

In the Name of God



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M.A. Thesis

**A Contrastive pragmatic study of gratitude strategies of English
and Persian speakers**

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March 2010

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 سیده وجیهه آهار تحت عنوان

کاربرد شناسی مقابله ای راهکارهای ابراز قدردانی انگلیسی و فارسی زبانان

در تاریخ ۱۳۸۸/۱۲/۱۱ توسط هیأت داوران زیر بررسی و با درجه عالی به تصویب نهایی رسید.

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- ۴- استاد داورداخل از گروه دکترزهره کسایان با مرتبه ی علمی استادیار
امضا
- امضای مدیر گروه

Acknowledgments

During the time of writing I received support and help from many people. In particular, I am profoundly indebted to my supervisor, Dr. Eslami-Rasekh, who was very generous with his time and knowledge and assisted me in each step to complete the thesis. Many thanks also go to Dr. Ahmadi my advisor and Dr. Tavakoli because of their precious guidance. I would like to take this opportunity to express my immense gratitude to all those persons who have given their invaluable support and assistance. 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. Their successful teaching has made the dissertation possible.

I would also like to thank my whole family who has been an important and indispensable source of spiritual support. My sincere thanks go to the students who participated in this thesis. I would like to thank my dear friends Parisa Abdolrezapour, Samira Atefi and Mojtaba Khabbaz for their love, care and encouragement which give me the incentive to finish this work.

. . . and to God who gave me the strength and perseverance to continue when I wanted to give up.

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. I have received much useful advice throughout the writing of my thesis, but all the faults that remain are obstinately my own.

*I dedicate this dissertation to my mother and
father, Farideh Zamini and Abdolrah Ahar,
Both of whom gave me strength and support to
complete this work in ways they may never
understand.*

Abstract

This study investigates the strategies Native English and Persian speakers employ for expressing gratitude in different situations. The strategies of Persian EFL learners are also compared with English strategies in order to find the differences that may exist between these two languages. Social status and size of imposition of the favor are social variables which are investigated in detail for three groups. Unlike comprehensive studies on SAs such as request and apology, the number of cross-cultural studies investigating expressions of gratitude is fairly limited and there are few studies investigating this speech act in Persian. The participants of this study were 75 advanced students from the English department of Isfahan University. The participants were both male and female, aging from 20 to 31 years old. 24 American college aged, native speakers also participated in this study. An open-ended DCT were employed for studying participants' responses and verbal reactions to different situations. The results of Chi-square test suggested that Persian and English speakers vary in their gratitude strategies. Persian students' sensitivity to social variables made them use inappropriate expressions and strategies in their English responses. It suggested that Persian learners of English transfer some of their L1 pragmatic norms to L2 because they perceive these norms to be universal.

Keywords: Contrastive Pragmatics, Interlanguage pragmatics, Speech Act, Gratitude Strategies

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List of Abbreviations

1st : First person

2nd : Second person

3rd : Third person

CAH: Contrastive analysis hypothesis

D: Distance

DCT: Discourse completion test

DRPT: Discourse role play task

DWDCT: Dramatic written discourse completion task

EFL: English as a foreign language

ESL: English as a second language

FL: Foreign language

H: Hearer

IL: Interlanguage

ILP: Interlanguage pragmatics

M: Mean

NA: native American

Neg-marker: Negative marker

NP: native Persian

NS: Native speaker

NNS: Non-native speaker

Obj-marker: Objective marker

P: Power

PLOE: Persian learners of English

Pl: Plural

R: Ranking

S: Speaker

SA: Second language

SD: Standard deviation

Sing: Singular

SL: Source language

SLA: Second language acquisition

Subj: Subjunctive

TL: Target language

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Overview

For communicating successfully the *appropriateness* of language use, which is of great importance, varies not only from context to context within a language, but also varies from one language to another and from one culture to another. Therefore, *appropriateness* may be interpreted differently by people of different cultural backgrounds in different contexts. Contrastive pragmatic studies determine the patterns and strategies that native speakers of one language use in different situations. By comparing the patterns of two languages teachers and other practitioners can equip their students with necessary and appropriate tools for a successful communication.

1.2. Statement of the problem

Persian and English native speakers give thanks and reply to thanks on numerous occasions in their everyday-life interactions with family members, friends, acquaintances and strangers. It is necessary to learn how to understand and construct language that is appropriate to the situations in which one is functioning, because failure to do so may cause misunderstandings and miscommunications. Being able to express one's gratitude and respond to expressions of gratitude appropriately in a wide variety of situations ranging from thanking someone for opening a door to expressing one's gratitude for a gift is something that most native speakers (NSs) take for granted. The importance of knowing the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic rules for thanking and responding to thanks is evidenced by the fact that these rules are taught to children at an early stage in their socialisation process (Becker and Smenner, 1986). Consequently, native speakers often think that everyone, even non-native speakers, should be able to perform this speech act in accordance with the pragmatic norms of their society (Kasper 1990; Hinkel 1994).

NSs can draw on the resources of their linguistic and sociocultural knowledge to formulate their speech appropriately for a given context. This knowledge is referred to as *pragmatic competence*. Unlike NSs, most language 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 Bodman and Eisenstein (1988) point out "learners of a foreign language often assume that the expression of gratitude is universal and remain unaware of significant differences in its cross-cultural realization" (p. 1). As a result, neither native speakers nor learners of the target language expect to encounter different strategies in the thanking behaviour in their interactions with each other.

The complexity of language should not make language teachers to postpone teaching pragmatics until a certain level of linguistic competence has been

achieved. 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. Despite the spread of communicative methods in language pedagogy, the syllabi of many L2 courses still follow the sequence of grammatical structures rather than language functions. TL 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.

Unfortunately, this aspect of language is usually ignored in Iran English classrooms and despite the wealth of empirical studies conducted about speech acts in general; few studies have focused on L1 transfer of gratitude expressions.

Therefore, the research questions that the present study seeks to answer are:

- 1- What are the strategies by which Persian speakers, Persian learners of English and English speakers express their gratitude?
- 2- What is the effect of social status on the native Persian, Persian learners of English and English speakers' expressions of gratitude?

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 interlanguage for doing that act. Accordingly, Learners with limited knowledge

of a particular language and culture may find themselves in awkward situations of misunderstandings and *faux pas*.

Ellis (1994) argues that speaking natively is speaking idiomatically using frequent and familiar collocations and the job of the language learner is to learn these familiar word sequences or *formulaic sequences*, as Gatbonton and Segalowitz (1988) call them. Research into the pragmatic competence of adult foreign and second language learners has demonstrated that grammatical development does not guarantee a corresponding level of pragmatic development (Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei, 1997) and that even advanced learners fail to comprehend or to convey the intended intentions and politeness values in their second or foreign languages.

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 interlanguage (IL) pragmatics because you already have pragmatic knowledge of your first language while you acquire pragmatic knowledge in your second language.

Your pragmatic knowledge from your first language, however, can either help you or hurt you, depending on how close or how different the second or foreign language and culture are to your own and how much you are aware of the socio-cultural norms of the target language.

Studying pragmatics helps learners become more native-like in their language production and helps them build relationships with members of the target language culture. Even if students are able to perfectly master all of the grammar of the language they are studying, unless they acquire pragmatic knowledge, their speech will always seem strange to native-speakers.

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, widely accepted definition of pragmatic competence. Kasper (1997) defines pragmatic competence as the ability to comprehend and produce a communicative act (which often includes one's knowledge about the social distance, social status between the speakers involved, the cultural knowledge such as politeness, and the explicit and implicit linguistic knowledge).

In Bachman's model (1990), language competence is divided into two areas consisting of *organizational competence* and *pragmatic competence*. Organizational competence comprises knowledge of linguistic units and the rules of joining them together at the levels of sentence (*grammatical competence*) and discourse (*textual competence*). Pragmatic competence consists of illocutionary competence, that is, knowledge of speech acts and speech functions, and sociolinguistic competence. *Sociolinguistic competence* entails the ability to use language appropriately according to context. It thus includes the ability to select communicative acts and appropriate strategies to implement them depending on the contextual features of the situation. In Bachman's model, pragmatic competence is not subordinated to knowledge of grammar and text organization but is coordinated to formal linguistic and textual knowledge and interacts with *organizational competence* in complex ways.

Research into the pragmatic competence of adult foreign and second language learners has demonstrated convincingly that the pragmatics of learners and native speakers (NSs) are quite different (Kasper 1997). Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) submit, "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). Therefore, there is a need for L2 instruction to focus on pragmatics of the language, and researchers in this area generally point out the positive

impact of instruction aimed at raising learners' pragmatic awareness (Kasper, 1997).

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 reported what is considered polite in one language is sometimes not polite in another. Contrastive pragmatics, however, is not confined to the study of a certain pragmatic principle. Cultural breakdowns, pragmatic failure are also components of cross-cultural and contrastive pragmatics.

To date, a handful of cross-sectional, longitudinal and theoretical studies on classroom basis have been conducted and the potentials along the interface of pragmatics with SLA research have been widely felt (Kasper & Schmidt (1996); Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford (1996); Takahashi (1996); House (1996) and Cohen (1996)).

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

1.4.4. Interlanguage pragmatics (ILP)

Kasper (1992, p.203) defines interlanguage pragmatics as "the branch of second language 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 is about the acquisition and performance of speech acts in the TL by L2 learners. Kasper & Dahl (1991) define Interlanguage pragmatics as "referring to non-native speakers'