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Speech Act Disagreement among Young Women in Iran

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Abstract: In their article "Speech Act Disagreement among Young Women in Iran" Vahid Parvaresh and Abbas Eslami Rasekh investigate the effects of solidarity and deference proposed by Ronald Scollon and Suzanne Scollon on the ways in which young women in Iran perform the speech act of disagreement in their own language and culture. Their data has been analyzed using Geoffrey Leech's classification of illocutionary functions which is based on the social goal of establishing and maintaining comity. Special care has also been exercised to take the respondents' points of view into consideration. Parvaresh and Rasekh suggest that in a non-Western Islamic culture such as Iran, the considerations of deference might override those of solidarity when young women want to disagree with their close male friends. In this way, they argue that young women in Iran employ conflictives, which have the most impolite intention, mostly when and where their addressee is of the same sex.

Vahid PARVARESH and Abbas ESLAMI RASEKH

Speech Act Disagreement among Young Women in Iran

The phenomenon of politeness occurs when and where one interlocutor wants to disagree with what the other interlocutor has just mentioned. When one disagrees with what a person is saying or doing, one might, in one way or another, threaten that person in his/her face. Erving Goffman, based on the work of his predecessor Emile Durkheim, introduced this concept and since then it has had an enormous impact on scholarship in the fields of pragmatics and sociolinguistics. Goffman defined face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman 5). One of the greatest impacts of Goffman's concept was on Penelope Brown and Steffen Levinson, who extended Goffman's social emphasis on the nature of face towards an individualistic and cognitive model (see Bargiela-Chiappini). They combined Goffman's notion of face with Paul Grice's framework, which was proposed for the analysis of conversations, and came up with their own model of politeness. In this way, they entertain the idea that some basic aspects of politeness are universal; and, as a result, they contend that face is invested in the individual and can be lost and, therefore, it must be constantly attended to in the course of interaction.

Brown and Levinson distinguish between two universal aspects of face, namely positive and negative ones. They define the former as "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others" and the latter as "the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others" (62). The authors believe that each utterance might impose a threat to the other interlocutor's face. In this regard, they contend that the assessment of the seriousness of face threatening acts (FTAs) involves the following factors in many and perhaps all cultures: 1) the social distance (D) of the speaker and hearer, 2) the relative power (P) of the speaker and hearer, and 3) the absolute ranking (R) of impositions in the particular culture (Brown and Levinson 74). Although this individualistic and cognitive model of politeness has been widely accepted, it has also been criticized on the grounds that politeness is not a universal concept but a form of social interaction which is determined by sociocultural norms of a particular society (see, e.g., Bargiela-Chiappini; Blum-Kulka; Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper; de Kadt; Edstrom; Felix-Brasdefer, *Decline, Mitigation*; Haugh, *Revisiting*; Ladegaard; Nwoye; Olshtain and Cohen; Mao; Watts). In other words, although it seems that politeness is a universal concept, at least its realization will vary from culture to culture. Therefore, the use of varying strategies of politeness across different languages and cultures has been the topic of intensive research in recent years. In fact, scholarship of intercultural pragmatics has investigated how one culture uses one strategy rather than another in order to save face in a given situation. But although these strategies have been investigated in many languages, they have remained untouched in some other languages and cultures (see Haugh, *Importance*; Felix-Brasdefer, *Indirectness*, *Linguistic*). Ronald Scollon and Suzanne Scollon, for example, tried to avoid the confusion that might surface as the result of using the terms "positive" and "negative" and they use the term "involvement" instead of the former and "independence" instead of the latter. They argue that this substitution emphasizes the fact that politeness is not only the result of cognitive, individualistic factors but also of group factors. Their face system includes the following determining facets: 1) deference, 2) solidarity, and 3) hierarchy. In a system of deference politeness, although none of the interlocutors exerts power over the other (- Power), the relationship is distant (+ Distance). In a system of solidarity politeness, still none of the interlocutors exerts power over the other (- Power); but, unlike in a system of deference politeness, the relationship between the interlocutors is intimate or close (- Distance). And finally, in the system of hierarchical politeness, although one of the interlocutors has power over the other (+ Power), the relationship might be either close (- Distance) or distant (+ Distance).

A large number of studies have recently been concerned with the effects of gender and also cultural differences in people's choice of strategies of politeness. Most of them have concluded that generally young men are more assertive than young women (see Kyratzis and Ervin-Tripp; Sachs). Others have come to the conclusion that young women can be as assertive as young boys and even, at times, more assertive (see Cook-Gumpers and Szymanski; Thorell). Still others have studied how cultures differ from each other as far as the realization of polite behavior is concerned. For example, studies by Anna Wierzbicka reveal that directness does not necessarily express impolite behaviour, but, rather, it might be seen as an expression of closeness. Others like Carmen Garcia and Cesar Felix-Brasdefer (*Declining*) also discovered how insistence to an invitation is, unlike in some other cultures, an indication of politeness not impoliteness. However, almost all of the studies have focused mainly on Western cultures, ignoring what might be the dominant trend in eastern or Islamic cultures. The only exception

might be Akbar Afghari who found direct expression of apology and an acknowledgment of responsibility to be the most frequent apology formulas in Farsi. This study is, therefore, an attempt to shed light on what happens in an eastern and Islamic culture such as Iran. In this study the effects of two of the above-mentioned systems of politeness, proposed by Scollon and Scollon, on the use of strategy by women native speakers of Farsi while doing the speech act of disagreement is investigated. The systems under investigation are those of solidarity and deference. The reason for choosing such systems is that in Iran young women appear to not have the same authority and initiative as most young men do. This might be the result of the fact that in a society like Iran, women and men spend most of their lives interactionally and spatially segregated. This study is an attempt to explore some of the differences that might appear between same-sex (female-female) and cross-sex conversations (male-female). In this regard, we follow John Gumperz and Jenny Cook-Gumperz who believe that social processes are symbolic processes but that symbols have meaning only in relation to the forces which control the utilization and allocation of environmental resources.

Eighty native Farsi-speaking women university students took part in this study. Half of them were junior students of physics and the rest were sophomore students of English translation. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 23. The university students were chosen in order to increase the comparability level of the study with other studies in other cultures because most of the politeness studies have targeted university students. All of the participants were chosen from the University of Isfahan located in the center of the Islamic Republic of Iran. A task of discourse completion (hereafter DCT) comprising of 4 tasks was developed based on a Persian short story written by Jalal Ale Ahmad (see Appendix). In those tasks the context would force the participants to disagree with what the other interlocutor had just said or requested. The original story was about a boy who wanted to urge his friend to climb a staircase which would lead to the roof of a mosque. But because we wanted to investigate both the effects of solidarity and deference on female speakers, two versions of that DCT were developed. In the first version, the name of the first interlocutor remained constant (a man's name) and in the second version the name of that person was changed into a woman's name. The reason for changing the name was that in an Islamic society such as Iran the addressee's gender might have an effect on the choice of words. In fact, it is believed, that however close a person is with his/her friend, his/her choice of words will be affected if the addressee will be from the opposite sex as that of the speaker.

The participants of the study were randomly assigned to one of the versions of the DCT. Half of them received the version in which they had to disagree with a male speaker (male-female relationship) and the rest had to disagree with a female one (female-female relationship). The following table summarizes the situations in the two developed versions of the DCT:

Table 1. Two DCT versions of the study

DCT Version	Speaker Gender	Addressee Gender	Deference	Solidarity
1	Female	Female	-	+
2	Female	Male	+	+

The unit of the analysis was decided to be the utterance or sequences of utterances the respondents produced in order to complete the missing parts. These utterances were, then, analyzed based on Leech's classification of different illocutionary functions (see Table 2). According to this classification, illocutionary goals are divided into four categories of a) competitives, b) convivials, c) collaboratives, and d) conflictives based on how they relate to the social goal of establishing and maintaining comity. Being in agreement with this kind of classification, the first (competitives) and the last category (conflictives) were regarded as impolite with the latter being the rudest; and the second (convivials) and the third category (collaboratives) were regarded as polite in nature.

Table 2. Classification of illocutionary functions (adapted from Leech)

Illocutionary Function	Definition	Examples
Competitives	The illocutionary goal competes with the social goal	ordering, asking, demanding, advising, commanding.
Convivials	The illocutionary goal coincides with the social goal	offering, inviting, thanking, promising, vowing, condoling.
Collaboratives	The illocutionary goal is indifferent to the social goal	claiming, boasting, reporting, stating, and complaining.
Conflictives	The illocutionary goal conflicts with the social goal	threatening, accusing, cursing, reprimanding.

Special care was also taken to ensure that the identifications were in concordance with the intention of the respondents themselves. For this reason, each respondent was later interviewed and asked to comment on her/his responses to the DCT items. This resulted in the clarification of ambiguous utterances. For example, in Farsi, the following utterance could, in nature, be regarded as either a complaint or a reprimand: "inghadr natars az in modir" ("don't be so scared of the head teacher"). For this reason, the analysis was conducted based mainly on the speakers' comments on the utterances that they had produced. Several expressions were used in order to disagree with what the other interlocutor had previously said. They ranged from highly impolite, rude responses like "haalam az in harfaat beham mikhore" ("what you're saying makes me feel sick") to more polite ones like "in harfaa az to baeede" ("I don't expect you to talk like this"). As Table 3 shows, in task number 1 highly impolite utterances like cursing and reprimanding accounted for more than 50% of the overall responses where the respondents had to disagree with a woman speaker whereas such responses accounted for less than 10% of the whole responses where the respondents had to disagree with a speaker of the opposite gender. In woman-woman situations the dominant pattern was a reprimand like "dobaare in zeddehaal shoorou kard" ("the party pooper has started talking again") sometimes followed by a suggestive curse like "aakhe ahmagh age mikhaast beshkane taa haalaa shekaste bood" ("Are you crazy? If it was to fall apart, it should have fallen apart by now"); but in man-woman situations the dominant pattern was a claim like "vali man miram baalaa azash" ("but I'm going to climb it") followed by an invitation like "toham biyaa dige" ("you come too"). It might be argued that an utterance like the last one could have been regarded as a demand as well. This is exactly what was found in the follow-up interviews. Some of the respondents regarded such an utterance as an invitation whereas some others considered it as a demand.

Table 3. Illocutionary goals used in task 1

Woman-Woman					Man-Woman				
Competitive	Kind	Number	Total	Percent	Competitive	Kind	Number	Total	Percent
	Demand	8	8	10.38		Demand	12	12	15.18
Convivial	Invite	5	7	9.09	Convivial	Invitation	19	29	36.70
	Vow	2				Vow	3		
						Promise	7		
Collaborative	Claim	15	22	28.57	Collaborative	Claim	25	32	40.50
	Suggest	7				Suggest	4		
						Assert	3		
Conflictive	Curse	12	40	51.9	Conflictive	Curse	3	6	7.59
	Reprimand	23				Reprimand	3		
	Blame	5							
Total			77	100	Total			79	100

The analysis of the DCT number 2 revealed that women in the man-woman situation used about three times as many boasts as the women in the woman-woman situation (see Table 4). This might suggest that perhaps in Iranian culture, as in many other cultures, boasting is not considered as a rude behavior. This finding is further confirmed by the fact that the women used about three times fewer

conflictives compared with the women in the woman-woman situation. If boasting had been a rude behavior, they might have used more conflictives too. For the women in the man-woman situation, the major pattern was a boast like "haalaa ke intor shod dafeye dige ham jeloye cheshmesh dobaare baa daste chapam minevisam" ("now it's turned out like this I'm going to write with my left hand again in front of his eyes") sometimes preceded or followed by a vow like "be khodaa ghasam" ("God my witness") or by a reprimand like "chraa partopalaa migi?" ("why are you talking rubbish?"). But in the woman-woman situation the dominant pattern was the use of a curse like "aakhe ahmagh che rabti daare?" ("what has what you're saying have to do with anything, stupid?") or a reprimand. This is why in this situation too the use of conflictives accounted for around 82% of the responses.

Table 4. Illocutionary goals used in task 2

Woman-Woman					Man-Woman				
Convivial	Kind Vow	Number 2	Total 2	Percent 2.53	Convivial	Kind Vow	Number 19	Total 19	Percent 26.02
Collaborative	Boast	12	12	15.18	Collaborative	Boast	33	33	45.20
Conflictive	Curse Reprimand	34 31	65	82.27	Conflictive	Reprimand	21	21	28.76
Total			79	100	Total			73	100

As Table 5 shows, in the third DCT task the women in the man-woman situation used an utterance like "don't be timid" mostly as an indication of complaint not as an indication of reprimand or curse which was the dominant pattern in woman-woman situation. This might also be considered as a piece of evidence supporting the view that complaining is not usually considered as rude behavior. The number of complaints in man-woman situations was three times as much than the number of complaints in woman-woman situations. This finding might also account for the fact that in Iranian culture men are supposed to be courageous and powerful and that their inability to live up to such attributes might force the opposite sex to complain. Generally speaking, the usual pattern in the Girl-Girl situation was a curse like "tarsoo khaanoom" ("scared young lady") sometimes preceded or followed by a claim like "nemishkane" ("it won't fall apart"). In man-women situations, on the contrary, it was the pattern of complaint and claim which turned out to be dominant. Again women in the women-woman situation used more than twice as many conflictives as the women in the other situation did.

Table 5. Illocutionary goals used in task 3

Woman-Woman					Man-Woman				
Collaborative	Kind Claim Complain	Number 21 9	Total 30	Percent 41.66	Collaborative	Kind Claim Complain	Number 24 37	Total 61	Percent 78.20
Conflictive	Curse Reprimand	33 9	42	58.33	Conflictive	Curse Reprimand	8 9	17	21.79
Total			72	100	Total			78	100

Regarding the final task, the results of the analysis of the responses and the post-task comments of the respondents revealed that for the women in the man-woman situation an utterance like "inghadr az in modir natars" ("don't be so scared of the head teacher") was served mostly to be the indication of complaint rather than reprimand and this is perhaps why complaints accounted for nearly half of the responses in this situation. This resulted in the pattern of a complaint followed by a claim like "oon hich kaari nemitoone bokone" ("there's nothing he can do to us"). But in the woman-woman situation those complaints were mostly intended as reprimands, and, moreover, the claims were very much similar to curses. This is why in this situation the dominant pattern was a reprimand followed by a curse like "hich ghalati nemitoone bokone" ("he can't do a damn thing to us"). In this task the re-

spondents in the woman-woman situation used conflictives about six times more than the respondents in the man-woman situation (see Table 6).

Table 6. Illocutionary goals used in task 4

Woman-Woman					Man-Woman				
Collaborative	Kind	Number	Total	Percent	Collaborative	Kind	Number	Total	Percent
	Claim	11	19	25		Claim	34	70	88.60
	Complain	8				Complain	36		
Conflictive	Curse	32	57	75	Conflictive	Curse	9	9	11.39
	Reprimand	25							
Total			76	100	Total			79	100

In conclusion, the results of our study indicate that in Iranian culture the addressee's gender highly affects the use of strategies while performing the speech act of disagreement even when there is a high amount of solidarity. Put it another way, it was found that in an Islamic culture such as Iran solidarity is usually overridden by considerations of deference when and where the addressee is of the opposite sex as that of the speaker. In this way it was found that women employ conflictives, which have the most impolite intention, mostly when and where the addressee is of the same sex. For this reason we can argue, as Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker do, that when men and women try to interact in cross-sex conversations they do not play the same role in interaction, even when there is no element of flirting. The reason for such a difference can be attributed to the differences in social power (West and Zimmerman). In a society such as that of Iran it is men who are usually supposed to be invested with power and authority and this is likely why the element of power can influence the choice of words and strategies even when women try to speak with their close male friends. Another reason might as well be related to psychological factors. Robin Lakoff, for example, believes that such differences can be attributed to the fact that usually young girls are taught to speak like ladies. Still another reason might be, following Maltz and Borker, the presence of different male and female subcultures. Finally, it should also be mentioned that in this study the data were analyzed based on Leech's classification of illocutionary goals. The findings are, in fact, compatible with that classification. Other different approaches like conversation analysis with the focus on repeated surface patterns (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson), or ethnography of communication dealing with reasonable acts the actors perform toward achieving particular goals (Saville-Troike) could have been used, which might have resulted in different findings.

Appendix
Discourse Completion Task

Please complete the missing parts. You should disagree with your close friend.
　　1) Asghar [man's name] (Maryam [woman's name]) held my hand and dragged me to the courtyard, and once I saw the minarets I hankered for them. After we walked for a while I asked him (her) "Why are the minarets incomplete?" He (she) said "I don't know, I think when Moayyer died they were left incomplete. People say his sons were clumsy." I asked "Who is Moayyer?" He (she) said "I don't know. I should ask my dad." I said "I wanna climb one of them." He (she) said "It is impossible. Even the muezzin cannot climb it." I said….
　　2) I knew Asghar (Maryam) since the time when our teacher hit my left hand with a stick because I had written the name of God with that hand. Our teacher would believe that writing the name of God with the left hand was a hideous act. But I couldn't do anything with my right hand. I was left-handed. Asghar (Maryam) took me near the pool and put my hand in water. Then he (she) nudged me and asked "Why are you so sad? Didn't you see that the teacher was not in good mood?" I was to cry. I didn't reply; but Asghar (Maryam) nudged me again and said "Hey! Suppose your left eye was blind. Ok? In that case you didn't want to see? What if you didn't have this left hand? OK? The beggar near our home doesn't have the left hand." I said….
　　3) As we reached the roof of the mosque the children saw us and started to shout. We rushed into the staircase of the minaret. Asghar (Maryam) was in front of me. The staircase was circular, round,

and narrow, so we couldn't go fast. We could still hear the children shouting. Asghar (Maryam) said "I think the staircase is going to fall apart." I said….

4) Asghar (Maryam) went one step higher to the extent that children could see his (her) head. He (she) said "It is too cold here. Let's get down." I said "Wait. Guess how much the top of the minaret is higher than us." Asghar again (Maryam) said "It's too cold. Let's get down." I said "I wish the mina-rets had been completed." Asghar (Maryam) said "Oh! The head teacher is staring at us." I said "I want to climb higher" He (she) said "Are you an idiot? The wind will make you fall, and the head teacher will punish us. I said….

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