

Conversational disclaimers in Persian

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Received 18 April 2013; received in revised form 10 September 2013; accepted 24 September 2013
Available online 6 November 2013



Abstract

The principal motivation for this study is to examine Persian disclaimers, which, notwithstanding their significant communicative role, have not received the attention they deserve. More precisely, the present study is an attempt (i) to see how the Persian language enables the speaker to disclaim an unwanted interpretation, (ii) to extrapolate the formulaic disclaimer patterns that tend to recur in Persian, and (iii) to explain the range of functions fulfilled by these expressions. Contrary to the long-held view that disclaimers are prospective explanations used prior to potentially problematic actions, the 20-h corpus of daily conversations under investigation revealed, for the first time, some cases of retrospective disclaimers which were explicable in terms of our recognition criteria: (a) the presence of a potentially problematic action, (b) the identity retypification which needed to be disavowed, and (c) the very act of saying or doing something. Besides, the analysis of both retrospective and prospective disclaimers revealed certain pragmatic functions. In this respect, it was found that in Persian the three most frequent functions fulfilled by both prospective and retrospective disclaimers are 'explicating negative interpretation', 'showing tentativeness' and 'showing modesty', respectively.

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Keywords: Retypification; Disclaimer; Retrospective use; Potentially problematic action; Persian

1. Introduction

It is generally recognized that speakers are constantly aware of the fact that their use of language displays not only how they perceive others but also how they want to be perceived by others (Bublitz and Hübler, 2007; Caffi, 1994, 2007; Lucy, 1993; Mey, 2001; Ran, 2013; Verschueren, 2000). Conversational disclaimers (e.g., 'I don't want to push you, but' as used in 'I don't want to push you, but I think you should have your eyes examined') are among the most frequent indicators that point to such awareness. The importance of disclaimers is corroborated by the existence of a growing body of literature that has built up over the past few decades (see Caffi, 1998, 2007; Delbene, 2004; Fraser, 1980; Goffman, 1959; Hewitt and Stokes, 1975; Hongladarom, 2007; Martinovski, 2006; McLaughlin, 1984; Overstreet and Yule, 2001).

It must, however, be realized that although the study of disclaimers can provide insight into how speakers usually tend to maintain joint social relations, these expressions have been left unexplored in many languages, including Persian. The principal motivation for this study is thus to examine Persian disclaimers, which, notwithstanding their significant communicative role, have not received the attention they deserve.

Drawing on examples from a personally collected corpus (circa 20 h), we shall present an analysis of Persian disclaimers in a range of daily conversational contexts. In this respect, we will (i) present a formal study of conversational disclaimers in Persian, and (ii) devote more attention to the analysis of everyday disclaimer use in natural settings with a view to explicating the range of functions that conversational disclaimers fulfil.

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2. Some notes on disclaimers

Disclaimers are expressions employed to avoid potential trouble in communication (Overstreet and Yule, 2001; also cf. El-Alayli et al., 2008). It is precisely for this reason that scholars such as Goffman (1959) and McLaughlin (1984) have described disclaimers as preventatives. For example, the disclaimer “I’m not prejudiced, but” in “I’m not prejudiced, but I hate this university” serves to prevent the speaker from the potential trouble of being characterized as a prejudiced person who has an unreasonable dislike of something. Here are some more examples (from Hewitt and Stokes, 1975:4):

- (a) I really haven’t thought this through very well, but . . .
- (b) I could be wrong on my facts, but I think . . .
- (c) I’m no expert, of course, but . . .

Broadly speaking, research studies on disclaimers have progressed in the following two directions:

- (1) Studies that have addressed disclaimers from the viewpoint of social psychology or speech communication. In this line of research, disclaimers are considered as examples of ‘alignment talk’, which is defined as verbal courses of action taken to prevent negative characterizations of the speaker’s social and cultural identity (Stokes and Hewitt, 1976). As examples of alignment talk, disclaimers are considered to be “essentially prospective explanations” (Ragan and Hopper, 1981:86) used prior to an upcoming event that can threaten to disrupt the emergent meaning (see Bell et al., 1984; El-Alayli et al., 2008; Erickson et al., 1978; Goffman, 1971; Ragan and Hopper, 1981; Schutz, 1964; Schutz and Luckmann, 1989).
- (2) Studies that have analyzed disclaimers in terms of their pragmatic properties, usually in extended discourse contexts. In some of these studies the focus of attention is on speech acts such as ‘judgment’ and ‘criticism’ that can convey an unwelcome effect (Fraser, 1980; see also Hongladarom, 2007). In some other pragmatic studies the argument is that disclaimers operate on the assumptions of shared experience or intersubjectivity, and that they are co-constructed by interactive partners (Overstreet, 1999; Overstreet and Yule, 2001; see also Caffi, 2007). In point of fact, the prevalent assumption underlying pragmatic studies of disclaimers is that these expressions are used to disavow in advance a negative interpretation of the speaker’s intention that might lead to his/her identity being associated with, or rather retypified as, an unwanted one.

Regardless of the general directions in question, disclaimers, however, seem to demonstrate a number of specific elements. The first and the most important element in this respect is the notion of identity (see Caffi, 1998, 2007; Fraser, 1980; Hewitt and Stokes, 1975; Martinovski, 2006; Schutz, 1964; Schutz and Luckmann, 1989). In this connection, Hewitt and Stokes (1975) have argued that disclaimers are employed to define forthcoming actions as irrelevant to the identity-challenge they might ordinarily provoke. More precisely, disclaimers are viewed as expressions used to avoid the speaker’s identity being retypified as “an unthinking, irrational, or irresponsible member of society [. . .] who either doesn’t know the rules, or doesn’t care about them” (McLaughlin, cited in Overstreet and Yule, 2001:49).

Another noteworthy element in the analysis of disclaimers is the realization that disclaimers are a modification of only those effects which are potentially unwelcome to the ‘speaker’ (see Caffi, 1998, 2007; Fraser, 1975, 1980; Hongladarom, 2007; Martinovski, 2006; Schutz, 1964; Schutz and Luckmann, 1989).

The final crucial element is that disclaimers are expressions used to pre-define forthcoming actions. In other words, disclaimers have always been regarded as prospective moves (Overstreet and Yule, 2001:48; see also Hongladarom, 2007).

The following example from our personally collected corpus of Persian conversations serves to illustrate the significance of the elements mentioned above. The example is founded on a telephone conversation between two close friends, one of whom has decided to call off a party to which many of his friends have already been invited. Note that the disclaimer patterns discussed here and elsewhere are in bold:

- **jeho fek nakoni mixam zede hal bezanam, na, vali** mixam mehmuni ro (.) kansel konam. [**All of a sudden don’t think that I want to spoil the fun, no, but I want (.) to call the party off.**]

Faced with the potentially problematic act of informing one of the invited guests that he is going to cancel the party in question, the speaker in the above example seems to have used the disclaimer “All of a sudden don’t think that I want to spoil the fun, no” as a prospective attempt to avoid being retypified as a person who spoils the fun.

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