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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 encounters in Persian. The implications for im/politeness theory are discussed in conclusion.

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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
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
facets of epistemic order and deontic order are, according to Haugh (2013) important in the analysis of im/politeness. The former refers to the participants’ relative knowledge over the other and the rights and responsibilities associated with that knowledge (Heritage, 2009). The latter, however, refers to the participants’ ‘entitlements’ and authority over their “rights and obligations” (Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2012, p. 298).

Haugh then argues for broadening the scope of evaluation from speaker-hearer to the ‘participation order’; that is, to whoever participates in and whoever observes interactions. As is the case in most evaluations of im/politeness and especially impoliteness, there is often no consensus among the participants. It is hard, for example, to assume that a person who is evaluated as impolite would agree with this evaluation. Moreover, nonparticipants’ (i.e. observers including analysts’) evaluations are equally important. A comprehensive analysis of im/politeness, therefore, as Haugh (2013) argues, should incorporate all participants and non-participants’ evaluations, which would not be necessarily the same. It is important to note that im/politeness evaluations are not always readily agreeable by the participants and observers. They are subject to change over time, across different networks, and are even subject to individually different perceptions. This gives way to variability in ‘entitlements’ and ‘participation order’ (Kádár and Haugh, 2013; Haugh, 2013), which might at times be contradictory.

3. Persian honorifics

Persian is an honorific-rich language. According to Beeman (2001), Persian is akin to Japanese in terms of honorifics, but differs from it in that Persian has simple grammatical forms but a very complex morphological system. This complex morphological system makes the Persian language tedious and circumlocutory, but it is well conventionalized and ritualized. Grammatical honorifics in Persian include the use of plural pronoun (plural form of T/V) to address a singular addressee and a referent, plural form of the verb to implicate a singular person to agree with plural (respected) subject, and switching the second person to the third person pronoun to refer to the addressee. These grammatical honorifics are often combined with a rich constellation of lexical honorifics that involve using the deferential alternative of neutral verbs and nouns, to convey the deferential form of the language, which is used to lower the ‘self’ and elevate the ‘other’ (Beeman, 1976, 2001; Sharifian, 2008) in the form of an extremely hierarchical conversation between a servant and a lord.

For example, ‘goftan’ (to say) is the neutral verb. The elevated form of ‘goftan’ (to say) is ‘farmudan’ (to command) and is used for the addressee to give deference, whereas the downgraded form is ‘arz kardan’ (to petition) and is used for self (Beeman, 1976, 2001) to show one’s humility. Similarly, for the neutral verb āmadan (to come), the elevated form which is used for the addressee is tashrif āvardan (to bring presence) and eftexār-e-hozur dādan (to give (somebody) the honor of (one’s) presence). The form which is used for the self is xedmat residan (to be/arrive at one’s service). The formulaic ritual ‘eftexār bedid dar xedmat bāshim: Give (pl) (us) the honor of being at your service’ is frequently used in (ostensible) invitations. It is normatively responded to with nice hyperbolic words, such as qorbunetun beram (may I sacrifice for you), xedmat az māst (service is from ours) lotf dārid: you are being kind, etc. The addressee is elevated as high as to command (which is a truncated form of command saying, sitting down, etc.), and the self is lowered as to provide service, sacrifice and servitude. Such acts of invitation—refusal, along with the pleasant honorifics associated with them, are part of an all-pervasive ritual known as taārof (Eslami, 2005; Koutlaki, 2002; Beeman, 1976).

A linguistic formula which dominates honorifics is the singular and plural imperative form of the verb farmudan, which literally means ‘to command/order’. Asjdjidi (2001) quotes from Persian historical books that in requesting the King to sit down in Pre-Islamic era, the Prime Minister used the plural imperative of farmudan; that is, befarmāyeed (to command) followed by the infinitive neshastan (to sit down). The PM’s phrase befarmāyeed neshastan (command (plural) to sit down) instead of benshinid (sit down: plural) implied that the command to sit down had to be issued from the King. It followed that the King issued the command in an inclusive imperative form mineshnim (lit. we are sitting down), followed by his gesture of sitting down to signal that the other companions are allowed to sit down after the King. The same applied to other similar activities such as entering, eating, etc. In Modern Persian, however, the infinitive, which used to carry the main semantic load, is dropped and implied in the context. Therefore, the imperative befarmāyeed (colloquially, befarmāyn) and its singular form befarma (less formally) takes its meanings from the context of talk (cf. Asjdjidi, 2001).

Honorifics are the linguistic manifestations of ehterām (respect, deference), which is an instantiation of adab (politeness), and with which it often collocates. Ehterām cognates with hormat and hareem (both mean border of territory). In Persian terms, one pays ehterām to others to attend to their shaxsial (personality, social standing, character, identity) and depict his/her own shaxsial (Izadi, forthcoming; Koutlaki, 2002). In other words, ehterām reflects the person’s showing awareness of self and other’s territory of individuality, autonomy, privacy, differentiation, independence and the like (Izadi, forthcoming) with close attention to one’s social status in the society (Beeman, 1976; Sharifian, 2008). Sharifian (2008) writes that the concepts of deference and respect in western Anglo-centric societies reflect egalitarianism while Persian ehterām reflects hierarchy. Social members are morally motivated to pay each other ehterām. Junior members are especially expected to pay ehterām to senior members. Giving and receiving ehterām constitutes an important part of politeness norms, and failure to pay ehterām is subject to impoliteness evaluations.
Ehterām links honorifics to a broader concept of taārof, which has become known as Persian ritual politeness (Beeman, 1976; Koutlaki, 2002). Taārof is a cascade of ritualized pleasant verbosity which expresses good will and intentions and at times flattery and empty formalities (Koutlaki, 2002). It reflects the moral order of the society that encourages and emphasizes considering others’ feelings, desires and wants and even putting others’ feelings, desires and wants prior to one’s own. There is no clear-cut equivalence for taārof in English; Aryanpour and Aryanpour (1976:306–307) provide a range of no fewer than 12 definitions for taārof as “compliment(s), ceremony, offer, gift, flummery, courtesy, flattery, formality, good manners, soft tongue, honeyed phrases and respect”.

Koutlaki (2002) concentrates on offers and expressions of thanks (as a refusal strategy) and reveals (among others) examples of Iranians’ reluctance to readily accept money in business transactions and in situations when a debt is returned. The practice of taārof in these situations is reflected in both the linguistic and gestural implementations of refusing to accept money. The honorific ‘qābele shomā ro nadāreh’ (it’s not worthy of you) typically indexes one’s downplaying the value of money with respect to the higher value of the addressee (as a sign of showing ehterām to him) to show he is not hardened with money (Koutlaki, 2002). The same expression is also commonly used in responses to the compliments delivered on a person’s possessions, where compliment receivers ambivalently tone down their own possessions, negating their value and elevating the complimenter to the point of being worth more than their possessions to depict their shekastenafsi (lit. breaking self; humility) as a sign of ehterām (Sharifian, 2008). A typical response to the compliment ‘what a beautiful watch’ can therefore be ‘your eyes see it beautiful, it’s not worthy of you’ (cf. Sharifian, 2008, for a full discussion). This honorific is of course a taārof and should not be taken literally. When one receives a guest at home, he/she encourages his/her guest not to do taārof (i.e. to feel at home), and the guest assures the host that he/she is not doing taārof, but both know that (some degree of) taārof is indispensable. Iranians sometimes apologize for ‘not doing taārof’ or ‘speaking without taārof’ in situations where they anticipate that their words may have an unwelcome effect on the addressee.

Koutlaki (2002) states there are two ambivalent perceptions connected to the concept of taārof: on the one hand, it is perceived positively as a token of “goodwill”, “courtesy”, and “good manners”. On the other hand, it is associated with “flummery, flattery” and pneumatic formalities (p. 1741). The insincerity that is inherent in many instantiations of doing taārof leads to its negative perception and makes it subject to challenge and self-criticism (Beeman, 1976). However, taārof is not always intended insincerely (Eslami, 2005; Sharifian, 2011) and the border of sincerity and insincerity is difficult to locate (Eslami, 2005). It is incumbent on the participants in the interaction to work out the sincerity or insincerity of the act and respond accordingly. A critique of past studies on taārof is that they are heavily influenced by intention-based pragmatics, and the questions of sincerity or insincerity arise due the focus on speaker’s intention in human communication. While some previous studies (e.g. Koutlaki, 2002) have used conversational data, their analyses do not reveal how participants interactionally achieve taarof in interactions. This study adopts CA to move away from speaker’s intention to what a dyad of participants jointly achieves in interactions.

4. Persian honorifics, taārof, and face

Some aspects of taarof have been the subject of inquiry with regard to face in past pragmatics research. Koutlaki (2002) studies offers and expressions of thanks as refusal strategies in the context of face a la Brown and Levinson (1987). She argues that the two acts are face enhancing, despite Brown and Levinson’s assumption that they are face threatening. Similarly, Eslami (2005) investigates ostensible invitations as another instantiation of taarof and assigns them a face enhancing feature. However, these studies suffer from the inadequacies that are associated with the notion of face as conceptualized by Brown and Levinson. Face in this sense has been mainly criticized of individualism and cognitivism (Ike, 1989; Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003; Arundale, 2009, 2010, to name a few).

This study departs from previous works on face and taarof by adopting an understanding which views face as a relational phenomenon which is dynamically co-constituted in interactions (Arundale, 2010). To this end, it draws upon CA and Face Constituting Theory (hereafter FCT) (Arundale, 2010) to give importance not only to relationships, but also to interactions as primary foCi of relationships to arise. In providing an alternative to the theory of ‘face’ as an individual phenomenon a la Brown and Levinson (1978) and Goffman (1967), Arundale (2006) uses the phrase “persons in relationship to other persons” (p. 204), to move away from the concept of face as a psychologically formed image or concept of the ‘self’. And as he conceptualizes ‘relationship’ in a ‘strong’ sense of “non-summative properties that arise in the interdependencies among two or more individuals” (2010, p. 2086), he moves away from previous conceptualizations of face as a person-centered attribute. Arundale argues “face belongs to the dyad or social unit, and hence as ‘our connection and separation’ or ‘our face’” (2010, p. 2090). Face emerges in relationships and is conjointly co-constituted in interactions (cf. also Don and Izadi, 2011, 2013; Izadi, forthcoming). Relational connection and separation are dialectically related and mutually define one another. Therefore, each conversational meaning/action can potentially be projected and interpreted to involve a certain degree of separation and connection simultaneously, while extreme separation (with little connection) or extreme connection (with little separation) is also possible.
Relational connection and separation are intentionally taken as broad culture-general concepts (Arundale, 2010). Arundale (2010) argues that each cultural group may voice connection and separation in different terms. A researcher must conduct or employ ethnographic research to identify the culture-specific construal of relational connection and separation before investigating them in interactions. Drawing upon the Persian emic concepts of āberu (lit. water of the face) and shahsisat (lit. personality, character, identity), Izadi (forthcoming) argues that close bonding and differentiation are the Persian-specific voicing of connection and separation. One’s shahsisat is dynamically co-constructed in his/her interactions with others, and one’s āberu (lit. water of the face) is what one considers others think of his/her shahsisat, and that others’ āberu is what one thinks of their shahsisat (Izadi, forthcoming, p. 5). Āberu is closely linked to one’s concern about significant others’ negative evaluation of their conduct, which is reflected in harfe mardom (people’s talk). It reflects one’s envisioning of his/her relational bonding and differentiation with significant others and ‘maintaining āberu’ (āberudârī) is whatever action one initiates or avoids to manage his/her relationship vis-à-vis bonding with and differentiation from significant others (Arundale, 2013). Here I contextualize ehtērām and taārof in relational bonding and differentiation, in terms of FCT (Arundale, 2010).

Honorifics are linked to taārof by way of ehtērām. Achieving ehtērām in talk in interaction paves the way to achieving both bonding and differentiation. On the one hand, ehtērām highlights the distance (to whatever degree) between the individuals, hence hampering their total unity. In other words, every time two interactants use honorifics to pay ehtērām to each other, they co-construct a degree of distance by not encroaching on each other’s territory of individuality and at times by recognizing each other’s social status. On the other hand, as members of a collectivist society (Sharifian, 2011; Izadi, forthcoming), creating close bonding is a necessity to maintain. One way to maintain close bonding, for example, is to show one’s hospitality to others; that is to show that one is always ready to receive them as guests, that one is willing to put their feelings, needs and desires prior to his/her own, and is ready to spend money, time and energy on them. However, the philosophy of ‘putting others first’ is not always practically possible, since individuals have their own feelings, needs and desires, which may run contrary to others. As a consequence, they may just keep up the appearance of it by extending invitations that remain superficial at the level of words. An invitation, therefore, reflects the inviter’s attempt to create bonding. But given that it may remain only superficial, it both reflects and creates some degree of differentiation.

In an invitation–refusal interaction, if the two participants interactionally achieve taārof (ostensible invitations and refusals for example), they achieve more bonding and less differentiation. However, the degree of bonding is even higher (and differentiation becomes lower) if the two participants interactionally achieve genuine invitation-acceptance acts. While taārof is an attempt to create bonding, it precludes people from creating that bonding, which would ensue if a genuine invitation were achieved; that is, bonding is achieved against the background of differentiation. Therefore, there is always a tension between both bonding and differentiation, to whatever degree, in achieving taārof. However, the degree of bonding and differentiation achieved in a situated interaction depends on the participants and the context they create. For example, if one expects his former friend to treat him with intimacy, but receives honorifics, he may find his friend’s behavior clashing with his shahsisat (Izadi, forthcoming), since he had expected an intimate behavior. Similarly, if the use of honorifics does not align with the wider societal morality, or if they are used in ironical or even sarcastic circumstances, there is the risk of creating a higher degree of differentiation.

5. Analysis

In this section, I examine two excerpts of my data to investigate how evaluations of im/politeness arise in social practice with particular focus on the role that honorifics play. I adopt im/politeness as social practice (Haugh, 2007, 2013) and FCT (Arundale, 2010; Izadi, forthcoming) as theoretical frameworks. Both theories are informed by approaches and methods in Conversation Analysis, which take participants’ interactional achievement of meaning/action and relational phenomena into account. The analyses are grounded in the evidence in talk in interaction. Excerpt 1 is drawn from a corpus of 4 h and 20 min of audio-recorded natural talk in Iran. The participants comprise 17 middle-class, educated Persian speakers of both genders, who are aged between 25 and 62. The conversations were recorded in family gathering events and on doorsteps after the participants had granted their consent. The participants were informed about the broad research area; that is, Linguistics, but not the particular objective of this paper; that is, politeness. The data in excerpt 2 represent my data of street harassment which were field noted in 2007 and 2008 in two Iranian major cities. I acknowledge that the field noted data are restricted in not capturing pauses, exact vocalization, gaze, etc., and so I would limit my analysis to the extent for which there is evidence in the field noted talk.

5.1. Excerpt 1: honorifics in ostensible invitation–refusal exchanges (taārof)

The conversation takes place between two young male speakers of Persian, Ali and Reza (pseudonyms: aged 27 and 29, respectively). This prototypical interaction conjures up taārof in the Iranian mind. I start by briefly analyzing the
interaction to show why Iranians call this kind of interaction *taārōf*, and what they understand by it. After enjoying each other’s company for two hours, Reza has given Ali a ride home and now they are at Ali’s doorstep. Ali lives with his family, and the female members of the family generally cover up in front of a non-family member. It is almost midnight, and definitely not a proper time for receiving guests, especially if it is not prearranged. Both know that Ali’s family is not prepared to receive a guest at this time. Although Ali and Reza are close friends, Reza’s coming into Ali’s house would severely restrict the family’s privacy, especially given that the female members will have to either hide or to cover their heads in front of Reza. With this shared knowledge and cultural background, Ali and Reza exchange normative acts of *taārōf*. Ali’s invitation is in response to Reza’s favor of giving him a ride home, and it is an indication of his willingness to receive him as a guest at any time. This is a prototypical normative behavior that is socially expected of the two interactants, although as Eslami (2005, p. 464) writes, “invitations made as the person is passing by are usually considered ostensible even if they are made using emphatic and assertive form and tone... These are invitations that are solicited by context”.

Pragmatically, the interaction introduces a set of invitation–refusal adjacency pairs, which is repeated (with modification) three times, a question-response sequence and a closing sequence, both of which are linked to the invitation–refusal. Linguistically, the honorifics used in the interaction reflect the normative language which has been ritualized to index *ehterām* and more generally *taārōf*. This range of hyperbolic honorifics is not uncommon in communication among Iranians.

**Ali**: *befarmā*

Command
Come in

1. **Reza**: *=qorbo[net*

    (May I) sacrifice for you

    Thanks a lot

2. **Ali**: [biā too=

    Come in

    Come in

3. **Reza**: =*mersi bāyad beram (0.2) [kār dāram,*

    Thanks-must-go-I work-have-I

    Thanks, I’ve got to go. I have a work

4. **Ali**: [xo hālā ye deighe biā to ba’d boro=

    Well now one minute come in then go

    Well, just come in for a minute, then you can go

5. **Reza**: =*qorboonet beram kāri nadārī?* ((extending hand))

    Sacrifice-you go-I work don’t have-you

    May I sacrifice for you. Don’t you need a favor?

6. **Ali**: ((refuses to shake hands)) *taārōf miko[ndri?*

    Taarof doing-youSING

    Are you doing taārōf? (Are you standing on ceremonies?)

7. **Reza**: [na be xodā salām beresoon, (1.0)

    No by God hello send-SING

    No (I swear) by God, convey my hello

8. **Ali**: *ma dar xedmatim* ((extending hand))

    We at service-1PLURAL Pro

    I’m at your service

9. **Reza**: *chākkeretam*

    Slave-youSING-I

    I’m your slave

Ali initiates his *taārōf* using an honorific *befarmā* (1), which is here employed as the linguistic implementation of an invitation. Based on the shared background knowledge between the two interactants, Ali designs this turn for Reza to be interpreted as an invitation, but provisionally projects interpreting of it as *taārōf*, given the time and that genuine invitations are generally prearranged and not made impromptu (Eslami, 2005). The use of singular form of the imperative *befarmā* versus the plural alternative ‘*befarmāyeed*’ indexes a long-term friendship between Ali and Reza. Ali’s orientation to the social action of invitation along with the singular honorific creates a slight degree of bonding. However, the preference of an honorific over a non-honorific informal version (e.g. *biā too*: come in: singular) indexes Ali’s projecting of certain degree
of differentiation. Ali invokes the moral codes of ‘hospitality and putting others’ feelings first’, using a normative resource in the language (befarma) which provides procedural consequentiality for interpreting of it as taarof, and hence ‘polite’. Reza’s uptake is an indication of his interpreting of Ali’s turn as mere taarof. Therefore, he reciprocates a prototypical honorific qorboonet (lit. may I sacrifice for you), in singular form to be interpreted as a refusal, which is just another aspect of taarof, and is something socially expected of him. Such refusal shows Reza’s awareness that he should not take Ali’s invitation literally (abusing his taarof), but to express his gratitude toward him for his kind invitation. Reza’s refusal turn latches with Ali’s invitation, which is consistent with the structural preference for a refusal to an ostensible invitation (Taleghani-Nikzam, 1998). Again the reciprocation of singular form of the pronoun ‘you’ indexes that Ali’s interpretation regarding the degree of intimacy between him and Reza is right. Reza’s uptake also displays his assessment of Ali and his taarof as morally good and hence ‘polite’. It also indexes his interpreting of the projected bonding and differentiation, and reciprocates slight bonding (through expression of gratitude) and differentiation (through refusal). Ali now has evidence that his projecting of his utterance as ‘taarof to a close friend’ along with his projecting of relational accounts is consistent with Reza’s interpreting of it, and he can move a step forward to the third position utterance.

In the third turn, having interpreted Reza’s turn as refusing his taarof invitation, Ali reformulates his invitation, this time using an informal expression bia too (come in) and in terminal overlap with Reza’s turn. Ali’s insistence shows his understanding that delivering an invitation only once is not sufficient for this context. Shifting from an honorific to informal language here is evidence for Ali’s interpreting of Reza’s interpreting of his first turn befarma as taarof. So, Ali delivers an utterance which is interpretable as a genuine invitation, and hence indexes his attempt to create more bonding with Reza. Reza’s response to this insistence is a latched turn (4), consisting of a ritual thanking (mersi) followed by expressing an obligation (I have to go) and providing reason (I have a work), which is again preferred; that is, delivered without qualification or delay, in contrast with genuine refusals which are structurally dispreferred (Heritage, 1984).

Ali’s next turn (5) comes in overlap with Reza’s expression of a reason. He displays orientation to doing more taarof by issuing a stronger invitation. His turn initial ‘kho halā’ (well now) indicates his disagreement with Reza’s contribution that ‘he has to go because he has some work’ (4). He then delimits his invitation by saying ‘come in for a minute and then go’, which is interpretable as genuine intimate invitation. In return (6), Reza recycles his previously uttered honorific qorboonet beram: may I sacrifice for you followed by kāri nadāri (don’t you need a favor?) which is normatively used to signal goodbye and to begin closing of the greeting ritual in Iran. His extending hand also points to Reza’s orientation to leaving and to an implicit suggestion to quell the taarof. In these two sequences, Ali’s orientation to building on the bonding created in the first exchange sequentially implicates Reza’s orientation to more differentiation.

Ali’s insistence on his invitation has not yet come to an end. He frames a question to make sure that Reza’s refusal is genuine and he is not doing taarof. Ali’s question ‘taarof mikoni?’ (lit. are you doing taarof; are you standing on ceremony?) is a common meta-pragmatic expression used in many instantiations of taarof among Persians. To convince Ali that he is not doing taarof, Reza swears by God (8) that he really means his refusal to come in. Again such swearing is normatively invoked in this context and among Iranians in such situations in general, and it is used to place emphasis on the propositions, although they sound bizarre to those who do not speak Persian. To assure Ali that he really intends to go, Reza uses another typical marker of leave taking salam beresoon (convey my hello). Again, Ali is moving toward more bonding but Reza’s refusal precludes his attempt to create bonding.

Ali’s final turn (9) is an indication of his acceptance of Reza’s implicit suggestion that he has adequately done taarof. He initiates the closing sequence by the normative hyperbolic honorific mā dar xedmatini (lit. we are at your service). The use of plural pronoun ‘we’ which collocates with the expression ‘to be at one’s service’ indexes Ali’s shekastenafsi (humility), a cultural schema that encourages Iranians to lower the ‘self’ and elevate the ‘other’ in interactions (Sharifian, 2008). Reza reciprocates with another honorific (chākkeretim: we are your slave) using the same schema to interrelationally achieve closing of the conversation. The honorifics here ambivalently index and reinforce both parties’ recognition of distance and hierarchy as well as their expression of affection, which articulate with differentiation and bonding, respectively, and provide procedural consequentiality for achieving ehteram and taarof. Note how Ali’s orientation to bonding increases as he moves on by gradual shift from a more formal honorific (befarma) to informal language (bia to), by suggesting to move away from taarof (standing on ceremonies), and by insisting on his invitation, all sequentially implicating a more emphatic refusal from Reza’s end. Despite Ali’s insistence on his invitation, however, Reza’s uptakes display his social knowledge that he should not abuse Ali’s attempt to consolidate bonding by accepting his invitation, but to recognize and acknowledge by reciprocating thanks and pleasantries of taarof.

In this interaction, Ali is invoking an over-arching moral creed of the Iranian society: namely hospitality through inviting his friend using the honorifics which are associated with it. Reza responds to this moral act by invoking another moral act of considering his friend’s need and desire for privacy through refusing this invitation while appreciating it, and using reciprocal honorifics which are ritualized in language. Honorifics are procedurally consequential in interactionally achieving taarof, which reveals the moral values of the society. Reza’s reciprocation of Ali’s invitation with appreciation (as evidenced in the honorifics) indexes his evaluation of Ali’s act as moral, contextually and normatively relevant and hence polite. And, Ali’s reformulation of his invitation with more insistence reflects his evaluation of Reza’s refusal as his
understanding concern for a friend, not to abuse a friend’s taärof, and hence morally good and polite. Therefore, as they are interactionally achieving taärof through invitation–refusal exchanges, they are also displaying their evaluations of each other as ‘polite’. These evaluations are also consistent with my evaluations as an emic meta-participant and an analyst (cf. Haugh, 2013, for participation order).

5.2. Excerpt 2: honorifics in street harassment context

Verbal and sexual harassment on the streets is a common social phenomenon in Iran (Mohammadi, March 9, 2009; http://www.irandailybrief.com/2014/01/14/unsafe-environment-for-women-in-iran-sexual-harassment-in-the-workplace). As an Islamic country, Iran bans every kind of out-of-marriage relationship between the sexes. As such, no facilities are provided for people to practice this kind of lifestyle (e.g. pubs and nightclubs are banned). “The limitations imposed on sexual and intimate relationships between women and men or girls and boys have transformed men and boys into sexual predators in the alleys and streets of Iran” (Mohammadi, March 9, 2009). Streets are the places where (usually) men approach women with the view of dating and sexual encounters. While acknowledging that some women appear in the streets with the view of being approached for a relationship which could even lead to sexual encounters, many women who are on their own daily business (other than looking for dates) are often sexually harassed. Men’s approach styles differ from taunting to the so-called ‘polite’ offer or invitation, which is the case when there is a serious hope of convincing a woman for companionship. In the following, a woman is standing on the street, and seems to be waiting for a taxi. An elegant car is approaching her and pulling over. A young man sticks his head out of the car and starts the conversation:

1. Man: salâm xânom effectär midid?: Hello lady honor give (SP pl)
   Hello lady will you (pl) give (us) the honor ((of giving you a ride/having you in the car))
2. Woman: ((silence))
3. Man: befarmâin jâie tashrif mibarin? Command (pl) any place presence take (SP Pl)
   Will you get into (the car), are you (pl) taking your (pl) presence anywhere?
4. Woman: ((agitated)) gom sho âqâ mozâhem nasho Get lost Mr. don’t disturb
5. ((The car started moving away))
6. Man: ((While driving away, in ascending mocking voice)) vâ: che bi ada:b Wow! How impolite

The man starts by greeting (salâm: hello), followed by the address term xânom: Mrs. or lady (1). He then frames an honorific in interrogative form effectär midid: will you give us the honor? (1), which is the short form of ‘will you give us the honor of having you in the car?’, and which is interpretable as a respectful (with ehterâm) offer. This offer is apparently most interpretable as an offer to give the woman a ride, but can be extended to imply a suggestion for a sexual encounter. The use of honorifics by the man is also interpretable to some degree of differentiation–separation, by giving the woman the option of either accepting or rejecting, and elevating her to the point that her companionship would be considered an honor, in the background of the bonding-connection which is potentially created due to the proposal for accompanying in the car. The man’s contribution, while procedurally consequential for the subsequent turns, affords interpreting of his behavior as an implicit suggestion for sexual intimacy which is ‘immoral’, socially sanctioned, legally punishable and hence ‘impolite’. It also reflects the man’s assigning a low ‘entitlement’ to himself (and his friend) and high ‘contingencies’ of the woman’s rejection of the suggestion (Curl and Drew, 2008).

The woman’s response to this offer is a pregnant silence (2). She would have reciprocated a normative refusal with ehterâm if she had interpreted the man’s turn as a kind offer for a ride. The silence here, while evidencing that the woman has interpreted the man’s turn as an implicit suggestion for a sexual encounter, is interpretable as her evaluation of the man’s suggestion as ‘inappropriate’, ‘morally bad’ and hence ‘impolite’. Silence here indexes that the woman is the object of suggestion, and it reflects the woman’s assigning very low entitlements to the man in his suggestion. It also makes evident that she has been interpreting a far greater degree of differentiation than projected by the man. The silence normatively projects either withdrawal from suggestion or insistence in the subsequent position, which is interpretable as involving more differentiation (in the former) or more bonding (in the latter). It becomes evident later (turn 4) that the former is the case.

In turn 3, the man repeats his apparent offer, using another formulaic honorific befarmâyêed: lit. to command: get into the car, and a question jâie tashrif mibarin: are you taking your presence anywhere. The reformulation of the previous turn provides evidence for the man’s interpreting of the woman’s silence as desiring for insistence. In turn 4, the woman responds gom sho âqâ mozâhem nasho: get lost don’t disturb. The reciprocation of this response to the man’s seemingly respectful
offer indicates that the woman has been evaluating the man's behavior as an orientation to sexual harassment, which is morally stigmatized (in her view) and hence impolite, and that she is emotionally agitated. The response also indicates that, in the woman's view, the man is not entitled to make such a suggestion, and that she has been interpreting the man's insistence on his suggestion as clashing with her shaxsiat (personality, identity: Izadi, forthcoming), and hence as extreme differentiation. The woman's retort, in return, is interpretable as a strong rejection, involving extreme differentiation, and morally bad (impolite). Both interactants are incrementally achieving extreme differentiation in this sequence.

The man's next position utterance shows his interpretation of the woman's retort as a strong rejection of his suggestion, and as involving extreme differentiation. The car starts moving (5), but the man utters his final turn in ascending and mocking tone while departing. In denouncing his evaluation of the woman's previous turn as impolite in vā che bi adāb: wow how impolite (6), he shifts from the honorifics in the previous turns to the girlish speech style which affords interpreting as mocking the woman. This not only reflects his evaluation of the woman's rejection, but it is also evidence for his emotional reaction to the blunt rejection. The man's evaluation of the woman as 'impolite' comes to surface in talk. In terms of relational bonding and differentiation, the two participants are interactionally and incrementally achieving extreme differentiation with very little bonding in this interaction.

In order to widen the scope of the participation order (Haugh, 2013), I have frequently reproduced this story and have sought the evaluations of different Iranians, but I have reached quite inconsistent evaluations. One group of informants (generally male) viewed the man's veiled suggestion for sex as 'polite', although anti-religious and illegal. Their justification was that "there is no specific place for love-making, . . . , so how can one tell that a woman is seeking sexual encounter or she is doing her routine business". From their perspective, the woman could have refused politely. Another group (generally female) found the man's attempt to approach the woman an insult to women, both impolite and immoral, hence deserving such a counteraction. A female meta-participant informed "regardless of what religion or the government says, I find it very offensive to my shaxsiat that somebody allows himself to think that I am open to his sexual desire". She continued "the woman's response serves him right, polite response doesn't work in such situations... once I politely refused such a suggestion by saying that I am married, but the dirty guy said: 'don't you go to the cinema if you have a TV at home?'". The question implies that being married and having casual sex do not contradict each other. The third group (male and female) took a moderate stance by evaluating both interactants as justifiably 'impolite', condemning the bigger social and legal restrictions.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, following Haugh (2013), I examined how im/politeness evaluations arise in talk in interaction using two cases of social interaction in Persian. Particularly, I demonstrated how honorifics are linked to the evaluations of im/politeness as social practice vis-à-vis the moral order and the participation order. The study offers three theoretical implications: First, although honorifics are conventionalized to index linguistic politeness by way of ehterām, they should not necessarily occasion evaluations of a particular social action/meaning as polite in local interactions. This supports the argument that honorifics are potentially relevant to politeness (Kádár and Mills, 2013), that im/politeness is not inherent in the language (Mills, 2003), and that the analysis of im/politeness should go beyond the analysis of language (Kádár and Haugh, 2013; Haugh, 2013). A social action may be evaluated as impolite, even if the language used to realize it is normatively associated with politeness (excerpt 2). We may use the otherwise (conventionalized) polite form of the language in, say, a sarcastic compliment to mock someone, and hence be evaluated as impolite. Alternatively, we may use the otherwise impoliteness-associated language in a jocular way to establish and strengthen bonds of solidarity in an in-group network, and hence not be evaluated as impolite (as in mock impoliteness: Haugh and Bousfield, 2012).

The use of language must be consistent with the orientation to social meanings and actions in terms of the moral order they invoke. Honorifics may not be consequential for the evaluations of politeness if the wider frame of behavior is evaluated as 'impolite', 'non-polite' or even 'over-polite'. In excerpt 1 above, honorifics are procedurally consequential for interactionally achieving tāārof, and they are completely relevant to the context that the participants are creating (Heritage, 1984). The pleasantries of words are combined with the pleasantries of hospitality and appreciation of it. In excerpt 2, however, both parties interactionally achieve social actions and pragmatic meanings that reflect sexual harassment. From the woman's perspective, the man's whole action of attempting to sexually abuse her is considered impolite. It is the very act of encroaching upon the woman's territory of individuality, leading to clashing with her shaxsiat, which occasions evaluation of impoliteness from the woman's end. Honorifics, therefore, are neither relevant nor procedurally consequential for the woman's evaluation of the man as 'impolite'.

Second, as Haugh (2013) argues, the analysis of im/politeness should address the question 'to whom a social action/meaning is polite, impolite, non-polite, etc.', since variability in evaluations of different participants and meta-participants is the norm rather than the exception. And, there are usually multiple understandings of politeness rather than one understanding (Kádár and Haugh, 2013; Haugh, 2013). In the first excerpt, it is not difficult for both parties and even meta-participants to agree that Ali and Reza are 'doing politeness' by orienting to the normative practice of tāārof which
involves an implicit appeal to a moral code that is arguably shared among a vast majority of Iranians. In the sexual harassment case, however, both participants display evaluations of each other’s conduct as impolite: one for the implicit suggestion/sexual harassment, and the other for the strong rejection and the use of a kind of language which is conventionally associated with impoliteness. My informal search on meta-participants’ evaluations supports the view that evaluations of impoliteness are not readily agreeable among members of the same culture and are even subject to idiosyncratic variations. It shows that not only do different communities of practice constitute the moral order in different ways (Haugh, 2013, p. 59), but also that different participants and meta-participants invoke their own moral order in their evaluations.

Finally, the study examines honorifics in the Persian emic concepts of tārōf and ehterām vis-à-vis face as encompassing a dialectic of relational connection and separation (Arundale, 2010) and its Persian-specific construal relational bonding and differentiation (Izadi, forthcoming). Previous treatment of tārōf and ehterām as face saving (Koutlaki, 2002; Eslami, 2005) has failed to examine how participants jointly co-create the context of tārōf, and how they achieve face in the context they create, simply due to its preoccupation with B&L’s intention-based politeness theory (Eelen, 2001). Honorifics not only represent and reconstruct the normative language which a discourse community uses in everyday interactions, but also function as dialectically connecting and separating individuals. The very fact that we use honorifics indexes that we are distant individuals (cf. Dunn, 2011), and that we attempt to build connection. This is evident in the fact that the more connected and intimate we become, the fewer honorifics (and the more informal language) we use in our communication. However, the degree of connection and separation we interactionally achieve depends on the context we create. In excerpt 1, both parties interactionally achieve some degree of bonding-connection through inviting and appreciating, which is an invocation of a shared moral code, but some degree of differentiation—separation by making that invitation an ostensible one. The use of honorifics was procedurally consequential in creating the context of ehterām and tārōf, which in turn reflects recognition of distance, hierarchy and differentiation. But this separation is achieved in the background of creating bonding through invitations and endearments. Therein lies the tension between separation and connection (Arundale, 2010). In excerpt 2, however, the participants achieve a much higher degree of differentiation, which is created in the violation of at least one party’s moral order, and in the one party’s encroaching on the other’s territory of individuality. The man’s attempt to create bonding through an offer extendable to a suggestion for sexual intimacy (in the background of differentiation created in the honorifics) was interpreted as involving extreme differentiation (incrementally achieved in turn 4) and was evaluated as an immoral act of harassment by the woman.

Transcription conventions

[] overlapped voice starts
= latching
: elongation of previous sound
- cut off sentence or word
Word stressed word in the sentence/clause
WORD spoken in high pitch
? rising intonation
↑ sudden rise in intonation
↓ marked fall in intonation
(0.2) length of pause
oo words between degree sign are soft words
<> sotto voce
> < faster voice
(() ) transcriptionist’s description
ä Persian long a: vowel as in father
x voiceless velar uvular with scrape
q uvular plosive

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