

Developing intercultural competence in the foreign language classroom: The case of the Persian politeness system, *ta'ārof*

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ABSTRACT

In the age of globalisation and multiculturalism, the need for developing students' competence in intercultural communication in foreign language classes, including those of South West Asia and North Africa (i.e. the SWANA region), is steadily growing. This issue becomes especially important in the context of East-West relations, which have recently been marked by plural, intersecting geo-political tensions. This paper explores the problem of developing the pragmatic and intercultural competence of Ukrainian students, specifically in the Persian language – especially as regards the corresponding multifaceted cultural system, *ta'ārof*. It seems that without knowledge of this system, successful communication between non-native Persian speakers and native Persian speakers is impossible. *Ta'ārof* includes a broad, complex of behaviours permeating Iran's social and cultural life, and is used for both marking differences in social status and harmonising the communications of speakers/listeners who are equal in social status. Methodologically, in this study the communication behaviours of Persian speakers is analysed based on the theory of speech acts, in particular as interpreted by Brown and Levinson (1987), respectively the American and British founders of the linguistic politeness theory whereby individuals can either 'lose face' or 'save face'. The current research, however, finds that some speech acts identified by these Western researchers as 'face-threatening' are not when understood via the Persian politeness system.

KEYWORDS

intercultural competence, intercultural communication, communicative behaviour, speech act, politeness system

Introduction

Today, it is generally accepted that for successful intercultural communication, a good command of language is not enough. Rather, knowledge of cultural particularities of the interlocutors, as well as differences in communication traditions, is also required. Many researchers note that, when communicating with people from other places, people normally tolerate grammar and lexical errors, but are comparatively more sensitive to violations of their own cultural norms (e.g., Janney and Arndt, 1992; Sifianou, 1992; Agar, 1994).

The object of this study is the Persian cultural complex, *ta'ārof*, which is sometimes regarded as a politeness system, but in fact reflects much more than simple polite interaction, due to its comprehensive nature and decisive influence on all types of social communication in Iran, both historically and today. As Koutlaki states, *ta'ārof* is a 'central concept in Iranian interaction [...] felt to be indispensable in all communication by native speakers' (2002, p. 1741). According to Beeman, '*ta'ārof* is used to indicate a nearly untranslatable, but fundamental cultural concept encompassing a broad complex of behaviours in Iranian life that mark and underscore differences in social status and degrees of social intimacy' (2020, p. 203).

The word *ta'ārof* is derived from Arabic, into Persian, and comes from the Arabic root فرع ['arafa], which means 'to know.' Thus, in Arabic *ta'ārof* literally means 'becoming acquainted', but coming into Persian its semantic field grew considerably, and the word now has several meanings. In Rubinchik's Persian-Russian Dictionary, *ta'ārof* is translated as 'exchange of courtesies', 'observance of ceremonies, conventions', 'gift giving', and 'treat' (Персидско-русский словарь, 1985, p. 379). The Aryanpur Persian-English dictionary suggests a rather wider range of meanings, including 'compliment(s), ceremony, offer, gift, flummery, courtesy, flattery, formality, good manners, soft tongue, honeyed phrases, respect' and renders *ta'ārof kardan* (i.e., to do *ta'ārof*) as 'to use compliments, to stand upon ceremony, to make a present of, to speak with courtesy, to use honeyed phrases (soft tongue)' (Aryanpur and Aryanpour, 1986, pp. 306-307). Therefore, translating this term is a fundamentally difficult task since it has no one-word equivalent in other languages.

It should be noted here that without comprehension of this cultural system, successful communication with native Persian speakers is scarcely possible. Although at first glance, *ta'ārof* seems to be merely courtesy, though perhaps exaggerated to some extent in fact it covers all the spheres of Iranian social life; indeed, it is a vital framework that structures any communication between any

interlocutors, whether equal and unequal in their social status. As such, mastering this pervasive cultural complex is often a challenging task for foreigners. Furthermore, as Beeman states, ‘though *ta’ārof* has largely positive connotations in Iranian society, it can also be used in ways that might be interpreted as impolite, manipulative, or self-interested’ (2020, p. 203).

Against this backdrop, it becomes obvious that, in order to form and develop the appropriate level of pragmatic interlanguage and intercultural competence of students learning Persian, it is necessary to give them proper instruction in how to practise *ta’ārof*, as well as apply some of its specific communicative strategies in Persian language classrooms.

Theoretical framework

Ta’ārof has received much attention from both Iranian and non-Iranian researchers (see: Ahmadi and Ahmadi, 1998; Asjodi, 2001; Assadi, 1980; Beeman, 1986; 1988; 2001; 2020; DelVecchio Good and Good, 1988; Eslami, 2005; Hillmann, 1981; Keshavarz, 2011; Koutlaki, 2002; Salmani Nodoushan, 2012; Sharifian, 2007; Shirinbakhsh and Eslami Rasekh, 2012; Taleghani-Nikazm, 1998).

Many such scholars note that foreigners’ attitudes towards this cultural phenomenon can be quite controversial. For example, as the Iranian scholar, Assadi observes, some of them find *ta’ārof* ‘baffling, intriguing, frustrating, complex, and time consuming’ (1980, p. 221). Conversely, the French scholar, de Bellaigue states:

You should know about ta’ārof. In Arabic ta’ārof means behavior that is appropriate and customary; in Iran, it has been corrupted and denotes ceremonial insincerity. Not in a pejorative sense, Iran is the only country I know where hypocrisy is prized as a social; and commercial skill (cited by Sharifian 2007, p. 41).

This disrespectful view gives plenty reason to pay special attention to this cultural phenomenon in the Persian language classroom, in order to: (a) keep students from misunderstandings and communication failures when dealing with Iranians, and (b) prevent them from uttering culturally ignorant opinions like the one above, rooted in not only poor awareness of fundamental Iranian communication behaviours, but also a misplaced sense of superiority over Persian culture.

One potential starting point for teaching ta’ārof is how researchers consider it as a politeness system based on the communication strategy of ‘saving face’

(see, for example: Koutlaki, 2009; Salmani Nodoushan, 2012; Izadi, 2015). The concept of ‘face’ was introduced by Erving Goffman (1967), who regarded how others see a person as the most important social value for every individual. Subsequently, developing their theory of linguistic politeness, American and British researchers, Brown and Levinson identified ‘face’ as a universal concept, a kind of social image, which every member of society wants to save, and considered politeness as a set of strategies for ‘saving face’ (1987, p. 61). Within these perimeters, it is important that in the course of communication each interlocutor should strive to save not only their own face, but that of the person they are interacting with. According to Goffman’s figurative expression, ‘to study face-saving is to study the traffic rules of social interaction’ (1972, p. 323).

In their theory, Brown and Levinson (1987) determined two aspects of ‘face’ – positive and negative. Positive face is the desire of an individual to have their self-image be appreciated and approved by other people; on the other hand, negative face is the wish to enjoy freedom of action and prevent others from interfering in their private life (Brown and Levinson, 1987, pp. 62, 129). According to these researchers, the concepts of positive and negative face are inherent in all cultures. Nonetheless, scholars who have studied politeness as a cross-cultural construct have criticised this theory for being fundamentally Western in its perspective, since it is devoted to the notion of the individual and their individuality above all else (see: Koutlaki, 2002, pp. 1737-1740). In contrast, from a Japanese perspective, for instance, Matsumoto observes that ‘what is of paramount concern to a Japanese [person] is not his/her own territory, but their position in relation to the others in the group and his/her acceptance by those others’ (1988, p. 405). Similarly, in Iranian cultures, ‘face’ is also actualised within the group context – first of all, in the family unit. Koutlaki notes:

The nuclear family is an all-important unit of social organization in Iranian society, not only as the minute component of the social edifice, but also as a frame of all kinds of support for its members. Thus, people are seen as belonging to a family rather than standing as individuals, although this does not by any means entail any loss of their individuality: they are known both as members of a family and as individuals in their own right (2002, p. 1740).

Another key problem with Brown and Levinson’s theory, from the perspectives of researchers exploring SWANA region politeness systems, is linked to so-called ‘face-threatening acts’ (FTA). Brown and Levinson determined four types of speech acts (SAs), defined by which ‘face’ – positive or negative – they threaten (1987, pp. 65–68):

- 1) SAs threatening the speaker's positive face are: excuses, admittance of fault or responsibility; acceptance of compliments, etc. They indicate that the speaker is ready for a certain degree of self-humiliation.
- 2) SAs threatening the speaker's negative face are: expressions of thanks; acceptance of gratitude or apology; excuses; acceptance of offers, etc. Uttering these SAs potentially violates the speaker's freedom of action.
- 3) SAs threatening the positive face of the hearer are: criticism; disapproval; accusation; derision; insult; disagreement; challenge, etc. They take place when the speaker demonstrates indifference to the hearer's feelings or wants.
- 4) SAs threatening the negative face of the hearer are: orders; requests; offers; reminders; advice; menace, etc. They demonstrate that the speaker may violate the hearer's freedom of action.

Brown and Levinson (1987) further note that speakers and hearers should cooperate in order to save both the positive and negative faces of themselves and each other. This goal can be achieved through 'strategies of politeness'. Thus, politeness expressed via appropriate linguistic tools is supposed to hide any SAs threatening the positive or negative face of either party. In total, we find 15 strategies of positive politeness and 10 of negative politeness in their theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987, pp. 101–211).

Study methods

When applying Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory to Iranian cultures of communication, it is evident that some of the SAs determined by these Western researchers to be FTAs are not in the context of *ta'ārof* regulations. In this paper we consider two of the most important and everyday ones: namely offers and refusals.

Brown and Levinson (1987) suppose that offers (including invitations) universally threaten the face of the hearer because, after having accepted the offer from the speaker, they will feel obliged. In Iranian culture, however, offers are an essential component of polite interaction. Repeated offers and invitations are central to the *ta'ārof* rituals employed to demonstrate a positive attitude towards the hearer, along with a wish to meet their needs. More specifically, '[...] in Persian, when you make offers, the more forceful and direct you are the more polite it is' (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005, p. 203). For example, when receiving guests,

persistent offering of food and drinks – as well as rejecting them, in turn – are parts of the politeness ritual. If the guest refuses, the person hosting feels obliged to keep on insisting because they know that, while the guest may follow the rules of *ta'ārof*, they do ultimately want to be treated.

Thus, in Persian cultures of communication, offers (including invitations) are regarded not as 'threatening' SAs, but rather as 'encouraging' ones. Besides, within this cultural context, offers and invitations can be very often ostensible in nature and, in the course of uttering such SAs, both interlocutors share a mutual understanding that the main goal of their dialogue is to please the hearer or guest (see, for example: Eslami, 2005; Koutlaki, 2002).

In contrast to such direct and persistent offers (and the corresponding rounds of refusals prior to acceptance), in many Western cultures offers are made more indirectly in order not to impose an obligation to accept upon the hearer or guest. From an Iranian perspective, these differences in communication strategies can render Western cultures as seemingly being devoid of proper manners, due to bad upbringing. Therefore, there is a need for speakers and hearers to possess a real awareness and understanding of this fundamental difference – and others – between Persian and non-Persian cultures prior to undertaking intercultural communications.

In Western cultures, refusal is typically regarded as a face-threatening SA: the person who receives the refusal feels uncomfortable as their intentions are rejected, thus undermining their positive face. Meanwhile, in Iranian cultures of communication, the rejection (of an offer, present, invitation, etc.) is simply an integral part of polite conversation. As Eslami observes:

[...] in several middle eastern languages (including Persian) it is required to refuse an invitation several times and for the inviter to insist further [...] A strong social convention in Eastern societies is that, out of modesty, any offer must be refused at least once and often more than once as a matter of course, resulting in the initiator's stronger insistence. Such insistence is seen as a sign of consideration for the guests and of concern for the guests' needs (Eslami, 2010, p. 238).

Of course, this pattern may confuse non-Iranians who do not use ritual refusals in their cultures. In these contexts, excessive persistence from the speaker may also be interpreted as forcefulness.

Rather, in Iranian culture, the exchange of ostensible refusals and persuasions can take a long time. For instance, the seller at the market – to demonstrate their friendly attitude to their customer – can repeatedly reject the money which the customer is trying to pay for the goods they want to buy. Another example

of this kind of dialogue is recorded by Koutlaki: the borrower is trying to return the money due to the lender, but the lender rejects it, saying they do not need it. This courtesy exchange lasts for a long while until the lender finally gives up and takes the money (Koutlaki, 2002, pp. 1746–1754). Extrapolating from these examples, in general, too quick an acceptance of any offer in Iranian culture may be considered as a failure of upbringing, or – in the case of intercultural communication – foreign ignorance about the rules of etiquette, thus highlighting a key issue that should be included in the Persian language classroom.

In this vein, students of Persian will benefit from the writings of Sharifian explaining ta'ārof in a US context. Consider the following two examples:

(1) 'Ta'ārof is a verbal dance between an offer and an acceptor until one of them agrees. It is a cultural phenomenon that consists of refusing something that has been offered to you even though you want it, out of politeness. On the giving end, it is offering something that may cost a lot in order to be polite, but not really wanting to give it away for free.

and

(2) 'OK, here's how I try to explain it to anyone who's not Persian: it's like when you offer something to someone that you don't really genuinely want to give to them but are only doing so to make yourself look all nice and sweet and classic Persian. But at the same time you know that they won't accept your offer to be polite in the same way and maintain their own cool Persian status... then it's their turn to offer something more outrageous or extreme than what you have offered, they are doing it to up their so called politeness, but they know that you would never accept... then you do the same and it goes on and on and on until people get too tired, sleepy, or someone starts crying, or people finally realize they have to get on with their lives... disaster happens when someone actually ACCEPTS one of the crazy polite offerings... hehehe..." (Sharifian, 2007, pp. 40–41).

Research and empirical studies in the field of foreign language teaching demonstrate that the inclusion of explicit pragmatic instruction as a part of the curricula plays an important role in the development of the student's pragmatic ability and, thus, intercultural competence as well. This endeavour is about:

giving primary importance to the achievement of functional abilities in the target language (TL) with the final purpose of understanding and producing language that is appropriate to communicative situations in accordance with specific socio-cultural parameters. Failure to do so may cause misunderstandings and sometimes communication breakdowns as well as the stereotyping of the TL learners as insensitive, rude, or inept (Rueda, 2006, p. 170).

Given the fact that in a foreign language classroom not only two languages but also two cultures – with all their similarities and differences – interact, students' pragmatic competence should be formed through planned classroom activities. First of all, such activities must address the need to cultivate the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge and conventions absent in the students' native language and culture. Since students may not initially be ready to properly understand the pragmatic and socio-cultural values of certain SAs in Persian, such as offers and refusals, the following means of learning could be useful: 1) explanation of culturally determined differences; 2) discussion with a native Persian tutor; and 3) further instruction on the strategies and linguistic forms by which specific pragmatic features are performed by Iranians, as well as how these strategies can be used in different social contexts.

Any explanation of culturally determined differences should come from a position of proactively seeking to appreciate and value other cultures – not simply to tolerate or accept them. Then, in the course of discussion, it is useful to present some concrete examples from cross-cultural (mis)communications and examine them together with students. Beyond this, the goal is to organise activities where students can practise using the new linguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge they have acquired. However, such classroom practices are not intended to urge learners to completely adopt values of the target culture and to give up their own ones. Rather, as Eslami-Rasekh states, '[a]n important issue to be considered by teachers is to acknowledge and respect learners' individuality and freedom of choice and their systems of values and beliefs' (2005, p. 207). As such, fostering respect, understanding, and appreciation for Persian culture should be the focus of the teacher's attention.

Ultimately, this kind of class activity should provide students with valuable knowledge of the socio-cultural rules existing in Iranian society, and furnish them with the pragmalinguistic tools needed for comprehending and navigating the communication behaviours of their Persian interlocutors – allowing them to interact effectively and in a contextually appropriate way.

Conclusions

Given the communicative approach underpinning contemporary foreign language teaching, students' pragmatic ability is of primary importance: comprising the understanding and producing of language that is appropriate to in accordance with target language sociocultural parameters. Learners' intercultural compe-

tence is the capacity which allows them to communicate with interlocutors in proper and meaningful ways.

One of the most important tasks in the Persian language classroom today is developing non-Persian students' pragmatic ability and fluency in using the Persian politeness system, *ta'ārof* – a scheme which can be viewed as standing in contrast to the linguistic politeness theory developed by Western scholars, Brown and Levinson. Put simply, many SAs considered by Brown and Levinson as 'face-threatening', are not regarded as threatening in Iranian culture. In fact, not only are they non-threatening, but Persian speakers regard the repeated, emphatic SAs of offers (or invitations) and refusals as integral parts of polite interaction. Failure to keep to these rules may, ironically, result in the speaker losing face before their Iranian listener. Therefore, SAs of the Persian language must be taught in the classroom as fundamentally ethno-specific, with the capacity to facilitate socio-cultural harmony via communication.

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