Bailey Street remarks to women in five countries and four languages: Impositions of engagement and intimacy

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Abstract
In this paper I analyze the remarks men make to passing young women on the street in 134 naturally occurring encounters that were video recorded in 2013 and 2014 across five countries and four languages and posted on the internet. I categorize these remarks in terms of the speech acts they contain, showing the most common acts, in descending order of frequency, to be addressing, greeting, expressing astonishment or admiration, summoning, and asking rhetorical questions. In immediate interactional terms, the great majority of the men’s actions are thus oriented to constituting what Goffman (1963) called a ‘focused interaction’, a face-to-face engagement with a common focus of attention. The very ordinariness of these acts in terms of content and surface meaning – they are not vulgar or explicitly threatening – may explain why defenders of street remarks regularly draw attention to seemingly benign referential or speech act content, e.g., ‘He was just saying “Hi”’ or ‘He was just giving her a compliment’. At another level, however, street remarks impose intimacy on passing strangers, thus flouting the normative conventions for interaction through which we manage social and personal risk and establish trust. Women targeted by street remarks treat them as breaches by not responding to them. The very ordinariness of the language in the street remarks documented, along with the relative difficulty of articulating the implicit social conventions that they breach, may veil their harm and indirectly contribute to the perpetuation of male domination of women in public spaces.

Keywords: STREET REMARKS, CATCALLS, STREET HARASSMENT, SPEECH ACTS, CROSS-CULTURAL, PIROPoS, PERU, COLOMBIA, UNITED STATES, ITALY, EGYPT

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1 Introduction

In this paper I examine the things men say to passing young women on the street in 134 naturally occurring encounters that were video recorded in 2013 and 2014 and posted on the internet. In each of seven contexts, a woman (or in one case, a male impersonating a female) carried microphones that recorded what was said to her by men she encountered while a nearby confederate videotaped the encounters. These videos were recorded in Lima, Peru; Barranquilla, Colombia; New York, USA (two sets of recordings); Italy; and Cairo, Egypt (two sets of recordings). In each of these seven cases, an edited compilation video of the female target’s encounters with men was posted on the internet.

I use the term ‘street remarks’, borrowed from Gardner (1980), to refer to the things men say to passing women. This term is general enough to encompass the wide range of things that men say in this corpus and it is relatively neutral, avoiding the evaluation inherent in terms such as ‘street harassment’, which impose an interpretation a priori on anything that is said by a man to a woman. I also choose not to use the term *piropo* (‘flattering, sexually-oriented compliments’ in Spanish-speaking contexts), except in a technical sense to describe a small subset (6 instances) of these 134 encounters. The term *piropo* has a wide range of interpretations – from desirable flattering compliments to street harassment – and can thus not only impose a priori interpretations, but can also be highly ambiguous.

The men who make remarks in these recordings and the women who are their targets are of reproductive age. Based on the often intimate and sometimes sexual language of the remarks, one might assume their function to be a utilitarian one for achieving a sexual encounter. This may be the logic of ‘pick up lines’ or ‘come-ons’ in places where single people of reproductive age gather, e.g., in singles bars in the United States. These street remarks, however, are done anonymously in passing and do not lead to a romantic engagement – the female does not respond.

I thus approach street remarks not as a means to achieving a sexual encounter, but rather as an end in themselves: actions that, in and of themselves, enact male fantasies. When a man addresses a passing female stranger, Hi, beautiful, he is enacting a context and relationship that exists elsewhere in society – a man addressing his lover with a term of endearment – and constituting that world in the passing moment of a fleeting encounter. The speaker exploits the power of language to not just comment on a pre-existing world but to perform and constitute social reality (Austin, 1962; Giddens, 1984; Duranti, 1997). These imposed fantasies of intimacy are couched in seemingly mundane acts such as greeting, summoning, or using affectionate terms of address.
In immediate interactional terms, the great majority of the men’s actions are oriented to constituting what Goffman (1963:24) called a ‘focused interaction’, in which people are not merely co-present but ‘the kind of interaction that occurs when persons gather close together and openly cooperate to sustain a single focus of attention, typically by taking turns at talk’. Such actions documented in this corpus, in declining order of frequency, are (1) using a term of address, (2) greeting, (3) expressing astonishment or admiration, (4) summoning, and (5) asking rhetorical questions. These acts occur 158 times in the 134 encounters recorded. While street remarks are sometimes associated with men’s objectification of women, there were only 41 explicit evaluations of women’s appearance in this corpus, most frequently in the form of an ostensibly complimentary term of address, e.g., Hi, beautiful and usually with the adjective ‘beautiful’ (28 occurrences) or ‘sexy’ (or equivalents in Spanish, Arabic, and Italian). There were only two comments that referred to specific body parts of the target female. From the perspective of face-to-face interaction, the men are doing considerable work to capture the attention of passing females and engage, however briefly, with them (cf. Duneier and Carter, 1999 on ‘entanglement’).

Despite their mundane literal meanings, the street remarks in this corpus transgress the conventional ‘ground rules’ of Goffman’s interaction order (1983), the ground rules that allow us to manage personal and social risk. Men take advantage of this interactional machinery of conversation, such as the normative pressure to respond to a greeting or question, to try to force women into engagement. Goffman argued (1967:46) that, ‘the person in our urban secular world is allotted a kind of sacredness that is displayed and confirmed by symbolic acts’. Street remarks deny women this protected, sacred status as persons. The regular silence of women in response to street remarks serves as evidence that such remarks, no matter how non-threatening in terms of literal meanings, are being treated as outside of norms of civil interaction.

The combination of mundane explicit content and transgressive interactional practices in these street remarks helps solve a persistent puzzle: the widely varying ways in which street remarks are interpreted, condemned, and defended. On the one hand, women often experience street remarks as threatening invasions, and feminist scholars emphasize their role in enacting and reproducing patriarchy (e.g., Bowman, 1993; Tuerkheimer, 1997), even putting them on a continuum with rape:

street harassment is not a product of a sexually terroristic culture, but an active factor in creating such a culture. An environment of fear and sexual terrorism is produced by, in part, street harassment that frightens women and reinforces fears of rape and other acts of terrorism. (Kissling, 1991:456)
At the same time, others, often men, question how greetings or compliments constitute harassment. Thousands of comments posted online in response to the YouTube video ‘10 Hours of Walking in NYC [New York City] as a Woman’, for example, enumerate specific street remarks made to the woman in the video, such as How are you doing, today?, God bless you, and Have a nice evening and conclude that the targeted woman in the video is being complimented or well-treated. This discrepancy in interpretation can be at least partly explained by discrepancies between (a) the conventional meanings of the words and acts in street remarks, and (b) their flouting of the conventional ground rules of interaction through which we establish trust (Garfinkel, 1963:238). The conventional meanings of greetings or compliments are positive when they follow the ground rules of interaction, i.e., they display respect for the symbolic value of self and other. Such mundane acts, however, can be threatening or an imposition when they breach social norms, e.g., when directed to a woman by a strange man on the street. While it is easy to point to the innocuous referential content of many street remarks, we lack a commonsense vocabulary to describe their precise transgression, outside of the abstractions of Goffman’s interaction order or the ‘the esoterica of conversation analysis’ (Duneier and Molotch, 1999:1288).

The lack of verbal response to street remarks creates an interpretive difficulty for their analysis. Scholars typically rely on after-the-fact, reported interpretations of the remark by the target, elicited evaluations from native informants, or the analyst’s own commonsense interpretations. As described above, interpretations can vary widely, with the very same utterances interpreted in quite different ways, e.g., as a flattering compliment or as a form of sexual harassment. I partially address this difficulty by providing a relatively close-to-the-ground descriptive account of what men ‘do’ in these encounters, in terms of speech acts and conversational sequences.

I use the term speech act to refer to verbal actions, such as ‘addressing’, ‘greeting’, or ‘complimenting’ that have a conventional use and related meanings in everyday interaction (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). The concept of speech act is typically of limited value for analysis of naturally occurring interaction – it comes from a tradition in which philosophers use their intuitions to think about isolated individual utterances rather than actual, recorded interactions – but it is a particularly fitting and useful concept for the analysis of street remarks because the majority of street remarks are individual utterances. In virtually the entire corpus analyzed in this paper – and in ethnographic descriptions in the literature – females do not respond verbally to such remarks. The only verbal content to analyze is the man’s utterance.
Despite the lack of back-and-forth talk in these encounters, the majority of the things men say and do only make sense in terms of implied conversational sequences. I therefore also use terminology and concepts from conversation analysis such as *adjacency pair* to make sense of the street remarks that were recorded. As discussed in the analysis section, below, a number of seemingly disparate speech acts by the men – greetings, using address terms, exclamations, and asking questions – all serve as conventional first-pair-parts of adjacency pairs that make relevant a response from the female, putting pressure on her to engage with the man. The female’s *lack* of response to these first-pair-parts, whether greetings, summonses, or questions, suggests a refusal on the part of the women to engage in the activity that the man initiates. As described by Dueneier and Molotch (1999), this puts women in the uncomfortable position of being ‘rude’ in terms of expected patterns of interaction, in which there is enormous normative pressure to respond verbally and cooperatively to first-pair parts, such as greetings. It is precisely this *non-response* to men’s street remarks that serves as empirical evidence that women are treating men’s remarks as breaches of the interaction order.

### 2 Data and methods

The use of electronically recorded street remarks as a data set in this paper distinguishes it from the vast majority of scholarly work on street remarks from men to women, which has relied on self-reported instances based on memory. While self-report from memory may capture the gist of what was said in a remark, it is highly unlikely to represent accurately the details of such remarks, especially when they are recalled at a later time. As noted by Duranti (1997:134), ‘Social scientists have shown again and again that memory is extremely selective and shaped by the future as much as by the past. Even the most skilled observers may miss or misinterpret what might turn out to be important properties of an exchange’. Using recordings, in contrast, allows the analyst to listen repeatedly and transcribe, achieving a more accurate representation of the remarks, and one that other scholars can scrutinize and compare to the original electronic recordings. Using recordings is particularly useful for capturing mundane details of interactions that we often take for granted and that are likely to be lost in recalled versions of street remarks.
Starting from a recorded corpus as the basis of analysis forces the analyst to address a naturally occurring range of encounters, rather than eliciting examples that fit a particular analytical or political end. Men say a range of things in these encounters that do not fit into a single category in terms of content features or immediate communicative import. Their remarks range from single syllable response cries, e.g., *Wow* [NYC], to much more elaborate comments, e.g.: 

¡Mira eso! ¿Por qué saliste de Cartagena? ¿Te escapaste del reinado?  
(‘Look at that. Why did you leave Cartagena [site of the Miss Colombia beauty pageant]? Did you escape from the beauty pageant?’ [Barranquilla])

They include a few comments that are explicitly vulgar, e.g., *I lick pussy* [NYC] and *Me la cacho* (‘I’ll fuck her’ [Lima]) but many comments that are typical of relatively formal, polite ways of speaking, e.g., *How are you this morning?* and *Have a nice evening* [NYC]. They can include questions, commands, blessings, and professions of love. An account or explanation of what men say to passing women must take into account wide variation in content and immediate illocutionary force of the utterance.

The street remarks analyzed in this article come from seven different compilation videos posted on the internet (see Table 1). They were the only videos I found in hours of searching that included at least ten encounters with remarks made by men. The videos are edited compilations from hours-long videos made of women (and in one case, in Cairo, a man impersonating a woman) who carried microphones and were videotaped as they walked through city streets. All but one of these recording projects were inspired by the video ‘10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman’, which was published on YouTube on October 28, 2014. Aspiring actress Shoshanna Roberts walked through various neighbourhoods of New York City for 10 hours carrying a microphone in each hand while she was being video recorded by Robert Bliss, who ran a small video marketing agency. He had been commissioned by Hollaback, a non-profit dedicated to combatting street harassment, to record a video. Text on the screen at the end of the video states that there were over a hundred instances of verbal harassment during this 10-hour period. Eighteen encounters are included in the edited, 1 minute 56 second compilation video that was posted. The posted video went viral with over 1 million views in 24 hours and, as of July 2015, had been viewed over 40 million times. This initial video inspired others to make similar videos in various locations around the world. Five of the six other videos included here were recorded within weeks of this one and make explicit reference to this initial video as inspiration.
The second video from NYC was entitled ‘10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman in Hijab’. It was made by Karim Metwaly of YouTube channel AreWeFamousNow and published on YouTube on November 6, 2014. In this video, a young woman walks through the streets of NYC for five hours. In the edited 1 minute 35 second compilation, there are 11 encounters with street remarks. There is an additional video segment of the same woman walking through New York City wearing *hijab* (modest Muslim clothing), but that segment is not included here, as it did not include any street remarks.

In Rome, 26-year-old Rachele Brancatisano spent 10 hours walking through various neighbourhoods. The video was posted on November 4, 2014 to Youmedia.fanpage.it. Text at the end of the video claims there were more than a hundred instances of remarks, whistles, and overtures. During the edited 2 minute 23 second edited compilation, there are 27 encounters.

The video from Baranquilla was made by *El Heraldo* newspaper in Barranquilla, Colombia with a female volunteer and posted to YouTube on November 9, 2014. The newspaper claims that the volunteer female was subjected to 31 harassing acts in 2 hours. Fifteen encounters appear in the one minute 37 second long edited segment posted online.

In Lima, journalist Stephanie Bravo emulated the original 10 hours in New York video, walking through the streets of various neighbourhoods. Excerpts of the video were posted on YouTube on November 1, 2014 and shown on the *Panamericana Televisión* show *Al sexto día* on November 2, 2014, and posted to the television network’s website. In the 6.5 minute edited compilation, there were 35 encounters.

The first Cairo video, from Spring 2013, a joint production of ONTV and Belail Productions (Cairo-based group of activists and filmmakers), predates the ‘10 hours of walking in NYC as a female’ video. For this video, male actor Waleed Hammad was made up and dressed as a female before walking through the streets of Cairo. The makers of the video argued that using a male dressed as a female would get the attention of male Egyptians and make them think about street harassment in a new way. The two minutes of video clips analyzed here, which were part of a 90-minute TV show, include ten verbal encounters.

The second Cairo video, ‘Four hours of walking in Cairo, Egypt as a woman’ was produced by media company Dot Masr and posted by December 4, 2014 to YouTube. Text in the video states that the female target was verbally harassed by men 76 times in four hours. Eighteen of these encounters are documented in the two-minute compilation video posted.
Although these videos provide an empirical record of street remarks, they do not represent a random or systematic sample of them. The video makers chose particular target females, particular neighbourhoods, and particular times of day to record, and the encounters in the posted videos represent only a selected subset of the encounters that they did record. Video makers were explicit about two pressures, or biases, in the selection of recorded encounters for the edited compilations: audio and visual production values and the desire to affect and educate viewers. Robert Bliss, who made the ‘10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman’, for example, noted that he edited out instances in which the male speaker was off-camera or the audio was of poor quality because of sirens or other background noise. Such selection processes may explain the relatively good video and audio quality in all of the edited compilations, which display a clear, focused frame of the target female and many of the male speakers.

It is less clear how the stated desire of the video makers to educate the public about street harassment affected the selection of videos for the compilations. This might lead to overrepresentation of the most harassing (e.g., vulgar, insulting, or threatening) remarks, but there were actually very few such remarks in the entire corpus. Only eight of the 134 communicative acts, for example, included explicitly vulgar words. An implicit selective pressure was the desire to attract as much attention and audience as possible. This might lead to over-representation of surprising, colourful, or creative street remarks. Despite this possible selection pressure, the most frequent remarks in the edited compilations are very mundane, e.g., What’s up, beautiful [NYC] and Ciao, bella (‘Hi, beautiful’ [Rome]), and only a relatively small number might be considered more creative or memorable.

All of the videos included subtitles of what was said in the encounters and some had occasional explanatory comments in subtitles. A native speaker of Peruvian Spanish was consulted for transcription and translation of some of the encounters from Lima, and a native speaker of Egyptian Arabic transcribed, translated, and transliterated the encounters from Cairo. The author did the other translations from Spanish and Italian.

Each encounter was analyzed into constituent speech acts and conversational moves. Thus, What’s up, beautiful? was coded as including a greeting (‘What’s up’) and a term of address (‘beautiful’). In the encounter, Dayum [damn], mami. God bless, there are three constituents: an expression of admiration or surprise (‘Dayum’), akin to Goffman’s (1978) ‘response cry’, a term of address (mami ‘baby’), and a blessing (‘God bless’). Some of these categories are further subdivided in the analysis below, e.g., terms of address are further categorized into neutral honorific ones (miss and señorita),
conventional *non-adjectival terms of endearment* (*girl*, *amore* ‘dear’ [Rome], *gasal* ‘honey’ [Cairo]), and *adjectival terms of endearment*, in which an adjective is used as a term of address (e.g., *beautiful* and *bella*). The speech acts were also described in terms of the conversational sequences they imply. The utterance ‘What’s up’, for example, a first-pair-part of a greeting sequence, makes relevant a return greeting from the other party, compliments make relevant compliment responses, and questions make relevant answers.

### 3 Analysis

In this section I describe the speech acts and conversational moves in the street remarks directed at women in this corpus. By generating a close-to-the-ground account of what men are doing with their words in an empirical corpus, I hope to (a) counter the common notion that the literal content of street remarks is what makes them offensive, and (b) suggest that street remarks are attempts to engage women in ways that violate the ground rules of civil interaction.

The seven things that men do most frequently in these encounters with women are, in declining order of frequency:

- address them with a term of address (53),
- greet them (and, in a few cases, say good-bye) (40),
- express astonishment (ostensibly at the female’s beauty) or admiration (27),
- summon or call for their attention (e.g., *hey*) (20),
- compliment them (18),
- ask rhetorical questions (16), and
- make indirect comments that might flatter the woman (e.g., *piropos*) (13).

In the first section, below, I address those acts – addressing with a term of address, greeting, expressing astonishment, summoning, and asking rhetorical questions – that serve as attempts to engage the target female and create an encounter of mutual engagement. In the second section, I address two types of compliments – explicit ones and more indirect, metaphorical ones – that represent a special way to attempt to create engagement.
### Table 1. Summary of encounters and acts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video source of encounter</th>
<th>Number of encounters</th>
<th>Non-adjectival term of endearment</th>
<th>Adjectival term of endearment</th>
<th>Greeting</th>
<th>Expression of astonishment or admiration</th>
<th>Summons</th>
<th>Rhetorical question</th>
<th>Direct compliment</th>
<th>Indirect compliment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 hours NYC (New York City)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hijab NYC</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rome (Italy)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barranquilla (Colombia)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lima (Peru)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cairo (Egypt), ONT (male as female)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cairo, Dot Masr</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.1 Acts of engagement

The most common thing that men did was to **address the woman with a vocative form or term of address**. Forty-nine of these 53 instances of address terms were terms of endearment. A relatively small number (4) of these address forms were of the neutral, honorific type on which scholarly works on terms of address have focused (e.g., Braun, 1988). These include **Miss** in NYC and **Señorita** (‘Miss’) in Lima.

Of the 49 terms of endearment, 27 were conventional terms of endearment, such as (English) **girl**, **baby**, **darling**; (Spanish) **mami** (‘baby’), **mi amor** (‘dear/my love’), **muñeca** (‘doll’), **amiga** (‘[female] friend’); (Italian) **amore** (‘dear/my love’); and (Arabic) **gāsāl** (‘honey’) and **gassuulā** (‘sweetie’). The other 22 of these terms of endearment were of a type I call **vocative adjectives**, which
are adjectives used to address the woman. Thus, in Hi, beautiful and What’s up, gorgeous? adjectives that refer to positive attributes of the addressee are used to address and identify her. These vocative adjectives were particularly evident in the New York City data (five instances of beautiful, gorgeous, or good looking) and in the Rome data, in which there were six instances of bella (‘beautiful’) and one of bellisima (‘most beautiful’) being used as address forms. Vocative adjectives, unlike many traditional terms of endearment such as baby, are very close in form and meaning to the prototypical compliment form YOU + BE + ADJECTIVE (Manes and Wolfson, 1981). In other words, addressing a woman, ‘Hi, beautiful’ is close in form and meaning to, ‘Hi, you are beautiful’, while addressing a woman as ‘baby’ or ‘girl’ does not imply a closely related adjective-based compliment.

Terms of address have several functions in these utterances. As vocatives, they constitute an addressee out of a person who is otherwise just passing by and may help constitute a focused gathering. They may help individuals who hear the vocative to understand whether or not they are the targeted addressee from among a larger group of passersby. Only women, for example, might see themselves as the referent of girl or linda amiga (‘pretty female friend’ [Lima]).

Forty-nine of the 53 terms of address were terms of endearment, suggesting functions beyond the mere constitution of an addressee. If the function were merely to constitute an address, such common terms of address as ‘Miss’, ‘Ma’am’, or ‘Lady’ and their equivalents would be expected to occur in a higher proportion than they do here. Terms of endearment are used to address a person – typically a lover, family member, or close friend – for whom one feels love or affection. Their use here, where the speaker does not know the addressee, is thus marked – the form does not reflect the context or circumstances. Addressing a woman as baby, darling, or mi amor (‘my love’) is a metaphorical act that compares the addressee to a lover or intimate of the speaker. Language is performative, or constitutive, and these metaphorical terms of endearment bring some element of an intimate relationship to this passing encounter. Using a term of endearment to address a passing female stranger is thus an attempt to conjure and impose a fleeting moment of heterosexual intimacy.

In addition to connoting intimacy, terms of endearment can also connote a social hierarchy between speaker and addressee, particularly when their use is non-reciprocal and when it is between non-intimates. In an empirical study of terms of address in US service encounters, Wolfson and Manes (1979:19) found that service personnel switched from more formal terms of address such as ‘ma’am’ to terms of endearment such as ‘dear’ and ‘hon[ey]’ when customers
showed themselves to be less than fully competent in the interaction. They also found that terms of endearment were not used reciprocally in interactions between strangers. This contrasts with their reciprocal use among intimates, such as lovers. The non-reciprocal use, however, parallels the use between adults and children: while parents or other adults may refer to children with terms of endearment, the children may not use such terms back to their parents. This use is not so much a question of age, however, but of power. Hewison (1995:80), for example, has documented the use of terms of endearment by nurses to elderly patients, reflecting not just a caring, parent-child like relationship but also one of hierarchy.

When a non-intimate is addressed with a term of endearment, it suggests that the addressee is subordinate to the speaker. This is part of the larger pattern described by Brown and Gilman (1960), in which linguistic forms of address that are used reciprocally by intimates are also used by superiors to subordinates in a non-reciprocal pattern. Addressing unacquainted women with a term of endearment is a metaphorical act: it attempts to constitute a fleeing heterosexual romantic intimacy that does not exist and it attempts an enactment of power over women.

The second most common speech act in these recordings was greetings. Anthropologists and sociologists interested in social interaction have long emphasized the social, phatic functions of greetings (Malinowski, 1923; Goffman, 1967; Firth, 1972; Duranti, 1992). Firth (1972:1), for example, describes their function as ‘the recognition of an encounter with another person as socially acceptable’. Speech act theorists Searle and Vanderveken (1985:215–216) classify greetings as an ‘expressive’ speech act aimed at ‘a courteous indication of recognition, with the presupposition that the speaker has just encountered the hearer. Greetings are about creating an encounter, a period of sustained, interpersonal, joint attention.

The greetings recorded were conventional ones and similar across contexts. In the English greetings in New York City, these included Hi, Hello, Good morning, and such greeting substitutes (Sacks 1975:68) as What’s up? and How are you doing?. In Barranquilla and Lima in Spanish, they included Hola (‘Hi, Hello’) and Buenos días (‘Good morning’). In Rome, women were greeted in Italian with Ciao (‘Hi, Hello’), Come stai? (‘How are you?’), and Buongiorno (‘Good morning’) and in English with Hello and How are you?. Greetings in Cairo included Eh ya (‘Hi/What’s up?’).

In the videos, there is no verbal response by the women to these greetings. The women may have been instructed not to respond, and the video ‘10 Hours of Walking as a Woman in NYC’ may have established a convention for the five subsequent videos in which the recorded female stared straight ahead and did
not respond to remarks made to her. This non-response to street remarks, however, also matches the conventional and prescribed response to street remarks that has been widely documented and reported ethnographically (e.g. Gardner, 1995; Duneier and Carter, 1999). Greetings are a paradigmatic example of utterances that occur in adjacency pairs, in which a first greeting receives a return greeting (Schegloff, 1968). These greetings without responses thus count as highly marked. These greetings are also marked in that they are initiated toward strangers in urban areas. In these videos, there are hundreds of instances of passersby appearing in the frame who do not greet each other. In cities, people do not typically greet the hundreds or thousands of unacquainted passersby whom they encounter as they walk.

There were 27 instances of exclamations of astonishment or admiration. These included Arabic ʕisturha ya rabb (‘Oh my god’), and Yaaaaah muʃanmad (‘Whoa, Jesus’ [literally ‘Mohammed’]) Eeehy! and Uhy! in Rome, Damn! (and variant DAY-um) and Wow! in NYC, and ¡mierda! (‘shit’), ¡uy! (‘wow’), ¡Dios mio! (‘My God’) and ¡asu mare! (‘Oh my God’) in Lima. These exclamations can include words with referential value such as ‘Damn’ or expressions such as ‘Wow’ with no referential value. In either case, their primary functions are not reference but interactional. In the context of street remarks directed to women, the exclamation is ostensibly one of surprise or admiration regarding the woman’s beauty.

Goffman (1978:800) argues that the popular, conventional interpretation of such cries is that they are ‘a natural overflowing, a flooding of previously contained feeling, a bursting of normal restraints’. This popular interpretation of such exclamations as involuntary expressions of overflowing feeling may serve men who wish to engage with passing women in two related ways: (1) if exclamations are seen as natural, they are less likely to be seen as ploys, reflecting negatively on the man, and (2) if the exclamation is seen as natural, the admiration implied by the exclamation can more easily be interpreted as sincere and therefore flattering.

There were 20 instances of summons in these recordings. A summons is an attention-getting device (Schegloff, 1968:1080). It is explicitly designed to transform mere co-presence of people into a situation with common orientation. Summonses in these recordings include hey (6 instances), yo, and excuse me [NYC], oye (‘listen’), and a ver, a ver [‘Hey’] Lima], ya (‘hey’) and pssst [Cairo], and ehy, scusi (‘Excuse me’), and scusa (‘Excuse me [Rome]). Conversation analysts note that a summons is a first-pair-part, which entails a second-pair-part response, such as ‘Yes?’, ‘What?’, ‘Uh huh?’ or the directing of the eyes or body toward the beckoner (Schegloff, 1968:1080). In the recorded
interactions, the women targeted by remarks did not respond verbally to these summonses or engage in focused interactions. Minor nonverbal responses – e.g., a shift in eye gaze direction – were not easily discernible in the videos.

A final communicative act related to seeking or maintaining engagement was the posing of rhetorical questions, which occurred 16 times. Rhetorical questions are made with little expectation of an answer, but rather to persuade or achieve an effect. In this case, questions were asked in order to engage the female target and prolong the (one-sided) interaction; to express the male’s romantic or sexual desires; and, in a few cases, to reproach the female for her lack of engagement. Many of the questions would not be rhetorical questions under other circumstances. For example, ¿Por qué te vas? (‘Why are you going?’ [Lima]), might be asked of a person prematurely leaving a gathering of some sort. In this case, however, it was directed at an unacquainted, passing female by a young man on a bench, and it was treated by the speaker and passing female as rhetorical. When a parent asks a child, Manco un abbraccio? (‘Not even a hug?’ [Rome]), the child will likely treat it as a legitimate question or request, but when a man asks this of a passing female stranger, she is less likely to treat it as a question that needs to be answered.

Many of the rhetorical questions are a means to express romantic interest. The woman in Rome was addressed in English (by non-native speakers) three times: Single in Rome?, Are you married?, and (sung lyrics to a Lionel Ritchie pop song) Hello, is it me you’re looking for?. At least some of these speakers were not native speakers of Italian. Perhaps the most direct question of this type, not accompanied by any other utterance, was Wanna play? (i.e., ‘Do you want to have sex?’ [NYC]). All of these are conventional ways of expressing romantic interest and trying to assess a person’s possible romantic availability in situations where contact and engagement are already occurring. In this case, these expressions impose a fantasy intimacy. In not responding, the female targets are refusing to participate in this imposed, male fantasy, and they are treating the remark as a form of behaviour that does not adhere to implicit rules for civil engagement.

While terms of address, greetings, exclamations of admiration or astonishment, summonses, and rhetorical questions differ in form and details of immediate function, they overlap in that each represents an attempt to engage a passing female, however briefly, in a focused gathering, an interaction characterized by joint mutual attention. The fact that the women commonly do not respond suggests that they are rejecting the fantasy of intimacy that the men attempt to impose through their remarks. In ignoring men’s first-pair parts, women defy enormous normative pressure; they choose a ‘technical rudeness’ (Duneier and
Molotch, 1999:1276) at the level of conversational sequences over submitting to the imposed fantasy. Women are treating the street remarks as breaches (Garfinkel, 1963) in the interaction order and treating the men who are making them as beyond the social trust that is a foundation for social interaction.

4 Compliments

Two of the speech acts discussed above – addressing someone with a term of endearment adjective such as ‘beautiful’ and exclamations of astonishment and admiration – have clear complimentary force. Holmes (1988:446) describes a compliment as a speech act that ‘explicitly or implicitly attributes credit…usually to the person addressed, for some “good” (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer’. While the first-order function of using a term of address is to pick out a person and constitute an interaction, a second function of such terms of address as ‘beautiful’ is to compliment the addressee, beauty being a characteristic positively valued. Similarly, while an exclamation of astonishment most immediately claims attention of others, it can also communicate admiration and a positive valuing of a person.

In addition to complimentary terms of address and acts with a secondary function of complimenting, there were also 18 explicit compliments in these 134 encounters. Fifteen of these eighteen compliments contained adjectives, e.g., *Mami, estás bella* (‘Baby, you’re beautiful’). Five of the compliments consisted simply of adjectival characterizations, with an implied subject (‘you’) and verb (‘to be’). In Spanish, such compliments included *¡Que rico!* (‘How hot’), *¡Que linda!* (‘How pretty’), and *¡Linda!* (‘Pretty!’); in English, *Nice*, in Italian *Che bello* (‘How pretty!’) and in Arabic *Gamiila sawy* (‘Very beautiful’).

The adjectives used in compliments and adjectival terms of address in these data were strikingly narrow and formulaic (cf. Manes and Wolfson, 1981). Of the 38 adjectives used, 28 were terms that mean ‘beautiful’: *bella* and variants in Italian, *beautiful, good-looking, and gorgeous* in English, *gamiila* in Arabic, and *linda*, *preciosa*, *hermosa*, *bonita*, and *bella* in Spanish. Seven of the remaining adjectives were words for ‘sexy’. Thus 35 of the 38 adjectives were forms of ‘beautiful’ or ‘sexy’. The highly formulaic nature of these compliments is at odds with what some scholars (e.g., Beinhauer, 1934; Achugar, 2001; Bailey, 2017) have noted as defining features of Spanish *piropos* – their creative and spontaneous qualities.
Finally, explicit compliments, like the speech acts outlined in the previous sections of this analysis, serve as first-pair-parts of adjacency pairs, inviting engagement. Compliments, as ostensible verbal gifts, are followed by a response that acknowledges the compliment (Herbert, 1990:202). As verbal gifts, they can be seen as obligating the recipient. In New York City, one man specifically commented on the target’s lack of response to what he saw as his compliment to her: Someone’s acknowledging you for being beautiful. You should say ‘Thank you’. By not responding to compliments from passing males, a targeted female rejects not the literal meaning of the compliment, but the attempted intimacy of it and its violation of the interaction order through which we manage social and personal risk.

5 Indirect compliments and piropos

In this section, I briefly describe 13 utterances in this corpus that differ from the explicit compliments described above in that they were very indirect or poetic in the way that they attempted to flatter the target female. Specifically, six of the total of 28 remarks documented in Cairo were highly indirect, and five of the 50 encounters from Lima and Baranquilla were poetic piropo-style remarks, as was one of the 27 remarks in Rome.

By American standards, six remarks in the recordings from Cairo were highly indirect in their propositional content – commensurate with research suggesting a relatively high degree of indirection in Egyptian Arabic communication style more generally (Feghali, 1997; Nelson, Al Batal, and El Bakary, 2002) – but they were immediately interpretable by a native Cairo consultant. Several of them rely on the notion of the male’s pain, caused by his encountering the beauty of the target female, e.g., Ilwagaӝ (‘Oh, the pain!’) and ṣharga ӝeeb wallahy (‘I swear this is rude [to be so beautiful and thereby inflict pain on me]’). One of them displayed verbal artistry by combining the conventional opening to Muslim prayers – an address to God, ʕilahy (‘Oh, God’) with a very earthly request – that the target female stumble as she walks: ʕilahy tuʕaӝy (‘Oh God, I hope you stumble.’). The female causes the speaker so much pain through her beauty that he wants her to feel pain, too. Two of the comments were tailored to characteristics of the female target. One male stated, Wallaahi-Igazǐim ʕeshta (‘I swear this is cream.’). The ‘cream’ in this case refers to the fair skin of the target female, a trait considered synonymous with beauty in Egypt. This was an indirect way of saying, ‘You are beautiful’. Another man stated, Anoot ʃyl ʃimaar ilmuxatʄat (‘I love [literally, “die for”] zebras’). In this case, the target female was wearing a sweater with black and white stripes, and he was metaphorically identifying her as
what he loved. This indirect statement contrasts sharply in style with the direct form used by one man in New York, I love you, but it has the same underlying meaning.

Five remarks in the 50 encounters from Barranquilla and Lima were conventional piropos. These remarks used stylistic elements associated with poetry, such as metaphor, indirect language, irony (through hyperbole), parallel structure, alliteration, or rhythm. They compliment or flatter a women in a way that is not explicitly sexual.

In Barranquilla, there were three such remarks. In the first one, the speaker suggests that the target female is so attractive to him that nothing else matters if he could be with her:

¡Si así fuera el cáncer que me diera rapidito!
(‘If cancer is like this, give it to me now!’)

In the second one, the speaker implies the target female is beautiful by feigning surprise at seeing her and then addressing her as if she were a contestant in the Miss Colombia beauty pageant, which was taking place at the time in Cartagena:

¡Mira eso! ¿Por qué saliste de Cartagena? ¿Te escapaste del reinado?
(‘Look at that. Why did you leave Cartagena? Did you escape from the beauty pageant?’)

In the third, the speaker elevates the target woman by offering to do all the low-status housework in place of her, even using the metaphor of himself as her slave, ostensibly because he finds her so attractive:

Yo te lavo, te plancho, te cocino, mi amor, soy tu esclavo, te lavo todo.
(‘I’ll wash for you, I’ll iron, I’ll cook, my love, I’m your slave, I’ll wash everything for you.’)

In the recordings from Lima, there were two indirect, poetic compliments. In the first remark, the speaker uses the metaphor of the target female as an angel to suggest her positive qualities:

Los ángeles han bajado.
(‘The angels have descended [from Heaven].’)

In the second one, the speaker implies the target female is beautiful by feigning surprise at seeing her and then addressing her as if she were a contestant in the Miss Colombia beauty pageant, which was taking place at the time in Cartagena:

¡Mira eso! ¿Por qué saliste de Cartagena? ¿Te escapaste del reinado?
(‘Look at that. Why did you leave Cartagena? Did you escape from the beauty pageant?’)

In the third, the speaker elevates the target woman by offering to do all the low-status housework in place of her, even using the metaphor of himself as her slave, ostensibly because he finds her so attractive:

Yo te lavo, te plancho, te cocino, mi amor, soy tu esclavo, te lavo todo.
(‘I’ll wash for you, I’ll iron, I’ll cook, my love, I’m your slave, I’ll wash everything for you.’)
In the second one, the speaker suggests that the female target is so attractive that he will marry her without worry or regard as to what kind of marriage ceremony they have or her religious orientation:

Me caso con ella, civil, católico, apostólico.

(‘I’ll marry her [whether] civil ceremony, catholic, apostolic.’)

Although creativity and spontaneity may be valued in piropos, only one of the piropos among these five – making reference to the concurrent beauty pageant in Cartagena – was customized to the context, and even that one was conventional in comparing the target to a beauty pageant contestant.

In Rome, there was one poetic, flattering remark:

Ma gli angeli non volano?

(‘But don’t angels fly?’)

In this remark, the speaker feigns confusion that the target female is walking, rather than flying, as do the angels to which he metaphorically compares her. This is virtually identical to a widely documented piropo in the Spanish speaking world.

6 Conclusions

In their street remarks to passing women, men enact fantasies of engagement and intimacy. Through greetings, intimate address terms, summonses, and other conversational moves they seek to catch the attention of a passing woman and achieve a moment of engaged, focused interaction. Fewer than ten of the things men said in this corpus were explicitly vulgar or degrading; the vast majority were mundane and many were complimentary. Men use terms of endearment such as ‘beautiful’ and mi amor (‘my love/dear’) to compliment the addressee as beautiful or sexy, and in one case even profess, ‘I love you’. Such terms and acts are associated with relationships of intimacy rather than anonymous public encounters. By using such language to a stranger in passing, men exploit the constitutive power of language to create a fleeting, one-sided moment of heterosexual intimacy. While there may be a thrill in fantasizing about a romantic or sexual relationship with a passing stranger, there may also be a thrill in simply performing one side of that relationship, however transiently.
Women regularly reject street remarks by ignoring them. It is not the literal content of the words, which can be complimentary, or the surface acts, such as greeting, that leads women to ignore them. Rather it is their violations of the interaction order, the ground rules of face-to-face interaction that moderate social and personal risk. In flouting implicit rules of civility – e.g., ‘Don’t address strangers as if they were intimates’ – men making street remarks show themselves to be untrustworthy as interlocutors. This breach is significant enough that women are willing to defy normative pressure to respond to first-pair parts with second-pair parts, i.e., they do not return greetings, answer questions, or respond to summonses or compliments.

The analysis presented here helps to explain how competing, contradictory discourses about street remarks can co-exist. Put simply, street remarks simultaneously ‘mean’ at different levels, and the meaning at one level can be directly contradictory to the meaning at another. Defenders of street remarks, often men, regularly make reference to the innocuous or positive literal meanings of words uttered and speech acts done, such as greeting or complimenting. This perspective and type of interpretation is massively represented in on-line discussions of street remark videos posted to the internet. Critics of street remarks tend to make arguments based on relatively more abstract concepts of context, power, and the constitutive nature of language. While it is simple to argue that ‘Have a nice evening’ is merely a pleasantry, it is complicated to argue that such a remark transgresses the interaction order by forcing women into conversational sequences that impose an inappropriate intimacy. The very ordinariness of the language in the street remarks documented, along with the relative difficulty of articulating the implicit social conventions that they breach, may veil their harm and indirectly contribute to the perpetuation of male domination of women in public spaces.

About the author

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