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Expressing Honesty in English and Persian**

Azade Katal, SafaEvazzade

TarbiatModares University, Tehran, Iran

Azade Katal (corresponding author) received her B.A in English language and literature from Mazandaran University and her M.A in TEFL from TarbiatModares University. She is currently an instructor. Her research interests include teacher education, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and attribution theory. Email Address for correspondence: a.katal@yahoo.com.

SafaEvazzade received her B.A in English language and literature from Ferdowsi University of Mashhad and her M.A in TEFL from TarbiatModares University. She is currently an instructor. Her research interests include teacher education, teacher reflection and sociolinguistics. Email Address: s.evazzade@yahoo.com.



Abstract

Honesty can be defined as a personality trait the manifestation of which in speech is a matter of significance in the realm of sociolinguistics. As Holmes and Brown (1987) noted sociopragmatic failure, which can be justified by inadequate knowledge of relevant cultural and social values, takes place when a speaker selects an inappropriate linguistic strategy to express a speech act in a particular context. As a result, unless language learners pay conscious attention to the social factors, they are likely to lapse automatically into the norms of their native language and culture and this may cause unintended offense.

To this end, this study is intended to compare and contrast different patterns of expressing honesty in Persian and English. The data was gathered through natural observation and DCT. It was revealed that Persian speakers tend to use oaths even for trivial matters much more than English speakers. The reason may rely on cultural or religious matters. On the other hand, English speakers seem to prove their honesty through assertions rather than swearing.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, pragmatic, speech act, honesty



1. Introduction

Languages differ in their patterns of interaction; in order to assist language learners in developing their communicative competence, researchers tried to investigate different speech acts in various contexts. Their findings revealed that speech acts may vary greatly across speech communities; therefore, lack of enough knowledge of them may result in miscommunication.

The study of speech acts and their realization in different languages and cultures has been mostly limited to the study of apologies, invitations, compliments, refusals, and the like. As Holmes and Brown (1987) noted sociopragmatic failure, which can be justified by inadequate knowledge of relevant cultural and social values, takes place when a speaker selects an inappropriate linguistic strategy to express a speech act in a particular context. Consequently, unless learners pay conscious attention to the social factors, they are likely to lapse automatically into the norms of their native language and culture and may cause unintended offense. Learners of a language need to learn not only the correct words and forms, but also the appropriate strategies for where, when, and how to use them, as well as the speech acts of a language.

One of the most perplexing areas of language instruction is that of instilling within learners a sense of appropriate language behavior, and especially speech act behavior. Learners of a language can have all of the grammatical forms and lexical items and still fail completely at conveying their message because they lack necessary pragmatic or functional information to communicate their intent (Wolfson, 1981). Over the period of a decade or more, research in interlanguage pragmatics has identified how learners’ and native speakers’ pragmatic use of language may differ; more recently, interventional studies have examined the effects of instruction on the developmental process of learners’ pragmatic ability. With increasing evidence regarding the benefits of explicit instruction in pragmatics (for example, Rose & Kasper, 2001), there seems to be some consensus on the potential effectiveness of formal instruction in pragmatics and practical efforts at teaching L2 pragmatics has begun to appear (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Mayhan-Taylor, 2003).

Persian is in some ways like Japanese, in that it is a language with a very simple grammatical structure, and a rich set of idiomatic expressions that help individuals to convey accounts of their



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feelings. These accounts, as with all accounts, may be correct or incorrect reactions of actual emotions. It is a function of all parties in interaction to come up with the correct interpretations for what is said (Beeman, 2001).

Persian society (like all societies everywhere) provides basic frames that clue individuals in appropriate language behavior for any given situation. These frames provide a cognitive map that helps define what is normal and expected. (Beeman, 2001).

The basic dimensions of Iranian society are not terribly complex in a structural sense, but they provide for a rich play of linguistic expression. The basic orientation of interaction frames consists of a continuum, with situations that are considered more inside at one pole, and situations that are considered more outside at the other (Beeman, 2001).

Given that there appears to be great divergence between American and Iranian norms of speaking and social conventions and given that speech act behavior has been shown to relate closely to speakers linguistic and cultural norms (e.g., Blum- Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989), the honesty behavior of Iranians is worth studying in comparison with that of Americans.

In the case of English and Persian, a series of speech acts (such as requests, refusals, compliments, responses to compliments, apologies, and thanks) have been investigated in a number of cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics studies which have highlighted similarities and differences in speech act realization in the two languages.

Honesty is manifested in truthfulness, trustworthiness, sincerity, integrity and fairness. It also means the absence of deceitfulness, and untruthfulness. As far as the society is concerned, honest persons are dependable and can be counted upon to honor their duties, obligations, promises, and contracts (Kehinde, 2005).

Honesty must be performed in order to be effectively accomplished as a representation of behavior. It is rather assessed by addressees that the expressions of addressers are true representations of their feelings and emotional state or not. Honesty seems to be a cross-cultural variable. In many societies honesty is highly valued for all people at all times.



2. Methodology

2.1. Data collection procedure

The Persian data of the study was gathered through natural observation. Two researchers observed people in different situations, namely, bus stop, taxi, shop, university, etc and in different parts of the cities including uptown and downtown (Tehran and Mashhad). Moreover, a number of movies were watched to collect the data of the situations that were not accessible to the researchers like prisons. Based on the data gathered through observation a DCT was devised to confirm the already obtained data. The fourteen scenarios in the DCT included a variety of situations and a number of roles with different social distances. Particularly, the situations required participants to express their honesty to a number of people like a family member, a boss, a teacher, and some friends.

Concerning the English data, since there was no direct access to native Americans, natural observation could not be used, as a result a DCT was sent to some professors and students of various universities, but unfortunately few of them responded. Inevitably, a number of American movies were selected based on different locations, their genres and their characters; then they were watched and most of the English data were gathered through film observation.

2.2. Translation of the instrument

The DCT was translated from Persian into English. For this purpose, first we translated the Persian version of the test into English. Then another translator was asked to translate it back into Persian, without having any knowledge of the first Persian version. At last, a final questionnaire was decided upon.

2.3. Data analysis

In the current study, due to the categorical nature of the data, chi square is used to investigate whether the representation of honesty in speech differ between the Persian and the English group. The analysis showed that there is a significant association between the group and the choice, meaning that groups are different in their tendencies to choose oath or non-oath which is assertion here ($\chi^2=65.67; df=1; p<0.05$).



Groups * choice Crosstabulation

			choice		Total
			oath	assertions	
Groups	English	Count	6	57	63
		Expected Count	28.5	34.5	63.0
	Persians	Count	50	11	61
		Expected Count	27.5	33.5	61.0
Total		Count	56	68	124
		Expected Count	56.0	68.0	124.0

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	65.674 ^a	1	.000		
Continuity Correction ^b	62.781	1	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	73.541	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.000	.000
N of Valid Cases	124				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 27.55.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table



Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	-.728	.000
	Cramer's V	.728	.000
N of Valid Cases		124	

Having observed the differences between the expression of honesty by Persian and English speakers, the researchers conducted a detailed inspection of the data. The statements people used in Persian to prove their honesty were generally classified into oath and assertion categories based on the content. According to Beeman(2001), sincerity can be merely asserted if there is a need, using formulas like Bavarkon, rastmigam [believe me, I’m telling the truth], etc., as in the following example;

[a young man to his friend who works in a coffee shop, while moving his head:]

Male: jeddimgam man dah million pool mikham. [I’m serious, I need 10 million tomans.]

His friend: to az man chetavaghoidari? Azkojajoorkonam? [How do you expect me to have this amount of money? Where should I get it from?]

Not only when things get really agitated, but also for tiny matters the addresser may feel the need to swear an oath to assert his honesty.

[an eighteen-year-old son to his father, while moving his hand:]

The son: mamangoftbiam be khoda [Mom asked me to come, I swear to God]

His father: to ghalatkardi bi ejazoomadi too daftare man [You were not allowed to come in without permission]

Persian statements of honesty were classified as follows:

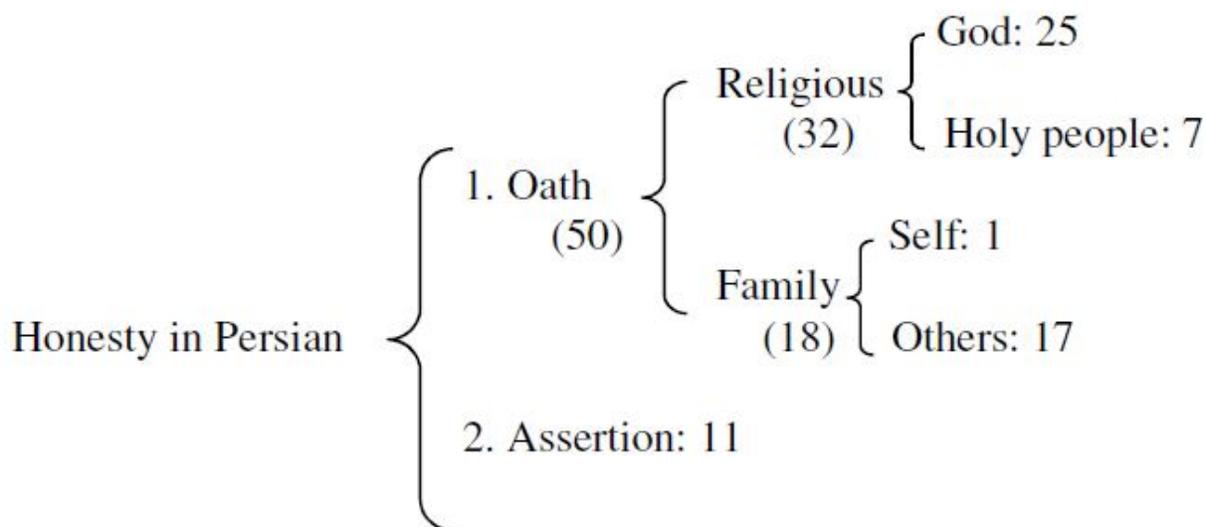


Figure 2.3.1 classification of Persian data

Concerning the English data, since few oaths were observed, the statements were arranged based on seven paramount patterns as the table shows:



Table 2.3.1 the English data

The phrase	Frequency
I’m sorry,...	26
Believe me,...	10
Honestly, ...	7
I swear...	6
Trust me	6
I’m telling the truth,...	4
I assure you...	4

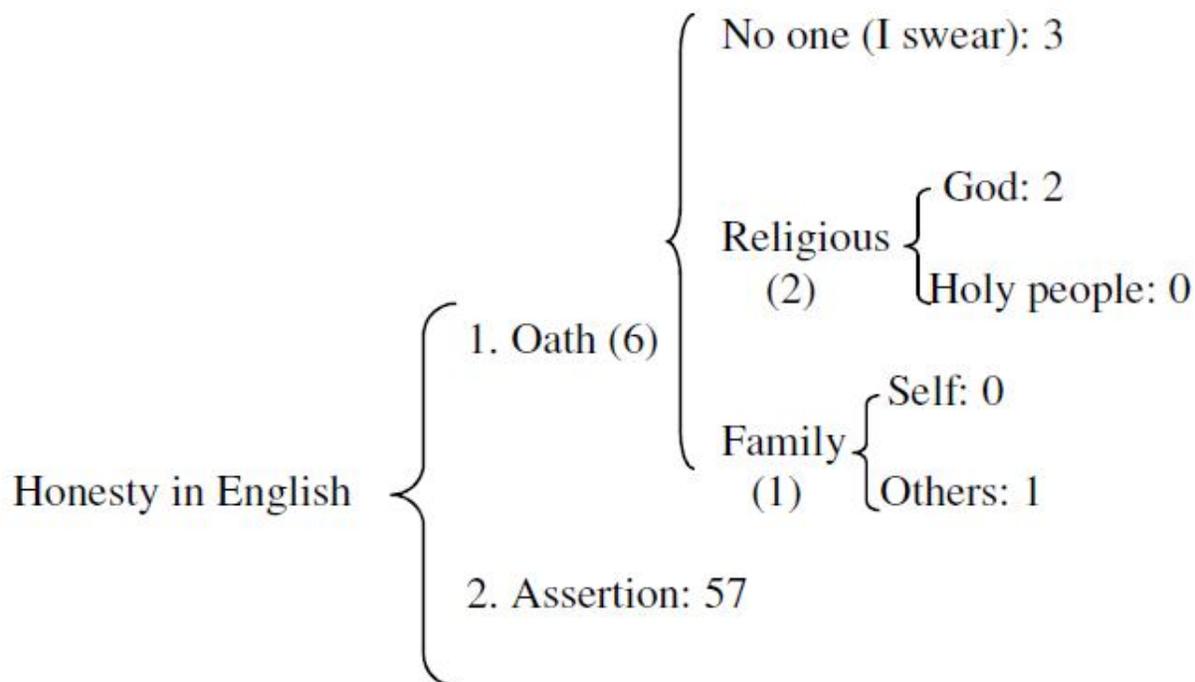


Figure 2.3.2 classification of English data

As the above figure shows oaths are used rarely by English speakers. One example is:

[A police officer to a robber, while moving his head:]

Robber: How should I believe you will do what you're saying?

Police officer: I swear on my daughter.

Interestingly, English speakers made use of “I’m sorry” in their speech quite frequently as the example shows it:

[A man to his wife at home:]

Wife: I know that you were out drinking alcohol with your friends.

Man: I'm sorry that you don't believe me.



3. Discussion

Predictably, like most of the studies in the field of sociolinguistics, this study poses more questions than it answers. This study was aimed at describing the observed verbal behaviors of speakers of the two languages, rather than finding out the underlying reasons. As the data reveals ES (English speakers) seem to prove their honesty through assertions rather than swearing. On the other hand, PS (Persian speakers) tend to use oaths much more than the English speakers. Their frequent use of swearing for trivial matters seems unjustifiable, the reason of which may rely on cultural or religious matters.

Among PS religious oaths are more common than non-religious ones and assertions. God is the main source of swearing among PS. Moreover, it seems that swearing on the life of family members is very convincing in proving honesty to the addressee. This happens while ES show more tendencies toward using assertions in proving their honesty.

Speakers of Persian have many cultural and religious resources for performing honesty in interaction. Of course it is a matter of choice on the part of any individual whether to use these resources or not, and whether to use one resource or a combination of them.

It is important to realize that success in the expression of honesty in discourse depends on an array of factors including the situation in which it is being expressed, the reaction of those hearing the expressions, and the importance one attaches to be considered as honest.

4. Limitations

Since the nature of interaction is mutual, the written answers to the situations may not completely stand for what in reality happens in the context of the society. According to the results of a study by Sasaki(1988) on the investigation of speech act of refusal and request by EFL students in Japan, when role plays were used for data collection, the participants produced more strategies and a greater variety of strategies in comparison to when written questionnaires(DCTs) were used. She attributed this to the interactive nature of role plays. This may be one of the shortcomings of DCT, so part of the data that were gathered through DCT may suffer from this defect.

Moreover, the American movies that were chosen may not be good representative of American behavior of expressing honesty since most of them are produced by Hollywood. But since there



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was no access to native Americans, the researchers had to make use of films as natural observation. As a result of these shortcomings, the findings cannot be generalizable to other groups or situations. It is just a description of the present situation. Furthermore, lots of other factors that might be effective in expressing honesty can be taken into account in future studies such as age, social class, gender, and context.

Realizing that honesty and its assessment vary widely can be a trigger for doing a number of studies. Power and status relations between addressers and addressees are of paramount importance, as are settings in which honesty takes place.

Appendix 1

This study is designed to compare cross-cultural pragmatic differences between American speakers and other learners' of English. The researchers would be highly grateful if you kindly fill out the below questionnaire carefully. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw anytime you wish. The data will be used for research purposes only.

Age:

Gender:

Education:

Profession:

Place of living:

Nationality:

Please read the following 14 situations. After each situation, you are asked to write a response in the blank after "you." Respond as you would in actual conversation. Please be natural and write what you would actually say, not what you think would be the best thing to say.

Situation 1

You buy some yogurt from a supermarket. Having come back home, you notice that the expiration date is passed. You go back to the salesperson to change it.



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Salesperson: It is impossible because we check our goods regularly and remove the expired ones.

You:

Situation 2

You didn’t study the lessons you were supposed to be prepared for because you were sick. You give your reason to the teacher but he doesn’t believe you.

Teacher: You always bring excuses of this kind. I can’t take your word for it.

You:

Situation 3

You have just started working in a new big company. Your boss notices that one of his cheques is lost. All of the other workers have been working there for a long time so you are the prime suspect. The boss calls you to his office.

Boss: You are the only one who came to my room yesterday. I trusted you, when I gave you the keys of my room.

You:

Situation 4

You are late for work today. Your boss warns to fire you if you continue coming late to work, but it is the first time that you are not on time.

Boss: the company cannot tolerate your everyday coming late. I hope this is the last time otherwise you know what will happen.

You:

Situation 5

You come back home late at night because you saw one of your friends on the way home. Your wife/husband doesn’t believe you.

Your wife/husband: I got used to these excuses. I know you were out doing x...

You:



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Situation 6

You promised to visit your parents on the weekend but you were busy with your project and you couldn’t go.

Your parents: You never keep your word.

You:

Situation 7

You work at a store as a salesperson. You are selling a good brand t-shirt to a young girl. The price is a bit high but the quality is quite good. The girl doesn’t believe your description about the t-shirt.

The girl: You salespersons always exaggerate to sell your goods.

You:

Situation 8

You are working in a factory. Your mother is sick and you urgently need to take one day off to take her to doctor. But the manager doesn’t accept it because he thinks that you are going to shirk your duty.

The manager: You always evade your responsibilities.

You:

Situation 9

You have just quit drinking alcohol because of the insistence of your family. You were out talking with your friend. Having come back home, you are too exhausted to talk to your family but they think you are drunk again. So they reprimand you for breaking your promise.

Your wife/husband: You don’t like me, your children and yourself. You didn’t respect my opinion.

You:

Situation 10



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You are an average student. You passed a very difficult exam last week and got a very good score. The teacher didn’t expect it. He thinks that you cheated on the exam since your answers were very similar to those of your close friend who was sitting beside you.

Your teacher: I expected you to trust your own abilities. I intended to check your progress, score doesn’t matter to me.

You:

Situation 11

One of your colleagues asks you for money but you left your wallet at home. You tell the truth, he doesn’t believe it.

Your colleague: I counted on you as a colleague. I was going to return it as soon as possible.

You:

Situation 12

You are invited to your friends’ birthday party. All your friends are going to come and they think you will join them too. But something unexpected happens to you and you cannot attend the party. You try to persuade them but they don’t believe you.

Your friend: You never care about our gatherings. You are too obsessed with your works that you have forgotten your friends.

You:

Situation 13

One day your neighbor comes to you and complains that your children were so noisy last night. But they slept early and didn’t make any noise.

Your neighbor: Living in an apartment has its own rules. You are expected to respect your neighbors’ rights.

You:

Situation 14

You are shopping with your little daughter. She wants you to buy her something she likes but you don’t have enough money. She doesn’t believe it and continues nagging.

Your daughter: You always say I don’t have money when it comes to dolls.

You:



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