

Metaphors in Online Compliments: a Cross-Cultural Analysis of Arabic and English

Nafla Alshahrani | ORCID: 0000-0002-1903-8661

Jazan University, Jazan, Saudi Arabia; University of South Florida,
Tampa, FL, United States

Corresponding author

nafla_alshahrani@hotmail.com

Camilla Vásquez

University of South Florida, Tampa, FL, United States

cvasquez@usf.edu

Received 2 June 2025 | Accepted 25 November 2025 |

Published online 16 January 2026

Abstract

This study presents a cross-cultural analysis of Arabic and English metaphorical compliments in YouTube comments directed at two Saudi diplomats. Taking a cross-linguistic approach, we identified a set of metaphors in both Arabic and English compliments and then categorized them into five source domains: animals, body parts, occupations, tools/abstract objects, and family-related references. The analysis reveals both cultural and gender-related differences. Arabic comments often employ both animal metaphors and familial metaphors, which reflect collectivist and religious values, whereas English comments tend to emphasize occupations and tools – often involving emotional and performance-based imagery – which reflect a more individualist orientation. In terms of their function, these online compliments are best viewed as acts of stancetaking and community alignment within the digital sphere and this is the case for both languages.

Keywords

compliments – Arabic – figurative language – gender – metaphor – YouTube comments

1 Introduction

In the digital era, online platforms have become vibrant spaces for public discourse, where users from all over the world can engage in a range of networked meaning-making activities. Online commenting practices often focus on current events or public figures, such as political leaders and other prominent individuals (e.g., Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al., 2013; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2012; Sharma, 2014). For instance, on platforms such as YouTube, users may construct “light” communities (Blommaert, 2017) through various forms of discursive involvement and social practices (Sharma, 2014). As Tovares (2019) elucidates, such light communities often consist of fleeting collectives, who come together in digital spaces around some shared interest or activity. In these spaces, the act of complimenting, which involves the expression of a positive stance toward some individual, is a common form of engagement. When public figures are the focus of online compliments, those compliments function not only to express an individual user’s stance of admiration toward that public figure, but also contribute to aligning with other members (DuBois, 2007; Kiesling, 2022) of that community, who are participating in the same digital space.

Pragmatics scholars have been interested in the speech act of complimenting since the early 1980s. Early research on compliments focused primarily on spontaneously occurring oral interactions (e.g., Holmes, 1988; Manes, 1983; Wolfson, 1983). In these types of interactions, compliments serve as a face-flattering act (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1987) or a type of face-work that involves all of the interlocutors engaged in the interaction. However, in the digital realm interactional dynamics are different. Therefore, in the present study, compliments are not intended to individually enhance rapport (e.g., Spencer-Oatey, 2008) between the compliment givers (YouTube comment writers) and the targets of the compliment (one of two Saudi diplomats). Because the public individuals who are being complimented are not likely to read these online comments themselves, the primary audience for these compliments is instead other YouTube viewers and commenters, who may interpret these positive expressions as indicators of social identity, solidarity, or political alignment with a particular individual cause, or community.

This study draws on data from a larger analysis of 800 comments that included compliments: 400 in Arabic and 400 in English (Alshahrani, forthcoming). After observing that a subset of compliments in both languages included metaphors ($N=60$), in this article, we examine how users employ figurative language to express admiration in online settings. The use of metaphors in complimenting across languages and cultures (specifically a comparison between Arabic and English) has yet to be systematically studied, particularly with respect to the evaluations of male and female public figures.

Digital spaces such as YouTube provide an ideal context for gathering naturally-occurring complimenting data. One of the advantages of analyzing language from digital media and social media platforms is that it provides natural data, not produced under conditions of elicitation, and thus it is not subject to the observer's paradox. And although there has been growing interest in the speech act of compliments from scholars of digital media in recent years (e.g., Yusof and Hoon, 2014; Placencia, 2019; Cirillo, 2012; Cenni and Vásquez, 2023), few of these studies have taken a contrastive, cross-cultural, or cross-linguistic approach. In addition, compliments in Arabic remain generally underexplored (Traverso and Dimachki, 2017), with existing research on Arabic compliments focusing on face-to-face interactions (e.g., Farghal and Al-Khatib, 2001; Nelson et al., 1996), leaving a gap in understanding how Arabic speakers produce compliments in digital spaces. Situating our research within both cross-cultural pragmatics and internet pragmatics, our study explores the intersection of compliments and figurative language, as we highlight both cross-cultural variation and culturally-specific meanings in the use of Arabic and English metaphors in compliments directed at two Saudi diplomats: Adel Al-Jubeir and Princess Reema bint Bandar.

The unique design of our study – i.e., we examine online comments responding to media interviews with each of the two diplomats as they discuss the same topic, for both an English-speaking audience and an Arabic-speaking audience – allows us to identify factors related to gender, which is especially relevant when considering differences in English and Arabic. For example, prior research by Al Momani et al. (2018: 423) illustrates how, in many Muslim societies, indirect reference to women, especially through figurative language, is a common linguistic practice “... seen as a politeness tool that aims at showing respect to women.” This cultural preference for figurative language used to refer to women illustrates how gender norms may shape language use in culturally specific ways. Taking into account that women are often referenced differently than men in Arabic discourse, our study includes the analysis of metaphorical compliments directed at both male and female public figures.

This allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how gender may be related to variation in metaphor usage, shedding further light on the connections between language, gender, and cultural norms in online discourse.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 *Digital Discourse and YouTube as Participatory Space*

YouTube's mission of "giving everyone a voice," enables users to both post video content as well as to respond to content posted by others (Jones and Schieffelin, 2009), allowing for the expression of opinions and the construction of a wide range of stances on innumerable topics. Since their inception, digital platforms such as YouTube have become spaces where individuals from varied cultural, linguistic, and ideological backgrounds may potentially interact with other users. Thus, YouTube and similar social media platforms may operate as border-crossing spaces of interaction exchanges, or a "transnational space" (Chun, 2013) located within the global public sphere. In recent years, YouTube has also grown significantly as a tool for disseminating institutional texts and genres such as political speeches and media interviews with political figures (Boyd, 2011; Boyd, 2014) which have provided fertile ground for digital discourse analysts who are interested in political genres. YouTube has been referred to by scholars as "a site of participatory culture" (Burgess and Green, 2009) and a "participatory spectacle" (Androutsopoulos, 2013), reflecting the active role that internet users play not only in watching but also in producing and disseminating content. Importantly, the comment sections beneath videos serve as interactive arenas, providing a space for users to articulate identities, engage in meaning-making, and negotiate alliances and affiliations in public discourse (e.g., Jones and Schieffelin, 2009; Chun and Walters, 2011; Androutsopoulos, 2013).

Due to its participatory affordances, YouTube represents a compelling site for examining expressions of stancetaking (Leppänen and Häkkinen, 2013). YouTube comments comprise video-prompted discursive reactions (Herring, 2013), and as a number of scholars have observed, it is often the case that comments respond not only to the video itself but also to other users' remarks, creating layered interactional threads (e.g., Hachimi, 2013). For instance, the participatory nature of YouTube is evident in politically focused videos that elicit substantial engagement through comments and replies (Thelwall et al., 2012), providing an alternative avenue for political engagement and expression (Marsh et al., 2010). Finally, YouTube is a rich platform for pragmatic analysis,

where linguistic forms are used to perform actions such as complimenting, criticizing, aligning, distancing, and more, especially in response to institutional genres like political interviews.

2.2 *Compliments: Forms and Functions*

In this study, we follow Spencer-Oatey's (2008) definition in treating culture as flexible communicative patterns shared by a group. These shared communicative patterns apply to speech acts, for example by extending to how individuals from different linguacultures give and interpret compliments. Such cultural patterns, of course, do not completely dictate individuals' linguistic behavior since they are not a fixed blueprint. However, they do at least provide a shared resource for language users to draw on, especially when idiomatic expressions and figurative language are concerned – as is the case in the present study, where we examine how members of different linguacultures express metaphorical compliments in ways that are recognizable to other members of their linguistic communities.

A compliment is a speech act that “explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some possession, characteristic, skill, etc., which is positively valued by the speaker” (Holmes, 1988: 486). Traditionally, compliments have been conceptualized as acting as “social lubricants” (Wolfson, 1983), helping to maintain smooth interpersonal relations. As noted earlier, prior scholarship on compliments has primarily focused on face-to-face interactions, where they function as face-flattering acts (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1987) that enhance rapport (e.g., Spencer-Oatey, 2008) and enact politeness among interlocutors. In contrast, our study focuses on compliments within YouTube comments, where the function is not so much about establishing or maintaining interpersonal rapport among interlocutors as it is about expressing one's stance, encouraging particular types of behavior, or signaling alignment with others who have shared values. Given the public and anonymous nature of digital spaces, online compliments are often designed for a broader audience of viewers and commenters (i.e., Goffman's “overhearers”) rather than one specific addressee. Unlike face-to-face compliments, digital compliments lack immediate relational cues and are shaped by anonymity and mass visibility. This makes interpreting their function more complex. On YouTube, understanding the compliment often requires consideration of the video content, public sentiment, and relevant sociopolitical contexts, especially when the compliment is directed at a public figure participating in a politically charged interview – as is the case in our study.

2.3 *Digital Compliments*

The speech act of complimenting differs across cultural and contextual boundaries (e.g., Eslami and Yang, 2018). With the expansion of social media over the past two decades, new opportunities have emerged for examining complimenting practices in online spaces. Pragmatics scholars have explored how compliments are expressed across a range of platforms, from widely used sites like Twitter (Yusof and Hoon, 2014), Instagram (Placencia, 2019), and Facebook (Eslami et al., 2019), to more niche contexts such as online gaming environments (Cirillo, 2012) and digital tourism platforms (Cenni and Vásquez, 2023). Despite this growing body of work, complimenting behavior in YouTube comments remains relatively underexplored.

2.4 *Arabic Compliments*

According to one of the foundational studies of cross-cultural compliments in Arabic and English, Nelson et al. (1993) found that compliments in both languages tend to be adjectival in form; however, they found a preference for slightly more elaborated syntactic framing in Arabic. Lexically, Arabic compliments frequently rely on adjectives that highlight personality and innate qualities, whereas English compliments often use adjectives that emphasize effort, achievement, or output. Nelson et al. (1993) suggested that this lexical contrast suggests that Arabic cultures may place a stronger focus on inherent traits, while English speakers value results and individual performance.

The directness of compliments reveals further cultural divergence. While English speakers, particularly Americans, often employ direct and unambiguous praise (Knapp et al., 1984), Arabs may shift between direct and indirect compliments depending on the context (Cohen, 1987; Nelson et al., 1993). However, even within Arab cultures, such as in Egyptian (Nelson et al., 1993) or Saudi Najdi Arabic (AlAmro, 2013), the directness of a compliment may depend on the nature of the relationship and the topic being praised. Familiarity and gender play a large role, especially in face-to-face settings, where indirectness may be preferred to maintain politeness or modesty. Other studies have highlighted how religious and metaphorical elements are deeply rooted in Arabic complimenting practices. AlAmro (2013) and Migdadi et al. (2010) both demonstrate that invocations like *Masha'Allah* or *Tabarak Allah* function not only as praise but also as protective or affiliative markers, reflecting broader cultural beliefs such as the evil eye. Dendenne's (2021) Algerian data similarly reveal how religious expressions blend with admiration, blurring the line between compliment and invocation. This use of figurative and religiously saturated language stands in contrast to English complimenting norms, where metaphors tend to

be less formulaic and rarely, if ever, linked to spiritual belief. In Arabic, however, metaphorical richness is part of a broader linguistic aesthetic (Shouby, 1951), with compliments often drawing on local imagery and elevated comparisons.

2.5 *Compliments and Metaphor*

Metaphor is a central feature of human communication, shaping not just language but thought itself. Although all languages convey ideas through metaphor, the specific metaphors used vary widely across languages and cultures. A metaphor common in one language may lack a direct or close equivalent in another, and the same concept may be expressed using entirely different metaphoric imagery across languages (Habib, 2022). In Arabic discourse, metaphor functions not merely as stylistic resource but as a fundamental communicative and cultural resource. Euphemistic metaphors are particularly common in Arabic, serving to soften directness and align with norms of politeness and emotional sensitivity (Wardhaugh, 2006; Rabab'ah and Al-Qarni, 2012). Al Momani et al. (2018) found that metaphor is the most commonly used off-record strategy for referencing women in the Qur'an, particularly when addressing feminine issues in a decent and respectful manner. These figurative strategies serve to maintain politeness and avoid unpleasant or direct references in spiritual contexts. They also function to prevent misrepresentation, preserve the dignity of women, and avoid causing embarrassment, thus protecting the face of both women and the recipients of the message. In Arabic culture, using titles for both men and women is a form of showing respect. Furthermore, it is culturally not preferred to refer to women by their first names in public settings. Arabs commonly use relational titles based on factors such as age, social status, and familial connection. These include expressions like "*mother of* [eldest son's name]" or "*wife of* [husband's name]." Men, for instance, may address a young girl as "sister" or "daughter," while older women are referred to as "aunt" or "mother." For the elderly, terms like "mother," "granny," or "ḥājjah" (a title for a woman who has performed the pilgrimage to Mecca) are used as marks of respect (Al Momani et al., 2018).

Metaphor functions by mapping a well-understood source domain, such as physical objects, animals, or body parts, onto a more abstract target domain, like emotion, intellect, or character traits (Black, 1962; Chilton, 2004; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). As Forceville (1996) explains, the power of metaphor lies in the selective transfer of features from the source to the target domain, where users highlight or suppress aspects to serve their communicative intentions. A prominent example of this mechanism appears in metaphors that draw from body-part vocabulary as well as animals. As Ibarretxe-Antuñano (2013) notes,

body parts frequently serve as source domains to conceptualize spatial positioning (e.g., *at the foot of the mountain*), cognitive ability (e.g., *to have a good head for figures*), and emotional states (e.g., *hard-hearted*, *broken-hearted*). These expressions also reflect deeper cultural roots, such as the Western dichotomy between the mind and body, where the head symbolizes rationality and the heart represents emotion. Animal metaphors function similarly, carrying strong symbolic associations that can be used to convey positive, often gendered, connotations. In many cultures, such as Arab culture, animals such as lions, hawks, or roosters are invoked to masculinize and glorify individuals, particularly in complimenting practices (Momani et al., 2009). The authors highlighted that describing a person as a “lion” metaphorically conveys courage and authority, while referring to someone as a “hawk” suggests vigilance and honor. These metaphors are not arbitrary but serve specific rhetorical purposes, such as praise, encouragement, or euphemistic politeness, by inducing familiar traits associated with the animal domain. In Arabic, metaphors of both small and large animals are culturally loaded and widely used to uplift, honor, and align individuals with admired qualities, leaving favorable impressions on the addressee. Thus, whether drawn from the human body, the animal kingdom – or some other source domain – metaphors provide a rich, culturally embedded means of expression that reinforces values, identities, and social norms.

3 Methods

The data we discuss here come from a larger study (Alshahrani, forthcoming), which investigated cross-linguistic and gender-related variation in the speech act of complimenting, by focusing on a set of Arabic (n=400), and English (n=400) YouTube comments that included compliments directed at two Saudi diplomats. For the present study, we identified from this larger dataset all of the compliments that included figurative language, specifically metaphors (N=60/800), as we explain in more detail in section 3.2. Furthermore, because our data include responses to both a female and a male diplomat's performances in media interviews, this allows us to also consider the variable of gender in the cross-cultural realization of compliments, thus allowing for a deeper examination of how metaphorical compliments function across languages, taking into account the gender of the complimentee (i.e., the individual who is being complimented).

3.1 Data

In October 2022, Saudi Arabia and the United States experienced diplomatic tensions after the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies (OPEC+) announced a significant cut in oil production. U.S. officials interpreted the decision as a challenge to global efforts to stabilize energy markets, particularly in the context of the ongoing Russia–Ukraine conflict. U.S. officials perceived the move as a signal that the kingdom was aligning itself with Russia, further straining the bilateral relationship. Consequently, President Biden and other American leaders responded with criticism, and several lawmakers urged a reassessment of the United States–Saudi relationship, including proposals to suspend arms sales to the kingdom. In response to this growing pressure and speculation about Saudi Arabia’s geopolitical alignment, senior Saudi officials – notably Princess Reema bint Bandar and Adel Al-Jubeir – participated in high-profile media interviews. Through these interviews, they clarified the kingdom’s position, defended the decision, and emphasized its economic rather than political foundation. The data for this study come from online comments responding to these two televised interviews: one with Adel Al-Jubeir and the other with Princess Reema bint Bandar. Subsequently, each interview was published twice on YouTube: once for a Western audience via CNN’s YouTube channel, and once – with Arabic subtitles – on CNNArabic for an Arabic-speaking audience. Accordingly, the dataset comprises user comments responding to the four posted videos, which represent the two interviews. YouTube metadata for the four versions of the two interviews is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Metadata for the 4 videos of CNN interviews with 2 Saudi speakers

Interviews	Views	Comments
CNNArabic Male Speaker (Al-Jubeir)	1,000,000	2,859
CNNArabic Female Speaker (bint Bandar)	134,000	676
CNN English Male Speaker	3,200,000	21,531
CNN English Female Speaker	1,100,000	7,882

Adel Al-Jubeir is a seasoned Saudi diplomat who often articulates Saudi Arabia's foreign policy to the media. Al-Jubeir was born in 1962 and also pursued his education in the United States, earning degrees in Political Science, Economics, and International Relations. His diplomatic career began in the 1980s and, he later served as Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to the U.S. and as Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. Commenters on social media platforms often highlight his poise, rhetorical control, and measured responses.

Princess Reema bint Bandar is a Saudi diplomat, entrepreneur, and political figure. In 2019, she became the first female Saudi ambassador to the U.S. Born in Riyadh in 1975 into a royal and political family, she spent her formative years in Washington, D.C., while her father served as ambassador. This bicultural upbringing, along with her degree from George Washington University, prepared her to serve as a diplomatic bridge between Eastern and Western contexts. In Saudi Arabia, she took on influential roles that advanced women's empowerment and social development. On social media, users frequently praise her eloquence, empathetic tone, and strong connection to her father's legacy, often drawing parallels between their public images.

Both interviews are characterized by the following variables, which allow for an analytic comparison: both interviews were conducted by the same mass media outlet, CNN; both were hosted by the same CNN interviewer, Becky Anderson; both interviews discussed the same topic; finally, both interviews were published in two versions, enabling responses from two linguistically and culturally distinct audiences, which allows for a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparison.

In order to create our dataset for the larger study, for each of the four videos indicated in Table 1, we selected the top 200 comments (displayed according to YouTube's algorithm) that included compliments. This deliberate aspect of the study's design allowed us to create two parallel corpora of YouTube comments that corresponded to four videos (Table 2), which enabled us to conduct a parallel analysis that includes two variables: the language of compliment (Arabic, English) and the gender of the complimented person (male, female).

3.2 *Data Collection*

The data from the present study come from the larger study, described above, which examined cross-linguistic and cross-gender variation in the speech act of complimenting, by focusing on a set of Arabic ($n=400$), and English ($n=400$) YouTube comments that included compliments about the diplomats in the interview.¹ In the larger study, we have identified several categories of

1 Given the anonymity afforded by YouTube it is impossible to ever be certain about any user demographics: for example, to know whether or not any user is a "native speaker" of a

TABLE 2 Proportions of metaphors in our dataset of 800 YouTube compliments

	Arabic	English	Total
Male Speaker (Adel Al-Jubeir)	26/200	17/200	43/400
Female Speaker (Princess Reema bint Bandar)	10/200	7/200	17/400
Total	36/400	24/400	60/800

compliment forms (e.g., nominal, adjectival, and adverbial). However, beyond simple grammatical forms, our analysis also revealed a range of compliments expressed at the discourse level and constructed more implicitly through idiomatic expressions.

For the purposes of the current study, we focus here only on the compliments expressed through metaphors. Thus, from the 800 complimenting comments that comprise our larger dataset, we extracted all of those compliments that included figurative language, specifically metaphors (N=60). The first number indicated in each cell of Table 2 corresponds to the number of metaphoric compliments directed at each speaker, by language. Specifically, of the 200 compliments we collected that were written Arabic and directed at Al-Jubeir, 26 included metaphors, whereas of the 200 compliments that were written in Arabic and directed at Princess Reema, 10 included metaphorical expressions. Conversely, of the 200 compliments we collected that were written in English and directed at Al-Jubeir, 17 included metaphorical expressions; whereas of the 200 compliments that were written in English and directed at Princess Reema, 7 included metaphorical expressions. It is this subset of 60 metaphorical expressions that we focus on in our analysis that follows.

Our analytic procedures involved several readings through all 60 of these compliments that were expressed as metaphors and then classifying them according to their source domain. As part of this process, we drew on conceptual metaphor theory, which posits that metaphor functions by mapping a well-understood source domain (such as physical objects, animals, or body parts), onto a more abstract target domain, like emotion, intellect, or character traits (Black, 1962; Chilton, 2004; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). As a result of

particular language. However, only comments which displayed high proficiency in English and Arabic were included in our dataset. This assessment was based on grammatical accuracy and idiomatic language use we observed in the sampled texts.

this analysis, we classified all 60 metaphors into one of five source domains that we identified inductively from the data; these include animals, body parts, occupations/professional performance, tools/materials, and family members. As we demonstrate in the following section, these metaphorical compliments clearly go beyond literal description, drawing on figurative language to convey admiration in more imaginative and culturally-specific ways.

4 Findings

Both Arabic and English languages are rich in metaphors, but they differ in their cultural and historical contexts. Arabic, as a Semitic language, has a history that is deeply rooted in Islamic culture and ancient civilizations. Thus, the use of metaphors by Arabs is often influenced by Islamic teachings and history. In Arabic, metaphors often reflect the cultural heritage and history of the Arab world, including its close association with the desert environment (White, 2021). In contrast, English metaphors are shaped by different cultural, historical, and philosophical influences, most notably affected by the industrial and technological developments. Many common English metaphors are rooted in experiences related to commerce, war, sports, and machinery, reflecting the language's evolution within Western societies (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). In the next section we discuss five source domains of metaphors represented in our data: animals, body parts, occupations/professional performance, tools/materials, and family members. For each of these categories, we begin by discussing trends in the Arabic data (considering gender-related similarities and differences), followed by trends in the English language data.

4.1 *Animal Metaphors in Compliments*

In the data that we have observed, animals appear to be a common source domain in Arabic compliments that rely on metaphor. This category reflects socially important imagery, drawing on traits commonly associated with animals to highlight positively valued leadership qualities. YouTube users deployed a variety of animal metaphors in Arabic when complimenting the male diplomat's interview performance, comparing him to a lion, fox and falcon, as seen in Examples 1a–d.

[1a] *Asad fī shakhṣīyituh Asad ḥattá fī al-radd. Jabal mā yuhizzuh al-hawá.*

A lion in his personality, a lion even in his response, a mountain that is not shaken by the wind.

[1b] *Anā Kawsūrī aqdar hādhā al-Asad wa huwa fakhr lil-ummah al-'Arabiyyah, rajul hādī' wa razīn wa siyāsī mutamakkin!! Kull al-maḥabbah li-l-Sa'ūdīyyah ḥukūmah wa sha'ban.*

As a Syrian, I take pride in this lion. He is a calm, composed, and capable man. All love to Saudi Arabia, its government, and its people.

[1c] *Thighlib yā ḥabībī ... Thighlib. Mabrook lil-ikhwah al-Sa'ūdīyyīn wazīr bihādhihi al-ḥikma.*

A fox, oh my god, he is a fox. Congratulations to our Saudi brothers for having a minister with such wisdom.

[1d] *Adel aḥad al-ṣuqūr al-Sa'ūdīyyah ḥafaẓa Allāh al-Sa'ūdīyyah ḥākīman wa sha'ban yā Rabb al-'ālamīn.*

Adel is one of Saudi Arabia's falcons. May God protect Saudi Arabia, its rulers and its people. O Lord of the Worlds.

For many of these comments, YouTube users follow the animal metaphor with explicit statements about specific positive attributes, which also resonate with traditional associations of masculinity and leadership qualities in Arab culture. For instance, the lion is associated with strength and courage. In Example [1a], the speaker's strength and immovability are additionally referenced through the use of a second metaphor: *a mountain that is not shaken by the wind*. Similarly, comment [1b] references the speaker's unflappability, once again relying on the lion metaphor to underscore the qualities of being calm and composed. Another user [1c] relies on the metaphor of the fox traditionally associated with cunning, to emphasize the speaker's intellectual acuity. Finally, although the user in [1d] does not explicitly specify an attribute, in the Saudi context the falcon symbolizes not only national pride and authenticity but may also represent chivalry and courage.

Animal metaphors were also used for complimenting the female diplomat, and in her case all of the animal metaphors were familial, emphasizing her inherited traits and the continuation of her father's diplomatic achievements. Once again, metaphors included animals associated with strength, such as the lion [2a] and those associated with intelligence such as the fox [2b]. However, these compliments emphasize Princess Reema's status as an offspring, and thus one who has inherited such traits from her father. In other words, compliments such as these – as well as [2c] which refers to a wolf, another animal associated

with strength – used animal metaphors to refer primarily to Princess Reema's father and to draw a parallel between them, thus extending his qualities to his daughter.

[2a] *Antum fakhr li-kull al-ummaḥ al-ʿarabiyyah ... ḥaqīqan hādhā al-shibl min dhāk al-asad ... ḥafāẓakum Allāh min kull sharr.*

You are a source of pride for all of the Arab nation. Truly, this cub is from that lion. May God protect you from all harm.

[2b] *zayy abūhā Ṣāḥib as-Sumūw al-Malakī al-Amūr Bandar bin Sulṭān, lammā kān safīr al-Mamlakah al-ʿArabiyyah as-Suʿūdiyyah al-ʿUẓmā fī Amrīkā. Kān siyāsī muḥannak wa madrasah wa thaʿlab al-Mamlakah al-ʿArabiyyah as-Suʿūdiyyah fī as-siyāsāt al-khārijīyyah.*

Just like her father, His Royal Highness Prince Bandar bin Sultan. When he was the Saudi ambassador to the United States, he was a seasoned politician and a school of diplomacy, and the fox of the Kingdom in foreign policies.

[2c] *Lā yustaghrab min ibnat dhīʿb al-Jazīrah al-ʿArabiyyah Bandar bin Sulṭān.*

It is no surprise coming from the daughter of the Wolf of the Arabian Peninsula (Bandar bin Sultan).

In addition to these creative metaphors, some comments also draw on more conventionalized proverbs found in certain varieties of Arabic. For instance, one post complimenting the Princess included a proverb associated with Egyptian or Syrian Arabic (i.e., *The child of the goose is a swimmer*), an animal-based metaphor expressing the idea that children inherit the qualities or abilities of their parents. Animal metaphors here align Princess Reema's skills with her upbringing and environment, emphasizing her aptitude and preparation for her role. The authors of these comments refer to family roles (e.g., *the daughter of, her father, and the child of*) to establish this transmission of capability and skill from father to daughter. Overall, while both sets of metaphors praise competence and skill, the animal metaphors used to compliment the male diplomat focus on his personal attributes, whereas the animal metaphors complimenting the female diplomat tend to emphasize inherited qualities and family roles. This type of metaphor reflects broader cultural patterns

in Arabic discourse, where it is often considered socially dispreferred to refer to women by their first names in public. Instead, relational titles based on familial ties and social roles are often preferred, as noted above. In this context, familial references serve as both a form of respect and a means of positioning women within relational networks. Thus, the metaphorical framing of Princess Reema's abilities as inherited aligns with a culturally embedded practice of referring to women through their connections to others, rather than as autonomous individuals.

In our subset of English compliments expressed as metaphors, no animal metaphors were observed. While it is impossible to generalize our findings beyond this limited sample, it is worth pointing out that this result shows a striking contrast with the Arabic data, where such metaphors were commonly used to convey admiration and highlight qualities like strength, intelligence, or agility. This absence could indicate that English may rely less on animal-based figurative language when offering praise, or that such metaphors may not carry the same cultural connotations as they do in Arabic. However, both of these interpretations would need to be verified with English and Arabic compliments drawn from other contexts.

4.2 *Body Part Metaphors in Compliments*

The second category of metaphors identified in the comments involves the use of body parts to convey compliments. As observed by Ibarretxe-Antuñano (2013) body parts are the source domain of many conceptual metaphors and are often found in expressions related to cognition and emotions; in particular, in Western cultures, "the head is usually associated with intelligence, rational thinking, consciousness, and common sense (e.g., to have a good head for sth, to get one's head around)" (p. 331). YouTube users employed references to body parts in both Arabic and English comments to metaphorically construct various emotions and attributes, with Arabic data revealing slightly more body part metaphors than the English data. The most commonly referenced body parts in Arabic included facial features (i.e., nose, mouth, face, forehead, and eyes) each carrying distinct connotations depending on the individual to whom they were attributed.

When the Arabic body part metaphors described the male diplomat, they were typically linked with a personal attribute or characteristic. For instance, in comment [3a], the mention of "eyes" represents intelligence and competence. Additionally, some body part metaphors (as in 3b, 3c, and 3d) were invoked in prayers and blessings directed at the diplomats, reflecting how Arabic online compliments are often rich in religious invocations. These expressions are not meant to be understood literally; rather, they metaphorically represent abstract

qualities and attributes. In this context, the “nose” in [3b] signifies dignity and high status, while the “mouth” in [3c] conveys eloquence and rhetorical skill.

[3a] *Arā fī a'yuni hādhā ash-shakhs dhakā'an thāqiban, wa fī nazārī min akbar makāsib as-Sa'ūdiyyah wujūd mithl hādhihi al-kafā'ah ḍimn aṭ-ṭāqim al-ḥukūmī.*

I see in this person's eyes a sharp intelligence, and in my opinion, one of Saudi Arabia's greatest assets is having such competence within the government team.

[3b] *Yislam khashmak yā al-ghālī.*

Bless your nose, O dear!

[3c] *Lā fuḍḍa fūk.*

May your mouth never falter ...

[3d] *Allāh yubaṭīḍ wajhak yā al-Jubayr.*

May God whiten your face, Al-Jubeir.

Similarly, the “face” in [3d] also represents the diplomat's overall image and their role as a distinguished representative of their country. Through these metaphorical blessings, users express their admiration and well wishes for the diplomat's qualities, simultaneously praying for their continued success and honor.

When body parts were associated with the comment writer rather than the diplomat (as in 3e, 3f, and 3g), they typically suggested emotional or psychological impact that the diplomat's performance had on the audience. The body parts used in this context (heart, head, and chest) differ from those previously mentioned (nose, mouth, and face), and were more directly related to emotions. Three users employed the well-known Arabic expression *You raised our heads* (i.e., 3e), which conveys a sense of pride and honor indicating here that the diplomat has brought distinction and merit to their people: once in reference to Adel Al-Jubeir [3e] and twice in comments about Princess Reema [4a] and [4b].

[3e] *Rafa't rūsanā.*

You raised our heads.

[3f] *Ṣarāḥah yuthlij aṣ-ṣadr, biṣarāḥah kān al-Jubayr mumtāz fī al-ijādah, ḥaythu kān manṭiqī wa wāḍiḥ.*

Honestly, it froze the chest. Truly, Al-Jubeir was excellent in his response, as he was logical and clear.

[3g] *Mā arāhu 'alā wasā'il at-tawāṣul al-ijtimā'ī min jamī' ikhwatinā wa akhawātīnā al-'arab wa al-muslimīn min anḥā' al-'ālam yuthlij aṣ-ṣadr. Nas'al Allāh an yahfaz arḍ at-tawḥīd wa jamī' bilād al-muslimīn.*

What I see on social media from all our Arab and Muslim brothers and sisters from across the world is freezing the heart. May Allah protect the land of monotheism and all Muslim countries.

As noted by Ibarretxe-Antuñano (2013) the heart is typically related to more emotional states, as can be seen in [3g]. (At the end of this section, we address the cultural significance of “freezing” the chest/heart.) The data also included one body part metaphor in which the body part was attributed to a third party (i.e., neither the diplomat nor the author of the comment) [3h]. The forehead in Arabic is closely linked to personal and collective honor as it also indicates pride and dignity.

[3h] *Al-Jubayr kal-'ādah yaqṣif kull al-jabahāt bihudū'ihī alladhī yuḥsadu 'alayh.*

Al-Jubeir strikes every forehead with his enviable calm.

This metaphor suggests that Al-Jubeir's composure effectively challenges any of his opponents, emphasizing his dominance and strength in the discourse. Arabic speakers use the metaphor “struck on their forehead” to suggest loss of face, thus this usage highlights how body-part metaphors can function as a means of asserting power dynamics and social hierarchy in Arabic discourse.

Unlike the comments directed at Al-Jubeir, which featured a broader range of body part metaphors, Arabic comments about Princess Reema [4a] and [4b] only included references to the head – and, in both cases, referring only to the

heads of her audience. In both examples, the “head raised” or “head held high” represents a sense of pride that her performance has inspired in her audience.

[4a] *Mā shā’ Allāh, ka’ann Samūw al-Amīr Bandar bin Sulṭān yatakal-lam. Allāh yahfazhā. Muntahā aṣ-ṣidq wa muntahā ad-diblūmāsiyyah wa al-libāqah wa al-dhakā’, wa ka’annah taqrā min kitāb a’addahu duhāt ad-diblūmāsiyyah. Allāh yuwafiqhā. Rafa’at ru’usanā ‘āliyan. Taḥiyyātī aṣ-ṣādiqah li-Ṣāḥibat as-Sumūw. Hākadhā as-safīr wa illā falā!*

Mashallah, it was as if Prince Bandar bin Sultan was speaking. May God protect her. Utmost sincerity, diplomacy, eloquence, and intelligence – it’s as if she’s reading from a book prepared by master diplomats. May God grant her success. She has raised our heads high. My sincere greetings to Her Royal Highness. This is what a true ambassador should be.

[4b] *Rāsī murtafi’ min al-fakhr.*

My head is held high with pride.

The metaphor in [4a] is paired with a familial reference, as the commenter likens Princess Reema’s eloquence and diplomatic skill once again to that of her father. Similar to the animal metaphors, this comparison is consistent with a broader discursive pattern in Arabic of evaluating women through familial relationships. Using the reference to her father as the basis of the compliment grounds it in legacy and tradition.

In the English comments, body parts metaphors were less common, with only one example referring to the Princess [5a], and none referring to Al-Jubeir.

[5a] My heart was so delighted the way Princess Reema put all her bright thoughts across ... It’s heartwarming to see her speak wisdom.

In the case of 5a, the English compliment relies on two heart metaphors to construct a positive feeling in the viewer that was brought about the Princess’s performance.

Comparing the English and Arabic body part metaphors reveals a compelling cross-cultural contrast. In the Arabic data, comments such as [3f] and [3g] describe how Al-Jubeir’s interview induced a sense of “coolness” or “coldness” in the audience’s heart, while the English compliment [5a] uses “warming” to describe the effect of Princess Reema’s performance. Although both convey feelings of joy and satisfaction, Arabic speakers metaphorically

associate positive emotions with coldness (e.g., “cooling the chest,” “a cold heart”), whereas English speakers use warmth-related expressions (e.g., “heart-warming”). This contrast may come from environmental and cultural factors: in Arabic-speaking societies, hot desert climates make coldness a symbol of comfort and relief, while in Western contexts, warmth evokes affection, joy, and emotional closeness. These metaphors suggest how cultural environments may shape emotional expressions.

4.3 *Profession and Occupation Metaphors in Compliments*

The third category of metaphors used to compliment the Saudi diplomats is related to occupations, professions, or displays of skillful performance. Both Arabic and English compliments included these metaphors, which likened the diplomats to professionals from various fields, highlighting their competence, mastery, and exceptional abilities.

In our Arabic data, this category appears exclusively in compliments directed at Al-Jubeir and is not used at all for the Princess. Arabic users primarily emphasize occupations from educational institutions, ranging from being a student to a professor. The metaphor in [6a] highlights the importance of apprenticeship in Eastern societies, where the reputation of a mentor (former foreign minister, Prince Saud Al-Faisal, who was known for his key role in shaping the kingdom’s foreign policy) enhances the credibility of the student (Al-Jubeir). Example [6b] relies on the same reference which positions Al-Jubeir within a lineage of esteemed diplomats and leaders.

[6a] *Leesh ma yakoon thaki w huwa aḥad talāmithat Saud Al-Faisal? Kull man kānū ma’a tilka al-hāmah fa-yu’tabar annahu muḥannak wa mullim bikull shay’.*

Why wouldn’t he be smart when he is one of Saud Al-Faisal’s students? Anyone who was with that figure is considered seasoned and knowledgeable about everything.

[6b] *Al-Jubeir siyāsi min al-naw’ al-rafi’... kharīj madrasat Saud al-Faisal, Allāh yerḥamuh ... Rabbī yehfaz waṭanī al-ḥabīb.*

Al-Jubeir is a top-tier politician, a graduate of the school of Saud Al-Faisal, may he rest in peace.

The use of “the school” as a metaphor to refer to Al-Jubeir himself in [6c] and [6d] upgrades the description of the diplomat from being student and

graduate, to elevate him to the status of a living institution – as someone who both represents and sustains Saudi political traditions.

[6c] *Hunā madrasat al-siyādah.*

Here is the school of leadership.

[6d] *Adel al-Jubeir innahu al-madrasah al-siyāsiyyah al-diblūmāsiyyah al-Saʿūdiyyah.*

Adel Al-Jubeir is the embodiment of the school of the Saudi political and diplomatic school.

Comments [6e] and [6f] metaphorically assign him the role of a scholar-educator whose insights shape politics.

[6e] *Tamannayt an yakūn hādhā shakhs munāsib fī makān munāsib fī al-Maghrib – al-dīqah wa al-jawāb wa shakhsiyyah mawāzinah. Mā shāʾ Allāh ʿalayk yā al-brofīsūr ... min al-Ribāṭ, ʿaṣimat al-Maghrib. Bil-tawfīq.*

I wished this person were in Morocco – such precision, eloquence, and a balanced personality. Mashallah, he is a professor. Greetings from Rabat, the capital of Morocco. Wishing you all the best.

[6f] *Brofīsūr fī al-ʿulūm al-siyāsiyyah.*

Professor of political science.

Two Arabic comments in this category referenced other occupations and professions to compliment Al-Jubeir. The compliment in [6g] compares the diplomat's skill to that of an experienced fisherman who cannot be fooled or deceived. Similarly, [6h] likens Al-Jubeir to a warrior who delivers precise strikes with his calculated expertise.

[6g] *Al-mudhīrah ḥāwalat al-ṣayd fī al-māʾ al-ʿakīr, lakinnahā lam takun taʾlam anna ḍayfahā kabīr al-ṣayyādīn.*

The interviewer tried to fish in troubled waters, but she didn't realize that her guest is the master of all fishermen.

[6h] *Al-shakhsiyyah allatī lā taḍrib illā fī maqṭal.*

A personality that only strikes in a fatal spot.

In English compliments, users similarly employed metaphors of professions or occupations, as well as displays of skillful performance, to highlight the male diplomat's rhetorical mastery, emphasizing expertise, control, and strategic thinking. Comment [7a] draws from the sport of fencing, comparing the diplomat's verbal abilities to that of a skilled and talented duelist who skillfully counters attacks with precision. Similarly, [7b] likens his responses to an athlete who is able to "run rings around" their competition.

[7a] I like this guy!!! Verbal fencing, parry and deflect with class!!!

[7b] A gentle man, straight with educational answers cannot run rings around someone who is educated.

Similarly, [7c] and [7d] position Al-Jubeir as a skilled pilot or driver who remains firmly in control while his opponent (the female interviewer) fails.

[7c] Love how she tries to steer and crashes every time. He never swerves.

[7d] The journalist tried so hard to drive him over the edge, but he handled it like a master.

Other comments such as [7e] and [7f] also imagery of competitive performance where the diplomat's skills are metaphorically conveyed through phrases such as "shut her off" (referring to the female interviewer) and "he wasn't moved" signifying victory and final authority. These metaphorical expressions reinforce the image of a seasoned negotiator and an individual who, under pressure, maintains composure and control.

[7e] love the way he shut her soul off.

[7f] The lady pressed but he wasn't moved.

Although none of the Arabic users employed this category of metaphor to compliment Princess Reema, two of the English comments did. The metaphors in examples [8a] and [8b] reflect how English speakers often draw from

sports (*slam dunk*) and academic imagery (*a scholar*) to evaluate professional competence. These English examples metaphors reveal cultural emphasis on professionalism, expertise, and individual mastery.

[8a] She sounds like a scholar with high integrity. Everything she said is right to point. Her elegance and coherence on educating the West about the vision of this new generation of Saudi leaders are worth noting. I cannot think of any western diplomat that could match or rival Princess Reema. She is a living goddess.

[8b] Wow, princess Reema totally put a slammed dunk [*sic*] performance with such elegance and fluency. What a credit she is to the Kingdom. Bravo.

Unlike English compliments, which often emphasize individual control, Arabic compliments tend to highlight legacy, collective learning, and mastery within an established system of knowledge. These metaphors reflect how Arabic compliments often frame competence through institutional and mentorship-based imagery. Frequent references to schools, professors, and students reflects a cultural value of knowledge transmission as well as accumulated expertise. In other words, the use of these metaphors suggests that in English-speaking contexts, competence is often associated with individual technical skill and control rather than the more collective identity expressed in Arabic comments.

4.4 *Tools and Abstract Objects as Metaphors in Compliments*

The fourth category of metaphors employs references to various tangible, physical objects to describe Princess Reema's and Al-Jubeir's communication style. The following examples illustrate how concrete and physical properties of various objects (i.e., source domain) are used in compliments to symbolize abstract qualities and attributes (i.e., target domain) of the two diplomats. In the case of Al-Jubeir, most of the metaphors in this category refer to YouTube users' appreciation of his composure. Users explicitly referenced Al-Jubeir's composure not only through adjectives and nouns such as *calm* and *calmness* but also implicitly through this set metaphors. In Arabic, comments referencing this attribute employ both global/universal and culturally-specific metaphors.

[9a] *Afhamtahā wa aljamtahā wa akhrastahā wa askattahā wa aghḍabtahā. Ammā anta fa mā shā' Allāh 'alayk, hādī wa ka'annaka fī*

thalājah – dalīl al-ḥikmah wa al-ḥinkah wa rajāḥat al-‘aql. Uḥanī’uk, dublūmāsī min al-ṭirāz al-raḥī’.

You silenced her, stunned her, and left her speechless, unsettling and angering her. Mashallah, you remained calm as if you were in a refrigerator – a true testament to wisdom and sound judgment.

[9b] *Mithl qimmat al-Tuwaiq, shāmikh wa qawī.*

He is like Mount Tuwaiq, towering and strong.

[9c] *Mithl al-jabal mā yahuzzuh rīḥ*

Like a mountain that cannot be shaken by the wind.

In [9a] the reference “to being in a refrigerator” can likely be widely understood as a metaphor for composure and coolness under pressure. Other Arabic comments relied on more culturally specific imagery, linking the diplomat’s calmness and composure to the landscape of his homeland: for example, [9b] specifically references Mount Tuwaiq, an iconic mountain in Saudi Arabia. This metaphor carries additional significance, as it repeats a famous remark made by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who once described the determination of the Saudi people by likening them to Mount Tuwaiq. By using this imagery, commenters not only emphasize Al-Jubeir’s immovability but also intertextually position him as a figure representing his people. In contrast, the mountain metaphor we noted earlier in [1a] and in [9c] is a more global metaphor, which describes the diplomat’s strength without naming any specific mountain.

Princess Reema was praised using metaphors that not only highlight her personal attributes but also embed her achievements within a broader national and political framework. Example [10a] contains two metaphors: “fertile ground” and “soar like a hypersonic missile.” The phrase “fertile ground” metaphorically attributes her success to the sociopolitical environment cultivated by King Salman and the Crown Prince, which suggests that the Saudi leadership has created conditions conducive to the flourishing of women like Princess Reema, representing her skills as a natural outcome of this supportive context. The second metaphor, “soar like a hypersonic missile,” shifts into the register of technological and military power and conveys not only her rapid ascent in the field of diplomacy but also frames her as a symbol of national pride and futuristic progress.

[10a] *“Ḥaḳīqatan hādhihi al-amīrah maḳkharah wa i’tizāz likull al-Sa’ūdīyyīn limā tatamattā’ bihi min al-labāqah fī maḳāl al-diblūmāsīyyah. Innahā namūdḥaj li-shakḥṣīyyat al-mar’ah al-Sa’ūdīyyah fī ‘ahd al-malik Salmān wa walī ‘ahdih al-amīr Muḥammad, ḥafaḥahumā Allāh, alladḥayn wafarā arḍan khaṣbah lil-mar’ah al-Sa’ūdīyyah litanṭaliq inṭilāq al-ṣārūkh al-farṭ-ṣawtī.”*

Truly, this princess is a source of pride and honor for all Saudis, given her exceptional eloquence in the field of diplomacy. She is a model of the Saudi woman in the era of King Salman and his Crown Prince, may God preserve them, who have provided fertile ground for Saudi women to soar like a hypersonic missile.

[10b] *Aḥad arkān al-muthallath al-dhahabī al-‘abqarī.*

One part of the golden intelligent triangle.

In example [10b], the phrase “one part of the golden intelligent triangle” constructs Princess Reema as a crucial and distinguished element of a highly valued trio. The use of “golden” implies rarity and immense worth, while the “triangle” metaphor symbolizes a trio of influential figures – potentially including the King and Crown Prince Muḥamad bin Salman or Prince Saud Al-Faisal and her father Prince Bandar bin Sultan – thus positioning Princess Reema as an integral part of the nation’s leadership or reform movement. Rather than isolating her achievements, this metaphor ties her success to a collective vision, suggesting that her contributions are part of a broader, coordinated effort by the Saudi government.

English users also rely on global and (to a lesser extent) culturally-specific figurative expressions that involve physical objects. These compliments frequently rely on similes using *as a* or *like a* to express admiration. Conventional idioms, describing Al-Jubier, such as “cool as a cucumber” [11c], “sharp as a dagger” [11b], and “calm as a weapon” [11a] follow a consistent structure: an adjective (*cool, sharp, calm*), is linked to a concrete noun/object (*cucumber, dagger, weapon*) with *as a* or *like a*.

[11a] he broke the hypocrisy of the journalist ... calm as a weapon.

[11b] Sharp as a dagger

[11c] the guy was as cool as a cucumber

English users also use rely on similes to express admiration for Princess Reema, comparing her voice to music and her speech to that of a scholar [12 a]. These figurative comparisons enhance the compliment by evoking both emotional pleasure and intellectual respect.

[12a] Listening to princess Reema is like music to my ears. She sounds like a scholar with high integrity.

In these idiomatic expressions, the adjectives appearing before the comparison object (source domain) help to make explicit the intended meaning.

4.5 *Family-Related References as Metaphors in Compliments*

The fifth category of metaphors identified in the comments involves family-related references in compliments. While both Arabic and English employ familial metaphors, they do so in different ways. In the Arabic comments, family-related metaphors appeared in three instances, once in praise of Al-Jubeir [13a] and twice in praise of Princess Reema [14a] and [14b].

[13a] *Hādī jiddan raghma al-ḍagħṭ. Āshat mamlakatunā al-‘azīzah bi-ḥukkāmihā ikhwān Nūrah.*

Very calm despite the pressure. Long live our dear Kingdom with its rulers, the brothers of Noura.

One user [13a] complimented Al-Jubeir by emphasizing his ability to remain composed under stress, a recurring theme in many compliments, as we have seen. The comment continues with, “Long live our dear Kingdom with its rulers, the brothers of Noura,” an invocation that expands the compliment beyond the diplomat to include Saudi leadership, especially the royal family. The expression “the brothers of Noura” is a well-known phrase referring to King Abdulaziz the founder of the kingdom and his male descendants, highlighting the foundational role of the Saudi royal family. (Noura bint Abdulrahman, King Abdulaziz’s sister, was known for her wisdom and influence, making this reference a powerful way to acknowledge leadership, resilience, and noble qualities.) When a commenter describes Saudi rulers as “the brothers of Noura,” immediately after complimenting the diplomat they are reasserting the connection of the representatives (diplomats) to a historical legacy leadership. Unlike individualistic compliments often found in Western discourse, where praise is directed at personal achievements or characteristics,

Arabic compliments often extend to family and tribe heritage or to the rulers themselves, reinforcing collective pride and historical continuity.

The other two Arabic compliments [14a] and [14b] in this category praised Princess Reema by referring to her metaphorically as “the daughter of the Kingdom” and “the daughter of Saudi Arabia.” This form of reference is a culturally embedded strategy, also found in the Qur’an, used as a polite and respectful way to refer to women (Al Momani et al., 2018).

[14a] *Allāh yā ibnat al-mamlakah ... naftaqid fī ‘ālamīnā al-‘arabī al-mutaḥaddithīn al-bārī‘īn al-mu‘abbirīn biḥādhihi al-miḥaniyyah wa al-miṣḍāqiyyah ... al-ān faqaṭ āmantu bi-anna al-Mamlakah al-‘Arabiyyah lahā mustaqbal mushriq bifaḍl ḥādhihi al-ajyāl al-shābbah al-rā‘īah al-ṭamūḥah. Lakum kull al-taḥiyyah wa al-ḥubb min al-Sūdān.*

Allah, daughter of the Kingdom ... We miss in our Arab world such eloquent speakers with this level of professionalism and credibility. Only now I believe that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a bright future thanks to these wonderful and ambitious young generations. All greetings and love to you from Sudan.

[14b] *Mā shā’ Allāh ‘alayki yā bint al-Sa’ūdiyyah. Liqā’ yudarras wallāh, wa thaḡāfah wa labāqah – Allāhu akbar! Rabbīna yaḥfazik. Anā Miṣriyyah wa fakhūrah biki.*

Mashallah, daughter of Saudi Arabia. This is an interview to be studied, truly, with such culture, composure, and eloquence. Allahu Akbar, may God protect you. I’m an Egyptian woman, and I’m proud of you.

The user in [14a] expands the compliment to the Princess to encompass a broader reflection on the Kingdom’s governance and future. In other words, the princess here is praised not only for her individual achievements but also as a representative of her nation.

In contrast there was only family metaphor in the English compliments [15a], to compliment Al-Jubeir, and unlike the Arabic examples in this category which emphasized lineage and nation, here the family metaphor is used instead to frame the interactional dynamics between interviewee and interviewer, respectively.

[15a] This feels like a grandpa and a 4-year-old granddaughter having a conversation.

The comment uses a simile to describe the contrast between the two individuals (Al-Jubeir and the CNN anchor). The metaphorical language serves as an evaluative function, critiquing the perceived imbalance in rhetorical skill of the anchorperson conducting the interview with the wisdom and experience of Al-Jubeir on the other side. Unlike Arabic that uses family related references in compliments to reinforce legacy, this English compliment uses a family reference to illustrate the contrast evident in participants' relational dynamics.

5 Conclusion

Our cross-linguistic comparison of metaphorical compliments in Arabic and English from a digital context reveals both cultural divergence as well as shared communicative goals. Firstly, our Arabic data show a marked preference for metaphorical expressions rooted in familial, religious, and environmental imagery. Animal metaphors, body part metaphors, and references to inherited qualities or lineage were prominent in Arabic compliments, which draw on cultural norms that emphasize relational identities and collective pride. In contrast, English metaphors found in our data featured more individualized praise through performance-based metaphors and often highlighted personal traits or attributes using similes.

Gender also played a role in how metaphorical praise is constructed – especially in Arabic. Compliments directed at the male diplomat, Adel Al-Jubeir, were more likely to use metaphors that emphasized individual ability, poise, and strategic skill, such as sharpness, precision, and control, often with references to personal mastery. In contrast, Arabic metaphorical compliments about Princess Reema often underscored inherited traits, frequently connecting her performance to her family lineage (e.g., comparisons to her father) or the nation itself (e.g., “daughter of Saudi Arabia”). This mirrors findings in the politeness and gender literature that show how women, particularly in Arabic discourse, are more often referenced through relational identities and expected to align with broader moral or familial ideals (Momani et al., 2009; Al-Momani et al., 2018).

Although our study is based on a limited sample of data, our in-depth descriptive approach offers new insights about several topics relevant for contrastive pragmatics. Our study not only addresses gaps in scholarship on compliments and figurative language, but it adopts a contrastive approach to studying naturally-occurring compliments found in digital contexts. While research on compliments in digital discourse has expanded in recent years (e.g., Yusof and Hoon, 2014; Placencia, 2019; Cirillo, 2012; Cenni and Vásquez, 2023), few

studies to date have adopted a contrastive, cross-cultural, or cross-linguistic perspective – particularly with Arabic language, which remains underrepresented in studies of (digital) complimenting language, more generally.

By situating our analysis within both cross-cultural pragmatics and internet pragmatics, our study underscores the role of metaphor in both reflecting and shaping culturally specific meanings in complimenting practices. We acknowledge that neither English nor Arabic are monolithic linguacultures: both are pluricentric and thus represent significant cultural and linguistic diversity. However, as scholars from these broadly-defined distinct cultural backgrounds (i.e., one of us is from the US, and the other is from Saudi Arabia), we have both drawn on our complementary emic/etic perspectives throughout our interpretative processes, and the numerous dialogues resulting from our collaboration have facilitated our cultural comparisons.

Lastly, despite these cultural tendencies, one commonality across both Arabic and English communicative groups is that these compliments function less as direct communication with the diplomats, who are unlikely to ever see these posts, and thus much more likely, as public performances of stancetaking. Commenters express admiration not only for the individuals featured but also simultaneously signal their own alignment with certain values: eloquence, patriotism, diplomacy, and national pride. In this sense, these metaphorical compliments can be seen as a form of affiliative discourse, where users seek solidarity with others who share their appreciation. Thus, these acts of complimenting, while focusing on public figures, function as communal expressions of approval within this social media space.

References

- Alshahrani, Nafla. Forthcoming. *Complimenting Saudi diplomats Online: A Cross-linguistic and Cross-Gender Analysis of Syntactic Realizations and Stancetaking in Arabic and English YouTube Comments*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida (USA).
- Al Momani, Khalid, Feras Migdadi, and Emad Rabab'a. 2018. Politeness strategies and the representation of women in the Holy Qur'an. *Intercultural Pragmatics* 15(3), 409–435. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ip-2018-0012>.
- AlAmro, Mohammed A. 2013. *The Sociolinguistics of Compliment Behavior in Najdi Saudi Arabic*. Unpublished PhD dissertation. Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana (USA). Retrieved from <http://liblink.bsu.edu/catkey/1738070>.
- Androutsopoulos, Jannis. 2013. Participatory culture and metalinguistic discourse: Performing and negotiating German dialects on YouTube. In Deborah Tannen and

- Anna Marie Trester (eds.), *Discourse 2.0: Language and New Media*. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 47–71. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book26548>.
- Black, Max. 1962. *Models and Metaphors*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Blitvich, Pilar Garcés-Conejos. 2010. The YouTubeification of politics, impoliteness and polarization. In: Rotimi Taiwo (ed.), *Handbook of Research on Discourse Behavior and Digital Communication: Language Structures and Social Interaction*. Hershey, Pa.: IGI Global, 540–563. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-61520-773-2.ch035>.
- Blitvich, Pilar Garcés-Conejos, Nuria Lorenzo-Dus, and Patricia Bou-Franch. 2013. Relational work in anonymous, asynchronous communication: A study of (dis)affiliation on YouTube. In: Istvan Kecskes (ed.), *Research Trends in Intercultural Pragmatics*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 343–366. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614513735-343>.
- Blommaert, Jan. 2017. *Society through the lens of language: A new look at social groups and integration*. Tilburg Papers in Cultural Studies 178. <https://research.tilburguniversity.edu/en/publications/d6a94510-1c7f-446bab89-f7438dcdd17c>.
- Boyd, Michael S. 2011. (New) political genres for the masses? YouTube in the 2008 US presidential campaign. In: Srikant Sarangi, Virginia Polese, and Girolamo Caliendo (eds.), *Genres on the Move: Hybridization and Discourse Change in Specialized Communication*. Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 27–44.
- Boyd, Michael S. 2014. (New) participatory framework on YouTube? Commenter interaction in US political speeches. *Journal of Pragmatics* 72, 46–58. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2014.03.002>.
- Burgess, Jean, and Joshua Green. 2009. The entrepreneurial vlogger: Participatory culture beyond the professional–amateur divide. In: Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (eds.), *The YouTube Reader*. Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 89–107.
- Cenni, Irene, and Camilla Vásquez. 2023. “Jerry was a terrific host!” “You were a brilliant guest!” *Pragmatics and Society* 14(1), 117–142. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ps.20059.cen>.
- Chilton, Paul. 2009. Metaphor in mental representations of space, time and society: The cognitive linguistic approach. In: Hanna Pishwa (ed.), *Language and Social Cognition: Expression of the Social Mind*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 455–472. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110216080-3.455>.
- Chun, Elaine. 2013. Ironic blackness as masculine cool: Asian American language and authenticity on YouTube. *Applied Linguistics* 34(5): 592–612. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amto23>.
- Chun, Elaine, and Keith Walters. 2011. Orienting to Arab orientalisms: Language, race, and humor in a YouTube video. In: Crispin Thurlow and Kristine Mroczek (eds.), *Digital Discourse: Language in the New Media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 251–278. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199795437.003.0012>.
- Cirillo, Vincenza. 2012. The pragmatics of virtual environments: Compliment responses in Second Life. *Lingue e Linguaggi* 7: 37–58. <http://siba-es.unisalento.it/index.php/linguellinguaggi/article/view/12357>.

- Cohen, Raymond. 1987. Problems of intercultural communication in Egyptian-American diplomatic relations. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 11(1), 29–47. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767\(87\)90030-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(87)90030-7).
- Dendenne, Bahia. 2021. Complimenting on-the-go: Features from colloquial Algerian Arabic. *Journal of Pragmatics* 172, 270–287. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2020.11.013>.
- DuBois, John W. 2007. The stance triangle. In: Robert Englebretson (ed.), *Stance-taking in Discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 139–182. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.164.07du>.
- Eslami, Zohreh R., and Xinyuan Yang. 2018. Chinese-English bilinguals' online compliment response patterns in American (Facebook) and Chinese (Renren) social networking sites. *Discourse, Context & Media* 26, 13–20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2018.04.006>.
- Eslami, Zohreh R., Nahid Jabbari, and Li-Jen Kuo. 2019. Online compliments of Iranian Facebook users. In: Eva Ogiermann and Pilar Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (eds.), *From Speech Acts to Lay Understandings of Politeness: Multilingual and Multicultural Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 68–92. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108182119.004>.
- Farghal, Mohammed, and Mahmoud A. Al-Khatib. 2001. Jordanian college students' responses to compliments: A pilot study. *Journal of Pragmatics* 33(9), 1485–1502. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166\(01\)00006-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(01)00006-6).
- Forceville, Charles. 1996. *Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising*. London: Routledge.
- Habib, Sandy. 2022. On the verge of extinction: The semantics, pragmatics, and etymology of eight endangered similes in Jish Arabic. *Intercultural Pragmatics* 19(4), 513–530. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ip-2022-4004>.
- Hachimi, Atiqa. 2013. The Maghreb–Mashreq language ideology and the politics of identity in a globalized Arab world. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 17(3), 269–296. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12037>.
- Herring, Susan C. 2013. Relevance in computer-mediated conversation. In: Susan C. Herring, Dieter Stein, and Tuija Virtanen (eds.), *Pragmatics of Computer-Mediated Communication*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 245–268. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110214468.245>.
- Holmes, Janet. 1988. Paying compliments: A sex-preferential politeness strategy. *Journal of Pragmatics* 12(4), 445–465. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(88\)90005-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(88)90005-7).
- Ibarretxe-Antuñano, Iraide. 2013. The relationship between conceptual metaphor and culture. *Intercultural Pragmatics* 10(2), 315–339. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ip-2013-0014>.
- Jones, Graham M., and Bambi B. Schieffelin. 2009. Talking text and talking back: “My BFF Jill” from Boob Tube to YouTube. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14(4), 1050–1079. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2009.01481.x>.

- Kerbrat-Orecchioni, Catherine. 1987. La description des échanges en analyse conversationnelle: L'exemple du compliment. *Documentation et Recherche en Linguistique Allemande Vincennes* 36(1), 1–53. <https://doi.org/10.3406/drlav.1987.1054>.
- Kiesling, Scott. 2022. Operationalizing theoretical constructs. In: Camilla Vásquez (ed.), *Research Methods for Digital Discourse Analysis*. London: Bloomsbury, 37–53.
- Knapp, Mark L., Richard Hopper, and Robert A. Bell. 1984. Compliments: A descriptive taxonomy. *Journal of Communication* 34, 19–31.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1980. The metaphorical structure of the human conceptual system. *Cognitive Science* 4(2), 195–208.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Leppänen, Sirpa, and Anu Häkkinen. 2013. Buffalaxed superdiversity: Representations of the other on YouTube. *Diversities* 14(2), 17–33.
- Lorenzo-Dus, Nuria, Pilar Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, and Patricia Bou-Franch. 2011. On-line polylogues and impoliteness: The case of postings sent in response to the Obama Reggaeton YouTube video. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43(10), 2578–2593. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2011.03.005>.
- Manes, Judith. 1983. Compliments: A mirror of cultural values. In: Nessa Wolfson and Elliot Judd (eds.), *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 96–102.
- Marsh, David, Paul 't Hart, and Katrina Tindall. 2010. Celebrity politics: The politics of late modernity? *Political Studies Review* 8(3), 322–340. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-9302.2010.0021.111/j.1478-9302.2010.0021>.
- Migdadi, Fathi, Muuhammad A. Badarneh, and Kawakib Momani. 2010. Divine will and its extensions: Communicative functions of *māša'allāh* in Colloquial Jordanian Arabic. *Communication Monographs* 77(4), 480–499. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2010.502539>.
- Momani, Kawakib, Muuhammad A. Badarneh, and Fathi Migdadi. 2009. Gender metaphors in Middle Eastern politics and the Arab receiver. *Social Semiotics* 19(3), 293–310. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330903072664>.
- Nelson, G. L., Wael E. Bakary, and M. A. Batal. 1993. Egyptian and American compliments: A cross-cultural study. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 17(3): 293–313. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767\(93\)90036-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(93)90036-8).
- Nelson, Gayle, Mahmoud Al-Batal, and Erin Echols. 1996. Arabic and English compliment responses: Potential for pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics* 17(4), 411–432. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/17.4.411>.
- Placencia, Maria Elena. 2019. Qué perfección: Complimenting behaviour among Ecuadorian teenage girls on Instagram. In: Eva Ogiermann and Pilar Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (eds.), *From Speech Acts to Lay Understandings of Politeness: Multilingual*

- and *Multicultural Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 93–116. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108182119.005>.
- Rabab'ah, Ghaleb, and Ali M. Al-Qarni. 2012. Euphemism in Saudi Arabic and British English. *Journal of Pragmatics* 44(6–7), 730–743. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2012.02.008>.
- Sharma, Bal Krishna. 2014. On high horses: Transnational Nepalis and language ideologies on YouTube. *Discourse, Context & Media* 4–5, 19–28. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2014.04.001>.
- Shouby, E. 1951. The influence of the Arabic language on the psychology of the Arabs. *Middle East Journal* 5(3), 284–302. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4322293>.
- Spencer-Oatey, Helen. 2008. Face, (im)politeness and rapport. In: Helen Spencer-Oatey (ed.), *Culturally Speaking: Culture, Communication and Politeness Theory*. London: Continuum, 11–47.
- Thelwall, Mike, Kevan Buckley, and Georgios Paltoglou. 2012. Sentiment strength detection for the social web. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 63(1), 163–173. <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.21662>.
- Tovares, Alla. 2019. Negotiating “thick” identities through “light” practices: YouTube metalinguistic comments about language in Ukraine. *Multilingua* 38(4), 459–484. <https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2018-0038>.
- Traverso, Véronique, and Loubna Dimachki. 2017. “ktîr Tajjibe ce plat! fî garlic?": Compliments and assessments in French and Lebanese dinner talk. *Intercultural Pragmatics* 14(2), 137–163. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ip-2017-0008>.
- Wardhaugh, Ronald. 2006. *Sociolinguistics*. Victoria: Blackwell Publishing.
- White, Lisa J. (2021). *Rooted in the Body: Arabic Metaphor and Morphology*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2ks6wzm>.
- Wolfson, Nessa. 1983. An empirically based analysis of complimenting behavior in American English. In: Nessa Wolfson and Elliot Judd (eds.), *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 82–95.
- Yusof, Siti Yuhaida Anniqah Modh, and Tan Bee Hoon. 2014. Compliments and compliment responses on Twitter among male and female celebrities. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 22(8), 75–96.

Biographical Note

Nafila Alshahrani is a PhD candidate in Linguistics and Applied Language Studies (LALS) at the University of South Florida. She is also a lecturer in the English Department at the University College in Al-Darb, Jazan University, Saudi Arabia. Her research interests include intercultural pragmatics and digital discourse analysis.

Camilla Vásquez is a Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of South Florida, where she teaches in the Linguistics and Applied Language Studies (LALS) doctoral program. Her research interests include topics related to pragmatics and sociolinguistics in digital discourse.