A comparative sociopragmatic study of ostensible invitations in English and Farsi

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Abstract

In their study in 1990, Clark and Isaacs identified five properties and seven defining features that distinguished between English ostensible and genuine invitations. To see if Persian ostensible and genuine invitations could be distinguished by the same features and properties, the present study was carried out. Forty five field workers observed and reported 566 ostensible and 607 genuine invitations. In addition, 34 undergraduate students were interviewed and 68 ostensible and 68 genuine invitations were gathered. Forty one pairs of friends were also interviewed and afforded 41 ostensible invitations. The results of the data analysis revealed that Persian ostensible invitations can also be distinguished from Persian genuine invitations by the features and properties identified by Clark and Isaacs.
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1. Introduction

Very often, linguists claim that instances of verbal communication can be broken down into a series of speech acts, or communicative acts. Speakers use these acts and act sequences in a systematic way to accomplish certain purposes. As such, a number of research projects have focused on the study of conversations. These investigations have sought to fathom the depths of communicative events to arrive at the unspoken purposes that lie at the heart of each. The present paper reports the results, and discusses the findings, of the research done to investigate the probable similarities and differences in the use of genuine and ostensible invitations by native speakers of English and Persian.

2. Background of the study

Brown and Levinson (1978) are famous for their work on ''politeness'' which is usually viewed as a powerful constraint that controls the way people interact verbally. Politeness is the manifestation, through speech, of respect for another individual's face. We all evaluate the people to whom we talk partly on the basis of their ability to interact verbally. That is, we develop a feeling about others partly based on how they speak. The overall impression (of themselves) that people leave in us can be

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called their face. A definition of the term "face" is, therefore, necessary here.

> In deciding how much to take another person's feelings into account, we have three factors to consider. First, people are usually more polite to others when they are of higher status or perceived of as being powerful; second, people are generally more polite to others who are socially distant; and third, we are usually more polite in relation to the gravity of the threat we are about to make to others' face (Wolfson, 1989, p. 67).

According to Brown and Levinson (1978), two aspects of people's feelings are involved in face. The first is the desire of the individual not to be imposed on—which they called negative face. The second (i.e. positive face) is the desire of the individual to be liked or approved of. An example of positive politeness is our positive evaluation of our interlocutor's accomplishments, appearance, etc. Positive politeness also includes hints and signals that show the listener he or she is considered a friend and member of the speaker's "in-group". This may be accomplished through such strategies as giving gifts, showing interest in the other, extending invitations towards the other, etc. Negative politeness, however, involves a show of deference. The speaker, through negative politeness, usually tries to show the listener that he does not wish to disturb or to interfere with the other's freedom. Apologies, indirect requests, and other forms of remedial work usually appear in this category.

Brown and Levinson (1978) argue that face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced. There are three important factors that determine the distribution of face among interlocutors: (1) solidarity or the horizontal social distance between participants (*D*), (2) power relation or the vertical social distance (*P*), and (3) the weightiness of the imposition negotiated by interlocutors (*R*).

Social distance is defined as a "symmetric dimension of similarity/difference... based on an assessment of the frequency of interaction and the kinds of materials or non-material goods (including face) exchanged between S(peaker) and H(earer)" (Brown and Levinson, 1978, p.76). Power, however, is an "asymmetric social dimension of relative power" which involves the degree to which "H can impose his own plans and his own self-evalua-

tion (face) at the expense of S's plans and self-evaluation" or vice versa (Brown and Levinson, 1978, p. 76). The third factor (i.e. the weightiness of imposition) involves the degree to which impositions are considered to interfere with an agent's want of "self-determination or of approval" (Brown and Levinson, 1978, p. 77). Impositions are ranked on the basis of the "expenditure of services (including provision of time) and of goods" (non-material goods like information, expression of regard and other payments included) (Brown and Levinson, 1978, p. 77).

Brown and Levinson (1978) contend that any speech act has the potential of threatening either the face of the speaker or that of the hearer. They believe that conversation is much more concerned with observing politeness expectations designed to ensure the "redress of face than with the exchange of information". They have proposed a direct relationship between social distance and politeness in such a way as to indicate that an increase in social distance will bring about an increase in the degree of politeness and vice versa.

The notion of politeness, therefore, finds meaning when it is studied in the context of face-threatening acts (or FTAs) which include positive and negative ones. In other words, some FTAs threaten negative face while some others threaten positive face. The former includes directives such as commands, requests, advice, invitations, etc. The latter, on the other hand, includes criticisms, insults, disagreements, and corrections.

By the same token, the term "invitation" finds occasion in the contexts of "politeness" and "face". It is, therefore, necessary to define the term "invitation" here. In this paper, I have followed Wolfson's definition of invitation:

> According to popular wisdom, social commitments are normally arrived at through unambiguous invitations. Our operational definition of such a speech act is that it contains reference to time and/or mention of place or activity, and most important, a request for response. A simple example would be the following:

Do you want (request for response)	to have lunch (activity)	Tomorrow? (time)
		(Wolfson, 1989, p. 119)