Over-politeness in Persian professional interactions

Ahmad Izadi [a,b,*]

[a] *School of English, The University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, Jalan Broga, 43500, Semenyih, Selangor, Malaysia*
[b] *Department of English, Abadan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Abadan, Iran*

Abstract

Over-politeness is an under-represented topic in interpersonal pragmatics, compared with politeness and impoliteness. Drawing upon Conversation Analysis and theory of im/politeness as social practice (Haugh, 2013; Kádár and Haugh, 2013), this paper examines the ways over-politeness is interactionally achieved in two types of academic professional discourses. Analyses reveal the instances that participants in the professional interactions afford their evaluations of over-politeness to the social practices that are conventionally subject to evaluations of politeness. Moreover, it is demonstrated that the context of professional interaction is co-created by the participants' evaluative practices, including over-politeness, along with their joint accomplishment of meaning and action.
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1. Introduction

This paper builds on research in interpersonal pragmatics by foregrounding the under-researched notion of over-politeness in professional academic interactions. Drawing upon Conversation Analysis (hereafter CA), I particularly analyze selected interactions in institutional conversations to demonstrate how over-politeness is interactionally achieved in two types of academic professional discourses. I take over-politeness as one form of politeness-related evaluations that arise in social interaction (Haugh, 2013; Kádár and Haugh, 2013; Izadi, 2015).

While politeness has been extensively researched, and impoliteness has received considerable attention in recent years, over-politeness is yet to receive the attention it merits (Culpeper, 2008). Over-politeness can simply be defined as a behavior which is evaluated as too polite for the context. The term over-polite was introduced to politeness research with the advent of discursive approach to politeness, which not only marks a move from politeness as a concern for face (Brown and Levinson, 1987) to politeness as discursive evaluations of utterances as such, but also expands to politeness-related evaluations, including over-politeness, of social (including linguistic) action/behavior (Locher and Watts, 2005; Kádár and Haugh, 2013). Watts (2003) regards over-politeness as a kind of negatively marked behavior that, akin to impoliteness, creates affective reactions of the co-participants. Similarly, Locher (2004, p. 90) views over-politeness as negative "because it exceeds the boundary between appropriateness and inappropriateness". However, she also warns that what is considered appropriate or inappropriate in a particular situation is subject to the evaluations attributed to the social behavior by the participants and meta-participants in a given interaction (Locher, 2004; Culpeper, 2008; Kádár and

* Correspondence to: School of English, The University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, Jalan Broga, 43500, Semenyih, Selangor, Malaysia.
Tel.: +60 172414254.
E-mail addresses: Ahmad.Izadi@nottingham.edu.my, Izadi53fa@yahoo.com.

Haugh, 2013). Culpeper (2008) calls for empirical investigation as to whether over-politeness is perceived as positive or negative in interactions. This study is an attempt to respond to this call. Moreover, understanding the mechanisms of over-politeness is significant for the understanding of the overall discourse structures of the whole society in general and Iranian society in particular.

Haugh (2013) and Kádár and Haugh (2013) theorize im/politeness as a kind of social practice: Evaluations of im/politeness not only arise in social practice but also are a form of social practice. Building on earlier research informed by practice theory (notably, Eelen, 2001; Mills, 2003; Watts, 2003), they approach im/politeness as evaluative practices that are "interdependently interlinked with the interactional achievement of social actions and meanings" (Haugh, 2013, p. 56). Haugh (2013) also capitalizes on what we do through the evaluations of im/politeness and argues that im/politeness evaluations are not only constituted in but also constitutive of discourse. He continues that the 'moral order' is what underpins our evaluations of im/politeness, and so the careful examination of the moral order is critical to the analysis of the procedures and practices of everyday life vis-à-vis im/politeness (Haugh, 2013, p. 57). Haugh (2013) and Kádár and Haugh (2013) further suggest that the hearer's interpretation (Eelen, 2001) be extended to the 'participation order' to take all participants and meta-participants' evaluations of im/politeness into account. Along these lines, this paper uses CA to show how participants evaluate each other as being over-polite and how they create a context of professional interaction through this evaluation. Evidence is thus adduced to what participants display of their orientation to pragmatic meanings and social actions as well as their meta-pragmatic comments.

In what follows, I first address the notion of over-politeness in Persian (section 2) and introduce the theory of im/politeness as social practice (Kádár and Haugh, 2013; Haugh, 2013) in section 3. In section 4, I introduce the data and the participants of the study. Next, I analyze three segments of data in two types of academic interactions; an opening of a Q-A round in a dissertation defense session and part of a departmental meeting in a small university in Iran. I aim to show how evaluations of over-politeness arise in and as social practice. Finally, I draw my conclusions in section 6.

2. Over-politeness in Persian

The notion of over-politeness in Persian can be accommodated in some aspects of the ubiquitous practice of *taarof*, which is said to be the "the language of politeness and praise" and "verbal dance" (Beeman, 1976, 1986; cf. also Asdjodi, 2001; Koutlaki, 2002; Izadi, 2015). It constitutes a reciprocal exchange of ritualized (often exaggerated) honorifics that expresses good will and intentions and at times flattery and empty formalities (Koutlaki, 2002; Izadi, 2015). It reflects the moral order of considering others to the point of putting their feelings, needs and desires prior to one's own (Izadi, 2015). *Taarof* is defined as "compliment(s), ceremony, offer, gift, flummery, courtesy, flattery, formality, good manners, soft tongue, honeyed phrases and respect" (Aryanpour and Aryanpour, 1976, p. 306–307). Pragmatically, the concept subsumes interactional practices such as real and ostensible (often repetitive) invitations, real and ostensible (often repetitive) offers (Koutlaki, 2002), refusals to ostensible invitations (Sharifian and Babaie, 2013; Izadi and Zilaie, 2015), ostensible suggestions, letting a companion go ahead (e.g. at the doorstep), offering and refusing turns of speech (at a speech ceremony, for example), complimenting and their responses, showing reluctance to readily accept money (e.g. in business transactions; Koutlaki, 2002), and sacrificing business/professional practices at the expense of relational bonding (this section).

Addressing all aspects of *taarof* is beyond the scope of this paper (cf. Beeman, 1976, 1986; Koutlaki, 2002; Izadi, 2015, to name but a few, for a full discussion), but pertinent here is that aspect of it which is negatively viewed by at least some discourse participants and is subject to challenge and self-criticism (Beeman, 1976, 1986) in Persian every day and professional discourses. As I will demonstrate, it is this aspect of *taarof* which is a potential candidate for over-politeness evaluations by at least some participants in the discourse. It is important to note that the evaluations that a particular instantiation of *taarof* in a joint accomplishment of a pair of meaning and action (say, an offer-refusal) occasions vary from politeness to over-politeness, depending on the participants and the context. I am not going to argue, therefore, that *taarof* always creates the same evaluation across individuals and situations. In a recent study on Persian honorifics and linguistic manifestations of *taarof*, Izadi (2015) demonstrates how *taarof* practices in two contexts result in two different evaluations vis-à-vis im/politeness. While in one context, *taarof* is perfectly appropriate and evaluated as polite, in another context it does not counteract impoliteness evaluations. Some examples may help clarify this point: One practice that indicates *taarof* is to offer one's food or drink before eating it to an adjacent person, who can be a total stranger, in a public place (e.g. in an airplane). By offering their food once or twice using a formulaic honorific *befarma:yeed* (lit. to command, in this context please help yourself: cf. Izadi, 2015), Iranians practice a socially approved conventional behavior that invokes a moral order of considering others to the point of putting their feelings, needs and desires prior to one's own (Izadi, 2015). The other party does not take the offer literally, but refuses with appreciation. However, this has turned into a source of common self-criticism in Persian discourse because at times it is seen as overdone and exaggerated (Nanbakhsh, 2009), and totally unnecessary and irrelevant when made to total strangers. While this is a well-accepted polite behavior for many Iranians, there is also a competing voice against it, which attributes some negativity to it.