

UDC 811.111'276.11

811.222.1'276.11

Original scientific paper

Received on 26.03. 2010.

Accepted for publication on 02.02. 2011.

**Amin Karimnia**<sup>1</sup>

**Akbar Afghari**<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Islamic Azad University

Khorasgan Branch, Isfahan

<sup>2</sup> Sheikhabaee University, Isfahan

## **Compliments in English and Persian interaction: A cross-cultural perspective**

The study of compliments has attracted the attention of many scholars (e.g., Goffman 1971; Lakoff 1973; Brown and Levinson 1978; Amouzadeh 2001; Golato 2002; Sharifian 2005) and has become a major issue in the area of interactional sociolinguistics. To date, many models of politeness have been put forward in the literature. In this study, Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) politeness model was used to carry out a comparative analysis. The compliment response behavior of native Persian speakers was compared with that of native speakers of American English to see if it can provide evidence for applicability of Brown and Levinson's universal model. The data were taken from a corpus of 50 hours of recording the live interviews from the Persian and English TV channels. The results show Persian and English speakers use different strategies and culture has an important effect on speakers' speech act performance. The results also demonstrate the inapplicability of Brown and Levinson's model for cross-cultural comparisons.

**Key words:** politeness; American English; Persian; cross-cultural studies; compliment responses.

## 1. Introduction

The study of politeness has a rather short life. Leech (2005:2) asserts:

The academic study of politeness was a new field when I published my first paper on the subject – *Language and Tact* – in 1977, shortly before Brown and Levinson's more extensive and influential study appeared in 1978: 'Universals of language usage: Politeness phenomena'. Since then, the field has grown enormously: Watts (2003: xi) says that he has 'a bibliography [on politeness] that contains roughly 1,200 titles, and it is growing steadily week by week'. There is now an international journal dedicated to this field: *the Journal of Politeness Research*, founded in the year 2005.

The analysis of politeness has attracted a good deal of attention on the ground that (1) knowledge of politeness formulas is believed to be indispensable to the acquisition of communicative competence, (2) failure to grasp the fine politeness differences between first language and target language can lead to serious misunderstandings, and (3) a contrastive analysis of politeness formulas could help learners improve their communicative competence and develop a deeper understanding of the foreign culture.

To date, there have been many models of politeness put forward in the literature (e.g., Lakoff 1973, 1975; Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987; Leech 1983; Fraser and Nolen 1981; Green 1989). According to Kasper (1990), Brown and Levinson's theory has generated a wealth of theoretical and empirical research in a wide variety of disciplines such as anthropology, developmental psychology, education, and applied linguistics. Brown and Levinson's framework essentially presupposes the Gricean (1975) formulations of conversational maxims and implicatures as an appropriate and correct analytic model, thereby assuming that the nature of talk is based on a rational and efficient foundation so that a maximal exchange of information is achieved. However, we can frequently find in spoken exchanges that everyday linguistic behavior deviates from Grice's proposals. Brown and Levinson (1978) believe that such deviations from model situations more often than not are driven by a motivation of politeness, which could offer a rational explanation for the speaker's obvious inefficiency and irrationality.

Speech act theory as one of the fields in the philosophy of language considers the concept of context as a crucial one. Already for Austin, context was part of what philosophers of language have to explain, namely "the total speech act in the total speech situation" (1962: 148). In consideration of the close association between speech act and context, the way in which the context of a speech act is conceived contributes to what the speech act is supposed to be, for example,

whether it is a genuine social action and in what sense. In other words, speech acts operate by universal principles of pragmatics (e.g., Austin 1962; Searle 1979), or of politeness (e.g., Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987; Leech 1983). Furthermore, it is suggested that the strategies for realizing specific linguistic behavior are essentially identical across different cultures and languages, though the appropriate use of any given strategies may not be exactly the same across speech communities (Fraser 1985). By contrast, others maintain that speech acts actually vary in both conceptualization and realization across languages and cultures, and that their modes of performance are mainly motivated by differences in deep-seated cultural conventions and assumptions (e.g., Green 1975; Blum-Kulka et al. 1989). The issue of universality versus culture-specificity in speech act studies is still hotly debated. Typical of this debate are the opposing views of Searle (e.g., 1975) and Wierzbicka (e.g., 1991). Searle (1975) claims that speech acts are semantic universals and hence not culture-bound. He maintains that across languages and cultures, there are general norms for realizing speech acts and conducting politeness behavior, and that while the forms embodying these norms may vary from one language to another, the cross-cultural differences are not that important. However, Wierzbicka (1991) by providing examples from Polish and Japanese, objects to this universalistic stand and contends that choosing circumstances for performing certain speech acts is based on cultural norms and values rather than on certain general mechanisms. She even argues that any existing claims to universality in speech act behavior are necessarily subjective and ethnocentric. Given the point that only a few speech acts and languages have been studied in the literature, existing claims for universality are seriously called into question by studies such as Wierzbicka's (1985a, 1991).

In this study, the compliment response behavior of native Persian speakers was compared with that of native speakers of American English. This paper aims at possibly providing evidence for or against Brown and Levinson's universal theory.

## **2. Face in Brown and Levinson's theory and Intercultural Differences**

Goffman is acknowledged to have great influence on Brown and Levinson's work. In the revised edition of their 1978 essay, which they dedicate to Goffman's memory, the authors assert: "our notion of face is derived from that of Goffman and from the English folk term" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61).

The concept of 'face' is generally thought to have originated in China, and Goffman himself acknowledges Chinese sources. A careful reading of his essay on face-work reveals some distinctly individualistic traits, which appear to be

woven into socio-psychological construct of 'face.' This individualistic emphasis has been picked up and elaborated by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) into a cognitive model of 'face' based on western ethnocentric assumptions such as the existence of a predominantly rational actor and the strategic, goal-oriented nature of 'face-work' and of social interaction. Hence their model's obsession with FTAs.

The potential for face-loss is often compounded in cross-cultural discourse, due to variation in how each culture manages face (Holmes 1988). A dispreferred response may be construed quite mildly in one culture, but taken as an affront in another. Also, verbal messages are open to misinterpretation. In many Asian cultures, "the words are only part of...the total communication context, which includes the personal characters of the parties involved and the nature of the interpersonal relationships between them" (Gudykunst and Kim 2003: 216). This contrasts with many western cultures where the verbal message is most important. In addition, appropriate degrees of indirectness vary widely by culture. Non-verbal messages are also open to misinterpretation (Gumperz 1982) in cross-cultural exchanges. Such cues as eye contact (Hall 1966), or display of emotion (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey 1988) are all susceptible in this regard. Employment of negative speech acts in cross-cultural interaction is complex and problematic.

### 3. Face in Persian

Departures from Gricean norms by Persian people are also driven by politeness concerns and thus serve as face-redressive strategies. Koutlaki (2002) contends that there exist two aspects of face in Persian culture. One, *shakhsiat* refers to prestige, the other, *ehteraam*, refers to the respect of the community for a person with a good moral standard. The main difference between the two is that basically, *shakhsiat* has to do with an individual's prestige, whereas *ehteraam* has to do with recognition by community for an individual's socially acceptable, moral behavior or judgment. Nevertheless, both components involve respectable images that one can claim for oneself from the community in which one interacts or to which one belongs. Thus, to be polite in Persian discourse is to know how to attend to each other's *shakhsiat* and *ehteraam* (Koutlaki 2002).

#### 4. Compliment and compliment responses in English and Persian

Hobbs (2003: 249), defines compliment as “a speech act which explicitly or implicitly bestows credit upon the addressee for some possession, skill, characteristic, or the like, that is positively evaluated by the speaker and addressee.”

Compliments and responses to compliments have been studied for American English (Pomerantz 1978; Wolfson and Manes 1980; Wolfson 1981b, 1983; Knapp et al. 1984; Herbert 1989, 1990; Holmes 1986, 1988; Herbert and Straight 1989) and for Persian (Beeman, 1986; Sharifian 2005; Amouzadeh 2001; Yarmohammadi 1995; Koutlaki 2002).

The present study is patterned after Pomerantz’s (1978) analysis of compliment responses and addresses similarities and differences in the complimenting behavior of English and Persian. Pomerantz (1978) talks about a classification of compliment response routine patterns. These patterns are upgrades, downgrades, contrastive opposites, scaled-down agreements, reassignments of praise and returns.

#### 5. Methodology

Different tools and methods of data collection have been used in the study of compliments. They include: (a) discourse completion tasks and questionnaires (e.g., Barnlund and Akari 1985; Sharifian 2005; Tang and Zhang 2009), (b) recall protocols (e.g., Knapp et al. 1984), (c) role play (e.g., Saito and Beecken 1997), (d) field observation (e.g., Wolfson and Manes 1980; Herbert and Straight 1989, and many others) and (e) conversation and discourse analysis (Pomerantz 1978; Wieland 1995; Golato 2002). Golato (2003) discussed the merits and demerits of each of these methods of data collection, noting that each of them allows the researcher to investigate different facets of the topic at hand. Furthermore, she argued that conversation analysis (CA) is well suited for the close study of culturally determined speech events since it makes use of video-and/or audio taped samples of non-elicited face-to-face or telephone conversations, thus allowing for the repeated and detailed analysis of a phenomenon in its sequential context. As a result, both interactional features and nonverbal elements can be included in the analysis. Since the data are always spontaneous, they represent what speakers are actually doing in conversation. Crucially, they do not represent speakers’ intuitions, which are not always reliable in such contexts (Golato 2003). Following the recommendation by Golato (2003), the researchers used naturally occurring interview data which was recorded.

The data were taken from a corpus of 50 hours of recording the live interviews from the following Persian and English TV channels: VOA Persian TV, IRIB1PER, IRIB2PER, IRIB3PER, IRIB4PER (Persian), CNN, Hope Channel, Inspiration and VOATV1(English). They were randomly selected from larger pool of English and Persian TV channels and were collected in two months during January and February, 2009. The speakers ranged in age from almost 20 to 75 years as far as their faces showed. All speakers held or were pursuing a university degree or held white-collar positions (e.g., TV interviewers, politicians, managers, artists, authors, etc.). The 32 speakers (interviewers and interviewees) produced 65 compliment sequences from which 29 were English and 36 were Persian compliment sequences.

Table 1. Type and Number of Dyads in English and Persian.

Type	Frequency		Total
	English	Persian	
1. Upgrade and Downgrade	7	11	18
2. Contrastive Opposites	8	6	14
3. Returns	5	7	9
4. Scaled-Down Agreement	4	5	12
5. Reassignment of Praise	5	7	
Total	29	36	65

Because of the fact that the contexts are determining factors in such analyses, they were also discussed briefly.

## 1. Upgrades and Downgrades

Extract 1 (Persian):<sup>1</sup>

A: *Tafsire shomaa chie Aaghaaye Mohammadi shoma ke dar morede ma-saayele khaavare miaane az ma kheili behtar midunid va dar jaryaan hastid.*

‘What is your interpretation, Mr. Mohammadi? You know much better about Middle East issues than we do and are more informed.’

B: *Ekhtiaar daarid aaghaaye Hasani, in farmaayeshha ro nafarmaaid. Be har haal...*

‘Please Mr. *Hasani*, do not say so. Any way...’

This is the situation in which the first speaker (interviewer) compliments the other person (interviewee) by raising his position. The other speaker downgrades what the first speaker says by lowering himself. This self-lowering and the other-raising pattern is the commonest strategy in Persian.

In contrast, the self-lowering and other-raising pattern does not occur in English very often. That is, the interlocutors involved in a compliment interaction do not lower themselves. Their response is usually followed by agreement on the part of the addressee as in the following example:

Extract 2 (English):

A: *Thank you, Jack; it was an honor to have you in our program. You are really smart.*

B: *smart?*

A: *Yes. Really, you are.*

B: *Oh, yes. I am smart. However,...*

Paying attention to the context from which the above communicative routine was adopted and the intonational contour of speaker B’s response, one can see that the interviewee does not ironically accept the excessive praise bestowed upon him, on the contrary he is serious. Both the English and Persian extracts spell out that some characteristic of the speaker is the target of the compliment.

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<sup>1</sup> In transcriptions from Persian, the letter “a” symbolizes a low front vowel which is close to the sound of “a” in the word “cat.” The “aa” sequence, on the other hand, stands for a low back vowel which is close to the sound of “a” in the word “father.”

It should be noted that the English translations provided in this paper may not reveal some stylistic characteristics of the Persian expressions. For instance, the expression *ekhtiaar daarid* is a more polite form than please. *Ekhtiaar daarid* literally means “the choice rests with you” and implies “but I disagree”.

The extract in Persian suggests that there is no agreement on the part of the addressee while in English the addressee agrees with what the speaker says.

Beeman (1986: 22) contends that:

... one important principle of communication in the United States involves a tendency for individuals to try and arrive at a single set of interpretive criteria for understanding the relationship between message form and message content, and this can be glossed as 'certainty.'

The above English extract demonstrates that the addressee reinforces what the speaker says by strengthening it whereas in Persian the addressee lowers himself rejecting it. It postulates that what the first speaker says can be interpreted differently, that is, Persian compliment interaction is always characterized by 'uncertainty.' Beeman (1986: 24) in this regard asserts:

... the impression of uncertainty in Iranian life is based on observation of a core of regular phenomena in interaction and can be stated as a principle of communication: the relationship between message form and message content cannot be interpreted according to any single set of criteria.

## 2. Contrastive Opposites

One of the compliment patterns that frequently occur in Persian is the contrastive opposites as in the following example:

Extract 3 (Persian):

A: *Bebakhshid, maa emshab kheili ham azyatetun kardim?*

'Sorry, we bothered you a lot tonight.'

B: *Na kheir aslan*

'No, not at all.'

A: *Maa mojrihaa ye kam ziaadi harf mizanim.*

'We interviewers talk too much.'

B: *Na. ettefaaghan khosh sohbat hastid.*

'No, incidentally you are a pleasant speaker.'

This is the situation in which the interviewer apologizes the interviewee for what he did (too much talking). In other words, the interviewer blames himself. However, to appear polite, the interviewee denies what the interviewer says implying that he should not blame himself.



The above extract spells out that the speaker A demeans himself by saying that there was really something wrong. The conversation gives us the impression that what the addressee states does not reveal his true feelings.

Paying attention to the context from which the above communicative routine was adopted, one can see that the interviewer talked too much, that he bothered the interviewee, and that he was entirely intolerable. However, the interviewee, aware of this fact, attempts to give the impression that the interviewer was not such bad company as he thinks he is. In fact, the interviewee is concealing his true feelings towards the problem. If the interviewee expressed his true feelings towards the interviewer, it would be generally considered as impolite.

To describe the same pattern in English, an extract from one of the English channels seems to be in order:

Extract 4 (English):

A: *I don't know why I can't stop myself. I talk too much.*

B: *You don't talk too much. You are just lively.*

As the short segment suggests, the man speaking demeans himself by confessing the fact that he is too talkative, and that he must try to reform himself maximizing the harshness of his bad behavior. The second speaker opposes to what the first speaker says by raising his position.

To contrast the English and Persian interaction routines, it should be noted that the two extracts are similar in both English and Persian. In both extracts, the speakers consider their behavior reprehensible and put themselves down. The addressees oppose to what the speakers say. The addressees say something to raise the position of the speakers. In Persian, however, the speaker in the compliment interaction does not reveal his true feelings while in English, given the social norm and context, the English speaker expresses what he feels. Besides, in such cases in Persian if one says what he truly feels, he is considered to be impolite (Beeman, 1986).

### 3. Returns

One of the compliment response routines that occur in both English and Persian is referred to as return. This is basically shown as follows:

A: A compliments B

B: B compliments A

The following extract from English shows how the interlocutors involved return the compliment expression to praise each other:

Extract 5 (English):

A: *You are a very nice listener Jane!*

B: *And you are a nice speaker.*

This is the situation in which the speaker talking to a lady speaks highly of her. The addressee returns the compliment, praising him to show a gesture of good feelings. The extract indicates the fact that the speaker wants to say something good about the addressee, the meaning of which is implicit in all compliment interaction routines. It also indicates that what the speaker says is meant to consolidate mutual good feelings towards one another.

The following extract from the Persian data illustrates a similar pattern:

Extract 6 (Persian):

A: *Kheili mamnoon aaghaaye doktor. Az mahzare jenaabe aali kheili estefaadeh kardim.*

‘Thank you very much Mr. Doctor. We benefited from your presence.’

B. *Ekhtiaar daarid!*

‘Please!’

This extract indicates that the speaker is saying something to compliment the addressee, the intent inferred from all compliment interaction routines. The meaning inferred from the expression 'ekhtiar daarid' uttered by the addressee is an indication of the fact that the addressee does not agree with the compliment assertion. What the speaker and addressee say can be interpreted in terms of what Beeman (1986: 22) calls “a hail of uncertainty” in over all Iranian communicative interactions. Paying attention to the context from which the Persian exchange unit was taken, one can imply that the interlocutors involved try to conceal their true feelings towards one another.

#### 4. Scaled-down agreement

This is the pattern in which the addressee agrees with the compliment assertion to some extent. Yet he points to some flaw in the object, rejecting full agreement. For example:

Extract 7 (Persian):

A: *Binandegaane aziz in ketaab, ketaabe kheili mofidi hast.*

‘Dear viewers, this book is a very useful book.’

B: *Albatteh hanuz naghshae daareh ke dar chaahpe dovvom enshaa'llah bartaraf mishe.*

'Of course, it has some deficiencies that hopefully will be revised in the second edition.'

The exchange unit shows that the speaker is talking highly of the addressee's book. The addressee does not reject the assertion fully, drawing attention to some flaw in the object. The extract shows again that compliment interaction routines are characterized by a hail of uncertainty in Iran.

In order to contrast the Persian pattern with that of English, consider the following extract:

Extract 8 (English):

A: *I think your book is very useful.*

B: *Yes, It really is.*

The speaker involved in this conversation is offering praise for the addressee's book. Yet, the addressee agrees with the speaker, expressing agreement over the quality of the book.

### 5. Reassignment of Praise

A common type of compliment response that occurs in English and Persian is referred to as reassignment of praise. Pomerantz (1978) defines it as an entity in which the addressee agrees with the compliment assertion, but the compliment is shifted to some third person or object. Yet in Persian once the compliment is addressed to a Persian speaker, he usually disagrees with the compliment assertion to avoid self-praise. The following example illustrates the point.

Extract 9 (Persian):

A: *Cheghadr ghashang sohbat mikonid!*

'How beautifully you talk!'

B: *Khaahesh mikonam. Age chizi ham hast vaghean be khaatere falsafe ast.*

'You are welcome. If I do, it is really due to philosophy.'

The exchange unit is from a situation in which a philosopher is being praised by a TV interviewer. However, the philosopher reassigns the praise and shifts the credit from himself to something else (philosophy). One should note that while self-praise is not desirable in Persian culture, praising others is highly va-

lued. The addressee does not agree with the speaker on the compliment assertion to avoid self-praise.

In contrast, the following English example depicts a situation in which the speaker shifts the praise from the person himself to some good quality of the person addressed.

Extract 10 (English):

A: *Biff is quarterback in his team.*

B: *Well, that is nice, isn't it?*

A: *Good health.*

It should be noted that reassignment of praise ought to be interpreted with a careful consideration of the situation in which it occurs. For example, in Persian interaction routines one may often hear others talk highly of one's achievements in his studies, business, and other daily activities. The addressee(s) normally do not accept the praise, shifting the credit to the favors of the whole. The following extract, taken from a program reviewing the achievements of some Iranian champions, will clarify the point.

Extract 11 (Persian):

A: *Az in ke in maghaam ro dar sathe jahaan be dast aavardid, vaghean behetoon tabrik migam.*

'I really congratulate you on gaining such a position in the world.'

B: *Man in moffaghiat ro madyuneh doaye mardome azizemun hastam and...*

'I owe this achievement to prayers of our dear nation and...'

The interviewer congratulated Hossein Reza Zadeh, the Iranian Olympic weight-lifter champion, who won the gold medal in the Olympic Games of 2000 and 2004. He, however, professed that he obtained such great achievements owing to the goodness, favors, and prayers of the whole nation.

## 6. Discussion

Different studies have indicated that there seem to be substantial differences between native Persian and American English speakers. Persian speakers were generally found to produce non-acceptance responses more often than English speakers did whereas the latter more often employed acceptance strategies (Yarmohammadi 1995; Sharifian 2005; Afghari and Karimnia 2007; Knapp et al. 1984; Holmes 1988; Herbert 1989). In American culture, certain speech acts

tend to be considered FTAs because the relative power relations in conversational dyads often are not recognized; thus, requests or commands are seen as very face-threatening, and particular techniques for redressing potential face damage are highly favored in western societies (Holmes 1988). By contrast, in Persian culture, there appears to be no such lack of recognition of relative power, so that face redress may not be that much of a concern. It thus seems reasonable that native speakers of American English use many more face redressive strategies (e.g., acceptance. See extract 2 and 8) while Persian speakers employ more face-damaging utterances (e.g., rejection. See extract 1 and 3).

Brown and Levinson believe that “cultures may differ in the degree to which wants other than face wants ... are allowed to supersede face wants” (1987: 249). Accordingly, we may argue that there may be some norms in Persian society that make rejection expressions less of an FTA than they are in societies like America, where wants other than face are not considered as legitimate as they are in the Persian culture. In American culture, there seems to be a more even spread of positive face wants across persons; thus, the speaker usually tends to perform exaggerated positive politeness in certain respects (see extract 8). By contrast, there is no such even spread in Persian society; accordingly it appears to be rare for the Persian people to attend excessively to positive face desires when responding to compliments. Nevertheless, since speech act theory has long been criticized for its possible ethnocentric prejudice (e.g., Wierzbicka 1991, 1996, 1998a, 1998b, 2003, 2004, and 2007)), we cannot be sure if the above explanations really represent a true picture of native Persian speakers’ compliment response behavior, even if such accounts seem to illustrate English speakers’ behavior well.

To make sure, we need to go back to the notion of face, the premise upon which Brown and Levinson construct their universal model and cross-cultural applications. Even though they argue that the core contents of positive face and negative face desires—are manifested across languages and cultures, they acknowledge that these two kinds of wants are subject to cultural specifications of many sorts such as “what kinds of acts threaten face” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 13) and “what sorts of persons have special rights to face protection.” Therefore, the fact that for Americans, the act of inviting is generally seen as threatening to the addressee’s negative face (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987), while this is not the case for Persian (Afghari and Karimnia 2007) cannot undermine the validity of Brown and Levinson’s universal formulations. If, however, the Persian concept of face cannot be included under Brown and Levinson’s notions of positive and negative face, their claims to universality may be greatly challenged. In the following section, two aspects of Persian face, *ehteraam* and *shakhsiat*, will be discussed.

### 6.1. *Ehteraam*

Persian concept of face consists of two distinct components *shakhsiat* and *ehteraam* (Koutlaki 2002). Aryanpour (2006) defines *ehteraam* as respect, esteem, deference, courtesy, homage, etc. Any verbal or non-verbal act performed out of respect is *ehteraam* (Sahragard 2004). The range of situations resulting in *ehteraam* is not limited, of course. This includes saying a simple hello, making health enquiries, inviting people for a party, uttering complimentary remarks about someone's ability, showing modesty, exhibiting a good standard of ethics, etc. This enumeration and the explanation given above point to the fact that *ehteraam* concerns human relations, both publicly and privately. It can be inferred, though, that *ehteraam* may refer to both face-to-face interactions and distant ones, involving both verbal and non-verbal communication. Examples of considering *ehteraam* in face-to-face interactions can be found in nearly all speech act forms. This is achieved verbally using polite expressions or non-verbally through showing appropriate normal kinesics or facial expressions and gestures expected of an individual in a given social environment.

*Ehteraam* appears to bear some resemblance to positive face. Generally, just like positive face, *ehteraam* connotes a person's desire to be approved of, or liked by others. There is, however, a clear difference between the two: while *ehteraam* encodes a moral overtone regarding the speaker's everyday behavior, positive face does not. In other words, *ehteraam* embodies the approval of the society as a whole rather than the goodwill of another individual (Sahragard 2004); hence it seems to be more socially situated than positive face, something which makes its realization very different from that of positive face. For the Persian, *ehteraam* is perceived as an image that is given to them by society, whereas for Brown and Levinson, positive face appears to be regarded as a desire of an individual. Notwithstanding this difference, the desire to be liked or approved of plays an important role in Persian spoken interactions and thus the similarity between *ehteraam* and positive face may lend support to Brown and Levinson's postulate of the universality of positive face desires. And they may account for the distinctive feature of *ehteraam* by simply pointing out that the content of face is culturally specific and subject to cultural elaboration.

In Persian, an individual is presumed to associate him/herself with others, rather than to have his/her personal desires satisfied. Under this circumstance, western notions such as freedom and individual are usually greatly de-emphasized or even suppressed. In reality, it is this kind of presumption that underlies the connotative meanings of the Persian concept of face, which involve the respectable and reputable images that a person can claim for him/herself from the community to which s/he belongs (Koutlaki 2002).

## 6.2. *Shakhsiat*

Aryanpour (2006) defines *shakhsiat* as personality, character, entity, etc. *Shakhsiat* refers to an individual's desire to achieve public recognition of his/her reputation or prestige, while *ehteram* stands for respect of the group for the individual who can meet both social and internalized standards of moral behavior. In practice, these two aspects of Persian face have very little to do with an individual's need for unhindered freedom of action or attention (Brown and Levinson's definition of negative face). While this kind of face desire may be involved in the Persian interactional context, when an individual tailors his/her behavior to *shakhsiat*, such involvement does not by itself support Brown and Levinson's model.

In other words, the apparent role played by negative face in the Persian case is due to a desire for *shakhsiat*; it is *shakhsiat* that motivates the Persian people in their interactional behavior. Here, the act of inviting can be taken as an example. Under Persian sociocultural norms, the invitee usually tries not to accept a given invitation immediately, but instead employs some formulaic rejection expressions; the inviter is generally able to tell from such responses that the invitee's declining is only ritual. Thus, the inviter will continue the inviting several times even though the addressee may have already explicitly declined (Afghari and Karimnia 2007). That is to say, the invitee's utterances actually give the inviter a clue telling him/her to persist in the act of inviting and signaling that the invitee does not have any desire to be left alone. Thus, while it appears that the addressee's needs to act unimpededly are impaired in this case, his/her negative face is in effect not threatened. Nevertheless, this kind of Persian inviting act is surely very face-threatening under Brown and Levinson's construct of face. By contrast, the Persian people generally believe that this act of the speaker's is not imposing at all, and that the way s/he performs it indicates that the speaker is intrinsically polite because his/her persistence in trying to obtain the addressee's acceptance is considered strong evidence of sincerity.

In the above instance, for a Persian, an individual's face is threatened only when s/he fails to follow the cultural norms, in this case telling the inviter to keep inviting several times, following the invitee's initial rejection, and not to accept a rejection by the invitee right away. Suppose the latter did indeed happen, then the speaker would not be able to achieve public recognition of his/her reputation or prestige, thus having his/her *shakhsiat* damaged. Put another way, the seeming threat to Brown and Levinson's negative face is due by the inviter's and invitee's needs to maintain *shakhsiat*; neither interactant is motivated by any concerns about negative face desires.

This example shows that cross-cultural variation is a complex issue. It appears at first glance that the fact that for the Persian, the act of inviting is not a threat to the invitee's negative face does not invalidate Brown and Levinson's universal theory, for they do recognize that the nature of FTAs is subject to cultural elaboration. However, a deeper analysis of one of the constituents of Persian face, *shakhsiat*, shows that this fact indeed challenges their universality claim of face, because the Persian inviting act cannot be accounted for in a satisfactory manner within their framework. We have seen from the above discussion that the speaker's negative face desires are usually negligible or even irrelevant in Persian sociocultural contexts, where basically to be respected means to be included as a reputable member of a given community, rather than being left alone. Therefore, though it is indeed true, as Brown and Levinson claim, that the same underlying norm could produce observed differences, we cannot ignore the fact that it is equally true that observed similarity may result from different underlying norms. The Persian act of inviting discussed above is a clear case in point. In addition, compliment responses, which are the focus of this paper, also present irrefutable evidence against Brown and Levinson's universalizing formulations of face.

Accordingly, the universality of negative face want does not appear to be substantiated. In addition, negative face does not play a major role in the Persian conception of face.

### 6.3. *Aspects of Persian face and politeness*

Basically, to be polite in Persian spoken interactions is to know how to pay attention to each other's *shakhsiat* and *ehteraam*, and to make speech acts appropriate to and worthy of such an image (koutlaki 2002). Therefore, an individual will be thought of as being polite if his/her speech act performance demonstrates his/her knowledge of *shakhsiat* and *ehteraam*.

As far as compliment responses are concerned, this tendency appears to be substantiated by a norm of *shekasteh nafsi*. Aryanpour (2006) defines *shekasteh nafsi* as modesty and humility. Sharifian (2005) argues, however, that the word *shekasteh-nafsi* in Persian is different from *modesty* in English, as it is used in western cultures, in that they refer to two distinct but overlapping cultural schemas. In circumstances when an Iranian receives compliment for an achievement or success, the cultural schema of *shekasteh-nafsi* encourages the receivers of the praise to downgrade their own role in the achievement or the success that is the target of the praise and attribute the success to the interlocutor(s), or somehow make them share the praise. If the interlocutor(s) are clearly outside the



domain of the praise, the speaker may attribute their success to other people, like their parents, God, nation, or simply to fate or luck (see extract 11).

Under this norm, the complimenter usually does not expect an agreement from the complimentee; however this does not mean that the Persian people do not think positively of themselves. By not accepting the compliment given, they project *shekasteh-nafsi*. *Shekasteh-nafsi* is one of the most critical constituents of their self-image. Accordingly, in their eyes, lowering themselves helps to maintain or even enhance their image, and more importantly, doing so attends to others' face needs and in turn protects their own, so that their behavior may be regarded as polite (Koutlaki 2002; Sharifian 2005). In fact, the norm of *shekasteh-nafsi* will more often than not make the Persian people withhold expressions of delight or gratitude, even when they do feel pleased at receiving a compliment. Seen in this light, it seems very normal for a Persian hostess to say to her guest something like the following sentence out of *shekasteh-nafsi*.

*Khahesh mikonam in keik chandaan khub ham nist aghallan yek keyk meyl befarmaeed.*

'Please go ahead. This cake is not that much good. At least take one piece.'  
(Yarmohammadi 1995: 60)

By contrast, the norm for Americans appears to be to accept compliments. This is amply evidenced in socialization advice to children and in etiquette books (Herbert 1990). By agreeing with the complimenter, the complimentee not only maintains the former's face, but also enhances his/her own (see extract 2 and 8). Therefore, Americans, when complimented, frequently agree with the complimenter or at least avoid showing disagreement, even when they do disagree with the speaker (Leech 1983; Wolfson 1989).

As mentioned above, the Persian norm is to display *shekasteh safsi*, a culturally held value about what constitutes a good face and being polite. Since Brown and Levinson's theory does not really explain Persian politeness behavior, the question is how to account for this type of utterances. Obviously, Persian non-acceptance utterances reflect the cultural norm of *shekasteh nafsi*. By not accepting the compliment given and/or humbling/abasing themselves, complimentees verbally demonstrate their knowledge of Persian face, thereby achieving public acknowledgment of their reputation or prestige and maintaining their face. More importantly, they are able to give the complimenter face, and this behavior will in turn be considered polite. In other words, because the value of *shekasteh safsi* is salient in Persian society at large, the Persian complimenter feels that his/her face is enhanced as s/he recognizes that the complimentee has been polite to him/her. An American, however, may suffer some face damage in that, by ap-

pealing to a value such as honesty, s/he might infer that his/her opinion is not important to the complimentee.

Thus, we can see that for the Persian, this type of response in fact has nothing to do with Brown and Levinson's claimed bald-on-record and/or negative politeness strategies. An interesting question then arises as to whether this will hold true for other types of Persian compliment responses as well. As to utterances involving implicit agreement or non-acceptance (e.g., many of the strategies like transfer, downgrade, scaled-down agreement and reassignment of praise, see extracts 1, 7 and 9), these, too, can to some extent be explained by the *shekasteh nafsi* norm: when employing these responses, complimentees often humble or abase themselves by diminishing the complimentary force of the praise originally directed to them.

However, utterances that involve direct acceptance or agreement (e.g., acceptance strategies and some of the other responses like *upgrade*, see extract 1 and 2) appear to pose a serious problem to the culture norm explanation. Face is an individual trait, and there are many other variables, such as *gender*, *status*, and *distance* that may affect speech act behavior; hence it seems very unlikely that we will be able to account for all speakers' politeness performance entirely from the perspective of cultural norm. We certainly can expect to find individuals within the same culture sometimes making very different types of responses; not surprisingly, acceptance responses occur in a *shekasteh safsi* norm society like Iran, while non-acceptance utterances occur in an acceptance norm culture such as the United States.

An examination of the various types of Persian compliment responses clearly shows that they in general have very little to do with positive or negative face. Accordingly, the strong cross-cultural evidence that they provide points to the inapplicability of Brown and Levinson's argument as to how the addressee's positive and/or negative face wants may be directly damaged when responding to compliments.

## 7. Conclusions and implications

At first glance, the compliment response behaviors of native Persian and American English speakers appear to illustrate the politeness strategies of Brown and Levinson's universal model. However, the initially manifested support for their claims to universality, i.e., the fact all the model's main strategies could be observed in both Persian and English, and explained as fitting in with their theory, represented only the first layer of the analysis. At a deeper level, due to the fact

that the motivations for Persian politeness behavior are in reality different from those purported by Brown and Levinson, we have found clear evidence contradicting this fit.

Brown and Levinson's universal formulations are primarily based upon the problematic premise that the constituents of face are universal. Empirically, however, there have been problems with their universality claims when applied to speech act behavior across languages and cultures and it has been suggested that these claims are not warranted by the theoretical construct (e.g., Blum-Kulka 1989; Watts et al. 1992). For example, Wierzbicka (1991, 2002, 2004) charges Brown and Levinson's model to be Anglocentric, i.e. that they adopt as a baseline or template some aspect of Anglo norms or practices and attempt to generalize or adjust this to suit all others. The central point is that terms which do not correspond to indigenous conceptualizations cannot articulate the perspective of a cultural insider. Such theories therefore do not work when applied to many other societies. In this kind of cultural belief, negative face desires play an indispensable role in speech act behavior: ignoring others' negative face conflicts with speakers' underlying cultural values and may be seen as inappropriate or impolite (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987; Blum-Kulka et al. 1989).

As far as responding to compliments is concerned, the present study has shown that whereas negative politeness plays an important role in the realization of politeness strategies for native English speakers, the Persian regard this type of face desires as irrelevant to politeness. The examination of compliment responses has provided strong support for the claim that the Persian tend to deem negative face desires as negligible or irrelevant to their politeness behavior. Furthermore, the present study also indicates that when applying a given universal framework to some society, it is indeed necessary not only to have knowledge of that society's cultural conventions, but also to consider the framework's general applicability to the situations and their accompanying speech acts.

The present study supports Wierzbicka's (1991) idea that the communicative interaction routines are realized with regard to different cultural norms in different communalities. Speakers of a given culture have been demonstrated to have shared expectations about what the appropriate behavior and its social meanings are in different contexts (Blum-Kulka 1987). For compliment responses, the practice in American culture, which places special emphasis on agreement in discursal activities, appears to be for the speaker to respond to compliments with acceptance forms. By contrast, the practice in Persian society, which attaches a high value to relative power and *shekasteh nafsi* in spoken interactions, seems to be that the speaker will respond to compliments with non-acceptance forms. Interestingly, Chinese speakers were also generally found to produce

non-acceptance responses more often than English speakers did, whereas the latter more often employed acceptance strategies (Knapp, Hopper and Bell 1984; Holmes 1988; Herbert 1989, 1990). In addition, we can now see how cultural norms and social factors may intervene in determining the distinctive patterns of compliment response behavior for a given speech community. It is, therefore, clear that the important role socio-cultural norms play should never be treated lightly when exploring the cross-cultural evidence for evaluating the universality of speech act performance.

Another implication for this research project is related to second language acquisition and language teaching. Many researchers focusing on cross-cultural communication and second language teaching have pointed out the need for including the social rules of language use in the foreign/second language classroom (Afghari and Karimnia 2007; Cortazzi 2000; Aliakbari 2004; Thomas 1983; Wildner-Bassett 1984; Byrnes 1986; Kasper and Dahl 1991; Saito and Beecken 1997; Wong 2000). It has also been pointed out that textbooks in Iran generally contain too little information about language use and/or that the dialogues which are included in textbooks to serve as a model of language use are often misleading and do not follow the patterns of naturally occurring talk (Aliakbari 2004). To date, there are only a few studies that show how language use can be taught in the classroom, for example, Holmes and Brown (1987) show how compliments can be taught. This is an area where more research is needed.

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### Authors' address:

Amin Karimnia  
English Language Department  
Islamic Azad University  
Khorasgan branch  
Isfahan, Iran

aminkarimnia@yahoo.com

Akbar Afghari  
Sheikhbahaee University, Isfahan  
Islamic Azad University  
Khorasgan branch  
Isfahan, Iran  
afghary@yahoo.com

**KOMPLIMENTI U INTERAKCIJI GOVORNIKA  
ENGLESKOG I GOVORNIKA PERZIJSKOG JEZIKA:  
MEĐUKULTURALNA PERSPEKTIVA**

Komplimenti privlače pozornost brojnih istraživača (npr. Goffman 1971; Lakoff 1973; Brown and Levinson 1978; Amouzadeh 2001; Golato 2002; Sharifian 2005) i postali su jednim od glavnih predmeta proučavanja u okviru interakcijske sociolingvistike. Do sada su u literaturi ponuđeni brojni modeli učtivosti. U ovoj smo studiji za potrebe komparativne analize primijenili model učtivosti Browna i Levinsona (1978, 1987). Reakcije na komplimente u izvornih govornika perzijskog jezika usporedili smo s onima izvornih govornika američkog engleskog kako bismo utvrdili može li nam takav pristup pružiti dokaz o primjenjivosti univerzalnog modela Browna i Levinsona. Podatke za analizu čini korpus od 50 sati tonskoga zapisa intervjua koji su se prikazivali uživo na perzijskim i engleskim TV kanalima. Rezultati pokazuju da govornici perzijskog i engleskog jezika koriste različite strategije te da kultura pojedinca igra bitnu ulogu u njegovom izvođenju govornih činova. Rezultati također ukazuju na neprimjenjivost Brown i Levinsonova modela na međukulturalne usporedbe.

**Ključne riječi:** učtivost; američki engleski; perzijski, međukulturalna proučavanja; reakcije na komplimente.