, a younger man who is looking at Nick in awe, compliments him, to which Nick answers "What can I tell you? I'm blessed." The Portuguese subtitle, though accurate in terms of semantic equivalent, is an old-fashioned expression, mainly used by older people living in the countryside, which contrasts with what Nick Marshall's character represents. This takes away his cockiness and urbanity and causes a conflict between the text (subtitle) and image, as the man who appears on screen could not possibly utter such an expression. The Italian subtitles not only maintain the semantic equivalent but the expression used confers other pragmatic effects on its target viewers. "Vado alla grande" exceeds the original in its mode of significance by portraying a character that is even more arrogant and presumptuous than Nick.

4.3. Repetition

After leaving his colleague, Nick goes to his office, where his two secretaries are waiting for him. They compliment him on his choice of clothes for this special day and

remind him that the boss is waiting for him upstairs. As Nick leaves them, they comment on his looks.

Table 3

English	BT PT-EN	Italian	BT IT-EN
- He's so adorable! – The cutest thing!	- He's adorable.	- E' fantastico. – Cosa non gli farei!	- He's fantastic - The things I would do to him…

Nick's two secretaries refer to him as adorable and cute almost in unison. Though their relationship with Nick is professional, their interest in him is focused on physical attraction and appearance. These women reinforce Nick's identity as a womanizer, a lady's man and, by using the two above mentioned adjectives, they lead viewers to see this character in terms of physical/sexual attraction rather than his professional expertise or personality. In fact, that is further stressed by the fact that Nick is viewed from behind, a scene which we would commonly associate with men admiring a woman's body. This idea is present in the Italian subtitles, which refer to Nick's attraction more overtly, but there is no reference to this in the Portuguese subtitles. In fact, in Portuguese, there is no repetition; the reinforcement of the idea conveyed by the repetition is lost, and the only adjective used is "adorável" (adorable), a rather mild adjective. The Italian translation on the other hand, does not provide a repetition of the same words but rather a gradient appraisal which is conveyed by expressions whose semantic properties are stronger in rendering Nick's "greatness". Furthermore, the Italian subtitles emphasize the sexual component of Nick's "greatness" whereas the Portuguese subtitles tone it down. The visual clues, however, point to the

physicality of the character's identity and, as a consequence, the Portuguese audience may feel confused by receiving clashing messages from text and image.

CONCLUSIONS

> Translational approaches can be divided into two main groups: those that are faithful to the ST and serve the intention of the original author, and those that focus on the communicative intention with regard to the TT audience. The most appropriate approach is, among other factors, determined by the skopos of the ST" (FOERSTER, 2010, p. 83)

In the case of the compliments of *What Women Want* it is difficult to determine exactly what skopos the translator was concentrated on, as s/he constantly swayed back and forth from either rendering direct literal translations of the compliments, in what seemed as an attempted to be "faithful to the ST", or at other times would try to bring the subtitles closer to the TT audience but still failed in achieving the same effects as those conveyed in the ST.

In terms of the character's identity, if Portuguese viewers had access to the subtitles alone, the image they would hold of Nick's character would be of an older, more conservative and humbler middle-aged man. It seems compliments, especially those who have certain nuances of sexuality, are packed away into more formal and bland expressions. In the Italian subtitles, on the other hand, that very same sexuality in heightened and emphasized, leading to an even more exuberant Nick Marshall, a man whose interest in life are women and whose identity is reduced to being sexually attractive.

Despite all the developments in AVT theory and practice, it is our perspective that incongruence such as this still happen today. If translators fail to fully understand and determine what their skopos is, they will be unable to apply translation strategies in a coherent way throughout the same translation. Moreover, there is a growing need for translators to be more open and aware of the multimodal and polysemiotic nature of texts in order for the message to be completely conveyed in translation.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

ARCHER, Carol M. Culture Bump and Beyond. VALDEZ, J. M. (ed.). *Culture Bound – Bridging the cultural gap in language teaching*. Cambridge: CUP, 170-178.

BACKOWSKA, A. and M. KIÉS. (in press). Multimodal Subtitling of Implicit Compliments in Polish, Italian and Swedish. *Research in Language*.

BLUM-KULKA, S., J. HOUSE and G. KASPER. *Cross-cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1989.

CHUANG, Ying-Ting. "Studying Subtitle Translation from a Multi-modal Approach". *Babel* 52: 4, 2006, 372–383.

DÍAZ-CINTAS, J. (ed.). *New Trends in Audiovisual Translation*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2009.

DÍAZ-CINTAS, J. and A. REMAEL. *Audiovisual Translation: Subtitling*. Manchester: St. Jerome, 2007.

DASTJERDI, Hossein VAHID & Reza RAHEKHODA Expansion in Subtitling: The Case of Three English Films with Persian Subtitles. *Journal of Language & Translation* 11-1, March 2010: 7-27.

EDWARDS, John. *Language and Identity. An Introduction*. Cambridge: CUP, 2009.

FOERSTER, Anna. Towards a Creative Approach in Subtitling: a Case Study. DÍAZ-CINTAS, J., Anna MATAMALA and Josélia NEVES (eds.). *New Insights into Audiovisual Translation and Media Accessibility*. Media for All 2. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2010.

FRANCO AIXELÁ, Javier. "Culture-Specific Items in Translation". ÁLVAREZ, Román and M. Carmen-África VIDAL (eds). *Translation, Power, Subversion*. Topics in Translation 8. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1996, 52–78.

GAMBIER, Yves Multimodality and Audiovisual Translation. *MuTra 2006: Audiovisual Translation Scenarios: Conference Proceedings,* 1-8.

GOFFMAN, E. *Interaction Ritual.* Garden City: Doubleday, 1967.

HATIM, B. and I. MASON. Politeness in Screen Translating.Venuti, L. (ed.) *The Translation Studies Reader*. London/New York: Routledge, 2000, 430-445.

LEPPIHALME, Ritva. *Culture Bumps: An Empirical Approach to the Translation of Allusions*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1997.

LIU, S. Studies on Negative Pragmatic Transfer in International Pragmatics. *Guangxi Normal University Journal,* 2000. Retrieved October 2010 from http://www.gxnu.edu.cn/Personal/szliu/negative%20pragmatic%20transfer.doc

LLAMAS, Carmen and Dominic WATT (eds.). *Language and Identities.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

NEWMARK, Peter. *Approaches to Translation*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1998.

O'HALLORAN, K. L. and B. A. SMITH (accepted for publication). Multimodal Text Analysis. Chapelle, Carol A. (ed). *Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*. New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell. Retrieved January 2011 from http://multimodal-analysis-lab.org/events/publications.html

PEDERSEN, Jan. How is Culture rendered in Subtitles? *MuTra: Challenges of Multidimensional Translation*, 113-130.

POMERANZ, A. Compliment responses: Notes on the cooperation of multiple constraints. **in** SCHENKEIN, J. (ed.). *Studies in the Organization of Conversational Interaction*. New York: Academic Press, 1978, 79-112.

TAYLOR, Christopher. Multimodal Text Analysis and Subtitling. **in** VENTOLA, Eija, Cassily CHARLES and Martin KALTENBACHER (eds.). *Perspectives on Multimodality*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004, 153-172.

WEATHERALL, Ann. *Language, Gender and Discourse*. London/New York: Routledge, 2002. (e-book)

WOLFSON, N. 1981. Compliments in Cross-cultural Perspective. *TESOL Quarterly* 15(2): 117-124.

Filmography

What Women Want, by Nancy Meyers (2000).