

Ceremonious politeness and Iranians' social relations: A case study of teaching Persian as a second language

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1. Introduction

Using Simmel's (1971) formal sociology and Austin's (1962) performative utterance theory in linguistics, this article examines the role of ceremonious politeness (i.e., *ta'arof*) in teaching Persian as a Second Language. Ceremonious politeness is a prominent phenomenon in Iranians' communications, which span from simple verbal and non-verbal social relations to written and formal correspondence. Aside from Iranians, foreign learners of the Persian language also encounter the phenomenon, but most often they are not able to decode this social protocol. Since, in their everyday life experiences with Persian, these individuals face ceremonious politeness, it is very important that they gain a better understanding of the social relationships of Iranians, establish a two-way communication with the people around them, and become familiar with both the verbal codes and social structures of the Iranian society.

2. Theoretical framework

From a sociological perspective, ceremonious politeness is a social subject that relates to mutual relationships between individuals. Stressing the need to differentiate between social forms and their context, the German sociologist Simmel (1971: 25) argues that such distinction occurs through the abstraction of the form of mutual social interactions in different situations and different contexts. However, seen from Austin's (1955) lens, the form of ceremonious politeness, which includes verbal and non-verbal communications, becomes important in teaching Persian as a Second Language. As such, Austin (1962) states that one can do many things with language as reaction to speech can help the speaker utter a word or words.

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3. Methodology

This study uses the exploratory method of phenomenology in order to understand foreign students' experience with ceremonious politeness. Data were collected through random in-depth interviews with 48 respondents who were aged 18-45. These individuals were foreign students of advanced and graduate courses at Imam Khomeini University, Dehkhoda Institute's International Centre for Teaching Persian, and Iranology at the University of Tehran. Interviews were digitally recorded and then carefully transcribed for content analysis. All interviews were conducted in Persian but from time to time English words were also used to resolve potential misunderstandings.

4. Results and discussion

During the research, a majority of respondents happened to talk about their most common difficulties in learning Persian at different stages. Ceremonious politeness appeared to recur at all three levels of elementary, intermediate, and advance. At the elementary level, the form and context of ceremonious politeness remains unknown to them. For example, learners do not know that for ceremonies politeness to function, there is a need for both parties to take part in speaking so balance can be established. Given this lack of knowledge, when they encounter ceremonious politeness from Iranians, they put an end to the conversation by destroying the balance. At the intermediate level, they are familiar with the form of ceremonious politeness. They know that both sides need to express words so that the concept can maintain its meaning; however, they are not able to fully understand the verbal complexities and social protocols that underpin the concept and hence cannot decode it. Most of such misunderstandings appeared to happen when students participate in social activities and interactions. Finally, and at the advance level, students know both form and context and can understand the verbal complexities of ceremonious politeness. Yet, a full understanding of the social protocols and native codes and their details is still difficult. Such difficulties usually occur in individuals' professional and social interactions. The study shows that most of such difficulties occur at the intermediate level, where learners are familiar with the form of ceremonious politeness but are still less familiar with the context of the phenomenon.

5. Conclusions and suggestions

In teaching Persian as a Foreign Language, the sociological structures and verbal complexities should be taken into consideration. Familiarity with

these can help increase learners' knowledge of Iranians' cultural behavior. It can also help learners understand ceremonious politeness and employ correct models in their communication. They will also acknowledge that ceremonious politeness is an indispensable part of Iranians' language and culture and that they can use such knowledge in order to resolve cultural obstacles in their learning. Therefore, it is highly recommended that in teaching a cultural phenomenon such as ceremonious politeness, the characteristics of different levels of the language should be taken into account. Having said this, since the application of ceremonious politeness entails a wide range of social interactions, learners' needs should also be taken into account and categorized into different areas such as individual, social, professional, educational, and training. Such categorization can help both the learners and the teachers identify the most applicable contexts in which ceremonious politeness is more likely to happen.

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