

A Comparative Study of Perception of Politeness of American Reprimands by Iranian EFL Learners and Americans

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Abstract: Reprimand is a significant speech act in the daily communication. All speech acts are subject to the conventions of the particular culture with no exception of the speech act of reprimand. This study presents the results of an exploratory empirical study into the perception of reprimand speech act in American English and Iranian culture. As an initial step, open role-play situations were performed by 10 Americans in order to elicit reprimands and responses to reprimands in 4 different situations. Second, politeness rating questionnaire constructed based on the role plays was given to 25 Americans and 35 Iranian EFL learners to measure the perceived politeness of reprimands. Subject's perception of politeness was compared according to their native language. The study suggests that there are indeed some differences between the two cultures regarding the politeness perception. The findings indicate that learners should be taught the appropriate use of pragmatic reprimand proficiency.

Key words: Face-threatening acts, politeness, reprimand, speech act comparative study, Americans

INTRODUCTION

A number of studies have demonstrated that there can be important cross-cultural differences in the speech-act performance between two different speech communities (Blum-Kulka and House, 1989; Eslami-Rasekh, 1993, 2004; Olshtain and Weinbach, 1985). Fewer studies, however have focused on reprimands (Frescura, 2006; Garcia, 1996; 2004a, b) which are assumed inherently impolite because they are performed by the speakers with the intrinsic purpose of attacking or undermining the hearer's face. The study is the first attempt at investigating the perception of politeness of reprimand speech act and the first contrastive study on Iranian and American culture with regard to this speech act.

Literature review : The cross-cultural pragmatics literature has shown that the same speech act might be realized quite differently across different cultures in the way they are perceived, their distribution, their frequency of occurrence and even in the functions they serve (Eslami-Rasekh, 1993; Garcia, 1993; Lorenzo-Dus, 2001; Nelson *et al.*, 2002; Olshtain and Weinbach, 1985). With regard to finding cross-cultural differences between Persian and English, a number of studies have been carried out focusing on the various speech acts such as apologies (Afghary, 2007), complaints (Eslami-Rasekh,

2004; Salmani-Nodoushan, 2006a, b), compliments (Heidari *et al.*, 2009; Sharifian, 2008), griping (Allami, 2006), invitations, requests (Eslami-Rasekh, 1993; Jalilifar, 2009) and refusals (Keshavarz *et al.*, 2006).

Reprimand is one of the many speech acts frequently used in human interaction. Following Vanderveken, 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 (i.e., 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.

A number of studies have dealt with reprimand strategies in different cultures. One of the pioneer studies on reprimand speech act is Garcia (1996) 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 two 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 is correlated with a different perception of power.

Preferred politeness strategies in reprimanding and responding to reprimands in Argentinean Spanish (AS) was 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 two hospitals in Northern Italy on how smokers react to being reprimanded for their offense. The results of his 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, his study focused exclusively on reprimands issued for one type of infraction (smoking) committed in only one type of environment (hospitals) and other settings with other social variables (i.e., social power and social distance) which might have culminated in a different findings were not taken into consideration.

To date, to the best of the knowledge, no study has pointed to the possible cross-cultural differences between American native speakers and Iranian EFL learners with regard to the perception of politeness of American reprimand forms. This study adds to this body of research by covering this gap. Furthermore, the effect of social variables such as social distance and social power of interlocutors was scrutinized.

Research question: Taking into consideration the previous contributions, the purpose of this study is to investigate politeness levels of various forms of reprimands in English as perceived and judged by the

native speakers of English and Iranian EFL learners, thus the following research question is tackled:

Is there any significant difference between Iranian EFL learners and Americans with regard to the perception of politeness of various reprimand head acts?

MAETRIALS AND METHODS

Participants: In this study 25 Americans, 21 of whom were undergraduates; four were graduate students and 35 Iranian EFL students, none of whom had visited an English-speaking country before and all were undergraduate students, participated. 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 major proportion of the data was collected via role plays supplemented by a questionnaire. The role-play tasks comprised four situations resulting in the elicitation of reprimands and responses to these reprimands. These situations which were specifically designed for this study, had been assessed before conducting the study to ensure the comparability of the situations between the two cultures.

In the sense that 10 informants from each culture were asked to assess the naturalness of 7 situations by assigning a number from 1 which shows the situation occurs rarely and 5 which indicates its occurrence is highly probable. Four situations with comparably equal means were selected and three situations were excluded.

These situations (Appendix A) 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 involved an unequal status relationship between the interlocutors and two contained an unequal distance relationship with equal social power. Regarding the other politeness variable, i.e., degree of imposition, they were kept similar in all role-plays. Table 1 shown a description of the contextual variables.

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

The role-plays were tape recorded and then transcribed for analysis. Then the questionnaire (Appendix B for situation one) was constructed based on the role plays and the reprimand head acts used. These head acts were the same for all situations to be able to infer the effect of social variables, i.e., social distance or social power on the perception of politeness.

Data collection and coding procedure: First, American subjects were presented with a given situation and they were asked to engage in a regular, natural conversation. The participants' role plays were audio-recorded and after all role-plays were completed and taped, the role-played interactions were transcribed. Interactions were then characterized in terms of the recurrent types of strategies used as head acts. In this stage, Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989) categorization of head acts was made use of. Then, the questionnaires were constructed based on the role plays comprising 12 reprimand head acts, three for each situation (Appendix B). The informants were asked to rate each case by writing next to it a figure from 1-5. 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 differed significantly or not.

RESULTS

To answer the research question, i.e., whether or not there are cross-cultural differences with regard to perception of reprimand head acts between Americans and Iranians, the mean percentages of politeness expressed by subjects of each group in each of the four social situations was compared. Each situation is analyzed independently here. Descriptive statistics in Table 2 shows that politeness level expressed by Iranian subjects was lower than that of American subjects. In order to establish whether the mean differences which emerged were statistically significant, independent t-tests were used which lends support to the statistical significance among these two groups in situation one (Table 3). The results of the descriptive statistics for the second situation is given in Table 4 and 5 show the

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of situation one

Group	N	Mean	SD
Iranian	35	3.22	0.45
American	25	3.93	0.40

Table 3: Independent t-test for situation one

T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference
-6.22	58	.00	-0.71

Table 4: Descriptive statistics of situation two

Group	N	Mean	SD
Iranian	35	4.29	0.39
American	25	4.02	0.41

Table 5: Independent t-test for situation two

T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference
2.64	58	0.01	0.27

Table 6: Descriptive statistics of situation three

Group	N	Mean	SD
Iranian	35	3.98	0.15
American	25	4.08	0.28

Table 7: Independent t-test for situation three

T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference
-1.78	58	.08	-0.10

Table 8: Descriptive statistics of situation four

Group	N	Mean	SD
Iranian	35	4.07	0.20
American	25	4.19	0.28

results of the t-test. Mean scores of the two groups shown in Table 2 and 4 are indicative of the considerable difference between the two groups. Furthermore, statistically significant differences were evident in these two situations (Table 3 and 5). A closer look at two pairs of contexts which differ only in the interlocutors' power relationship indicates that the direction of the status differential is the crucial factor.

Iranian and American raters differed in their assessment of social power. Thus, social power was a determining factor in perceiving politeness of reprimands head acts. Followed, the remaining two situations which involve interactions containing the social distance factor with equal social power are examined.

Descriptive statistics for the third situation which dealt with the interaction between two passengers, shows minor difference between the means of two groups Table 6 and the results of independent t-tests shown in Table 7 confirm the fact the difference is not statistically significant.

As it is shown in Table 8 the mean scores are very similar across the two groups in situation four; moreover, as it was the case with the third situation, there was no statistically significant difference between Iranian and American subjects in terms of politeness levels expressed Table 9. So, it can be concluded that the

Table 9: Independent t-test for situation four

T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference
-1.87	58	0.06	-0.11

social distance between the interlocutors did not culminate in cross-cultural difference in perception of politeness.

DISCUSSION

The current study was designed to find the effects of the wording of the reprimands on interlocutors' perception of reprimand politeness and to investigate the possible cross-cultural differences between Iranian and American cultures with regard to this perception in asymmetrical situations containing different social variables.

The first two situations dealt with the interaction between a professor and a student in two different settings. It seems that unlike Iranians who paid attention to the power of the interlocutor (mean score of 3.22 in situation one as opposed to 4.29 in situation two), Americans were less concerned with this variable and considered the interlocutors of equal rights (mean score of 3.93 in situation one as opposed to 4.02 in situation two). So, the reprimand's politeness perception 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.

Comparing the ratings of Iranian informants with the Americans, as far as the situations involving social distance variable with symmetrical social power relationships were concerned, the two groups displayed close perceptions, in that no statistically significant differences emerged. So, in American and Iranian culture, perceiving reprimand's politeness is not influenced by the social distance between the participants which partly is in line Garcia (2004b) finding in that the social distance is not a motivating factor in perception of politeness.

Moreover, the analysis of the results showed that the Iranians do indeed perceive level of politeness less than that of Americans expect in the case that the speaker has more social power than the hearer, i.e., the second situation.

CONCLUSION

This study gives further support to the importance of understanding cross-cultural differences of speech acts. In particular, The study permitted an analysis of the

difference across cultures in perception of politeness and the perceived notion of social distance and social power. We conclude that reprimands are dependent upon the social power in the Iranian culture and social distance was not found to be statistically significant in both Iranian and American culture. 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 and the design and development of textbook materials which emphasize the pragmatic aspect of language.

APPENDIXES

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 paper 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. Response 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. Response to him/her.

Appendix b (questionnaire)

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

Example: Situation one

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 paper and say that your professor is wrong. Please rate the politeness level of the following statements from 1 (very rude) to 5 (very polite):

- Don't you think that my grade is a bit low? -----
- In my opinion the grade was a little low. -----
- I would appreciate it if you would reconsider my grade. -----

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