



Gender, Socioeconomic Status, and Politeness Strategies: Focusing on Iranian High School Students' Usage of Request Speech Act

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Abstract

The present study was developed in response to the need to further investigate politeness and politeness strategies in Persian context. The overarching goal was to extract and categorize the range of politeness strategies used in Iranian culture to see if they conform to the framework Brown and Levinson (1987) claim to be universal. The study also sought to investigate the potential effect that the two variables of gender and socioeconomic status may have on politeness strategies used in Iranian culture. An open-ended questionnaire was used as a modified version of the Discourse Completion Test to collect a number of requests from a sample of 120 male and female native Persian speakers. The analysis of strategy types and frequencies revealed that, in Iranian culture, speakers seem to prefer negative politeness strategies when making requests. As for the second part of the study, it was found that gender and socioeconomic status of Persian speakers have no significant effect on the type and frequency of politeness strategies used in performing requestive speech act. On the whole, the results indicated that all the politeness strategies used in making requests chime with Brown and Levinson's politeness framework and that Brown and Levinson's politeness theory can account for politeness strategies used in Persian.

Keywords: politeness, positive politeness, negative politeness, politeness strategies

INTRODUCTION

Politeness is a social phenomenon whose role in promotion of harmonious interpersonal relations is, at present, uncontested and beyond doubt. It is part of the socio-cultural knowledge of the people of a society; a knowledge mastery of which is very important for having a normal life in that society.

Politeness has both non-linguistic and linguistic realizations and is, therefore, also regarded as part of the sociolinguistic, sociopragmatic, or communicative competence of the speakers of a language. Seen from this perspective, politeness is viewed as the verbal

realization of proper social behavior which is developed by societies to facilitate interaction among people (Lakoff, 1973).

However, this view of politeness as a component of the communicative competence of the speakers is not old. In fact, it is not more than three decades or so that a knowledge of politeness and a mastery of its linguistic realization devices are regarded as a prerequisite for regarding a person as 'competent' in a language. We start this study with an overview of the development of the politeness theory, providing a background for discussion of the topic of interest to this study.

Politeness

Politeness seems to be a dominant concept in human interaction (Yu, 2003). One of the first scholars to consider the issue of what it means to be polite is Robin Lakoff (1973). She defines politeness as the verbal realization of proper social behavior which is developed by societies to facilitate interaction among people.

Elsewhere, Brown and Levinson (1987) define politeness as: the attempt to establish, maintain, and save face during conversation. They define it as "something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction." In their view, politeness is the use of some strategies through which humans understand and cooperate with each other.

Sifianou (1992) also defines politeness as "the set of social values which instructs interactants to consider each other by satisfying shared expectations. These shared expectations are assumed to constitute part of socio-cultural knowledge of the particular interactants and include both intentional strategies and more fixed social indices". Such a knowledge and its deployment, in her words, guarantee and promote harmonious interpersonal relations.

Holmes (1992) offers a more recent definition of politeness: "Politeness involves taking account of the feeling of others. A polite person makes others feel comfortable. Being linguistically polite involves speaking to people appropriately in the light of their relationship to you". Politeness, according to Holmes, is an effort to emphasize shared attitudes and values and avoid intruding on other people.

Theoretical framework

A considerable amount of work has been carried out on politeness in different linguistic and cultural contexts. These studies have addressed both the issues of degree of politeness as well as strategies of expressing politeness, which is of direct relevance to the present study. Up till now, several models of politeness have been proposed in the literature. However, the most comprehensive and detailed framework has been proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). As Locher (2004) notes, the model has inspired a host of empirical investigative attempts.

In Brown and Levinson (1978, p.61), a convincing case for the role of politeness strategies as face-saving devices is outlined. They see strategies for being polite as examples of a complicated system of assumptions and inferences upon which humans understand and cooperate with each other. Since this study is conducted within the framework proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978), a detailed review of their work is provided below.

Brown and Levinson's cohesive and comprehensive theory of politeness conceives of linguistic devices as realizations of specific politeness strategies. They consider strategies for being polite as examples of a complicated system of assumptions and inferences upon which humans understand and cooperate with each other. Their scheme incorporates two parts. The first part has to do with their fundamental theory concerning the nature of politeness and the way it works through interaction. The second part consists of a number of politeness strategies.

In the theoretical part of their work, Brown and Levinson introduce the notion of 'face' in order to broadly define 'politeness'. More specifically, during interaction all interactants seek to maintain two types of 'face': 'positive face' and 'negative face'. According to Brown and Levinson (1978), 'positive face' is the positive and consistent image people have of themselves, and their desire for approval. 'Negative face', on the other hand, is defined as "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, and rights to non-distraction" (p. 61). Building on this notion of 'face', 'politeness' is conceptualized in terms 'positive politeness' and 'negative politeness'. 'Positive politeness', Brown and Levinson observe, is expressed through a number of strategies which seek to minimize the threat to the hearer's positive face. They are used to make the hearer feel good about himself, his interests or possessions, and are commonly used in situations where the audience knows each other fairly well. Some strategies of positive politeness include statements of friendship, solidarity, compliments, and the following examples quoted from Brown and Levinson (1987):

- Attend to H's interests, needs, wants

You look sad. Can I do anything?

- Use solidarity in-group identity markers

Heh, mate, can you lend me a dollar?

- Be optimistic

I'll just come along, if you don't mind.

- Include both speaker (S) and hearer (H) in activity

If we help each other, I guess, we'll both sink or swim in this course.

- Offer or promise

If you wash the dishes, I'll vacuum the floor.

- Exaggerate interest in H and his interests

That's a nice haircut you got; where did you get it?

- Avoid Disagreement

Yes, it's rather long; not short certainly.

- Joke

Wow, that's a whopper!

'Negative politeness strategies' are oriented towards the hearer's negative face and emphasize avoidance of imposition on the hearer. Brown and Levinson define negative face as the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others. The following examples from Brown and Levinson (1987) exemplify negative politeness strategies:

- Be indirect

Would you know where Oxford Street is?

- Use hedges or questions

Perhaps, he might have taken it, maybe.

Could you please pass the rice?

- Be pessimistic

You couldn't find your way to lending me a thousand dollars, could you?

So I suppose some help is out of the question, then?

- Minimize the imposition

It's not too much out of your way, just a couple of blocks.

- Use obviating structures, like nominalizations, passives, or statements of general rules

I hope offense will not be taken.

Visitors sign the ledger.

Spitting will not be tolerated.

- Apologize

I'm sorry; it's a lot to ask, but can you lend me a thousand dollars?

- Use plural pronouns

We regret to inform you.

Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that their framework and the associated strategies are universal and, as such, applicable to almost all languages. They have tested it in some languages and it, they claim, has been confirmed.

THE PRESENT STUDY

A number of studies have been carried out on politeness strategies in different societies which have made their own generalizations (Cameron, 2001; Arundale, 2006; Haugh, 2007). Few studies, however, have been carried out on politeness and politeness strategies in Persian context (e.g., Eslamirasekh, 1992; Yarmohammadi, 1992; Salmani Nodoushan, 2008). The present study, therefore, was designed to shed more light on and

categorize the politeness strategies employed by native speakers of Persian to see if they conform to the framework which Brown and Levinson (1987) claim to be (at least to some degree) universal.

In doing so, the study reported in this article focused on the potential effect that the two variables of speaker's gender and socioeconomic status might have on politeness strategies used in Iranian culture. Thus, the present investigation sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the politeness strategies used by Iranian high school students in the realization of request speech act?
2. Do variables of gender and socioeconomic status of speakers affect Persian speaker's choice of politeness strategies?
3. Do politeness strategies used by Persian speakers correspond to those used by speakers of other investigated languages?
4. Can Brown and Levinson's framework of politeness be drawn upon to account for politeness strategies in Persian?

Accordingly, the following hypotheses were formulated:

1. The gender of the speaker does not affect his/her choice of politeness strategies.
2. The socioeconomic status of the speaker does not affect his/her choice of politeness strategies.
3. Politeness strategies used by Iranian speakers are not the same as those used by speakers of other investigated languages.
4. Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework of politeness, namely, negative and positive politeness, can account for politeness strategies used in Persian.

METHOD

Data collection and instrumentation

To find plausible answers to the research questions, an experiment was designed in which a number of requests were collected from a sample of native Persian speakers. As for the method of data collection, an open-ended questionnaire was used as a modified version of the Discourse Completion Test, or DCT, a written questionnaire consisting of socially differentiated situations. In the questionnaire used in this study, the hearer's response was eliminated from each situation and students were asked to read each situation and make the responses they usually make when they encounter those situations in their daily life.

Since the students' socioeconomic status was one of the variables under study, the questionnaire used in this study was divided into two parts. In order to gain some information on students' socioeconomic status, the first part included some questions on two significant factors that represented the socioeconomic status of a family in Iran. These factors are the parents' 'job' and 'level of education'. The second part of the

questionnaire included eight socially differentiated situations. In each situation, the setting was specified and students were asked to respond to each situation on the assumption that in doing so they would provide the speech act desired. The selected speech act was 'request' because of its intrinsic reflection of politeness and its wide applicability to a variety of situations in the students' daily life. In the present study, 'gender' and 'socioeconomic status' of only the speakers (not hearers) were the variables under study and in most of the situations selected for the study the speaker and hearer were of equal status.

Participants

For the purpose of this study, a total number of 120 participants ranging from 15 to 18 years of age were chosen from among male and female Persian-speaking students at four high schools in two different neighborhoods of the city of Isfahan in Iran. A girls and a boys school located in Mardavij neighborhood were chosen to represent people of relatively high socioeconomic status, and a girls and a boys school located in Zeinabieh neighborhood were chosen to represent people of relatively low socioeconomic status. On the basis of the information given by the participants regarding their parents' job and level of education, they were divided into four groups: a male group with high socioeconomic status, a male group with low socioeconomic status, a female group with high socioeconomic status, and a female group with low socioeconomic status.

In order to determine the degree of appropriateness and naturalness of the situations selected for the present study, a pilot study was administered to 20 students randomly selected from the similar population of interest to the main study. The goal of the pilot study was to establish the contextual appropriateness of the items in eliciting the speech acts under study and also to see if the instructions and questions were clear to the participants. The results suggested that students would indeed respond with appropriate speech act and with natural utterances. One of the investigators administered the test to the students while they were allowed to answer the questions without any limitation on the length of time. The test investigator was available to answer any question the participants might have.

Data analysis

The answers elicited through the questionnaires were classified according to the type of politeness strategies used. The basis for our classification was the framework proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), i.e., positive and negative politeness. Further data analysis was carried out using appropriate statistical procedures to clarify the relationship, if any, between the chosen variables (i.e., sex and socioeconomic status) and politeness strategies used in Iranian culture.

RESULTS

The overall analysis of the data collected through the modified version of DCT questionnaire showed that Persian speakers as represented by students who took part in this study, in their requests, use five politeness strategies. Three of these strategies go under the negative politeness super-strategy, and two under positive politeness super-strategy. Negative politeness sub-strategies used were strategy No. 1, be conventionally indirect; strategy No. 2, hedge, question, and strategy No. 6, apologize. The fourth strategy used by participants of the study was positive politeness sub-strategy No. 13, give (ask for) reasons. The last politeness strategy employed by students goes under positive politeness super-strategy as defined by Brown and Levinson (1987). It needs to be pointed out, however, that this sub-strategy has not been explicitly mentioned in Brown and Levinson's classificatory scheme. The strategy consists of an imperative used along with some lexical and phrasal devices indicating solidarity and intimacy.

The most frequent politeness strategy used in Persian was negative politeness strategy of hedging. As presented in Table 1, out of a total number of 1018 politeness strategies used by all participants, 327 or 36.5% included the use of hedging.

Table 1. Frequency distribution of the five politeness strategies used by all participants in all situations.

| Strategy type | | | | | Total |
|---------------|-------|------|------|-------|-------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| 320 | 372 | 32 | 25 | 269 | 1018 |
| 31.4% | 36.5% | 3.1% | 2.5% | 26.4% | 100% |

Note: 1. Negative politeness strategy No. 1

2. Negative politeness strategy No. 2

3. Negative politeness strategy No. 6

4. Positive politeness strategy No. 13

5. Positive politeness strategy not included in Brown and Levinson's classification.

Concerning the effects due to the gender, politeness strategies used by the speakers were analyzed to examine if there were any differences between males and females in the type and frequency of strategies used. In order to test the effect of this variable, a Chi-square analysis was performed on responses made by students of both genders. As illustrated in Table 2, the Chi-square analysis of the results revealed no significant difference, in terms of type and frequency of strategies used, between male and female students in any of the situations.

Table 2. Chi-square for the effect of participants' gender on type and frequency of politeness strategies employed

| Strategy | Gender | | Total |
|----------|--------|--------|-------|
| | Male | Female | |
| 1 | 169 | 151 | 320 |
| 2 | 181 | 191 | 372 |

| | | | |
|------------|---------|-----|------|
| 3 | 18 | 14 | 32 |
| 4 | 12 | 13 | 25 |
| 5 | 125 | 144 | 269 |
| Total | 505 | 513 | 1018 |
| Chi-square | P-value | | |
| 3.10065 | 0.54113 | | |

Also, the effect speakers' gender was examined with regard to socioeconomic status. In doing so, a Chi-square analysis was performed to see if there were any significant differences, in terms of type and frequency of strategies used, between male and female participants of high socioeconomic status. A second Chi-square analysis was carried out to see if there were any significant differences between male and female students of low socioeconomic status in type and frequency of strategies used. As illustrated in Tables 3 and 4, the Chi-square analyses revealed no significant difference between male and female participants in both situations.

Table 3. The Chi-square analysis for politeness strategies used by male and female participants of high socioeconomic status.

| Strategy | Gender | | Total |
|------------|---------|--------|-------|
| | Male | Female | |
| 1 | 94 | 78 | 172 |
| 2 | 85 | 92 | 177 |
| 3 | 12 | 5 | 17 |
| 4 | 5 | 5 | 10 |
| 5 | 62 | 77 | 139 |
| Total | 258 | 257 | 515 |
| Chi-square | P-value | | |
| 6.26435 | 0.18020 | | |

Table 4. The Chi-square analysis for strategies used by male and female participants of low socioeconomic status

| Strategy | Gender | | Total |
|------------|---------|--------|-------|
| | Male | Female | |
| 1 | 75 | 73 | 148 |
| 2 | 96 | 99 | 195 |
| 3 | 6 | 9 | 15 |
| 4 | 7 | 8 | 15 |
| 5 | 63 | 67 | 130 |
| Total | 247 | 256 | 503 |
| Chi-square | P-value | | |
| 0.70212 | 0.95107 | | |

In order to test the effect of socioeconomic status of the speaker, a Chi-square analysis was performed on the responses elicited from students of both levels of socioeconomic status. As illustrated in Table 5, the Chi-square analysis revealed no significant difference between the type and frequency of strategies used by students of high and low socioeconomic status.

Table 5. The Chi-square analysis for the effect of participants' socioeconomic status on their politeness strategy use

| Strategy | Status | | Total |
|------------|--------|-----|---------|
| | High | Low | |
| 1 | 172 | 148 | 320 |
| 2 | 177 | 195 | 372 |
| 3 | 17 | 15 | 32 |
| 4 | 10 | 15 | 25 |
| 5 | 139 | 130 | 269 |
| Total | 515 | 503 | 1018 |
| Chi-square | | | P-value |
| 3.95618 | | | 0.41197 |

The effect of socioeconomic status of speaker was also examined with regard to sex of the speaker. A Chi-square analysis was performed to see if there were any differences, in terms of type and frequency of strategies used, between male participants of high and low socioeconomic status. The same statistical analysis was run to examine the significance of the differences between female speakers of low and high socioeconomic status in type and frequency of strategies they used. As illustrated in Tables 6 and 7, the results revealed no significant differences, in type and frequency of strategies used, between male and female participants of both socioeconomic status.

Table 6. The Chi-square analysis for strategies used by male participants of high and low socioeconomic status

| Strategy | Status | | Total |
|------------|--------|-----|---------|
| | High | Low | |
| 1 | 94 | 75 | 169 |
| 2 | 85 | 96 | 181 |
| 3 | 12 | 6 | 18 |
| 4 | 5 | 7 | 12 |
| 5 | 62 | 63 | 125 |
| Total | 258 | 247 | 505 |
| Chi-square | | | P-value |
| 4.90866 | | | 0.29680 |

Table 7. The Chi-square analysis for the politeness strategies used by female participants of high and low socioeconomic status

| Strategy | Status | | Total |
|------------|--------|-----|---------|
| | High | Low | |
| 1 | 78 | 73 | 151 |
| 2 | 92 | 99 | 191 |
| 3 | 5 | 9 | 14 |
| 4 | 5 | 8 | 13 |
| 5 | 77 | 67 | 144 |
| Total | 257 | 256 | 513 |
| Chi-square | | | P-value |

4.94976

0.56626

DISCUSSION

The analysis of strategy types and frequencies in all the eight situations revealed that, in Iranian context, speakers seem to prefer negative politeness strategies when making requests. The percentage frequency of negative politeness strategies used by the participants was 71% compared to 29% for positive politeness strategies. In other words, negative politeness accounted for 71 percent of the cases in which speakers used politeness strategies and positive politeness for 29 percent of the cases.

The findings of the second part of the study, namely the investigation of the possible effect of the two variables of gender and socioeconomic status of the speaker on the type and frequency of politeness strategies used, revealed that, in the Iranian culture, gender and socioeconomic status of the speaker have no significant effect on the type and frequency of politeness strategies used in performing a requestive speech act. Therefore, the first and second hypotheses are confirmed as answers to the second and third questions of the study.

Comparing the results of this study with those of studies conducted in other cultures on politeness strategies (e.g., Odlin, 1989; Sifianou, 1992), it was found that the use of politeness strategies in Persian is similar to communities such as England and different from communities such as Germany and Greece. These outcomes are in line with Yu (2003) and indicate that while there are indeed some cross-cultural similarities in terms of general concepts and dimensions of politeness shared by speakers of different languages, the different strategies employed speaks to the significant effect of culture on its speakers' speech act performance. Thus, any study on the issue of speech act universality should take into account the central role of culture.

It was also observed that all the politeness strategies used by Persian speakers in making requests chime with and provide evidence for Brown and Levinson's universal thesis. Therefore, one may argue that though Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory may be biased by the Anglo-Saxon convention (Wierzbicka, 1991), it can be drawn upon to capture politeness strategies in different cultures (e.g., Persian). Broadly, this finding runs counter to a 'discernment account' of politeness (Ide, 1989) and lends support to the 'universality' of the politeness theory (see Fukada & Asato, 2004).

CONCLUSION

This study was aimed at examining the effects of Persian speakers' gender and socioeconomic status on their use of politeness strategies. All in all, the findings indicated that these speaker variables exerted no significant effects on the type and frequency of politeness strategies used in performing a requestive speech act. However, it was found that culture plays a central role in the choice of politeness strategies associated with the speech act of request. Theoretically, these observations lent further support to the cross-

cultural validity of Brown and Levinson's (1978) framework for capturing politeness strategies employed by speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Even so, to arrive at a full theoretical account of the role of speaker variables on the use of politeness strategies, further research is certainly needed to investigate, inter alia, the potential effect of such variables as education level, regional dialect, and profession on the politeness strategies associated with performing other types of speech acts in different contexts. It is hoped that future studies will be conducted to address these issues.

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