

A Comparative Study of Reprimand Strategies: Evidence from Iranian and American Speech Communities

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Abstract: This study explores the strategies used by Iranian and American participants when reprimanding and identifies their preferred politeness strategies. As an initial step, open role-play situations were performed by 25 Americans and 35 Iranians in order to elicit reprimands and responses to reprimands in 4 different situations. Second, interviews were carried out to find out the participants' perceptions regarding reprimanding strategies. The study suggests that there are indeed some differences between the 2 cultures regarding this speech act, since the participants from these two backgrounds tend to use distinctive strategies. Data elicited in post-performance interviews revealed that in some situations (e.g., in the situations when the target of reprimand has a higher status than the reprimander), the Iranians tended to be more reluctant to make a reprimand whereas the Americans avoid reprimanding less frequently. This study further supports the idea that speech acts are culturally laden and their understanding can hinder or encourage communication across cultures.

Key words: Face-threatening acts, politeness, reprimand, speech act, cultures, Iran

INTRODUCTION

A number of studies have demonstrated that there can be important cross-cultural differences in the speech-act performance between 2 different speech communities (Blum-Kulka and House, 1989; Eslami-Rasekh, 1993, 2004; Olshtain and Weinbach, 1985). These cultural differences could result in variance in the strategy preferences and an interlocutor may inappropriately choose some strategies according to his own culture with another interlocutor from a different culture, thus leading misunderstanding in the cross-cultural communication. Reprimands which are assumed inherently impolite because they are performed by the speakers with the intrinsic purpose of attacking or undermining the hearer's face (Haverkate, 1988) have been studied in a number of languages such as Peruvian Spanish (Garcia, 1996), Peruvian and Venezuelan Spanish (Garcia, 2004a) and Italian (Frescura, 2006) but a comparative analysis of this speech act as performed and realized in Iranian and American culture has not yet drawn much attention especially from the metapragmatic perspective.

The study is the first attempt at investigating the speech act strategies and the perception of reprimands in Persian and American from a cross-cultural perspective. The main objective of the study is two fold; to examine how Iranian reprimand speech act expressions differ

conceptually from corresponding American English expressions; to identify the politeness strategies preferred by Iranian and American speakers. These two issues determine the structure of the study. It is hoped that the result of the study will shed light on the nature and extent to which this speech act differs cross-culturally and will enhance second language learners' capability in using reprimands in cross-cultural communication.

Review of literature: The area of linguistic politeness has grown considerably, since the researchers as Lakoff (1973, 1974) and Brown and Levinson (1987) followed up on the notion of face adapted from Goffman (1967), defining the notion of politeness in terms of positive and negative face with positive face being the optimistic self-image and desire to be viewed positively by others and negative face being the desire to act without imposition. While positive and negative face wants exist in every individual and are present in most societies, different cultures tend to place different emphasis on 1 of these 2 aspects of face.

Certain societies have been found to favor the positive aspect of politeness while others emphasize the negative aspect of politeness (Garcia, 1989; Kitao, 1990; Sifianou, 1992). Eslami-Rasekh (1993) comparing the Americans to the Iranians showed that the Americans opt for negative politeness strategies whereas the Iranians in

line with their socio-cultural rules of language use, opt for positive politeness strategies. Research in cross-cultural pragmatics has shown that the perception, realization and frequency of occurrence of all speech acts depend on the conventions of the particular culture (Eslami-Rasekh, 1993; Garcia, 1993; Lorenzo-Dus, 2001; Nelson *et al.*, 2002; Olshtain and Weinbach, 1985) with no exception of the speech act of reprimand (Garcia, 2004a). This variance in the ways of expressing speech acts might cause difficulties in cross-cultural communication. With regard to finding cross-cultural differences between Persian and English, a number of studies have been carried out focusing on various speech acts such as apologies (Afghari, 2007), complaints (Eslami-Rasekh, 2004), compliments (Sharifian, 2008), griping (Allami, 2006), invitations (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2006), requests (Eslami-Rasekh, 1993) and refusals (Keshavarz *et al.*, 2006).

Reprimand is one of the many speech acts frequently used in human interaction. The reprimander induces the interlocutor to refrain from acting in a certain way and as it opposes the interlocutor's interests and thwarts his/her intentions, it is considered as a face-threatening act. Following Vanderveken (1990), a reprimand is recognized as a communicative illocutionary act of the assertive type and defined as (an accusation) with the special mode of achievement of adding personal displeasure as a punishment for the wrong doing. Reprimand is the most common form of punishment used by teachers and parents.

The majority of reprimands are used by persons in authority (parents and teachers) to stop or reduce a child's misbehavior. Performing this speech act which usually has a high potential of threatening the face (of the hearer) and responding to it appear to be challenging even for native speakers who often pre-plan how they will go about making a reprimand. Given the complicated nature of this speech act set, non-native speakers may face problems in expressing reprimands and they might sometimes express inappropriate reprimands unintentionally.

As it is the case for other speech acts, reprimands are sensitive to social factors such as gender, age, level of education, relationship between the participants (power, close or distant), the type of situation and the appropriate reprimand behavior varies across cultures. A number of studies have dealt with reprimand strategies in different cultures. One of the pioneer studies on reprimand speech act is Garcia (1996)'s who analyzed the responses of the role plays of Peruvians when reprimanding or being reprimanded. It was found that when reprimanding, the

participants preferred solidarity over deferential politeness strategies. Whereas in responding to a reprimand, deferential approaches were preferred to solidarity politeness strategies.

In a cross-cultural study, Garcia (2004a) compared the politeness strategies of reprimands and responses to reprimands of Peruvian and Venezuelan Spanish speakers, applying 2 role plays with a constant interlocutor. He concluded that both groups preferred to threaten their own negative face and opted for direct strategies. However, the Venezuelan group tended to be more verbose in both reprimanding and responding to a reprimand. In general, the variance in their performance was correlated with a different perception of power.

Preferred politeness strategies in reprimanding and responding to reprimands in Argentinean Spanish (AS) were examined in another attempt made by Garcia (2004b). In general, it was found that when reprimanding, the AS participants tended to threaten their interlocutor's positive and negative face equally as well as maintain their own authority and freedom of action.

When responding to a reprimand, the participants preferred to threaten their own negative and positive face as opposed to their interlocutor's positive or negative face. Moreover, he concluded that social power and social distance were not a motivating factor in making reprimands.

More recently, Frescura (2006) conducted an investigation in 2 hospitals in Northern Italy on how smokers react to being reprimanded for their offense. The results of her study revealed several types of reactive behavior with some possible impacts of the gender variable on the nature of the offenders' verbal and non-verbal reactions to the reprimand.

However, her study focused exclusively on reprimands issued for 1 type of infraction (smoking) committed in only 1 type of environment (hospitals) and other settings with other social variables (social power and social distance) which might have culminated in a different findings were not taken into consideration. The studies mentioned above focused on reprimand strategies in various cultures and results of the cross-cultural study mentioned in the literature (Garcia, 2004a) showed that perception was subject to interlocutors' culture.

Along this line, comes this study as an investigation into the differences between Iranian and American's preferred strategies in reprimand speech act in the field of cross-cultural communication which is the 1st attempt conducted on this speech act from the metapragmatic perspective. It primarily focuses on a quantitative analysis of the corpus in order to probe into cross-cultural

divergences with regard to strategies used in reprimand speech act. A qualitative analysis is done to substantiate the quantitative findings and scrutinize the preferred politeness strategies in these 2 cultures.

Research questions: Taking into consideration the previous contributions, the following research questions are addressed:

- Do Iranian reprimanding strategies differ conceptually from corresponding American English expressions?
- What are the preferred politeness strategies of Iranian and American speakers?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants: In this exploratory empirical study 25 Americans, 21 of whom were undergraduates; 4 were graduate students and 35 Iranian EFL students, none of whom had visited an English-speaking country before and all were undergraduate students were selected based on a stratified sampling procedure. Most of the students were between 18 and 25 years of age. Subjects in the study signed informed consent forms agreeing to participate in the study and were remunerated for their participation.

Instrumentation: The data was collected via role plays supplemented by interviews. The role-play tasks comprised four situations resulting in the elicitation of reprimands and responses to these reprimands. The situations which were mainly in American culture were translated into Persian with some modifications to ensure that they were both natural and corresponded with respect to the social factors as perceived by Iranians.

These situations (Appendix A for American data) are believed to vary according to the social distance between the speakers which is regarded as how well the interlocutors know each other: either close (-SD) or distant (+SD) and the relative social power of the interlocutors which is hereby understood as a non-reciprocal relationship, where one person can have control over the behavior of another (Brown and Gilman, 1972).

These politeness variables were taken into account as they have been thought as factors that affect the choice of particular pragmalinguistic forms as well as the interlocutors' perception of the politeness level. Thus, two of the role-plays represented situations in a hierarchical face system between status unequal and 2 contained interactions between status equal: one situation in a deference face system (smoking cigarette) and one in a solidarity face system (coming late).

Table 1: Classification of situations according to contextual and social variables

Situation	Social power	Social distance
Low grade	S<H	+SD
Homework	S>H	+SD
Smoking cigarette	S = H	+SD
Coming late	S = H	-SD

S = Speaker, H = Hearer, SD = Social Distance

Regarding the other politeness variable i.e., degree of imposition, it was kept constant in all situations. Table 1 shows a description of the contextual variables.

Data collection and coding procedure: First, subjects were presented with a given situation and they were asked to engage in a regular, natural conversation. They were then given the instructions which described each situation for both the subjects and their interlocutors.

The participants' role plays were audio-recorded and after all role plays were completed and taped, the role played interactions were transcribed. The role play data were then categorized with respect to the recurrent types of strategies used as head acts.

This categorization was modeled on the study of Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989) and the semantic coding for subcategories of each type of head acts in reprimands followed Garcia (2004b)'s 12 fold division, clarified with examples in the results section. Then, the interviews were conducted in which the interlocutors' perceptions were asked with regard to this speech act to find the preferred politeness strategy of each group. Brown and Levinson (1987)'s model of politeness was used to do a contrastive analysis of the politeness strategies used by Iranians and Americans.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To answer the first research question, i.e., whether or not there are cross-cultural differences with regard to reprimand speech act between Americans and Iranians, the percentages of strategies as head act types and supporting moves used by subjects of each group in each of the 4 social situations were calculated. In the present study, several expressions or variations of them were used by the participants of both cultures to voice a reprimand. Following Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989), the minimal units which could be taken as the core of the reprimand speech act were known as head acts which might be followed/preceded by some supportive moves. Then, the data was analyzed based on Garcia (2004b)'s 12 fold division, mainly designed for the interaction between a boss and an employee.

Bold on Record Strategies (BORS): Accusing/admonishing/warning/threatening, claiming authority, presenting facts, Rejecting explanation/accusation/request.

Positive Politeness Strategies (PPS): Accepting excuse/explanation, claiming common ground, requesting cooperation, requesting information, offering cooperation, moralizing.

Negative Politeness Strategies (NPS): Expressing gratitude, indicating reluctance to offend, though some such as threatening were not observed in the study. To help clarify them, some examples found in the study are given in context for each category.

Bold on Record Strategies (BORS)

Example 1 (Smoking):

- Sorry sir do you not think that smoking is forbidden in the bus
- Really, I have not heard that before

Positive Politeness Strategies (PPS)

Example 2 (Low grade):

- I understand that you had lots of studies to turn over but I think my grade is a bit low
- Well, I will remark it

Negative Politeness Strategies (NPS)

Example 3 (Low grade):

- I really appreciate your early marking. I was wonder if I could ask you to reconsider my grade
- Ok, send an email to me and remind me

After analyzing the data, the frequency with which they were employed and percentage of each category of reprimand strategies made by the speakers of each culture were calculated and shown in Table 2. As Table 2 shows the distribution of the strategies used by Iranian and American participants in reprimanding is quite different in all 4 situations.

When reprimanding someone in a higher position, i.e., situation one in the study, the informants of both cultures provided an explanation of purpose before actually stating the reprimand and the reprimand head act was more in the form of a candidate solution or a request. Iranian informants tended to use more mitigators to soften the face-threatening impact of their reprimands.

That is each Iranian subject explained the purpose of his/her presence to the professor and started talking about the exam and results before stating the reprimand speech act. And some internal modifications were used while maintaining the reprimand. One extract is provided

Table 2: General results for each type of head act used by iranian and american reprimanders

Situation	BOR		PP		NP	
	Ir.	Am.	Ir.	Am.	Ir.	Am.
Low grade	1	5	16	9	18	11
Homework	6	6	17	8	12	11
Smoking	4	9	12	6	19	10
Coming late	13	9	18	8	4	8
Total frequency	24	29	63	31	53	40
Percentage	17.14%	29%	45%	31%	37.85%	40%

BOR= Bold on Record Strategy, PP = Positive politeness, NP = Negative politeness, Ir = Iranian participants, Am = American participants, *Indicates that the percentages of the two groups differ significantly (p<0.05)

here as an example in which the reprimand head act is bolded and the modifiers are underlined:

Example 4 (Low grade):

- Hello Dr. Amini, I just came by to see if I could talk about my study
- Well, I'm at your service
- I think, uh, I was a bit disappointed with my grade, in my opinion maybe the grade was a little low. I would appreciate it if you could possibly reconsider my grade
- Ok, I will check it and inform you

American informants set the stage through explanation of the purpose and gave cause for their presence and reflected discontent with the grade. They were more direct than Iranians, 6 BORS as opposed to 1 and less mitigators were used. In the interviews carried out after the role plays, they said that the status difference should be taken into account, thus producing a criticism must be avoided and like Iranians they mainly selected the negative politeness strategy. Here, it is noteworthy to point that some of the participants who were not familiar with the politeness strategies (positive/negative) were given sufficient information by providing some examples for them.

When someone in a high position, a teacher in this case wants to reprimand someone he is very careful not to use inappropriate words. He is aware of the student's face and his position in the class. In the interviews, Iranian speakers emphasized being fair in voice and they said it is better to avoid embarrassing the student in the presence of peers and others. In the role plays performed, Iranian teachers used the shoma-form when reprimanding their students and this was accompanied by the term khanome or aghaye (miss or master), to underline the distance between them caused by their reprehensible actions or words.

The majority of American informants said that it is better to reprimand in close proximity to the individual who is the target of the reprimand and avoid reprimanding

in front of the other students. Comparing the 1st two situations which contained asymmetrical status relationship between the reprimander and the recipient in 2 different settings, it seems that Americans were less concerned with the social power variable. As Table 2 shows the type of strategy used by Americans in these 2 situations were comparably the same while Iranians resorted to NPS more when reprimanding someone of higher power and more BORS were used when the interlocutor had less power. This fact was supported in the interview section.

So, the reprimand speech act is affected by the context-external factors such as social power in Iranian culture while it is not the case for American culture. This part of study disagrees with Garcia (2004b) and lends further support to Garcia (2004a) in that the social power is found to be the overriding factor in cross-cultural difference in perception of politeness.

And this part of the study about Iranian culture confirms Scollon and Scollon (1986)'s assertion that the more powerful speaker speaks downward while the least powerful one speaks upward.

The 3rd situation is quite different from the previous ones in that the reprimand is made about a more serious matter that is smoking in the bus. Also, this situation differs with regard to the relation between the interlocutors, i.e., it contains interaction between status equal in a deference face system. The reprimands made in this situation by both groups of informants mainly contained an expression conveying sense of annoyance or dissatisfaction. A direct assignment of blame was absent from Iranian reprimands and the blame was transferred from the smoker to the cigarette which was the same as reluctance to offend subcategory of Garcia's (2004b) division. While, Americans tended to criticize the recipient more than Iranians and mainly used BORS with a cold and slightly irritated tone. This is illustrated in the following extract taken from American data.

Example 5 (smoking cigarette): Excuse me, may I inform you that smoking is not allowed in busses...? The reprimand strategies used by the participants represent an interesting picture for the forth situation. Iranians as a whole behaved differently from the previous situation while it was not the case for Americans. In this reprimand situation, the speaker reprimands a friend for late coming. Here, the relationship is familiar and close in terms of status and social distance.

In the interviews, Iranians stated that because of the high intimacy of their relationship, there is no need to be indirect and BORS with a fair voice was the prevalent type of strategy used. Americans used a majority of NPS and

in the interviews carried out, they intended that they would reprimand immediately with aggravators which was not consistent with the data gathered in their role plays.

The difference between Iranian and American participants was both in the type of reprimand strategy used in each situation as well as the effect of the social variables contained in the study; Iranians but not Americans were concerned about both social power and social distance.

In Iranian culture, blaming someone is not a normal part of human relationships and reprimanding is regarded as a threatening act.

Except in the interactions between acquaintances they prefer to stay away from it. While, in the United States people do not avoid reprimanding and voicing this speech act is quite normal. In the interviews carried out, participants stated that it was good to resolve these problems to be able to move on.

CONCLUSION

Contrasting the Iranian expressions with the American speech act expressing reprimand was the main objective of this study. Overall, a careful analysis of the role play interactions and interviews has provided us insight into the preferred reprimand strategies and perceptions about socially appropriate behavior in Iranian and American communities were examined. Also, it gives us an understanding about the notions of social power and social distance in each society. Investigating the Iranian and American speech act strategy preferences for reprimanding across the four situations show that social distance and social power are the determining factors in the way the Iranians reprimand while it was not the case for Americans.

Given the fact that presented findings are based on the comparison of frequencies of use of negative and positive politeness strategies in an arguably limited amount of data with few number of participants, the present study is exploratory and its findings must be confirmed or corrected by future studies carried out on these 2 cultures.

Nevertheless, this study does call attention to the cross-cultural differences among Iranian and American culture with regard to reprimand speech act. The results which lends support to the idea that language, particularly in speech acts is laden with culture, yields two significant pedagogical implications: the inclusion of pragmatics in language teaching; the design and development of textbook materials which emphasize the pragmatic aspect of language.

APPENDIX

Appendix A (role plays)

Instructions: You will be asked to read some brief situations in which there are two participants. You will role play one of the participants and another person will role play the other. You both know who you are and where you are however, one of you does not know what the other one wants. The interaction will be recorded. You will have to act as you would in an actual situation: you will have to act the situation and interact with the other person, thus expect there could be some social chat. Do not think too much and try to be as spontaneous as possible.

Situation one (Low grade)

Informant A: You are a university student. The grades of one your exams have been reported recently. Your grade is too much lower than what you expected. You want to talk about your study and say that your professor is wrong. What do you say to him/her?

Informant B: You are a university professor. One of your students talks to you. Respond to him/her.

Situation two (Homework)

Informant A: You are a university professor. One your students does not do his/her homework. This morning you call him/her and talk to him/her. You want to reprimand him. What do you tell him/her?

Informant B: You are a university student. One of your professors talks to you. Respond to him/her.

Situation three (Smoking cigarette)

Informant A: You are a bus passenger. One of the passengers which is sitting in front of you is smoking cigarette and you cannot tolerate the smelling. How do you reprimand him/her?

Informant B: You are on a bus smoking a cigarette. One of the passengers is talking to you. Respond to him/her.

Situation four (coming late)

Informant A: You have a date with your friend. You have been waiting for 30 min and it is not the first time that he/she comes late. How do you reprimand him/her?

Informant B: You are late again on a date with your friend. Respond to him/her.

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