

The Transfer of Persian Language Speech Acts into English Language

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Abstract This paper investigates socio-pragmatic transfer of speech acts from Persian language into English language. The researcher compares the data gathered from Persian speakers of English and American native English in five different service situations. Persian speakers of English have different semantic interpretations from native American speakers, they conform to different sociolinguistic norms. So when Persian speakers want to speak English they consider their own cultural and social norms and transfer them in to English. Misunderstanding and break downs in conversations are due to this socio-pragmatic transfer. Adhering to different speaking rules and models of accepted behavior can cause different cultural perceptions about the L2 speakers, some of which are not true perceptions of course. So we should be careful about false cultural perceptions naming stereotypes without having knowledge about L2 speakers' cultural and social backgrounds.

Keywords: speech act; transfer; cultural stereotypes; Persian, English;

1. Introduction

Cultures vary in terms of communication strategies, the type of language, the functions of various speech acts, and all the other dimensions of interpersonal communication that are considered as appropriate in given context. (see Blum- Kulka et al.1989). Speakers of different languages when interact, are quite aware of different sounds and structures; but at the same time they are unaware of socio-cultural norms that play a crucial role in their interpersonal communication. Native speakers are likely to misinterpret the intentions of nonnative speakers that will result in "mutual negative stereotyping". (Tannen, 1989).

Second language learners are not consciously aware of rules of speaking which are mostly culture-specific, and as a result they cannot learn socio-cultural rules automatically. (Hall, 1977; Thomas, 1983).

Seelye (1997, page.64) suggests that stereotypes pose an interesting paradox in that while stereotypes are often terribly out-of-date or dangerously derogatory, they often capture the characteristics attributed to a particular culture.

When non natives participate in communicative situations with native speakers are judged by the norms of target language culture and native speakers rarely attribute misunderstandings to non natives' adherence to different rules of speaking. Our cultural knowledge acts as a filter through which we interpret the behaviors of others. As speakers from other cultures tend to behave based on socio-cultural norms of their native language, they will behave more similar to each other than native speakers of target language and this can give rise to cultural perceptions and attitudes attached to them or cultural stereotypes. In the same way that native speakers recognize foreigners' accents (e.g. She speaks with Mexican accent, or he has Chinese accent so do native speakers attach certain behaviors to certain people and cultures and come to identify certain behaviors as Arab-like, Latino- like, etc.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the phenomenon of pragmatic or socio-cultural transfer and the role this type of transfer may play in having specific perceptions and attitudes toward people from specific culture namely stereotypes. Specifically the researcher will address the question of pragmatic transfer into English by native speakers of Persian within the speech act of complaints. In this study how native speakers of Persian complain in service settings in Persian, their native language, and in English, their second language, and how both these sets of data compare to data produced by native speakers of American English in same settings.

2. Literature review

2.1 Pragmatic transfer

Kasper (1992) defines pragmatic transfer as "the influence exerted by learners' pragmatic knowledge of languages and cultures other than L 2 on their comprehension and production and learning of L2 pragmatic information" (Kasper, 1992, p. 207). She subsumes studies in this area under a sub-discipline of second language acquisition (SLA) research known as inter-language pragmatics. In an earlier work, Kasper and Dahl (1991) offered a narrower definition of inter-language pragmatics as the study of "the nonnative speakers' (NNSs) comprehension and production of speech acts, and how their L2-related speech act knowledge is acquired" (Kasper, 1991, p. 216).

Pragmatic transfer occurs when L2 learners apply the socially appropriate rules of their native language to target language situation either because they are unaware of target language routines and norms or because they are psychologically unable to violate their L1 internalized accepted norms of speech behavior. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations are the results are such socio-pragmatic transfer. The recurrent happening of such misunderstandings and misinterpretations may give rise to wrong perceptions and attitudes toward people from different cultures.

In an attempt to account for the reasons underlying pragmatic transfer several proposals have been made, namely, learners' lack of linguistic proficiency, their perception of speech act use as governed by universal (versus language-specific) factors, or their perception of similarities between their native language culture and that of target language one, and the psycholinguistic processes of overgeneralization, simplification or reduction of new sociolinguistic knowledge.

Kasper (1979) and Blum-Kulka (1982) conclude that "even fairly advanced language learners' communicative acts regularly contain pragmatic errors, or deficits, in that they fail to convey or comprehend the intended illocutionary force or politeness value." (Blum-Kulka et al.1989:10)

Misunderstanding of illocutionary force of an utterance leads to ' Pragmatic failure', while making incorrect social judgments about the appropriate and thus expected behavior in a given context results in 'socio-pragmatic failure'. (Thomas, 1983). Pragmatic failure stems from lack of familiarity with' the linguistic resources which a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions. (Leech, 1983:11).

According to Canale (1983) Socio pragmatic failure , on the other hand, involves lack of awareness of the conventions and the sociocultural norms of the target language, such as not knowing the appropriate registers, and topics or taboos governing the target language community (i.e., not knowing when it is when it is appropriate to perform a speech act.

When second language learners in L2 communicative situations. They are judged by the socio-cultural norms of target language culture but not with norms of their own native culture.

Americans usually characterize Middle East people and specially Iranians as terrorist, aggressive, hating Americans, etc. Americans stereotyping Iranian women as "uneducated homemakers," and Iranian men as being "sexually and emotionally aggressive" toward women. Although Iranians usually characterize Americans as meek, cool, having a lovely accent, and a wide range of Iranian students are likely to follow English with an American accent.

As Asghar Farhady, Iranian director of the masterpiece ' a Separation', in Oscar 2012 presented on the stage: "Our people are truly peace loving people."

3. Research methodology

3.1 Participants

The data for this study were gathered from 80 subjects: 40 native speakers of Persian and 40 native speakers of American English. The subjects ranged in age from 18 to 25. Persian subjects provided two sets of data: responses in Persian and responses in English. These subjects were asked first to complete written discourse completion questionnaires in English and then to complete another set in Persian. The subjects were purposefully asked to complete the questionnaires in order to minimize covert encouragement of transfer from their native language into their second language.

The Iranians

The subjects were the undergraduate students from different majors, studying at University of Isfahan. They had all studied English for 5-6 years .None of the subjects had ever lived abroad although some of them had traveled to English -speaking countries on vacation. The data collection was through sending questionnaires to their Email addresses.

The Americans

The Americans were college students, who were members of a chat room for American College Students. The subjects came primarily from New York. None of the participants had ever lived overseas and none spoke any language other than English.

3.2 Data collection procedures

The instrument used in the present study is a discourse completion questionnaire. This instrument is an efficient means of collecting information which allows the researchers to gather a large amount of data quickly, and allowing them to obtain important background data such as socioeconomic status, educational background, and geographic place of residence. It also permits the researcher to gather data on speech acts in specific settings. This type of data collection also allows non native speakers to prepare a good response. Second language learners often become nervous and unsure while being tested orally (Bodman, 1986). Thus a written format of data collection removes the element of anxiety and more closely reflect what the nonnative speakers would really produce in spoken interactions. (see ,e.g., Cohen ,1986; Rose ,1992; Kasper, 1993 for further information on the use of written discourse questionnaires) .

3.3 Materials and procedures

The data collection instrument used in this study was a discourse completion questionnaire with 5 situations. These five situations were designed to elicit complaints from respondents without actually using the word "complain". In order to control status and familiarity variables to some degree all the situation involved service relationships, that is an interaction between a customer or a client and a server. The same situations were used in both the English and in Persian versions of the questionnaires.

The first situation involves a customer who finds that he/she had bought rotten cheese after checking expire date at home, now he/she goes back to super market to have it changed. In the second situation a customer goes to a hair salon to have a haircut, at last the customer finds his/her hair too short! In the third situation a client is kept waiting in a law office for 2 hours! The fourth situation involves a student who receives C while he thinks that he/she answered all the questions thoroughly. And the last situation consists of an angry neighbor who calls 911 for the second time reporting an annoying neighbor always partying with loud music. Subjects were provided a brief description of the situation, a brief introductory turn by the subject's imaginary hearer, and then blank lines for the subjects' written responses:

You are in a law office now, you had an appointment with a lawyer at 2:00 but now this is 4:00. The receptionist looks cool and it seems nothing happened at all! You are very annoyed and you go to the receptionist.

Receptionist: "Yes?"

You:.....

.....

.....

The first conversational turn which is taken by the subjects' imaginary interlocutor was purposefully kept brief. In the example above the reader will note that the receptionist or the person in charge says only "yes" as the initial turn. The purpose of keeping the imaginary interlocutors' responses brief and nearly identical was to avoid unduly influencing subjects' responses. As is evident from the example, at no time are subjects actually instructed to complain; rather subjects are forced to produce this speech act by the nature of situation.

4. Findings and discussion

The tabulated data from all the respondents discuss four semantic categories that have the most relevance to our investigation into pragmatic transfer and cultural stereotypes: requests for repair, demands for repair, justifications, and criticisms. My focus on only these four of the semantic categories is because of their higher chance of occurrence in comparison to others. (For further information see DeCapua 1985, 1986, 1987)

4.1 Requests for repair and demands for repair

Requests for repairs are questions (and at times statements) that ask the hearer to remediate or redress the problem in

some way. In the data from the American respondents, requests for repair were frequently questions or pleas incorporating modal verbs such as 'can', 'could', or 'would'. Note that these forms are standard forms used in both English and Persian to make requests which indirectly function as directives but yet appear polite by virtue of the verb form which is marked for indirectness and hence politeness as in:

(1a) Can you either get me in to see the lawyer or make me another appointment?

(1b) Could I get another cheese pocket?

The Persian respondents produced questions or pleas incorporating modals primarily in the supermarket where the customer wants to change rotten cheese with a new one. This was true in both their English and their Persian responses. More common in the two sets of data produced by the Persians across all the situations was the use of a structure not found at all in the American English data, namely "لطفاً" 'please' plus the command form of the verb:

2) لطفاً رسیدگی کنید تا مشکل هر چه زودتر حل شود

Please see to it that you fix this as soon as possible.

Table 1 shows that the Persians responding in Persian produced the most requests for repair (70%). The Persians responding in English and the American subjects produced almost the same percent of requests for repair, in 60% and 42% of the situations respectively.

Table 1: Incidents as % of total subjects/situations

	Requests for Repair	Demands for Repair
Persian NSs	70	20
Persian EFL	60	24
American NSs	42	24

NS=Native Speaker ESL=English as a Second Language

In this table we see that demand for repair, in contrast to requests for repair, more demands for repair in their English responses than they did in their Persian responses. When they did make their demands for repair in English, the Persian respondents generally made much stronger or direct demands for repair than they did when responding in Persian or than did the American English speakers.

I suggest two reasons for this; first what the Persians may have intended to convey in English and what they actually conveyed may well not have been the same. Second language learners simply do not have the same ability to manipulate the target language that native speakers do. As such these learners are likely to err in the actual intended pragmatic force of their utterances (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Beebe, et al. 1990; Blum-kukla'1982; Bodman, 1993)

A second reason for the difference in directness lies, I maintain, in pragmatic transfer; namely the Persian modal باید, which technically compares to the English modal 'must' or 'have to', encompasses a somewhat different semantic field and hence carries a different illocutionary or pragmatic force than does either English counterpart. As these Persian and English modals are not exactly interchangeable in all situations, Persians speaking in English and using 'must' or 'have to' where Americans expect 'should' or some other, less direct means expression may intentionally come across as sounding unusually demanding or even commanding to native speakers.

Let me elaborate on this point. In several instances the Persian respondents used باید 'must/ have to' where American English speakers prefer 'should'. This at times had the effect that that the Persian subjects conveyed much stronger or more direct demands for repair than they probably intended to in their English responses.

Consider for instance:

(3a)You must pay for a new one.

(3b).....I think you have to give me a new appointment.

In both (3a) and (3b) American speakers would have phrased their demands somewhat differently; e.g., substituting 'should' where the Persian used 'must' or 'have to':

(3c)...You should pay for a new one.

(3d)I think you should give me a new appointment.

For Americans 'should' softens the pragmatic force of a demand whereas 'must/have to' act as intensifiers that increase demands to command status. Although all the examples in (3) are demands for repair, there is a difference in the pragmatic force; the intensity or directness of the semantic content of the phrases is not identical. In American English 'must' when used in the sense of obligation (and to a somewhat lesser extent 'have to'), is a very strong modal auxiliary

which conveys the idea of law or order. It implies that there is no possible or permissible alternative (Frank, 1972). In Persian 'باید' also carries this meaning of obligation; in addition, however, it encompasses the notion of a milder obligation, that is, one in which there are other alternatives possible. This latter sense of Persian 'باید' is in English conveyed more appropriately by 'should'.

Thus in American English when native speakers wish to express the idea of obligation with reference to responsibility or duty, they prefer to use 'should' and when they wish to express the idea of obligation with reference to an order to law, they use 'must' with 'have to' functioning as a sort of halfway point between 'should' and 'must' they are exercising their authority vis a vis the hearer (Quirk et al. 1985). In short, in English a demand phrased with 'must' is significantly stronger and direct than one phrased with 'should'.

In Persian both of these meanings are part of the semantics fields encompassed by 'باید'. L2 learners' pragmatic knowledge or understanding of the functional equivalence of target language and native language norms is often incomplete (Blum-Kulka, 1983; S. Takahashi, 1996). It is therefore not surprising that Persians, when speaking in English, will often use 'must' incorrectly and thereby impart a greater sense of directness or bluntness than they actually intended. As these speakers unintentionally violate American rules of speaking, their verbal actions provide impetus for cultural stereotyping of Persian as aggressive and commandeering.

4.2 Justifications

Justifications I define here as statements or phrases produced by respondents to defend, vindicate or lend support to their statement of problem and/or request or demand for repair. Overall, the Persian respondents produced more justifications in both their English and Persian responses than did the American respondents as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Incidence of Justifications as % of Subjects

	Sit1	Sit2	Sit3	Sit4	Sit5
Iranian NSs	15%	17%	46%	19%	46%
Iranian EFL	20%	19%	29%	14%	41%
American NSs	0%	0%	18%	11%	33%

NS=Native Speaker ESL=English as a Second Language

Sit1=customer returns back to store reporting he/she had received a rotten cheese

Sit2=customer finds his/her hair too short after getting a hair cut in a hair salon

Sit3=customer has been waiting 2 hours at law office

Sit4=a student receives C, but he/she asserts that it's definitely a mistake!

Sit5=an angry neighbor calls 911 for the second time reporting a noisy neighbor

Of more interest and relevancy to our inquiry into pragmatic transfer is the difference in the types of justification rather than a comparison of the actual number of justifications produced by either group. The way in which Persians defended or vindicated their complains was rather clearly related to a different set of sociocultural norms than typical American norms (Althen, 1988;). The clearest example of this occurred in the situation where the hair stylist cut the hair of customer too short. Here the justification in the Persian's English and Persian responses were related to the customer's expectations that a hairstylist should know how to handle cutting properly as in (4):

(4) Native speakers of Persian

(a) (English) But I thought you are professional!

(b) (English) You must be trained for that!

(c) (Persian) که مطمئن بشید مشتریتون چه مدلی و چه اندازه می خواد موهاشو کوتاه کنه

To ensure that you know what is your customer's desired size and

Model of haircut!

(d) (Persian)... چون من فکرشم نمی کردم موهامو اینقدر کوتاه کنید بدون اینکه حتی یک سوالی بپرسی..

Because I couldn't even imagine that you go for just cutting all my hair too short even without asking a question!

These types of justifications by the Persian respondents probably have their roots in Persian societal expectations: Iran is a culture in which everyone has duties and obligations and is (more or less) expected to comply with them. A cleaner,

by virtue of his/her profession, should know how to handle clothing properly; accordingly, those Persian respondents who chose to justify their complaints did so by pointing out the failure of the cleaner in his/her professional capacity. The fact that the American respondents did not produce any justifications at all in this situation is similarly rooted in different societal expectations. Duty and obligation, although certainly valued in American society, are not valued in American society, are not valued in the same way as Persian society; as such Americans generally may not feel a need to remind others, particularly those in service positions, of their accountability to social roles or to appeal to their hearers' own and most likely shared preferences (Althen, 1988) when Americans do make such references or appeals, it is only in the most serious of situations.

In short the differences in the type of justifications between the two groups of respondents illustrate another instance where pragmatic transfer may act in the creation and maintenance of cultural stereotyping. Since American speakers do not expect justifications, and certainly not justifications that appeal to duty or responsibility in these types of complaint situations, their reaction is most likely to be negative when speakers of Persians do furnish such justifications in such settings as English. Indeed an informal survey of native speakers of American English indicated to me that they almost uniformly interpreted such justifications as criticism, and inappropriately strong criticism at that. It seems that here we see again an example of how pragmatic transfer underlies native speaker perceptions that Persian speakers are more accusatory than is appropriate.

4.3. Criticisms

The last category I will discuss is criticisms, namely sentences or phrases that offer an evaluation of the problem or situation, as in:

(5a) **You've ruined my hair!**

(5b) It's 4:00 and I'm waiting here for 2 hours! **You should have told me if there was going to be a problem** and I would have come back another time. (Criticism bolded).

The important element for a sentence or phrase to be labeled as 'criticism' is the element of reprobation or disapproval. A criticism is intrinsically a subjective (and negative) statement about the topic at hand. By its very nature a criticism is a face-threatening act, and in social interaction is expressed in a variety of ways depending upon the sociocultural norms governing criticism, as well as the goals and temperament of the speaker.

Table 3: Incidence of Criticism as % of Subjects

	Sit1	Sit2	Sit3	Sit4	Sit5
Persian NS	12	38	35	30	36
Persian EFL	9	44	29	24	32
American NSs	6	30	32	12	29

NS=Native Speaker ESL=English as a Second Language

Sit1=customer returns back to store reporting he/she had received a rotten cheese

Sit2=customer finds his/her hair too short after getting a hair cut in a hair salon

Sit3=customer has been waiting 2 hours at law office

Sit4=a student receives C, but he/she asserts that it's definitely a mistake!

Sit5=an angry neighbor calls 911 for the second time reporting a noisy neighbor

In comparing the Persian and English data from the Persian respondents with the English data from the Americans, we find a qualitative difference in the tone and style of the criticisms. Compare for instance:

(6.1) Native speakers of Persian responding in Persian (criticisms bolded)

(a) چطوری این طوری شده؟ شما باید دست کم یک سوالی می پرسیدی چه سایز و چه مدلی می خوام.

How could this have happened? **After all, you're supposed to ask me about the desired size and model.**

(b) اصلا نمی شه آدم خودشو بسپره دست شما آرایشگر! حالا باید کلی صبر کنم تا باز موهام بلند بشه

Nobody can trust you! I should wait a long time to have long hair again!

(6.2.) Native speakers of Persian responding in English

(c) I'm sitting here for two hours and I could not see the lawyer and I think **that's really annoying!**

(d) I'm sorry, but have you seen the expire date on this pocket? This cheese is rotten! I think **you are not responsible enough in your job.**

(6.3.) I've reported the case of my noisy neighbor several times! **You still haven't Handled it.**

Here we don't want to say Americans are more polite and conservative or Iranians are aggressive or blunt but we want to say due to having different semantic interpretations of words they may seem so. By the same token, different semantic fields encompassing modal choices and ways of expressing oneself in Persian can also prompt Persian learners of English to sound more direct, more accusatory or blunter than is usually acceptable to Americans. Thus in communicative interactions between Americans and Persian speakers of English, Americans are likely to misinterpret Persian speakers of English, Americans are likely to misinterpret Persian verbal behavior at times because each group of speakers is operating under different (and at times because each group of speakers is operating under different (and at times conflicting) rules of discourse. As such at least some of cultural stereotypes have their origins in pragmatic transfer.

5. Concluding remarks

In this paper I have attempted to explore whether the source of at least some cultural stereotyping lies in pragmatic transfer. In other words, do differing socio-cultural norms of communicative interaction between native speakers and same language groups of nonnative speakers influence cultural misunderstandings that then give rise to stereotypes? Specifically I examined how native speakers of Persian complain in service settings in English and in Persian, and compared these data with data from native speakers of American English. I focused on four semantic categories: requests and demands for repair, justifications and criticisms. The preliminary results indicate that the type and tone of the Persian responses differed from those of the American responses, such that cultural misunderstandings as to the directness and intent of the speakers are likely to result. As I have attempted to illustrate here, these cultural misunderstandings, when they occur consistently among groups of same language nonnative speakers, can give rise to cultural stereotypes.

The data in this study indicate that Persians in English are generally more direct, that is, more aggressive and blunt than are Americans in similar situations. Some of the specific semantic response categories that they are likely to transfer are the more frequent use of strong criticisms, more justifications, and more direct requests. In considering the complaint response set, the data produced by the Persians in Iran indicate that they tend to prefer more direct and stronger types of utterances than do American speakers.

Many of these differences in directness may be due to different cultural perceptions as to the roles of speaker and hearer in service situations in Persian and American society. In Persian society, especially nowadays youngsters consider being blunt as fashionable and showing self confidence. Although Iranians are known for compliment and indirectness but this is due to previous generations. Young people and especially teenagers feel more confident using direct speech, being blunt and sometimes to the excess even rude! Parents try to teach their children to be blunt, to have the art of saying NO and not to suppress their demands and needs. Parents want their children to stand up for their right, something that they themselves didn't have the chance for that. Iranian culture for many years appreciated being indirect, keeping calm even if others especially older people offend or ignore their rights. But at the other side of this excess youngster today are blunt and confident but not aggressive. The types of complaints produced by the Persian subjects in the five service situations investigated here reaffirm these Persian societal attitudes. It is not only the fact that there is a problem that requires remedy, but it is as though the speaker is morally offended and morally obligated to point out to the hearer that the person has failed in doing his/her duty.

In American society, by contrast, there is more emphasis on the individual and appeal to the individual rather than to societal norms (Althen, 1988). A problem is not an offense against one's societal role or duty, but rather an offense against a person's individual rights; e.g., of property, or of time.

Further research, however, is needed to confirm these findings; the subjects were within a limited age group, and only five controlled complaint situations and only written data were examined. Further studies should combine a variety of elicited and ethnographic data collection methods in order to probe the role of pragmatic transfer in cultural stereotyping.

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