

# Persian honorifics and im/politeness as social practice

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## Abstract

Im/politeness has recently been conceptualized in terms of evaluations that not only arise in social practice but also form a social practice (Haugh, 2013; Kádár and Haugh, 2013). This necessitates the analysis of politeness to go beyond the analysis of language to the analysis of social actions and meanings. This paper examines the role of Persian honorifics (the language which is conventionally associated with politeness) in the im/politeness evaluations that arise in localized interactions. Conversation Analysis is used to analyze two cases of honorifics-included social interactions in Persian. The implications for im/politeness theory are discussed in conclusion. © 2015 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Im/politeness; Social practice; Honorifics; Conversation analysis; Persian

## 1. Introduction

This paper examines how Persian honorifics are linked to politeness and impoliteness (hereafter both written as im/politeness) as a form of social practice (Haugh, 2013; Kádár and Haugh, 2013) in actual interactions. Particularly, it investigates politeness-related evaluations in two cases of honorifics-included social encounters in Persian drawing upon Conversation Analysis (hereafter CA).

That honorifics are associated with politeness is often taken for granted. Traditional research on politeness has linked honorifics to politeness either by way of attending to face through giving deference (Brown and Levinson, 1987), or by way of conforming to the social norms according to which people are expected to behave in order to be appropriate (Ide, 1989). Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that politeness involves the use of mitigating strategies to soften the threat incurred to face or one's public self-image in communication. They propose that 'give deference' is one of the strategies which attends to the hearer's negative face, which "represents the individual's basic claim to territories, personal preserves, [and] rights to non-distraction" (p. 61). Ide (1989), however, argued that in Japanese and honorific-rich languages politeness is motivated by *wakimae*, or discernment, rather than strategic concern for the face of the hearer. Honorifics in Japanese, in her view, are fixed formal forms of linguistic politeness that speakers have to follow based on the nature of their relationship with the addressee. While these traditional studies view honorifics as linguistic forms which are inherently polite, Kádár and Mills (2013) argue that honorifics are "only *potentially* related to politeness, even though there is a pivotal interface between these phenomena" (p. 144: emphasis added).

Following a long-held debate over the nature of im/politeness, in a recent conceptualization, Haugh (2013) and Kádár and Haugh (2013) conceptualize im/politeness as evaluations that not only arise in ongoing social practice, but also are a form of social practice. This essentially focuses on "what participants are *doing* through evaluations of im/politeness, and

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how such evaluations are interdependently interlinked with the interactional achievement of social actions and meanings” (Haugh, 2013, p. 56; emphasis in original). It follows that im/politeness evaluations are grounded in the moral order of the society and that they need to be situated vis-à-vis the participation framework in interaction, with variability of evaluations seen as inherent. Kádár and Haugh (2013) and Haugh (2013) further suggest that the analysis of im/politeness should go beyond language, as such analysis requires a link between linguistic forms and meanings, social actions and evaluations of those actions as social practices (Haugh, 2013). This is an important theoretical move which suggests a great potential for continuing research to investigate how linguistic phenomena like honorifics are associated with the evaluations of wider social meanings and pragmatic actions vis-à-vis im/politeness, using empirical data. The present study adopts Ethnomethodology, and particularly, CA to focus on how participants interactionally achieve pragmatic meanings and social actions as well as evaluations of im/politeness in talk. The analyst’s interpretation of meaning/action and im/politeness evaluations, therefore, must be consistent with the participants’ interpretations, using evidence from the talk.

In what follows, I first introduce the interactional approach to im/politeness and its offspring im/politeness as social practice, which provides the theoretical and methodological base of my study. Next, I discuss Persian honorifics in relation to the wider notion of Persian concepts of *taārof* and face (Arundale, 2010; Izadi, forthcoming). I then analyze selected fragments of natural data to show how honorifics are related to im/politeness as social practice (Kádár and Haugh, 2013; Haugh, 2013). Finally I discuss the implications of the analyses for interpersonal pragmatics.

## 2. Im/politeness in interaction and as social practice

Eelen’s (2001) meticulous critique of the traditional approaches to politeness (most notably, Brown and Levinson’s face-saving view) initiated a number of shifts in focus in politeness research. The major epistemological shift from politeness as concern for face to politeness as discursive evaluations of utterances as such brings with it a number of theoretical and methodological issues. The interactional approach to im/politeness and, particularly and more recently, im/politeness as social practice respond to two of these issues; one methodological and one theoretical.

The methodological problem deals with how analysts confidently identify instances of im/politeness if im/politeness constitutes the participants’ evaluations of their own behavior (Haugh, 2013). Evaluations of im/politeness are deemed as the psychological outcomes of interactionally achieving conversational meanings and actions. They arise in ongoing social practice along with, but distinct from, achieving meaning and action (Haugh, 2007, 2013; Kádár and Haugh, 2013). Fundamental to CA is that participants reveal what they achieve in talk. Therefore, the projecting and interpreting of utterances as polite/impolite/politic/over-polite are revealed when participants orient to certain behavior in interactions and place their adjacent utterances based on projecting and interpreting (Haugh, 2007), or when they are involved in conversational practices of turn taking (Hutchby, 2008). These evaluations, thus, procedurally become known to the analysts. The analysts may look for the meta-pragmatic talk related to politeness as in ‘I don’t want to appear rude, but...’ or the reciprocation of concern put adjacent to the previous turns (Haugh, 2007).

In theorizing im/politeness as social practice, Kádár and Haugh (2013) Haugh (2013) go further by arguing that im/politeness evaluations not only arise in ongoing social practice, but also are a form of social practice (Haugh, 2013, p. 56). Haugh draws upon work in discursive psychology and Ethnomethodology to move away from conceptualizing evaluations as cognitive states (as in traditional social psychology) to evaluations as social practices. This essentially focuses on “what participants are *doing* through evaluations of im/politeness, and how such evaluations are interdependently interlinked with the interactional achievement of social actions and meanings” (Haugh, 2013, p. 56; emphasis in original).

The theoretical question is “what grounds our evaluations of im/politeness?” (Haugh, 2013, p. 55). Research has acknowledged two interrelated bases for evaluations of im/politeness: Norms and canons of social appropriateness (Eelen, 2001; Locher and Watts, 2005; Haugh, 2007; Holmes et al., 2011; Terkourafi, 2011) and the moral order of the society (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003; Terkourafi, 2011; Kádár and Haugh, 2013; Haugh, 2013). Terkourafi (2011), in a meticulous survey of the history of politeness in different cultures, concludes that politeness, regardless of time and place, comprises a set of norms of propriety which has a regulatory role in society and is closely associated with the moral creed of the society (cf. also Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003). Haugh further elaborates on the moral order by arguing that

“the moral order is what grounds our evaluations of social actions and meanings as “good” or “bad”, [. . .] polite, impolite, over-polite, and so on. Conceptualizing im/politeness as social practice thus builds on the claim that social actions and pragmatic meanings are not simply the means and basis for accomplishing the multitude of interactions through which we constitute our daily lives, they are also “inexorably moral”. They can thus be interpreted in localized talk-in-interaction as evaluative of persons and/or relationships”. (2013, p. 57)

According to Haugh (2013), in the analysis of im/politeness as social practice, an analyst should “examine evaluations as they are recognizably occasioned by social actions and meanings” (p. 58) and demonstrate how participants invoke moral order in their assessment of each other’s persons and relationships (p. 57). Moral order is multifaceted, but two

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