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M.A. Thesis

**A Cross-Cultural Investigation of Politeness Strategies: The
Effect of Gender, Situational Context and Social Status on
Greeting Rituals of Iranian EFL Learners**

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May 2011

کلیه حقوق مادی مترتب بر نتایج مطالعات، ابتکارات
و نوآوری های ناشی از تحقیق موضوع این پایان نامه
متعلق به دانشگاه اصفهان است.



دانشگاه اصفهان
دانشکده زبان های خارجی
گروه زبان انگلیسی

پایان نامه کارشناسی ارشد رشته ی آموزش زبان انگلیسی
خانم زهرا قرقانی تحت عنوان

بررسی بین فرهنگی راهکارهای ادب: تاثیر جنسیت ، محیط و موقعیت اجتماعی
بر احوال پرسی زبان آموزان ایرانی

در تاریخ ۹۰/۲/۲۴ توسط هیأت داوران زیر بررسی و با درجه عالی به تصویب نهایی رسید.



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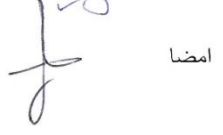
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عباس اسلامی راسخ
امضای مدیر گروه

Acknowledgments

During the time of writing of this thesis, I received support and help from many people. First and foremost I would like to thank God who gave me the strength and perseverance to continue when I wanted to give up. I am also profoundly indebted to my supervisor, Dr. Eslami-Rasekh and my advisor, Dr. Dabaghi who were very generous with their time and knowledge and assisted me in each step to complete this thesis. My sincere thanks go to my whole family who have been an important and indispensable source of spiritual support. I would like to thank all the friends and colleagues especially Chuck Hamilton who helped me to collect native English data, Ali Shahmohamadi, Iman Tohidian, Saeed Jaberipour, Elham Fardafshari and Mehrdad Namdari Gharaghani who helped me to complete this work and the students who participated in this thesis.

I would also like to acknowledge all the professors of the department of English, Isfahan university, who had taught me during the exciting past two years and their successful teaching has made this dissertation possible. I would like to take this opportunity to express my immense gratitude to all those people who have given their invaluable support and assistance.

I feel I have learnt a lot from writing this thesis searching for the truth of science and life. This is the great treasure I will cherish not only in my future academic career but in my whole life. Although I have received much useful advice throughout the writing of my thesis, all the faults that remain are obstinately my own.

Dedicated
To
My Family
And
Friends

Abstract

This study investigates politeness strategies that native Persian, native English and EFL learners employ for exchanging greetings in a variety of situations. Persian EFL learners are compared with native Persian and native English speakers in order to find the differences that exist across two cultures. Gender, situational context and social status of the speakers are social variables which are investigated in details. Forty-six (female and male) EFL learners divided into two groups participated in the present study. The first group included 30 undergraduate EFL learners in Isfahan university with an age range of 21-24. The second group of participants were 16 university students including 8 Persian EFL learners in Isfahan University and 8 native American English students studying Medical Laboratory Technology at Dalton State College in Dalton, Georgia, USA. The necessary data was collected from the responses to an open-ended Discourse Completion Task (DCT) and a Dramatic Written Discourse Completion task (DWDCT). The findings indicated that EFL learners are not competent in English greetings in different situations. They transfer Persian style of greeting to their EFL performance in different gender interactions and they are not linguistically sensitive to different situational contexts and to the social status of the interlocutors in greetings. The results of the study suggested that the degree of formality in EFL learner's greeting varies significantly due to cultural transfer and linguistic incompetency in informal use of language and EFL learners use inappropriate politeness expressions in their English greetings.

Keywords: Contrastive Pragmatics, Inter-language pragmatics, Speech Act of Greeting, Politeness Strategies.

Table of Contents

Title	Page
Chapter One: Introduction	
1.1. Overview	1
1.2. Statement of the Problem.....	1
1.3. Significance of the Study	3
1.4. Definition of Key Terms	4
1.4.1. Pragmatics	4
1.4.2. Pragmatic Competence.....	4
1.4.3. Contrastive Pragmatics	5
1.4.4. Inter-language Pragmatics (ILP)	5
1.4.5. Pragmatic Transfer.....	5
1.4.6. Politeness.....	6
1.4.7. Speech Act Theory.....	7
1.4.8. The Speech Act of Greeting.....	9
1.4.9. Contextual Variables: Gender, Situational Context and Social Status	10
1.5. Organization of the Thesis.....	12
Chapter Two: Literature Review	
2.1. Overview	13
2.1.1. Pragmatics	13
2.1.2. Inter-language Pragmatics	14
2.2.2. Pragmatic Transfer.....	16
2.2.3. Contrastive Analysis	18
2.3. Theories of Politeness	20
2.3.1. Face	20
2.3.2. Cooperative Principle	23
2.3.3. Social-norms	23

Title	Page
2.3.4. Gender and Politeness.....	24
2.3.5. Situational context, Social Status and Politeness	25
2.4. Theory of Speech Acts.....	28
2.4.1. The Speech Act of Greeting	30
2.4.2. Greeting as Linguistic Routines of Politeness.....	31
2.4.3. Greeting Strategies: Brown and Levinson Model	32
2.4.4. Social Factors Constraining the Use of Greetings.....	35
2.5. Summary	38
Chapter Three: Methodology	
3.1. Overview	41
3. 2. The Methodology of Previous ILP Studies.....	42
3. 2.1 Methods of collecting spoken data in previous ILP studies	42
3.3. Participants	44
3.4. Instruments	45
3.5. Procedures	48
3.6. Summary	49
Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Results	
4.1. Overview	50
4.2. Data Analysis	51
4.3. Gender and Politeness.....	58
4.4. Situational Context and Politeness	66
4.5. Social Status and Politeness.....	71
4.6. Concluding Remarks	79
Chapter Five: Discussion, Conclusion and Implication	
5.1. Overview	82

Title	Page
5.2. Discussion of the Results	82
5.3. Implications for Language Instruction	86
5.4. Limitations of the Study	88
5.5. Directions for Future Research	89
Appendices	91
References	125

List of Tables

Title	Page
Table 3.1. Number of respondents in each subject group	45
Table 4.1. The distribution of contextual factors	51
Table 4.2. The effect of gender on the choice of politeness strategy	58
Table 4.3. Chi-square result for gender	59
Table 4.4. The effect of situational context on the choice of politeness strategy	66
Table 4.5. Chi-square result for the effect of situational context	67
Table 4.6. The effect of social status on the choice of politeness strategy	72
Table 4.7. Chi-square result for the effect of social status	72

List of Abbreviations

2nd: Second Person

TL: Target Language

3rd: Third person

W: Weigh

CA: Contrastive Analysis

CAH: Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

D: Distance

DCT: Discourse Completion Task

DWDCT: Dramatic Written Discourse Completion Task

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

F: Female

FTA: Face Threatening Act

H: Hearer

ILP: Inter-Language Pragmatics

L1: First Language

L2: Second Language

M: Male

NE: Native English

NES: Native English Speaker

NNS: Non-Native speaker

NP: Native Persian

NPS: Native Persian Speaker

NS: Native Speaker

OPT: Oxford Placement Test

P: Power

PL: Plural

S: Speaker

SA: Speech act

SC: Situational context

Sing: Singular

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Overview

The appropriateness of speech is necessary to communicate successfully. Speech appropriateness varies not only from context to context, but also from one language to another. Therefore people of different cultural backgrounds may interpret appropriateness differently. Cross-cultural studies discover appropriate speech that native speakers (NSs) use in different situations. By comparing the speech styles, teachers and practitioners can help their students learn appropriate tools for more successful communication.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Greeting and greeting's response in interactions with family members, friends, acquaintances and strangers make it necessary to learn how to make and to understand appropriate speech because failure to do so may cause miscommunication. Being able to greet and respond to greeting appropriately in a wide variety of situations is taken for granted by most NSs. The importance of knowing the socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic rules for greeting and responding to greeting is evidenced by the fact that these rules are

taught to children at an early stage in their socialization process (Eisenstein, Bodman & Carpenete, 1995). Consequently, NSs often think that everyone, even non-native speakers (NNSs), should be able to perform in accordance with the pragmatic norms of their society (Kasper, 1990; Hinkel, 1994). Native people can draw on the resources of their linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge to formulate their speech appropriately for a given context. This knowledge is referred to as pragmatic competence. Unlike NSs, most English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners have limited resources in a target language (TL) with which to undertake their interactions. Thus, their utterances may be inappropriate for the addressees and the situation. However, as Eisenstein et al. (1995) pointed out learners of a foreign language often assume that the expression of greeting is universal and unaware of significant differences in its cross-cultural realization.

The complexity of language should not make language teachers postpone teaching pragmatics until a certain level of linguistic competency. It would be ineffective to treat TL pragmatics as a component of language to be added after the lexical and grammatical competencies have been fully formed (Eslami Rasekh & Ahar, 2010). Despite the spread of communicative methods in language pedagogy, the syllabi of many second language (L2) courses still follow the sequence of grammatical structures rather than language functions. Pragmatics, with few exceptions, remains a marginal part of L2 instruction, as evidenced by its placement in textbooks and the goals of teaching and testing (Eslami Rasekh & Ahar, 2010). Despite the wealth of empirical studies conducted about speech acts in general; few studies in Iran have focused on the effect of first language (L1) transfer on politeness in greeting. Therefore, the research questions that guided the present study are as follows:

1. Are Persian EFL learners competent in applying politeness strategies to greeting in L2?
2. Does gender of speakers affect Persian EFL learners' choice of politeness strategies in different gender interactions in L1 and L2?

3. Do the situational context and social status affect the choice of politeness strategies in learners' greetings in L1 and L2?

1.3. Significance of the Study

The reason for concentrating on the study of speech acts is that all linguistic communication involves linguistic acts. In Hymes' (1972) view, the formalist models of language, such as the work of Chomsky (1965), could not account for the creative and social uses of language, including speech acts (SAs). In the area of cross-cultural study of speech acts, researchers have focused on how a particular speech act is linguistically realized in different languages. It is assumed that if languages differ in the way they perform a speech act, then it is predictable that learners of a second language may develop a particular inter-language for doing that act. Accordingly, learners with limited knowledge of a particular language and culture may find themselves in awkward situations of misunderstandings.

During the last decades, a great number of studies have been done to form a theory of universals of language use and rules of politeness as an aspect of language use have been the target of many researches (e.g., Brown & Gilman, 1960; Langford, 1989; Klein, 1994; Yarmohammadi, 1995; Burke, 2000; Berry, 2001; Bijkerk, 2004; Beeching, 2007; Culpeper & Archer, 2008; Culpeper 2009; Kádár, 2011). The concepts of face and politeness are most probably universal to particular language and their realizations tend to be culture-specific (Brown & Levinson, 1978).

It is important to note that knowing a language is not simply limited to being able to form grammatically correct sentences; it is rather about appropriate use of language. Language teachers need to teach their students both how to form grammatically correct sentences as well as how to use these sentences in appropriate contexts. Lack of this knowledge may cause pitfalls in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication.

1.4. Definition of Key Terms

1.4.1. Pragmatics

According to Yule (1996, p.3), "Pragmatics is the study of how language is used in communication. As a learner of a foreign language, what you are learning is actually inter-language pragmatics because you already have pragmatic knowledge of your L1 while you acquire pragmatic knowledge in your L2".

Pragmatic knowledge of L1 can either help or hurt second and foreign language learners, depending on how close or how different the second language and culture are and how much learners are aware of the socio-cultural norms of the TL. Studying pragmatics helps learners to become more native-like in appropriate use of language in different situations and to build relationships with members of the TL's culture (Trosborg, 1995).

1.4.2. Pragmatic Competence

Even though pragmatic competence has been recognized as one of the vital components of communicative competence (e.g., Bachman, 1990), there is a lack of a clear and widely accepted definition of pragmatic competence. Barron (2003) claims that pragmatic competence is the knowledge of the linguistic resources available in a given language for realizing particular illocutions, knowledge of the sequential aspects of speech acts, and finally, knowledge of the appropriate contextual use of the particular language's linguistic resources.

Kasper (1997) defines it as the ability to comprehend and produce a communicative act which includes the knowledge about the social distance, social status between the interlocutors, the cultural knowledge such as politeness, and the explicit and implicit linguistic knowledge.

Research into the pragmatic competence of adult foreign and second language learners has convincingly demonstrated that the pragmatics of learners and NSs is quite different (Kasper, 1997). Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) state "Even fairly advanced language learners" communicative acts

regularly contain pragmatic errors, or deficits, in that they fail to convey or comprehend the intended illocutionary force or politeness value" (p.10).

1.4.3. Contrastive Pragmatics

The pragmatic principles people abide by in one language are often different in another. Thus there has been a growing interest in how people in different languages observe a certain pragmatic principle. Cross-linguistic and cross cultural studies have reported what is considered polite in one language is sometimes impolite in another. Contrastive pragmatics, however, is not confined to the study of a certain pragmatic principle. Cultural breakdowns and pragmatic failure are also components of cross-cultural and contrastive pragmatics.

Another focus of research in contrastive pragmatics is learner language or inter-language. This interest eventually evolved into inter-language pragmatics (ILP), a branch of pragmatics which specifically discusses how NNSs comprehend and produce a speech act in a TL and how their pragmatic competence develops over time (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993).

1.4.4. Inter-language Pragmatics

Kasper (1992, p.203) defines ILP as "the branch of L2 research which studies how non-native speakers understand and carry out linguistic action in a target language and how they acquire L2 pragmatic knowledge". In other words, ILP concerned about the acquisition and performance of speech acts in the TL by L2 learners. Kasper & Dahl (1991) define ILP as "referring to non-native speakers' comprehension and production of speech acts and how that L2-related knowledge is acquired" (p.216).

1.4.5. Pragmatic Transfer

Researchers in the field of ILP also claim an interest in transfer. They are interested in finding out in what way native language-based transfers influence

the learners in comprehending and performing a speech act in a TL and whether such transfers are appropriate in the context.

Kasper's (1992) defines pragmatic transfer as the effect of learners' pragmatic knowledge of first language and culture on their comprehension, production and learning of L2 pragmatic information. Kasper (1992) makes a distinction between positive and negative transfer. The kind of transfer that results in ILP behavior that is consistent with TL norms is regarded as positive, while the kind of transfer that causes ILP deviation from the target norm is considered negative.

The present study adopts Kasper's (1997) and (1992) definitions of pragmatic competence and transfer as they concern comprehension and production of a communicative act which focus on the interlocutors' social distance, social status, the cultural knowledge of politeness and the effect of learners' first language and culture on learning of L2.

1.4.6. Politeness

Politeness is an important principle in the area of pragmatics and ILP. According to Mills (2003, p. 6), "Politeness is the expression of the speakers' intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face threatening acts toward another". Being polite therefore consists of attempting to save face.

Politeness theory formulated in 1987 by Brown and Levinson expanded academia's perception of politeness. It states that some speech acts may threaten face needs of the speaker (S) or hearer (H). Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) distinguish two kinds of face; positive face and negative face. But these terms, positive and negative face can be misleading; instead, Hudson (1996) calls them solidarity-face and power-face to show the close link to the important concepts of power and solidarity. Solidarity-face is respect as in *I respect you for...*, i.e. the appreciation and approval that speakers show for the kind of person we are, for our values and so on. Power-face is respect as in *I respect your right to...* which is a negative agreement not to interfere. Therefore there are two kinds of

politeness; solidarity-politeness, which shows respect for the addressee and power-politeness, which shows respect for the rights of the addressee.

1.4.7. Speech Act Theory

This theory attempts to explain how Ss use language to accomplish intended actions and how Hs infer intended meaning from what is said. Although speech act studies are now considered a sub-discipline of cross-cultural pragmatics, they actually take their origin in the philosophy of language. It has been an important framework for analyzing language in many different contexts, such as child language, literature, and discourse analysis and, of course, ILP.

Philosophers like Austin (1962), Grice (1957), and Searle (1965, 1969, 1975) offered basic insight into this new theory of linguistic communication based on the assumption that "the minimal units of human communication are not linguistic expressions, but rather the performance of certain kinds of acts, such as making statements, asking questions, giving directions, apologizing, thanking, greeting and so on" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p.2). Austin (1962) defines the performance of uttering words with a consequential purpose as "the performance of a locutionary act, and the study of utterances thus far and in these respects are the study of locutions or of the full units of speech" (p. 69). These units of speech are not tokens of the symbol or word or sentence but rather units of linguistic communication and, it is "the production of the token in the performance of the speech act that constitutes the basic unit of linguistic communication" (Searle, 1965, p.136). According to Austin's (1962) theory, these functional units of communication have:

1. Propositional or locutionary meaning - the literal meaning of what is said *it's hot in here*.
2. Illocutionary meaning - the social function of what is said' *It's hot in here*' could be:
 - an indirect request for someone to open the window
 - an indirect refusal to close the window because someone is cold

-a complaint implying that someone should know it is better than to keep the windows closed (expressed emphatically)

3. Perlocutionary meaning - the effect of what is said '*It's hot in here*' could result in someone opening the windows.

Searle (1969, 1975, & 1979) tried to modify and extend Austin's SA theory. He introduced a taxonomy of actions that can be performed by speaking. Searle's classification has five basic SAs:

(i) *Representatives*: In using this act, the Ss commit themselves to the truth of the expressed proposition (e.g., asserting, concluding);

(ii) *Directives*: The S issues a directive as an attempt to get the H to do something (e.g., requesting, suggesting);

(iii) *Commissives*: The purpose of commissives is to commit the S to some action in the future (e.g., promising, threatening, and offering);

(iv) *Expressives*: The illocution of expressives is to convey the S's psychological state (e.g., thanking, apologizing, welcoming, greeting);

(v) *Declarations*: These acts, when successfully performed, have the effect of immediately changing the reality. The issuance of declarations often happens within an institutional context (e.g., religion, politics, employment) and alters the previous conditions (e.g., marrying two previously single individuals, swearing people into office to make them government officials, firing an employee and changing the person's status to unemployed).

These SAs have been claimed by some to operate by universal pragmatic principles (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1975; Brown & Levinson, 1978). Others have shown them to vary in conceptualization and verbalization across cultures and languages (Wong, 1994; Wierzbicka, 1985). Although this debate has been continued more than three decades, only the last 15 years marked a shift from an intuitively based approach to an empirically based one, "which has focused on the perception and production of speech acts by learners of a second or foreign language (in the most cases, English as a second or foreign language, i.e., ESL and EFL) at varying stages of language proficiency and in different social