

## Ritualized follow-up communication on Instagram: formulaic compliments and compliment responses as a compact form of online interaction

### Introduction and corpus

This paper explores follow-up communication in the discourse on body acceptance on Instagram mostly in response to posts by adult women which include selfies of themselves (Georgakopoulou 2016) in combination with captions. The debate covers representations of diversity and natural bodies in the media. To date there has been very little research on body-related online discourse from a linguistic perspective. This paper addresses “audience patterns of engagement” (ibid., p. 301) in this specific discourse focusing on the formal features and socio-communicative foundation of multimodal patterns of comments. The study is based on a corpus consisting of 29,373 comments on the topic of body acceptance and body love posted (predominantly) in German. A smaller sub-corpus was investigated which includes 4,668 comments annotated manually using INCEPTION. The comments were posted on Instagram in 2020/2021 in relation to 217 initial posts shared by 50 accounts. The captions of these posts include hashtags like #bodylove, #normalizenormalbodies and #bodyacceptance, which were taken as the selection criterion for compiling the corpus.

### Theoretical interfaces and key questions

Follow-up communication can be understood as text-based interaction (Beißwenger 2020); users communicate through multimodal text-based forms (Siever/Siever 2020) and collaboratively create (social) meaning. On a pragmatic level it is a form of multimodal stancetaking (Du Bois 2007) integrating both language and emojis and more specifically it is one form of evaluation (Zappavigna 2017): the commentators mostly post positive evaluations, which can be read as highly formulaic multimodal compliments (Placencia/Lower 2017) and which can be responded to in different ways. Examples from the corpus include:

- (1) *Wow mega schönes Bild* (‘Wow a mega beautiful pic’) ❤️ 🤔
- (2) *wahre Worte!* (‘true words!’) ❤️
- (3) *queennn* ❤️ ✨
- (4) *Sooo elegant* 😊 🙌
- (5) *Toll* (‘Great’) 🙌 😊 😊

While compliments and compliment responses are well researched for the most part as essential components of politeness research in pragmatics and interactional linguistics for spoken language, there is a research gap in relation to digital compliments in German-speaking contexts. Due to their distinct pre-structured nature, their predictability and their effect of creating and fostering group cohesion, (digital) compliments raise questions as to the ritualization of communication and their social functionality. Within this theoret-

ical framework this empirical exploration of comments on Instagram addresses the following key questions:

- Question 1: How does evaluation work in comments as part of the discourse on body acceptance on Instagram?
  - Sub-question 1a: What multimodal patterns can be identified in compliments and compliment responses?
  - Sub-question 1b: Which evaluative functions are taken on by language and which by emojis?
- Question 2: How can the observed (schematic) patterns and their scope for variation be interpreted from a socio-communicative perspective?

### Summary of results

In relation to these key questions, the corpus study included both quantitative aspects and a qualitative approach to sequence analysis. The chosen corpus covered linguistic practices of paying compliments as positive evaluations, of thanking and of self-positioning. More detailed attention was paid to schematic formats of compliments and compliment responses, which are a key feature of comments on posts about body acceptance on Instagram. The (schematic) patterns under discussion were primarily identified and compiled during the manual annotation and cursory analysis of the smaller sub-corpus. The investigated formats covered multimodal stand-alone noun phrases and multimodal stand-alone adjective phrases, both very frequent structures for paying compliments (see Tab. 1).

Stand-alone noun phrases	Stand-alone adjective phrases
<i>Tolle Einstellung</i> ('Great attitude') ❤️	<i>Sooo sooo wahr</i> ('Sooo sooo true') 😊
<i>Sehr schöner Körper!</i> ('Very beautiful body!') : )	<i>WUNDERSCHÖN</i> ('GORGEOUS') 🦋 <i>inside &amp; outside</i> 😊
<i>Oh mega Foto!!</i> ('Oh what a great photo!!')	<i>Hübsch hübsch wie immer</i> ('Beautiful beautiful as ever') 😊 😊 ❤️
<i>Die Farbe vom Kleid</i> ('The colour of the dress') 😊	<i>toll toll toll</i> ('great great great') ❤️ 🙌 🙌
<i>Der text</i> ('The text') 🗣️ <i>das foto</i> ('the photo') ❤️	<i>Megaaaaaa hübsch</i> ('Megaaaaaa beautiful') 😊 😊 😊 😊 😊 🙌

Tab. 1: A selection of stand-alone noun and adjective phrases in the corpus

Stand-alone noun and adjective phrases are syntagmata which are not embedded in more extensive syntactic co-texts. They act like autonomous syntagmata that independently take on an evaluative function. These (linguistically) brief means of evaluation represent relatively schematic compliment types with not the form of the lexical material being fixed but only their basic structure (type of phrase, part of speech of the components). The fixed linguistic slots – adjective and noun slots – are instantiated by a limited set of recurring fillers. Accordingly severely limited lexical alternation can be observed. Emojis are typically used as finalizing elements added to corresponding linguistic components; they appear to be almost obligatory elements of digital compliments (on Instagram). Their

function does, however, vary, oscillating, amongst others, between a modalizing function, opening up semantic frames, underlining evaluative expressions and providing an independent evaluative contribution. In relation to these pictorial elements, the scope for variation is strictly limited as well: frequently, only a small group of emojis is used repeatedly (especially the red heart emoji and the smiling face with heart-eyes).

Not every compliment elicits a reaction; in many cases positive evaluations are not commented on by the person who received them. When there is a reaction to a compliment in the corpus of comments, in the vast majority of cases, the follow-up appears in the guise of an accepting response. In these reply comments, various patterns of thanking become apparent, such as the accepting and appreciative compliment response. These either appear in the form of language-emoji combinations (in particular making use of routine formulas with {thank}) but also as purely pictorial responses. A strongly formulaic multimodal format with the stand-alone pronoun *du* ('you') also stands out, which is used for the positioning of the other writer (e. g. *@mondpunkte.makramee DUU ('YOUU') ♥ 😊*).

In summary: all patterns stand out as being strongly formulaic in nature with very limited variation observed in that a small set of lexical and pictorial elements fills the empty slots in the formats under discussion. The sequence of compliment interactions hardly appears to be spontaneous either but, instead, formalized to a high degree and thus predictable for everybody involved in the interaction. The follow-up communication under investigation principally serves to underline the multimodal-uniform (digital) appreciation of participants who generally do not know each other and it is very ritualized in nature.

## **Discussion**

The multimodal patterns elaborated on here serve to create a cohesive group from a socio-functional perspective: making use of strongly similar forms, (female) users sign up for communities, signaling their affiliation both in terms of the content and the formal make-up of the comments they post. Due to the posted comments and responses to these compliments, a high degree of "solidarity between participants" (Holmes 1986, p. 488) is signalled with ongoing confirmation of (body-related) group values. While the corpus study at hand provides well-founded insights into compliments and compliment responses in the context of (body-related) Instagram posts, an equally interesting question concerns the forms and functions that (positive) evaluations display on other platforms. Particularly in contrast with social media sites like YouTube, TikTok and similar, the findings relating to interaction on Instagram could surely be profitably enhanced.

## **References**

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