



Please cite this paper as follows:

Baktash, N. (2021). Polite Expressions Across Cultures: A Case Study of English and Persian Everyday Discourses. *Journal of Language and Discourse Practice*, 2 (1), 73-82.

Research Paper

Polite Expressions Across Cultures: A Case Study of English and Persian Everyday Discourses

Narges Baktash*

Department of Applied Linguistics, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

Narges.baktash@ut.ac.ir

Abstract

Strategies employed in cross-cultural compliments may cause misunderstanding in that they are either overused or under-used. In the literature, these types of misunderstandings have been referred to as pragmatic failure; however, they are mostly explained as cultural differences rather than linguistic ones. The present study looks at the problem of politeness formulas being used in English and Persian from a Relevance Theory point of view. To this end, a set of data collected in a variety of everyday situations were analyzed using the definition of compliments for classifying polite expressions. This study attempted to shed some light on such linguistic differences by showing different interpretations of compliments in both languages. The data comes from native speakers of English and Persian, both in monolingual and bilingual settings. The monolingual settings were both within and outside Iran, and, therefore the cultural settings were significantly different. The bilingual settings were so selected that they included speakers of both languages from different cultural backgrounds. The variety of linguistic as well as cultural backgrounds of the informants' data led to quite rich results so that they could be generalized to some extent.

Keywords: *Complements, Cross-Cultural Discourses, Discourse Analysis, Polite Expressions, Relevance Theory*

Introduction

Since the term pragmatic competence has been defined and used in several ways, the first thing to do in any study of this type should be to clarify the perspective one holds in their investigation. Fraser (1983), for instance, describes pragmatic competence as “the knowledge of how an addressee determines what a speaker is saying and recognizes intended illocutionary

force conveyed through subtle attitudes” (p.30). Without this knowledge, there are cases where interlocutors cannot understand each other, and, therefore failure in communication occurs. In line with this very general definition, one important aspect of pragmatic competence is politeness which according to Mills (2003, p.6) is “the expression of the speakers’ intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face-threatening acts toward another”.

Brown and Levinson 1987, seem to adopt this view when they say that o maximize the possibility of gain in requests without damaging the relationship with the hearer, and minimize pragmatic failure people use politeness strategies. These strategies are communication strategies used to change the hearer (H) as much as possible to achieve the speaker’s (S) goal and also maintain the relationship between S and H or make a good impression if H is a stranger. In most cases, if people use an appropriate level of politeness, they would not damage the relationship much in making requests (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

Socioculturally, Persians are indirect and more modest, sometimes even ambiguous, in their social interactions. They seem to tend to leave the complements vague, usually avoid assertive statements, and use obscure and lengthy expressions in their discourses. This vagueness and obscurity, along with the lengthy discourses they produce, often leads to misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication. While, the English interactional functions demonstrate the intricate orientation around the particulars of the talk context (Gomez, 2006).

Some studies showed that the shift of perspective towards studying English as a lingua franca suggests that the very notion of pragmatic failure may need to be redefined to take account of increasing diversity in language use in the world today, and some much more heterogeneous methods of analysis and evaluation need to be developed (Chen & Li, 2015; Kaur, 2011; MaízArévalo, 2014). Therefore, the concept of ‘trans-local pragmatics’ (Verzella & Mara, 2015) has been proposed as a useful starting point for examining the issue.

The polite formulas used to show the utmost respect for the addressee when requesting focus on the person’s pride and honor by exaggerating the use of bombastic titles. This was much more common in the past and is diminishing since social media propagate a different style of language, especially among the younger generation who are less observant of the clichés in communication. In chatting, for instance, no formal greetings and farewell expressions are used even when getting in touch with seniors. Some differences between Persian culture and Western culture, in general, could clarify the point a little further here.

A very significant aspect of the three levels of formality in Persian interactions is the observation of the H’s *Shakhsiat* (pride) and *Ehteram* (honor) in making requests. That is, for each level the Speaker will use the appropriate formulaic request which fits the Hearer’s *Shakhsiat* and *Ehteram*, in terms of age, social status, distance, kinship, etc.

The key point in selecting the best polite expression is relevance, that is, whether the situation is fit for using a specific polite expression or not. However, the recognition of relevance or irrelevancy of an expression would very much be a matter of cultural choice, rather than linguistic appropriateness. The basis of what Himes (198?) referred to as communicative competence, was the recognition of the appropriateness of language in use. This was previously recognized in Wilson and Sperber, (1993) as Relevance theory:

Relevance Theory (RT) adopted Grice’s general views that communication involves inference and that communicated meaning can be explained in terms of the speaker’s intentions, but vastly redefined the role of inference and the status of principles governing inferential processes. This was necessitated by the change of perspective: although Relevance Theory continues the philosophical-linguistic tradition inspired by Grice, it is committed to the scientific rigor of cognitive science at the same time.

The latter means that information processing by the human mind in real-time has to be treated as a crucial factor in constructing the theory. Therefore, it has to be taken into account that inference is spontaneously and instantaneously performed on linguistic material, that the principle governing inferential processes has to be cognitive (rather than based on philosophy or rules of social conduct), and that the evolutionary advantage of the communication the mode employed by humans over alternative models has to be explained too (Walaszewska and Piskorska 2017, PP. 2-3).

In the present study, therefore, the polite expressions used in everyday discourses of the two languages, Persian and English, will be considered in terms of their relevance to the situation they are used, not solely their linguistic or even social appropriateness. This is what makes the study different from the previous attempts at politeness strategies investigated.

Literature Review

Today, there are established literature in communication studies and the researchers attached great importance to the discourse analysis and have discussed the broader significance of politeness in everyday communications.

Thomas (1983) makes a distinction between paralinguistic failure and socio-pragmatic failure as two major causes of cross-cultural misunderstandings. Paralinguistic failure for Thomas refers to a misunderstanding of the intended illocutionary or pragmatic force of an utterance, while socio-pragmatic failure can be accounted for by inadequate knowledge of relevant cultural and social values and may occur when a speaker selects an inappropriate linguistic strategy to express a speech act in a particular context.

As an important part of human language, Rao (2017) explained that the development of polite expressions is essentially an equivalent symbol of human cultural progress. Considering that different languages generally bear different ethnic cultures, then, corresponding differences and polite expressions will express the thought or emotion in cross-cultural communication. Correct understanding in communication is based on understanding the cultural background, then, according to the pragmatic principles, the exclusion of cross-cultural communication barriers may lead to a better understanding of the other side.

There are several proposed theories of politeness such as Fraser (1990), Leech (1983), and Brown and Levinson's model (1978) that were revisited in 1987. Brown and Levinson tried to study how people used language in the service of 'face management' that comes in two varieties: positive face, or the person's need to be well thought of; and negative face, or the person's dislike for being imposed on by others. Thus, there appears that people incorporate into the structure of an utterance positive and negative politeness strategies to diminish these potential threats.

Politeness in making a request is a communication strategy that the speaker uses to achieve his/her goals while maintaining a good relationship between him/herself and the hearer. The speaker chooses the level of politeness based on the size of the request to reduce the imposition of it. There are three conditions to choose pragmatically correct expressions in requests in communication for most languages: a) Social Distance: the more distant the interlocutor, the higher the degree of imposition, and the more formal the politeness expression! b) Degree of Imposition: the greater the degree of the request, the politer should the language be! c) Degree of Necessity: the higher the degree of necessity, the higher the degree of politeness formula!

There are sociolinguistic rules for polite acceptance of requests or their refusals, which differ cross-culturally. Refusing a request in Persian culture, for instance, is very different from the same act in American culture as requests do not impose great moral or religious obligations on

the H in American culture, while in Persian culture they do. Lakoff (1975) sees linguistic features as politeness devices, for instance in rising intonation or tag questions. In Persian, the issue of preserving a positive face is so strong that sometimes one may sacrifice one's life to achieve it. This is referred to as *ABEROO*, which is the face in the best image of it. So, losing face is the same as *ABEROO BAKHTAN* in Persian. If one fails in pragmatic competence, he will feel as having lost his face.

Consciousness of Social Relationships

An important aspect of Iranian (Persian) culture is a highly refined consciousness of social relationships. This strong sense of hierarchy, rank, and position is present at all times, and language is used to establish and reinforce the relationship between speakers.

Three Levels of Formality in Persian

A very significant aspect of the three levels of formality in Persian interactions is the observation of the H's *Shakhsiat* (pride) and *Ehteram* (honor) in making requests. That is, for each level the S will use the appropriate formulaic request which fits the H's *Shakhsiat* and *Ehteram*, in terms of age, social status, distance, kinship, etc.

Common Clichés Used in The Requests

The following are the most common clichés used in the requests in interactions in Persian. The clichés are transliterated so that there will be fewer problems with the pronunciation

Neutral Clichés

A passerby of not very specific age or social group of the same sex asks somebody on the street the time: *Bebakhshid* (pardon me) *Saat Chande* (What time is it)?

This is the most neutral cliché and does not impose any obligation on the Hearer. The degree of imposition here is reduced in both the request and the reaction

Intersexual Polite Clichés in Requests

A stranger of the opposite sex is usually extremely polite in making requests. This, seemingly, is true in most cultures, the reason is to avoid the possible misunderstandings of intimate feelings. In Persian culture, this is much more complicated because of cultural as well as religious considerations which impose obligations on the Speaker and Hearer respectively. A girl asking a boy to do something for her has to be on the lookout because this may be interpreted as her attempt to attract his attention. Therefore, the type of cliché she will use in this respect will be quite formal and as polite as possible. A case is when a girl asks her classmate, a boy of the same age, to lend her a book. She will use one of the following very formal but emotionally neutral expressions:

Aghaye X Lotfan Ketabetan Ra Be Man Amanat Bedahid.

Mr. X, please lend me your book.

The analysis by Gomez (2006) suggested that exploitation of politeness strategies in both British and American Englishes became a frame in which people's social roles were realized, and in which a distinctive construction of identity for each culture is displayed through discourse, by cultural relativistic ways. Then, face behaviors appeared to be associated with individuals' sensitivity and the projected images that each party wishes to have validated in the social interaction with the other.

Rao (2017) believed that since polite expressions are going to use more frequently in various countries then it is important to establish harmonious communication relationships to

define the cultural differences between polite expressions in the homeland and abroad. Therefore, understanding different politeness principles in different cultures can effectively promote cross-cultural communication, and will show the different views on the cognition and application of politeness due to cultural differences. For example, Rao (2017) found that Chinese and Americans generally respond very differently in some situations such as when they receive congratulations and praise, in expressing appreciation, to invitations, and in daily greetings.

Different research such as Ishihara and Cohen (2010), Kasper and Rose (2001), and Rose (2005) indicated that the development of pragmatic competence, whether pragma linguistic or sociopragmatic, can be facilitated by explicit instruction in which learners are not only exposed to contextualized input but also encouraged to become engaged in (meta)pragmatic analysis of the relevant phenomena. Therefore, attempting to teach linguistic politeness to L2 learners may raise the awareness of pragmatic norms in second language learning settings through an interactional approach.

Haugh and Chang (2015) examined in/politeness across cultures and interactional approaches to raising sociopragmatic awareness. They believed that the combination of raising pragma linguistic awareness about the interactional achievement with raising sociopragmatic awareness may provide the learners with the means to analyze differences between the politeness systems of their first and second languages, thereby allowing them to make more informed choices.

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

As shown in the brief review above, many studies have addressed the issue of politeness, both in English and Persian. However, not much has been done on finding the degree to which Persian and English users differ in terms of the three conditions (social distance, degree of imposition, degree of necessity) for selecting pragmatic expressions in requests. This study, therefore, puts forward the following research questions:

Q1. To what extent are the three conditions of social distance, degree of imposition, and degree of necessity different in politeness expressions in Persian and English?

Q2. Which of the three conditions of social distance, degree of imposition, and degree of necessity is/are more likely to be used similarly or differently by Persian and English users?

Q3. Which type of polite expressions are relevantly used in both English and Persian in requests?

Methodology

The study follows a corpus analysis type of design and is based on a comparative analysis of a body of complements comprised of 150 requests in each language, English, and Persian in total. The data was collected through native speakers' expressions in authentic contexts such as personal conversations, face-to-face interactions, personal chats on social media, and emails between teacher-students. The face-to-face conversations between the native/nonnative speakers are mostly based on the researcher's experience both inside and outside Iran in original contexts. The data was collected purposefully, recorded in a period of one academic year (2019-2020), and analyzed consequently.

Procedures

In the contexts where there was an opportunity to engage in conversations requiring the use of requesting expressions, the researcher recorded the talks using a cell phone voice recorder. The recordings were later transcribed, and the appropriate cases were extracted to be analyzed. In the

context of using social media and emails, the written data were collected using the same criteria. The criteria for the selection of native and non-native reactions for analysis were a) level of formality, b) sociocultural appropriateness, and c) degree of imposition in the context.

Politeness Strategies in Making Requests

Both Iranian and native speakers of English came from different walks of life. They engaged in different interactions, mostly contexts for requests and face-saving situations. The following are some examples of the exchanges between native and non-native speakers:

1. Senior Iranian gentleman addressed by young Iranian fellow when asking for money:

Young man: حاجی آقا، لطفا 500 تومن به کارتم بریزید.

2. Senior Iranian gentleman addressed by young Iranian fellow when asking for a large amount of money:

Young man: بابا جون، حاج آقا، لطفا 5 ملیون برای ثبت نام دانشگاه واریز کنید.

The two requests, in Persian, are the same but not in terms of the degree of imposition which is higher in the second one. The first request started with the general expression of *Hajagha* used in Persian when addressing a gentleman older than the addresser. Now, the difference between the two exchanges in 1 and 2 above is the degree of imposition presupposed by the young man as the amount of money requested in 1 is not significant and therefore not much of an imposition while the amount in 2 is quite high. That is why in the second exchange the very intimate expression *Babajoun* is used to add the weight of complement and reduce imposition.

This type of polite expression might appear in the following cases too:

1. A young man offers to help a senior lady addressing her as:

حاج خانم، مادر جان، اجازه بدید کمکتان کنم!

2. A young person offering to help a senior gentleman addresses him as:

پدر جان، حاج آقا، اجازه بدید کمکتان کنم!

In 3 and 4, the polite expressions solely reflect respect towards the seniority of the individuals addressed and obviously do not have the same meaning as in 1 and 2 because no imposition is presupposed here.

A stranger of the opposite sex is usually extremely polite in making requests. This, seemingly, is true in most cultures, the reason being to avoid the possible misunderstandings of intimate feelings. In Persian culture, this is much more complicated because of cultural as well as religious considerations which impose obligations on the S and H respectively. A girl asking a boy to do something for her has to be on the lookout because this may be interpreted as her attempt to attract his attention. Therefore, the type of cliché she will use in this respect will be quite formal and as polite as possible. A case is when a girl asks her classmate, a boy of the same age, to lend her a book. She will use one of the following very formal but emotionally neutral expressions:

aghaye X mishe lotfan ketabetan ra be man amanat bedahid?

Mr. X, could you please lend me your book?

In comparison with the native speakers of English who would simply ask for the book by the usual expression: *can I borrow your book?* The Persian expression is a request to ask somebody to do something for you, while in English it is a straightforward request for it. That is, while both expressions are focused on a single action, borrowing a book, the intersexual interaction demands a different way of putting it due to differences in cultural values! The

imposition degree may be the same but because of cultural differences, polite formulas change to be relevant.

In requests made to superiors, the following polite expressions are more common in formal situations such as in written messages or invitations as well as official letters and legal documents. The clichés are commonly introduced at the beginning of the request, and some other complements are also added at the end. The more intimate or formal clichés are if used appropriately, the less the imposition force.

(Desire, I have in service your to be!) میل دارم در خدمت شما باشم!	
(Request is!) (motamanni ast!) متمني است!	
(khahesh mikonam!) Please! (Politely I want!) خواهش می کنم!	
(permission do I have!) (ejaze daram!) اجازه دارم؟	
(can I?) (mitoonam?) می تونم؟	
(possible is?) (mishe?) می شه؟	
(favor do!) (lotf reformated!) لطف بفرمایید!	
(greatness do!) (bozorgi konid!) بزرگی کنید!	
(Favor do!) (marhamat farmaeed!) مرحمت فرمایید!	
(Request I have!) (taghaza daram!) تقاضا دارم!	
(Pardon sir!) (bebakhshid ghorban!) ببخشید قربان!	
(Request is!) (motamanni ast!) متمني است!!	
(Requesting is the applicant) (mostadaee ast!) مستدعي است!!	

Generally, in both English and Persian, the cultural context in which one uses the complement seems to be of utmost importance. This is particularly true about complements employed in requests, since the degree of cooperation does not much in Persian and English. In terms of force of imposition in the complements used in the two languages, the Persian clichés are stronger since in normal intimate requests the use of complements is not very much the norm, at least not in the everyday informal language.

Using Tag Questions in Refusals

In Persian, using tag question is more often to soften refusals when the S expects H to do something which S considers easy but H finds inappropriate. For instance, S asks H to lend him a large amount of money without giving him a receipt or a check for it. H will use a cliché like the following:

Khodat Ham Boudi Inkar Ra Nemi Kardi, Mikardi?
You wouldn't do this, would you?

Requests Made to Superiors

In requests made to superiors, the following polite expressions are more common in formal situations such as in written messages or invitations as well as official letters and legal documents. The clichés are commonly introduced at the beginning of the request, and some other complements are also added at the end. The more intimate or formal clichés are if used appropriately, the less the imposition force.

(Desire, I have in service your to be!) میل دارم در خدمت شما باشم!	
(request is!) (motamanni ast!) متمني است!	
want you (khahesh mikonam!) Please! (Politely I want!) خواهش می کنم!	
(permission do I have!) (ejaze daram!) اجازه دارم؟	

(can I?) (mitoonam?)	مي تونم؟
(possible is?) (mishe?)	مي شه؟
(Favor do!) (lotf befarmaeed)	لطف بفرماييد!
(greatness do!) (bozorgi konid!) بزرگی کنید!	مرحمت فرماييد!
(Favor do!) (marhamat farmaeed!)	تقاضا دارم!
(Request I have!) (taghaza daram!)	ببخشيد قربان!
(Pardon sir!) (bebakhshid ghorban!)	متمني است!
(Request is!) (motamanni ast!)	مستدعي است!
(Requesting is the applicant) (mostadaee ast!) مستدعي است!	

Clichés Preceding Requests

The above-mentioned clichés are usually preceded by one of the following forms of address, as appropriate, in informal requests made either orally or in writing.

(pilgrim Lady!) (haj khanom!)	حاج خانم!
(pilgrim Sir!) (haj agha!) حاج آقا!	
(brother!) (baradar!) برادر!	
(sister!) (khahar!)	خواهر!
(father dear!) (pedarjan!)	پدر جان!
(mother dear!) (madarjan!)	مادر جان!

In the comparisons made with regards to the English native speakers, the following situations and clichés were detected in everyday discourses of English users in the UK, USA, Canada, and some other countries where English is used as their first language.

Politeness Strategies in Making Requests

While in making requests in Persian the gender differences are significant and depend on the degree of familiarity between them, in English this is not as significant and could be treated as equal in that the degree of imposition is what makes the difference, not gender.

For instance, a young male asking a young female for a favor will use any of the following politeness strategies:

Hi! Can I borrow your book for tonight?

Hi Susan. Do you need your book tonight?

Hey Sue. I need your book tonight.

In these examples, no gender difference is observed in terms of the speaker's use of the politeness formula. What is important is the degree of imposition in the request

Results and Discussion

The use of polite expressions in Persian is mostly less positive in comparison with those of English since Persian speakers often violate the manner principle in their complements to avoid assertive statements. The reason for this is that Persian speakers tend to use the modesty maxim. Persian complements often seem to be more indirect, lengthy, ambiguous, and obscure than English ones.

In general, in both English and Persian, the cultural context in which one uses the complement seems to be of utmost importance. This is particularly true about complements employed in requests since the degree of cooperation does not much in Persian and English.

In terms of force of imposition in the complements used in the two languages, the Persian clichés are stronger since in normal intimate requests the use of complements is not very much the norm, at least not in the everyday informal language. The data analyzed above shows that in most cases the type of complements Persian speakers use when dealing with a native speaker of their tongue produce the desired results while in cross-cultural complements, specifically with speakers of English, they seem to be overusing such clichés, to the extent that they backfire as sounding fishy and dishonest. In contrast, English speakers who stick to their own patterns of complements in requests seem rude and aggressive because of under-using such clichés.

These findings are in line with Haugh and Chang (2015) who believed that by raising pragma linguistic and socio-pragmatic awareness between the politeness systems of the languages more informed choices would be possible. In addition, the concept of ‘trans-local pragmatics’ proposed by Verzella and Mara (2015) will be a very useful starting point for examining the appropriate usage of pragmatic expressions.

Conclusion

The following general conclusions can be drawn based on the discussions above:

In general, considering that different languages generally bear different ethnic cultures, corresponding differences, and polite expressions, one can conclude that in the analysis of emotions in cross-cultural politeness expressions, we need to consider such differences. Rao (2017) believes we need a clear understanding of the differences among the thought or emotions in cross-cultural communications. Otherwise, our judgments will not be appropriate and our understanding may be rendered invalid.

References

- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness. Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chen, X., & Li, M. (2015). *Pragmatic failures are reconsidered in the context of English as a lingua franca. Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*. Retrieved from http://en.cnki.com.cn/Article_en/CJFDTOTAL-WYWJ201502003.htm
- Fraser, B. (1983). The Domain of Pragmatics, In J. Richards and R. Schmidt (Eds.), *Language and Communication*. New York: Longman, 29-59.
- Gómez, A. G. (2006). British and American Expressions of politeness in anger-evoking contexts: a cultural-relativistic approach. *Culture, Language and Representation*, 3, 145-159.
- Haugh, M. and Chang, W. (2015). Understanding im/politeness across cultures: an interactional approach to raising sociopragmatic awareness. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 53 (4), 389-414.
- Hymes, D. H. (1972). On Communicative Competence. In Pride, J. B., & Holmes, J. (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics*, 269-293. Baltimore, USA: Penguin Education, Penguin Books Ltd.
- Hobbs, P. (2003). The medium is the message: Politeness strategies in men’s and women’s voice mail messages. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 35 (2), 243-262.
- Ishihara, N. Cohen, a. (2010). *Teaching and Learning Pragmatics: Where Language and Culture Meet*. John Benjamins. New York.
- Kasper, G., & Rose, K.R. (2001). Pragmatics in language teaching. *Linguistics*.
- Kaur, J. (2011). Raising explicitness through self-repair in English as a lingua franca. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43(11), 2704-2715.
- Lakoff, R., (1975), *Language and Woman’s Place*, New York: Harper & Row.
- Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. Routledge.

- Mills, S. (2003). *Gender and politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Maíz-Arévalo, C. (2014). Expressing disagreement in English as a lingua franca: Whose pragmatic rules? *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 11(2): 199 – 224.
- Rao, Y. (2017). Research on similarities and differences in polite expressions at home and abroad. *International Conference on Arts and Design, Education and Social Sciences*.
- Rose, K.R. (2005). On the effects of instruction in second language pragmatics. *System*, 33, 385-399.
- Thomas, J. (1983) Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 4, 91-112.
- Verzella, M., & Mara, A. (2015). Translocal pragmatics: Operationalizing post-national heuristics to locate salient cultural overlap. *Rhetoric, Professional Communication, and Globalization*, 7(1), 12-28.
- Watts, R. J. (2003). *Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Walaszewska, E. and Piskorska, A., eds. (2017). *Applications of Relevance Theory: From Discourse to Morphemes*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Yu, N. (2001). What does our face mean to us? *Pragmatics and Cognition*, 9 (1), 1-36.