

Using Naturally Occurring Language Samples to Teach Invitation, Offer, and Responses to Compliments to Language Learners

Kyra Grune*

Universität Münster, Germany

Abstract

To help learners develop the ability to communicate effectively in real life, it is important to introduce them to the ways social actions are carried out in naturally occurring conversations. In this paper, I focus on three common social actions: invitation, offer, and responses to compliments. For each action, I describe its general sequential organization, then provide an example of how it is achieved in a naturally occurring conversation taken from the [CA Bank](#) database, and conclude with suggestions for teaching it.

Invitation

Description of Interactional Practices

Based on research in Conversation Analysis, an invitation is a communicative act in which one individual proposes or suggests engaging in a shared activity or event with another person (Wong & Waring, 2021). The invitation can be explicit or subtly implied, and the way it is designed often reflects a degree of uncertainty or tentativeness, a feature referred to as "equivocation" (Wong & Waring, 2021). This uncertainty is built into the way invitations are expressed, using linguistic features such as incomplete constructions, negatively framed questions, and conditional forms. One example for this would be "You don't have to, but if you're free, you're welcome to join us."

Before the actual invitation, there is often a pre-invitation sequence. This preliminary phase involves subtle cues or questions, known as pre-sequences, that help the inviter gauge whether the recipient is likely to accept or reject the upcoming invitation. The inviter aims to minimize the possibility of rejection by interpreting the recipient's responses, categorized as go-aheads, blocking, or hedging. For example if the inviter asks "What are you doing this weekend?" the answers could vary between "I am free, why? Do you have something in mind?" (go-ahead), "I am really busy with work." (blocking), and "I might have a few things going on, why?" (hedging). When a recipient displays non-commitment, the inviter may add positive details about the target event in order to encourage acceptance for example by saying "it is a really good movie" (Wong & Waring, 2021).



Grune, K. (2024). Using naturally occurring language samples to teach invitation, offer, and responses to compliments to language learners. *TESOL Working Paper Series*, 22, 49-56.

Website: Hawaii Pacific University <http://www.hpu.edu>.

*Email: kyra.grune@uni-muenster.de. Address: Schlossplatz 2, 48149 Münster, Germany, Universität Münster, Germany

In summary, an invitation is a dynamic process that involves pre-sequences, specific linguistic elements, and a deliberate introduction of uncertainty to encourage participation while minimizing the potential for rejection. The success of an invitation depends not only on how it is presented but also on the inviter's ability to adapt based on the recipient's reactions.

Below I present an example of an invitation sequence in a naturally occurring conversation (Excerpt 1).

Excerpt 1: Invitation Sequence

(from <https://sla.talkbank.org/TBB/ca/CallFriend/eng-n/6869.cha>)

43 M1: aw:. tha:nks.
 44 G: °cause actually I'm° (0.3) I'm wasting time as it is. (0.4)
 45 M1: [o:(hh)h.]
 46 G: [ihhh] hhh hhh [ihhh]
 47 M1: [beautiful.]
 48 → M1: .hhh so (.) are you going out tomorrow night? (0.4)
 49 G: u::m:. (0.4) I: (.) dou:bt it actually.
 50 M1: why no:t?
 51 G: I've got so much work to do. (0.9)
 52 G: I've got seven assignments:. (.) due next wee:k.
 53 M1: s:even.=
 54 M1: how many classes you got. (0.7)
 55 G: u:h just fiv:e, (.)
 56 G: five and a half credi:ts,
 57 M1: and you have seven assignments due?
 58 G: ye:p.
 59 M1: ((=bang))
 60 M1: how is that po:ssible.
 61 G: we:ll, he doubled up in a couple of. (.)
 62 G: hhh hhh a couple of places.
 63 M1: would you like me to speak with the teacher:s.
 64 G: u::m: (1.1)
 65 G: yea:h,
 66 G: [actually, hhh hhh]
 67 M1: [°mh°hhh hhh hhh]
 68 G: [hhh]
 69 M1: [hhh] I don't think it will help,
 but would you like me to speak with them. (1.0)
 71 M1: [hhh]
 72 G: [hhh hhh hhh]
 73 M1: hhh but uh (0.6)
 74 →M1: w- why don't you come out for a little bit tomorrow. (.)
 75 M1: after you've done your studying.
 76 M1: hhh love [dog 's floor 's having] a party.
 77 G: [maybe >I don't know<]
 78 (1.5)
 79 M1: somewhat of a party. (.)
 80 M1: yeah, a floor party. (1.5)
 81 M1: and then uh (0.8) we might go to Fiji. (0.5)
 82 G: oh >really<? (1.)
 83 M1: and there's always ass:ured of (.) a fight to ensue the:re. (0.6)

84 G: hhh hhh hhh [hhh].
 85 M1: [cause] they're, they're fighting ty:pes
 as it i:s. (0.3)
 86 G: yea:h? (0.5)
 87 M1: we'll give Jo:sh a few, and Ma:rk a few bee:rs and.
 88 M1: ihhh.
 89 G: hhh hh[h hhh].
 90 M1: [well.] Mark only needs o:ne.
 91 M1: but sti:ll hhh hhh hhh.
 92 M1: ihhh ↑yeah right I'm waiting↑ for Mark to get back
 from a pla:y. (0.9)
 ((later, at @4:02))
 180 M1: b:reakfast is on me du:de. (0.4)
 181 M1: hhh hhh.
 182 G: yea:h that's good, (0.5)
 183 M1: so. (0.2) but not tomorrow.
 184 M1: cause we decided against that. right? (0.9)
 185 G: cause >what<?
 186 M1: ↑cause we decided against that. (1.0)
 187 G: yea:h:. [!]
 188 G: u:m. (1.9)
 189 G: maybe the next weekend thou:gh hhh (0.3)
 190 M1: oh yea:h. (0.5)
 191 M1: that we'll: be here for spring break.
 192 M1: maybe they'll be feeding us then though. (0.3)
 193 M1: we can [add to that.]
 194 G: [oh that's] ri:ght (0.3)
 195 G: ↑not on the weekends though. (0.4)
 196 M1: °yeah°. (0.3)

M1 initiates a pre-invitation inquiry by asking about G's plans for the next night in line 48. This pre-invitation is a phase where the inviter gauges the potential invitee's availability and interest. G responds and provides a reason for not going out, using a hedging strategy by expressing doubt and citing a heavy workload with seven assignments due in line 52. M1 expresses concern and offers assistance to resolve the reason for G's declining the invitation. M1 is also laughing, which suggests that he is trying to create a lighthearted environment in order to make the invitation more appealing to G so he will accept his invitation.

M1 then proceeds with his invitation in line 74 more directly, using a suggestion format, "Why don't you." At the same time, he softens the invitation with "a little bit" and acknowledges G's reason ("after you've done your studying") (line 75). However, G responds with uncertainty, using a hedging strategy with "maybe, I don't know." M1 then adds positive details about the event such as the floor party and beer (lines 76-91), thus making the invitation more appealing to G. However, during this time, G only laughs or produces minimal responses, indicating no acceptance of the invitation.

Although G does not explicitly decline the invitation, M interprets this as a rejection and this rejection is confirmed by G, as seen in the later part of the conversation (line 184-187). It is important to note that the two men end the invitation sequence with an open possibility for a

later commitment initiated by G, thus softening the rejection of the initial invitation (lines 188-196).

Teaching Ideas

Instructions:

- Provide students with a few short conversational excerpts that involve invitations, pre-invitations, and response strategies, such as the one in Excerpt 1.
- Guide a class discussion where students identify and analyze instances of pre-invitations, hedging, reporting, and other relevant strategies in the provided examples.

Practice:

1. Introduce the concept of improvisational theater, emphasizing its focus on spontaneous, unscripted performance. To introduce improvisational theater, you could show your students a video showing improvisational theater or a video that explains how it is done.
2. Prepare cards with different invitation scenarios written on them (e.g., inviting someone to a concert, a dinner party, or a study session). Shuffle and distribute these cards randomly to students.
3. Ask students to quickly think on their feet and act out an invitation scene based on the scenario they receive. Encourage the use of interactional strategies such as pre-invitations and equivocation.
4. After the initial round, have students switch roles within the same scenario. The inviter becomes the invitee, and vice versa.
5. After each round, facilitate a brief reflection where students discuss the challenges and successes of using different strategies in spontaneous invitations.

Offer

Description of Interactional Practices

Following research in conversation analysis, an *offer* refers to a specific type of speech act in which a participant in a conversation proposes to provide assistance, support, or a service to another participant (Wong & Waring, 2021). Offers are characterized by the speaker's expression of a willingness to do something for the benefit of the recipient. This can range from providing help with a task, offering information, or extending an invitation, to suggesting a solution to a problem.

Similar to invitations, the participant making the offer often uses a pre-sequence, known as pre-offer. A pre-offer is a preliminary statement or action that precedes the actual offer, allowing the speaker to assess the recipient's potential receptiveness. This strategy serves to minimize the risk of rejection and create a more favorable environment for the offer (Wong & Waring, 2021). Typical for a pre-offer is the use of conditional statements or questions beginning with "if," which allow the speaker to test the waters before making the actual offer. For example, a speaker might say, "I was wondering if you needed help with that".

Offers typically occur in conditional formats or they are explicitly presented through direct inquiries, often taking the form of "Do you want me to...?" Moreover, offers play a crucial role in managing social relationships, demonstrating cooperation, and addressing the needs or concerns of participants within the conversational context (Wong & Waring, 2021).

Excerpt 2 shows an example of a real-life offer sequence. For context, F1 is planning to visit F2, and the offer from F2 occurs after F1 has just finished talking about her plan for the visit.

Excerpt 2: Offer Sequence

(from <https://sla.talkbank.org/TBB/ca/CallFriend/eng-n/6899.cha>)

115 F1: so I'm looking forward to it. (0.9)
 116 F2: ihhh a:nd u:m.
 117 F2: ↑I mean I wasn't sure↑ if you were worried about not having a: ca:r
 118 but you know we've got three: ca:rs no:w. (0.4)
 119 F1: ↑no I didn't know tha:t. (0.6)
 120 F2: cause Chris: (.) ha:s a company tru:ck.
 121 F1: hhh o::h. (0.6)
 122 F2: hhh ↓so: (0.2) you could (.) dri:ve my: ↓car:. (0.3)
 123 F1: o[ka:y?]
 124 F2: [which would] be- (0.6) plenty big enough for all of you:
 125 F1: ri:[:ght?]
 126 F2: [if you] wa:nt to go out during the da:y.
 127 F1: .hhh.
 128 F2: and I could take (0.6) the es te:n to wor:k? (0.7)
 129 F1: the who? (0.5)
 130 F2: the: Chris's tru:ck.
 131 F1: hhh oh:.
 132 F2: the little [one].
 133 F1: [°hhh°].
 134 F1: °ihhh oh okay° right. (0.3)
 135 F1: okay,
 136 F1: ↑well that's a good idea too:.
 137 F1: yea:h. (0.3)
 138 F1: °m hm°? (0.6)
 139 F1: °m hm°? (1.3)

F2 initiates the offer by expressing uncertainty about F1's potential concern regarding not having a car during her visit (line 117). This can be seen as a pre-offer to the main offer, as F2 is gauging F1's situation and need for transportation. F2 then provides additional information about the availability of three cars (line 118) which can be considered a supportive move. This demonstrates an understanding of F1's potential worries, and makes the offer more appealing to accept. In response, F1 expresses surprise and indicates a lack of knowledge about the availability of three cars (line 119). F2 continues the offer by detailing the cars available, mentioning Chris's company truck. The offer becomes more explicit as F2 suggests that F1 could drive her car (line 122). F1 acknowledges the offer with a minimal acknowledgement, "okay," indicating an openness to considering or accepting the proposal but not an enthusiastic acceptance. F2 then further emphasizes the suitability of the car for F1's needs in line 124, strategically making the offer more appealing for acceptance. Finally, F2 marks the offer as contingent on F1's need by using the typical conditional form (line 126).

However, after F2's offer is complete, F1 still does not provide a clear acceptance, only an in-breath (line 127). This may be why F2 continues to make the offer more appealing in line 128. After a repair sequence (lines 129-134), F1 finally agrees to F2's offer in line 136, referring to it as

“a good idea” although she implies that there might be another good option (“that’s a good idea too”). Importantly, the way F2 structures and expands the offer indicates her recognition of the uncertainty surrounding F1's acceptance. F2's use of a pre-offer and efforts to make the offer as appealing as possible suggests a cautious approach, recognizing F1’s delayed and reluctant acceptance, possibly because she has other plans.

Teaching Ideas

- Provide an overview of the concept of offers in conversational analysis, emphasizing their role in social interactions.
- Present examples of offers from real-life conversations, such as the one in Excerpt 2.
- Analyze these examples with the students, highlighting key elements such as pre-offers, conditional formats, and attempts to make the offer more appealing.
- Practice: Introduce the “Offer Exchange Game” as an engaging way to practice these skills:
 - In small groups or pairs, have students brainstorm and create diverse scenarios where offers might be made (e.g., organizing an event, sharing resources, planning a trip). Each group writes down their scenario on a scenario card.
 - Shuffle the scenario cards, and give each group a card from another group. Each group will then act out the scenario on the card they received.
 - Rotate the scenarios among groups, ensuring each group experiences different offer-making situations. Additionally, you can assign different students to accept, deny, or be neutral to the offer, depending on your students confidence and ability.
 - Facilitate a class discussion after each scenario, encouraging participants to share their experiences and challenges.

Compliment Response

Description of Interactional Practices

In research on conversation analysis, a *compliment response* refers to the verbal or non-verbal reaction a person provides when receiving a compliment from another individual (Wong & Waring, 2021). Compliment responses play a crucial role in social interactions by influencing how individuals perceive and maintain positive relationships. Rather than a straightforward "thank you," speakers often navigate a complex set of linguistic strategies to balance the tension between accepting praise and avoiding excessive self-praise. Strategies such as praise downgrade and referent shift are used to manage the social expectations associated with responding to compliments. Understanding and employing appropriate compliment responses contribute to effective communication and the maintenance of social harmony.

More specifically, in compliment responses, “praise downgrade” is a strategy where individuals balance agreement and disagreement by downplaying the praise to avoid self-praise (Wong & Waring, 2021). One example could be the recipient answering with “Oh, this is just an old shirt”. This allows the recipient to accept or reject a compliment without fully committing to either extreme. “Referent shift” is another strategy where the focus of the praise is shifted to something or someone else (Wong & Waring, 2021). This involves either reassigning the target of the praise or returning the praise to the compliment giver, for example “No, you look great”.

Additionally, this helps manage the tension between accepting praise and avoiding self-praise by redirecting the focus (Wong & Waring, 2021).

Below is an example of compliment responses in a natural conversation (Excerpt 3). In this conversation, F1 receives a compliment from F2 for going out, having fun, and meeting new people. F1 responds to this compliment using strategies typical of compliment responses.

Excerpt 3: Compliment Sequence

(from <https://sla.talkbank.org/TBB/ca/CallFriend/eng-n/5000.cha>)

920 F2: >well< Bri:ar: I- I'm just very excited cause you sou:nd
like you're (.) going out and having f:u:n: [and meeting new]
921 F1: [uh (.) um::?]
922 F2: [peopl::e.]
923 F1: [I'm probably] making it soun:d like I:: am:: (0.2) doing (0.5)
b- better than I am: at this:.
924 F1: because I'm: hh ((breathy)) you know I'm not good at it.
925 F2: hhh but (.) it (.) sou:n:ds really good. Briar.
926 F1: °it-° it (0.2) could definitely be a lo:t wor:s:e.
927 F1: [like I think].
928 F2: [y:e:s::]
929 F2: see that 's what I would I: I: you: know::.
930 it doesn't sound like it was that ba:d,
931 F1: =·hhh no::.. I'm:=
932 F2: =do you know who die:d today:?

F2 initiates the compliment by expressing excitement and attributing positive qualities to F1's activities (line 920). In her response, F1 engages in a praise downgrade strategy. She downplays the positive picture painted by F2, stating that she might be making it sound better than it is and emphasizing her struggle in social situations in line 923. F1's statement, "you know I'm not good at it," aligns with the preference for avoiding excessive self-praise. F2, in turn, persists on the compliment in line by saying "but it sounds really good Briar," and counters F1's downplay (line 924). F1 eventually acknowledges the compliment but maintains a downgraded evaluation of her own performance, stating, "it could definitely be a lot worse" (line 926). F2 immediately agrees with F1's acknowledgement, emphasizing her agreement (line 928), and reiterates her compliment (line 930). F1 seems to agree (line 931) but F2 changes the topic abruptly (line 932). This sequence shows an example of balancing agreement and disagreement in compliment responses.

Teaching ideas

- Begin with a brief discussion on the importance of compliment responses in social interactions. For example, you could introduce the topic of compliment responses by asking the students how they usually react to compliments.
- Present examples of praise downgrade and referent shift, explaining how these strategies contribute to effective communication.
- Practice:

- Create two sets of cards: one set with various compliments and another with different compliment responses.
- Divide the class into small groups. Each group gets a set of compliment cards and a set of response cards.
- Similar to the game *Cards Against Humanity*, one person in each group draws a compliment card, and the other group members select the response card they think fits best.
- Rotate the role of the judge within each group. The judge decides which response card earns the most points for that round based on creativity or appropriateness.
- After several rounds, facilitate a discussion about the different ways people interpret and respond to compliments.
- Discuss cultural variations in compliment responses, emphasizing that responses can vary across different cultures.
- Ask students to reflect on how humor and creativity can be used effectively in real-life compliment responses. How might they apply these insights in various cultural or professional contexts?

References

Wong, J., & Waring, H. Z. (2021). *Conversation analysis and second language pedagogy* (Second Ed.). Routledge.

About the author

Kyra Grune is a BA student majoring in English and Sociology at Universität Münster, Germany, with a study abroad semester at Hawaii Pacific University. Her research interests include Literary and Cultural Studies, Linguistics, and English as a Foreign Language. She aims to pursue a Master of Education to teach English and Social Sciences.