

In The Name of God



University of Ilam
Faculty of Humanities
English Language and Literature Department

M. A. Thesis

**The Study of Politeness in Iranian EFL context; the case of
Persian Monolingual and Kurdish -Persian Bilingual
Learners of English**

**Thesis submitted in partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts from English Department,
Ilam University**

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BY
Somayeh Barani


THESIS

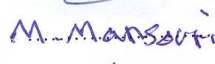
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To my dear husband

And

My daughter,

Sara

Abstract

The Study of Politeness in Iranian EFL context; the case of Persian Monolingual and Kurdish -Persian Bilingual Learners of English

The purpose of this study was (a) to see what kinds of politeness strategies are used by Persian and Kurdish speakers in the realization of request speech act (b) to examine the effect of language background, language level, and sex of speakers on the type and frequency of politeness strategies used.

To this end, a General Placement Test (Allen, 1992) as well as a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) on request speech acts were used.

The subjects of this study were 240 male and female students (180 EFL learners and 60 non-EFL learners) of two different language background and three language levels. The EFL Persian subjects were selected from Ilam University and EFL Kurdish subjects were selected from Azad University. Non-EFL subjects were selected from different fields of study from both university of Ilam and Azad university.

In order to compare variables, a number of non-parametric statistical techniques such as Lambda, Uncertainty Coefficient, and Contingency Coefficient were used.

The analysis of data revealed that Persian and Kurdish speakers used more negative politeness strategies than positive politeness strategies. Also, the three variables of language background, language level, and sex of speakers were found to have no significant effect on the type and frequency of politeness strategies used by subjects in the study.

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List of Abbreviations

CLT: Communicative Language Teaching

DCT: Discourse Completion Test

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ESL: English as a Second Language

FTA: Face Threatening Act

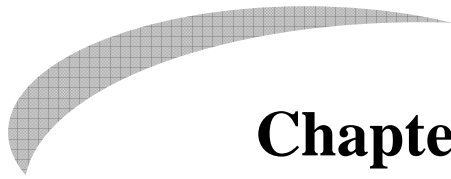
H: Hearer

L1: first Language

L2: second Language

PSs: Politeness Strategies

S: Speaker



Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. The scope of the study

One of the most influential theories of language ever posed is Chomsky's theory of language. He defined language as a body of knowledge that resides in the minds of human beings. In his study of language, Chomsky gave the central role to syntax and morphology. He also made a distinction between linguistic competence (the ideal language user's knowledge of rules of grammar) and linguistic performance (the actual language behavior) subject to psychological, physical, and social constraints. For Chomsky, the intuitions of the native speaker (i.e. his mental representation of the grammar of language) are the true object of description rather than the sentences themselves.

Some linguists rejected this narrow definition of the scope of linguistics on the grounds that this approach to the study of language removes language from its social context and ignores the central role of language as a means of communication among people. They argued that if an individual wants to learn a language, he must, in addition to grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, learn the rules of speaking (Wolfson, 1983). These rules are shared by the speakers of the language and govern their spoken behavior. They maintained that second language learners might fail to communicate effectively, even when they have an excellent grammatical and lexical command of the target language.

Hymes (1978) developed his own theory, namely communicative competence to broaden Chomsky's view of language. Competence seen as the overall underlying linguistic knowledge and ability includes, in Hymes' words, concepts of appropriateness and acceptability. As a result, attention was diverted from linguistic competence to communicative competence.

With the advent of the communicative approach to language teaching, the concept of communicative competence gained increasing attention from both language teachers and language acquisition researchers. This change in perspective entails, among other factors, a widening of the notion of language proficiency to include not only the traditional areas of grammar, lexis and phonology, but also pragmatic competence, that is, the ability to use language according to the cultural norms of the target language society. More and more evidence demonstrates that lack of pragmatic skills can lead to misunderstandings and communication breakdowns, despite

otherwise high levels of L2 proficiency (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Bardovi-Harlig, 2001).

For most learners of a foreign or second language, however, gaining pragmatic competence in the target language is challenging. This may also be one of the reasons pragmatic issues receive relatively little attention in the language classroom. Yet, its importance for successful L2 use has been emphasized more frequently in recent years, and a growing number of researchers and instructors are arriving at the conclusion that "besides acquiring elements of the target language, students must be able to function within the total meaning system of that language" (LoCastro, 1986, p. 5).

While the increasing diversity of the EFL classroom poses special challenges for students and educators generally, this is especially the case in settings where L1 language backgrounds might have different linguistic and paralinguistic features. In such settings, the goal of communicative competence suggests that language teachers need to help students comprehend the implicit cultural differences distinguishing their own experience from that which is embodied within the speech acts of speakers of a target language. Here the role of the cultural context of language learners is quite important.

Within the field of pragmatics, which analyzes "how to do things with words" (Austin, 1962), most human utterances are regarded as actions fulfilling certain functions, and are therefore commonly referred to as speech acts (Thomas, 1995). With regard to English language, theoretically some speech acts have received abundant scholarly attention, the same while others have been more or less neglected by cross-linguistic empirical research. This is also, true about what has today come to be known as politeness features.

1.2. Politeness

To most scholars, politeness is used to avoid conflict. Lakoff (1975:45) defines it as forms of behavior that have been "developed in societies in order to reduce friction in personal interaction". Fraser and Nolan (1981) define it as a set of constraints of verbal behavior while Leech (1983) sees it as forms of behavior aimed at creating and maintaining harmonious interaction. According to Brown and Levinson (1978), politeness, as a form of behavior, allows communication to take place between potentially aggressive partners.

Politeness phenomenon has been the subject of a good number of studies and different scholars have approached it from different perspectives.

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.

Following Lakoff, Fraser and Nelson (1981), using the notion of conversational contract, see politeness as a distance-making strategy by which the speaker, abiding by the means of conversational contract, pays his personal respect to the hearer.

Brown and Levinson (1978) define politeness as: the attempt to establish, maintain, and save face during conversation. Having borrowed face from Goffman (1967), 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.

Leech (1983) makes a distinction between 'absolute politeness' and 'relative politeness' and states that people typically use polite in a relative sense; that is relative to some norm of behavior which, for a particular setting, they regard as typical. The norm may be that of a particular culture or language community.

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

Another definition of politeness is offered by Holms (1992): "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, in her words, is an effort to emphasize shared attitudes and values and avoid intruding on other people.

Politeness is an integral part of human interaction and can be regarded as reflecting a specific culture's behavioral norms. Consequently it is closely connected with communicating style realizations and forces speakers to make appropriate choices in planning, formulating and articulating utterances. While personal behaviors vary from one region to another within a country, why we should not assume that it happens

more drastically across boundaries? Studying politeness is an area of study which has experienced enormous amounts of interest over the past quarters of recent century. As a result, a number of recent comparative studies have tended to take English as one pole of comparison in cross-cultural comparisons between two languages and cultures (Hicky & Stewart, 2005).

1.3. Statement of the Problem

In communicative language teaching, classroom goals focus on all of the components of communicative competence and are not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence. Language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, and functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Organizational language forms are not the central focus but rather aspects of language that enable the learner to accomplish those purposes (Brown, 2000).

According to Brown (2000), second language acquisition becomes an exceedingly difficult task when sociopragmatic constraints are brought to bear. Variations in politeness and formality are particularly touchy. Pragmatic conventions from a learner's first language can transfer both positively and negatively. Apologizing, complimenting, thanking, face-saving conventions, and conversational cooperation strategies (Turner, 1995) often prove to be difficult for EFL learners.

EFL learners are expected to be different in their use of politeness strategies, especially because of variables such as sex, age, and language background. The purpose of this study was, then, to identify the politeness strategies used by Iranian EFL learners with two different mother tongues, Kurdish and Persian, in order to see whether there was a difference between language background, language level, and gender and the use of politeness strategies by EFL learners in realization of request speech act. Regarding this issue, the present research addressed the following questions:

1.4. Research questions and hypotheses:

1. Is there any significant difference between frequency distribution of politeness strategies used by Persian monolingual and Kurdish-Persian bilingual EFL learners in realization of request?
2. Does language background play any role in the use of politeness strategies by EFL learners in realization of request speech act?
3. Does sex play any role in the use of politeness strategies by EFL learners in realization of request speech act?
4. Does language level play any role in the use of politeness strategies by EFL learners in realization of request speech act?

Based on these questions, the research null hypotheses are as follow:

H₀₁: There is no significant difference between frequency distribution of politeness strategies used by Persian monolingual and Kurdish-Persian bilingual EFL learners in realization of request speech act.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between language background and the use of politeness strategies by EFL learners in realization of request speech act.

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between sex and the use of politeness strategies by EFL learners in realization of request speech act.

H₀₄: There is no significant relationship between language level and the use of politeness strategies by EFL learners in realization of request speech act.

1.5. Significance of the study

During the last three decades or so, a great deal of effort has gone into forming a theory of 'universals of language use' i.e. specifying which aspects of language use are universal and which are language specific. Rules of politeness – as an aspect of language use – have been the target of a good number of studies, and different claims have been made concerning their degree of universality. Lakoff (1973) claims that rules of politeness proposed by her are universal. Brown and Levinson (1978) claim that the concept of 'face' because of which politeness is exhibited will most probably be universal, but what its exact content will be is culture-specific. An intuitive approach towards politeness phenomenon will end

up in wrong conclusions and a great deal more data from different cultures is needed before researchers can draw sound conclusions concerning degree of universality of rules of politeness.

Furthermore, having realized the complex nature of sociolinguistic rules or rules of speaking in different cultures, we should sensitize our students to expect cross-cultural differences in linguistic realization of various speech acts and what such phenomena as 'politeness' and 'appropriateness' linguistically mean in the native as well as target culture (Lakoff, 1976).

Also, as it was pointed out earlier, knowing a language is not simply being able to form grammatically correct sentences; rather it also implies possession of a knowledge by the language users on the social appropriateness of these sentences, and language users' lack of this knowledge may present them with many pitfalls in the process of communication. Therefore, the goal of language educators should be educating language learners in both how to form grammatically correct sentences as well as in how to use these sentences in appropriate contexts.

This study will provide us with a better understanding of conditions of use of speech patterns. Such knowledge will help all those have a share in second language or foreign language enterprise, such as material developers, language teachers, and test designers with their efforts to contribute to the attainment of the above-mentioned goal.

As Widdoson (1978) argues, language learners are just as liable to transfer rules of use (having to do with contextual appropriacy) as those of usage (related to grammatical accuracy). The result of this study could be a base for the future study of negative transfer /interference of first language socio-cultural pragmatic competence to second language socio-cultural pragmatic competence, particularly in the research areas related to EFL/ESL. It can reveal the effect of pragmatic transfer from first or second language on Persian monolingual and Kurdish bilingual EFL learners.

Also, findings of this study can be useful for Iranian EFL learners because it can give them an awareness of their use of politeness strategies. In addition, the

instructors, especially in local universities in Iran, can use the findings of this study, if they show a significant difference between the use of politeness strategies by the Kurdish EFL learners and Persian EFL learners, as a guide for teaching styles.

1.6. Definition of key terms

Some of the terms are necessary to be defined as the following:

1.6.1. Politeness

Politeness is a special way of treating people, saying and doing things in such a way as to take into account the other person's feelings. (Brown, 1980, p.114).

1.6.2. Negative politeness

Negative politeness is redressive action addressed to addressee's negative face: his want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 129).

1.6.3. Positive politeness

Positive politeness serves to satisfy the hearer's need for approval and belonging and is used by the speaker to satisfy the hearer's positive face. Positive politeness refers to redressive actions directed toward H's positive face: his or her desire that his or her wants should be thought of as desirable.

1.6.4. FTA (Face Threatening Action)

It is being defined as certain kinds of acts that threaten face (Brown and Levinson, 1987). It means that there is contradiction between those acts and the acts, which someone wants to save his/her face. By doing those acts, a person may offend his/her addressee because what the person does is contrary to what the addressee wants. In some cases, a person can also threaten his/her own face by doing those acts, for instance humiliate himself/herself.