

## **A Cross-Cultural Study of Perception of Politeness by Iranian and American in Request Forms**

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**Abstract:** This study aims to study politeness levels of various forms of requests in English as perceived and judged by EFL Persian students and American native speakers. Based on the role plays conducted in American context, a questionnaire of politeness was constructed containing 18 requests in three different situations (i.e., requesting the professor to speak louder, asking the student to give his lecture sooner and finally asking another student for a pen). Each participant was asked to rank each request on a range of 10 levels of politeness. Subject's perception of politeness was compared according to their native language. Data collected from 65 students showed that there were differences in perception of politeness between the two cultures. The findings generally confirmed Lakoff's basic order of Imperative/Declarative/Interrogative mood which means in making requests imperatives are less polite than declaratives and declaratives are in terms less polite than interrogatives.

**Key words:** Requestive speech act, perception, politeness, American native speaker, Persian students, Iran

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Studies have demonstrated that there are cross-cultural differences between two different speech communities in relation to the type of request and level of directness of request realization (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka and House, 1989; Eslami-Rasekh, 1993; Wierzbicka, 1991). Most of these studies have dealt with request strategies based on the model proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), few however have focused on the perception of politeness (Fraser, 1978; Kitao, 1990). To the knowledge there are virtually no contrastive studies on Persian and American English with regard to perception of politeness of request forms. This study is intended to contribute to the body of research by finding the perception of politeness request head acts by American and Persian EFL learners.

**Review of literature:** It is widely acknowledged that verbal communication is a means of conveying information in addition to establishing, maintaining and terminating social relationship with other people. The rules which determine appropriate behavior are one of the aspects of culture which are clearly reflected in language. The relationship of interactors, their age, the context of situation and several other social factors directly affect language use to degrees determined by the culture. While

extensive studies have been done to discover a universal theory to be applied in diverse cultures and languages (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Grice, 1975; Leech, 1983), the idea that every culture has its own norms has attracted many pragmalinguists who study cross-cultural pragmatics.

With the goal of investigating cross-cultural differences which exist between Persian and English, several studies have been carried out focusing on the realization of different speech acts in an Iranian context. These include apologies (Afghary, 2007) complaints (Eslami-Rasekh, 2004; Salmani-Nodoushan, 2006a) griping (Allami, 2006), invitations (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2006b), requests (Eslami-Rasekh, 1993; Jalilifar, 2009) and refusals (Moradkhani and Feyzi, 2008). These studies provide readers with a fuller understanding of speech acts in intra and cross-cultural communication.

Requests are one of the many speech acts frequently used in human interaction. Because of the large degree of imposition that making a request places upon one's interlocutor (s), numerous studies have examined its functions to gain understanding of its use and interpretation in different cultures. Fukushima (2000) for example conducted a cross cultural study of polite request strategies in British English and Japanese. He showed that British and Japanese undergraduate respondents use different politeness strategies when making requests. He

concluded that perceptions of power, social distance and the weight of the imposition influenced politeness strategy choice in the two cultures differently. Kitao (1990) in a similar attempt to the study investigated the level of politeness of various forms of requests made in English as perceived by college-level native speakers of English, Japanese speakers in the United States and Japanese speakers in Japan. He administered a semantic differential questionnaire measuring ten levels of politeness and found no significant difference in perception between American and Japanese but the Japanese in the United States perceived the requests as more polite than the other Japanese. No significant difference in perception of politeness of requests by either sex or age for Japanese and American was found. In another study, Fraser (1978) determined the level of politeness of different types of request in order of descending deference. He concluded that the sentence with modals are more polite than those without them that positive sentences are more polite than negative ones that interrogatives are more polite than imperative plus-tag forms and that past tense is more polite than present tense. Carrell and Komaker (1981) compared politeness judgments of native speakers of American English and non-native English speakers on a set of request forms using different mood, tense and modals. Result indicated that grammatical mood makes the greatest contribution to politeness with interrogative being most polite, declarative mood next most polite and imperative least polite. Presence of modals contributes next most to politeness. There was a high correlation between the native and non-native judgments of politeness. Their finding was similar to that of Tanaka and Kawabe (1982) who found a high correlation between the perception of politeness in requests by Japanese ESL students and Americans. To date, to the best of the knowledge, no study has pointed to the possible cross-cultural difference between American native speakers and Iranian EFL learners with regard to the perception of politeness of American request forms. This study aimed to cover this gap.

**Research question:** The purpose of this study is to investigate politeness levels of various forms of requests in English as perceived and judged by the native speakers of English and Iranian students of English in Iran. Thus the following research question is addressed in the present study:

Is there any significant difference between Iranians and Americans in the perception of the level of politeness of request head acts?

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Participants:** Thirty native speakers of American English and 35 Persian EFL learners were selected based on a stratified sampling procedure. The informants were all university students and they varied in age from 18-26 years with an average of 21. The American participants were students of biology, geography and history at Fresno State University and the Iranian participants were EFL learners at University of Isfahan. Students were chosen as the target population in order to ensure as much homogeneity as possible in terms of educational background, age range, social class and possible future occupation.

**Instrumentation:** The major proportion of the data was collected via role plays and a questionnaire. The role-play tasks comprised three situations resulting in the elicitation of requests and responses to these requests. These situations had been assessed before conducting the study to make sure that they were comparable in both cultures. First, we had six situations which were used mainly in the Iranian culture. As we needed comparable situations between the two cultures in terms of naturalness, we asked ten informants from each culture to assess the naturalness of the situations by assigning a number from 1 which shows the situation occurs rarely and 5 which indicates its occurrence is highly probable. T-tests were run to find those situations in which there were differences and two situations were excluded.

The situations depicted in the role-play (Appendix A) reflect everyday occurrences of the type expected to be familiar to both American and Iranian university students. They vary according to the social distance between the speakers, the relative social power of the interlocutors and the rank of imposition of the request. Table 1 shows a description of the contextual variables.

In these situations, social distance is regarded as how well interlocutors know each other: either close (-SD) or distant (+SD); social power on the other hand, refers to the vertical disparity between the participants in a hierarchical structure. Then the questionnaire (Appendix B) was constructed based on the role plays and the request head acts used. These head acts were the same for all situations to be able to find the effect of social variables such as social distance or social power on

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

Situation	Social power	Social distance	Rank of imposition
Speak louder	S<H	+SD	Low
Give a lecture	S>H	+SD	High
Borrow a pen	S = H	+SD	Low

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

perception of politeness by informants. Also we intended to find the possible effect of degree of indirectness on perception of politeness.

**Data collection and coding procedure:** Following the assessment of the role plays, American subjects participated in the role plays. A tape recorder was made use of to audio-record the participants' role plays. Then the participants from both cultures completed the questionnaires constructed based on the role plays. We had three situations in the questionnaire and each situation was followed by six request head acts (Appendix B). The informants had to rate each case by writing next to it a figure from 1-9. Then, for each case and each participant a mean was calculated and in the last stage, means of all informants of each group for each situation were compared. T-tests were run to see whether the mean scores of the two groups in different situations were significantly different or not.

## RESULTS

This study presents results of data analysis related to each situation. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for mean scores in the first situation. As it is displayed in the Table 2, the mean scores are different across the two groups; however to establish whether or not the differences between mean scores of the two groups were statistically significant an independent-sample t-test was performed. Results shown in Table 3 shows the statistically significant difference between the two groups.

Independent T-tests were performed to see whether the difference between the means of the scores of the Iranian informants and that of American informants in the second situation were significant or not. Table 4 shows the results of the descriptive statistics for the second situation and Table 5 shows the results of the t-test.

The first and second situation concerned the interaction between a professor and a student in two different settings. Mean scores of the two groups shown in Table 2 and 4 are indicative of the considerable difference between the two groups. Furthermore, the results of the independent-sample t-tests (Table 3 and 5) confirm that the differences are significant. So, the effect of power on perception of politeness was found to be significant. In order to answer the research question for the third situation which dealt with the interaction between two students, mean scores were calculated. Table 6 shows the descriptive statistics for mean scores. As it is displayed in the Table 6, the mean scores are very similar across the two groups; however to establish whether or not the differences between mean scores were

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of situation one

Groups	N	Mean	SD
Iranian	35	7.16	0.69
American	30	7.91	0.64

Table 3: Independent t-test for situation one

T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference
-4.45	63	0.00	-0.74

Table 4: Descriptive statistics of situation two

Groups	N	Mean	SD
Iranian	35	8.67	0.45
American	30	7.99	0.64

Table 5: Independent t-test for situation two

T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference
4.91	63	0.00	0.67

Table 6: Descriptive statistics of situation three

Groups	N	Mean	SD
Iranian	35	8.11	0.47
American	30	7.94	0.56

Table 7: Independent t-test for situation three

T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference
1.30	63	0.19	0.16

statistically significant an independent-sample t-test was performed. Results shown in Table 7 do not point to any statistically significant difference between the two groups.

## DISCUSSION

This research is aimed at investigating perception of politeness of American request forms by Persian EFL learners and Americans. To find the answer, a questionnaire was constructed based on the role plays performed by American informants. Then T-tests were run to compare subject's perception of politeness according to their native language. Results of the present study provided evidence that the social power of the requestee is perceived differently by this two cultures. This finding is in agreement with the argumentations put forth in previous research about the possible effect of interlocutors' power on perception of politeness and the existing cross-cultural differences regarding this variable (Fukushima, 2000). A number of studies have documented empirical evidence in support of the similarity of the perception of politeness by EFL learners and native speakers (Carrell and Konneker, 1981; Lakoff, 1974; Tanaka and Kawabe, 1982). In this regard, then this study disagrees with the existing body of evidence confirming the similar perception of politeness by the two groups in situations with different social powers.

With regard to the influence of the social distance, the findings of this research reveal that as far as social

distance is concerned, the two groups display closer perception as for the third situation they had close means and the difference was not statistically significant. Interlocutors power is the key factor for difference expressed in perception of politeness by the two groups as the degree of politeness expressed by Iranians correlates positively with the power of the requestor. Americans, in contrast are less concerned about the power of the requestee and consider themselves at the same social level with no interlocutor exerting power over the other. This can be shown by the comparatively similar means situations of power unequal (e.g., asking the professor to speak louder and asking the student to give the lecture sooner).

A more consideration of the data suggested that almost in all three situations, all participants conceived imperatives (i.e., the first request in the questionnaire for all three situations, e.g., give your lecture sooner please, for the second situation) the most impolite but the difference between the perception of three groups, except for imperative in situation two (i.e., give a lecture) was significant. Analyzing the request head acts of each situation in terms of the degree of indirectness confirmed previous findings for basic order of Imperative/Declarative/Interrogative mood, which means in making requests imperatives are less polite than declaratives and declaratives are in terms less polite than interrogatives (Carrell and Kompeker, 1981; Lakoff, 1974).

Olshtain and Cohen (1990) in their study on the effect of instruction in developing pragmatic competence of Hebrew learners of English as a foreign language found that certain aspects of speech act behavior could be taught in the foreign language learning contexts.

As reported by Cohen (1996), further research on speech acts instruction should also consider available pragmatic information to learners in foreign language contexts and ways of exploiting the information in the classroom. So, it is suggestible to have some activities and tasks containing practice of speech acts and apply the result of studies such as the present one to avoid misunderstandings in communication.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, the perception of politeness of American request forms by Iranian speakers have been examined and compared against American native speakers in a number of power-asymmetrical social situations. Overall, the result yielded two important findings: the social power of the interlocutors is perceived differently by the two cultures; social distance of the requestee does

not lead to difference in perception of politeness by the two groups. A corollary of these findings may be the recognition that a multitude of potentially interacting situational, social and cultural factors influence the processes of foreign/second language comprehension, production and learning.

The logical conclusion that follows from the findings is that it makes sense for school systems to seek out and utilize principles of speech act behavior for students in EFL classrooms in an effort to promote their communicative competence.

### 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 (speak louder)

**Informant A:** You attend the first class of a new course. You can't hear the professor well. You want to request him to speak louder. 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 (give a lecture)

**Informant A:** You are a professor in a university. Because you have to attend an important conference, you ask your student to give his lecture earlier than scheduled. What do you say to him/her?

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

#### Situation three (borrow a pen)

**Informant A:** For registration you need to fill out a couple of forms. You search all of your pockets and you can't find a pen. You want to ask another student who is sitting next to you in the department hall. What do you say to him/her?

**Informant B:** You are sitting in the department hall. A student who is sitting next to you talks to you. Respond to him/her.

## Appendix B (questionnaire)

Age ..... Sex.....

This is a questionnaire to find out how you perceive the politeness level of requests. Please use your intuition and answer the following.

**Situation one (speak louder):** You attend the first class of a new course. You can't hear the professor well. You want to request him to speak louder.

Please rate the politeness level of the following statements from 0 (very rude) to 9(very polite):

- Speak louder, please. 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
- Could you speak louder? 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
- I would appreciate it if you could speak louder. 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
- Sorry I can't hear you. 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
- Would you possibly speak louder? 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
- You might speak louder, please. 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

**Situation two (give a lecture):** You are a professor in a university. Because you have to attend an important conference, you ask your student to give his lecture earlier than scheduled.

Please rate the politeness level of the following statements from 0 (very rude) to 9 (very polite):

- Give your lecture sooner, please. 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
- Could you give your lecture sooner? 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
- I would appreciate it if you could give your lecture sooner. 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
- I was looking for someone who could prepare his lecture sooner. 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
- Would you possibly give your lecture sooner? 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
- You might give your lecture sooner, please. 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

**Situation three (borrow a pen):** For registration you need to fill out a couple of forms. You search all of your pockets and you can't find a pen. You want to ask another student who is sitting next to you in the department hall.

Please rate the politeness level of the following statements from 0 (very rude) to 9 (very polite):

- Give me your pen, please. 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
- Could you give me your pen? 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
- I would appreciate it if you could give me your pen. 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
- Sorry I've forgot to bring my pen. 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
- Would you possibly give me your pen? 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
- You might give me your pen, please. 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

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