Iranian Ritual Politeness System: Taarof in Invitation-refusal Exchanges

Ahmad Izadi

Department of English Language and Literature, Islamic Azad University,
Abadan Branch, Iran

Abstract–**Taarof is among the most important components of Persian cultural identity, dominant in almost all every day interactions, and is considered the backbone of Persian ritual politeness (Beeman, 1976; Koutlaki, 2002; Izadi, 2015; 2016). Given this capacity, taarof has a great potential for intercultural miscommunication between Iranians and non-Iranians and has direct implications for Iranian's "relational connection with and separation from" (Arundale, 2010) each other and the outer world. Using naturally occurring conversations as data, the study demonstrates how taarof is interactionally achieved in the interactions. Finally, the implications are discussed in terms of face and politeness theories.**

Index Terms–**Interactional achievement, Persian, politeness, taarof.**

I. Introduction

This paper builds on past work on the concept of Persian ritual politeness *taarof,* providing its pragmatic functions and linguistic implementations. It draws on conversation analysis (CA) to demonstrate how Iranians jointly accomplish taarof in their interactions (Izadi, 2016)*. Taarof* is among the most important components of Persian cultural practices, dominant in almost all every day interactions, and is considered the backbone of Persian ritual politeness (Beeman 1976, 1986, 2001; Koutlaki, 2002; Asdjodi 2001). Given this capacity, it has a great potential for intercultural miscommunication between Iranians and non-Iranians and has direct implication for Iranians' "relational connection with and separation from" (Arundale 2010) each other and the outer world. One would not survive even a single visit to Iran if s/he is not aware of this complex cultural phenomenon. From an outsider perspective, the practice of *taarof* may sound like a "verbal dance" (Beeman, 1976); a reciprocation of mimetic performances of certain pre-patterned linguistic formulae (Kadar, 2013), which sounds bizarre to those who do not

speak Persian. It is an artistic, circumlocutionary and at times flowery language, which is repeated and recycled in every interaction. As Beeman (1986, p. 57) writes, it is a "ritualized realization of differential perceptions of superiority and inferiority in interaction." Its pragmatic meaning is often associated with opacity, ambiguity, and insincerity to the point that makes it subject to self-criticism (Beeman, 1986). It is a language that must not be taken literally; that is, it is a pragmatic language rather than a semantic one (Pinto, 2011), functioning as a relational solidarity building. Two colleagues who meet each other in the workplace on a daily basis typically spend around 2–3 min greeting. Moreover, the breach of this social etiquette is subject to impoliteness or at least not politeness evaluations. One can imagine the difficulty an Iranian who is "predisposed to greet in this way" (Watts, 2003) would face in a similar situation in intercultural setting, where a smile, a word of "Hi" or "good morning" serves the same function.

II. Taarof and Face

A few studies in pragmatics have investigated taarof in terms of the notion of face, proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) as a person's public self-image. Koutlaki (2002) studies offers and expressions of thank as refusal strategies; an adjacency pair which reflects *taarof,* in the context of politeness and argues that the two acts are face enhancing, despite Brown and Levinson's (hereafter B&L) assumption that they are face threatening. Similarly, Eslami (2005) investigates ostensible invitations as another instantiation of *taarof* and assigns them a face enhancing feature. A study by Nanbakhsh (2009), however, argues that *taarof*, especially when exaggerated, is face threatening. However, these studies suffer from the inadequacies that are associated with their theoretical framework; that is, B&L's understanding of face. According to some critiques, B&L's notion of face is primarily used as a motive for politeness. Later research, however, suggests disentanglement of the face from impoliteness (Locher and Watts 2005; Bargiela-Chiappini 2003; Arundale 2009). In his meticulous survey of politeness theories, Eelen (2001) suggests that the focus be shifted from speaker intention (the major theme in B&L) to hearer evaluation. Critiques also suggest that (for example, Ide 1989; Bargiela-Chiappini 2003; Arundale 2009, 2010, to name a few) conceptualization of face in terms of B&L

as purely cognitive and individualistic. Arundale (2010) moves away from this cognitive definition and conceptualize face as "relational connection and separation," that is both relational; that is, co-constructed in the relationships, and interactional; that is, interactionally achieved between at least two participants.

Arundale's (2010) conceptualization of face as "relational" and "interactional" should promise the analyses of *taarof* to produce different results from those of past studies, which have treated the face as an individual phenomenon, following Goffman and B&L. Moreover, it is difficult to assume complete face enhancement in the practice of *taarof* if it is sometimes negatively evaluated, due to flummery, emptiness and the mere formalities (Koutlaki, 2002), or complete face threatening (Nanbakhsh 2009) if it is meant to express good feelings. These contradictory findings seem to be rooted in methodological and conceptual deficiencies of face as a person-centered phenomenon. With regard to the relationship between *taarof* and face as relational connection and separation, Izadi (2015, 2016) argues that one way to maintain connection 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 before his/her own and is ready to spend money, time, and energy for them.

On the other hand, 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 the appearance (Beeman, 2001) of it by extending invitations that remain superficial at the level of words. In other words, among the triangle Zoroastrian principles, "good words" is not fully compatible with "good deeds" and "good thoughts." The tension between the psychological desire (sincerity) and social obligation (insincerity) to create close bonding is evident in *taarof*. An ostensible invitation, therefore, reflects the inviter understanding of his social duty to create bonding. However, given that it may remain only superficial and not truly intended, an ostensible invitation both reflects and creates some degree of differentiation and separation.

However, this social duty is mutually recognized (O'shea, 2000) and the vagueness, ambiguity, or insincerity is often tolerated. Moreover, most of the times the true intention of the speaker overlaps with his social obligation, and one can never accuse others for insincerity. Participants who share the same cultural background interactionally achieve some degree of connection and separation every time they practice taarof. Vagueness or insincerity in *taarof* reflects the complex and convoluted nature of interpersonal relationships among Iranians, which must be viewed from a pragmatic perspective rather than semantic (Pinto, 2011, for a discussion of sincerity).

In an invitation-refusal interaction, if the two participants interactionally achieve *taarof* (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. In

other words, there is a positive correlation between perceived sincerity and the interactional achievement of connection. Whereas *taarof* is an attempt to create bonding, it precludes people from creating complete bonding; that is, bonding is achieved against the background of differentiation. It is important to note that contextual expectations play a key role in interpreting connection and separation.

The contradictory statements "he did not do even an empty taarof" and "he did just an empty taarof" are equally negative. The former is said when a person has expected his/her interactant to at least ostensibly invite him/her home, but his/her interactant has failed to do so. The latter points to the speaker's expectation of a genuine act (for example, invitation), whereas his/her interactant has made a mere ostensible act. In general, taarof articulates with both connection and separation. Connection ensues due to one's desire and obligation to create and consolidate bonding. Moreover, separation occurs due to the very fact that for taarof to be relevant, some degree of differentiation and distance must be present to preclude total bonding and unity.

III. ANALYSIS

In this section, I analyze the selected scenario of interaction to show how participants in a conversation interactionally achieve *taarof* by interactionally achieving invitation-refusal exchanges. This is only one prototype of hundreds of excerpts from a corpus of Persian interactional data that were audio-recorded between 2010 and 2013 with the consent of the participants.

Taarof in ostensible invitation-refusal exchanges

1. Ali: *befarma=*
   Command
   Come in
2. Reza: *=ghorboo[net*
   (May I) sacrifice for you
   Thanks a lot
3. Ali: [*bia too=*
   Come in
   Come in
4. Reza: *=mersi bayad beram (0.2) [ka:rdaram,*
   Thanks-must-go-I business-have-I
   Thanks, I've got to go. I have a business
5. Ali: *[kho hala ye deighe bia to bad boro=*
   Well now one minute come in then go
   Well, just come in for a minute, then you can go
6. Reza: *=ghorboonet beram kari nadari?* ((extending hand))
   Sacrifice-you go-I business don't have-you
   May I sacrifice for you. Don't you need a favor?
7. Ali: ((refuses to shake hands)) *taarof miko[ni?*
   Taarof doing-you SING
   Are you doing taarof? (Are you standing on ceremonies?)
8. Reza: [*na be xoda salam beresoon,* (1.0)
   No by God hello send-SING
   No (I swear) by God, convey my hello
9. Ali: *ma dar khedmatim* ((extending hand))
   We at service-1 PLURAL Pro
   I'm at your service

10. Reza: *chakkeretam*
     Slave-you SING-I
     I'm your slave

Ali initiates his *taarof* using an honorific *befarma* (1), which is here employed as the linguistic implementation of an ostensible invitation. Based on the shared background knowledge between the two interactants, Ali designs this turn for Reza to be interpreted as an ostensible invitation, although the honorific is also interpretable as genuine invitation. Genuine invitations are generally prearranged and not made impromptu (Eslami, 2005). Moreover, Ali knows that his family is not prepared to receive guest at this time, but his invitation here merely instantiates his social obligation of doing *taarof* to his friend to show his willingness to receive him as a guest at any time. The use of singular form of the imperative *befarma* versus the plural alternative "*befarmaaeed*" indexes a close relationship between Ali and Reza.

Reza's uptake is an indication of his interpreting of Ali's turn as mere *taarof*. Therefore, he reciprocates a prototypical honorific *ghorboonet* (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 love 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-Nikazm 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. Ali has now evidence that his projecting of his utterance as "*taarof* to a close friend" 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. Whereas he does *taarof*, he needs to pretend that his invitation is genuine (Eslami, 2005); that is, he is not doing *taarof*. Shifting to informal language here is evidence for this. 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 business), 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 making a stronger invitation. His turn initial "*kho hala*" (well now) indicates his disagreement with Reza's contribution that "he has to go because he has a business" (4). He then delimits his invitation by saying "come in for a minute and then go," which is interpretable as the genuine intimate invitation. In return (6), Reza recycles his previously uttered honorific

(*ghorboonet beram*: May I sacrifice for you) followed by *kari nadari* (do not you need a favor?) which normatively used to signal goodbye and to begin closing of the greeting ritual in Iran. His extending hand also points to Reza's intention to leave and to an implicit suggestion to quell the *taarof*. 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 ceremonies?) 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, 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).

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 "*ma dar khematim*" (lit. we are at your service). The use of the 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 elevates the "other" in interactions (Sharifian, 2008). Reza reciprocates with another honorific (*chakkeretim*: We are your slave) using the same schema to interactionally achieve closing of the conversation.

In the push and pull of these *taarof* exchanges, Ali and Reza are interactionally achieving some degree of relational connection and separation. Firstly, Eslami (2005, p. 464) writes "invitations made as the person is passing by are usually considered ostensible even if they are made using the emphatic and assertive form and tone… These are invitations that are solicited by context." Although Ali insists on his *taarof*, both interactants know that 11:00 PM is not a proper time for hospitality, especially if it is not prearranged. Secondly, Ali's *taarof* is in place in response to Reza's favor of giving him a ride home. Finally, although Ali and Reza are close friends, both know that Reza's coming into Ali's house severely would 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 *taarof*. Despite Ali's insistence, Reza knows well that he should not abuse Ali's desire to consolidate bonding by accepting his invitation but to recognize and acknowledge by reciprocating thanks and pleasantries of *taarof*. Therein lies the tension between building bonding and differentiation, which in turn, goes with connection and separation, respectively.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this study, using CA, I demonstrate how Iranians interactionally achieve *taarof*. The analysis reveals how the

two participants jointly accomplish *taarof*, regardless of what the original intention of the speaker is. A CA-informed analysis can tell us that Ali and Reza are interactionally achieving *taarof* in achieving invitation-refusals. CA relies on what participants in talk reveal, not what they intend to do. Ali and Reza could have achieved real invitation-acceptance (non-taarof) if Reza had accepted the invitation.

This paper does not fully support the view that *taarof* is faced enhancing (as reflected in Koutlaki, 2002; Eslami 2005) or that it is face threatening (as reflected in Nanbakhsh 2009) by showing that participants interactionally achieve both connection and separation in the practice of *taarof*. It is true that *taarof* is an attempt to create close bonding with interactants. However, the same degree of bonding projected by speakers is not always interpreted by hearers. More importantly, *taarof* encompasses act with different degrees of sincerity and insincerity. This renders the potential ritual to be interpreted differently in terms of the degree of connection and separation, depending on who the participants are, their relationship history, and contextual expectations. As in the example of Ali and Reza (excerpt 1), the bonding between the two *friends* creates an invitation, but the differentiation between the two *individuals* precludes their interactional achievement of genuine and sincere invitation. Moreover, *taarof* ritual is an instantiation of "recurrent schematic language use" (Kadar, 2013) which reflects the tension between the two poles of the same dialectic; that is, connection and separation.

REFERENCES

Arundale, R.B. (2009) Face as emergent in interpersonal communication: An alternative to Goffman. In: Bargiela-Chiappini, F., and Haugh, M., editors. *Face, Communication, and social interaction*. London: Equinox.

Arundale, R.B. (2010) Constituting face in conversation: Face, facework, and interactiona achievement. *Journal of Pragmatics,* 42, pp.2078-2105.

Asdjodi, M. (2001) A comparison between ta'arof in Persian and limao in Chinese. *International Journal of Sociology of the Language,* 148, pp.71-92.

Bargiela-Chiappini, F. (2003) Face and politeness: New (insights) for (old) concepts. *Journal of Pragmatics,* 35, pp.1453-1469.

Beeman, W.O. (1976) Status, style and strategy in Iranian interactions. *Anthropological Linguistics,* 18(7), pp.305-322.

Beeman, W.O. (1986) *Language, status and power in Iran*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Beeman, W.O. (2001) Sincerity and emotion in Persian discourse: Accomplishing the representations of inner states. *International Journal of the Sociology of the Language*, 148, pp.31-57.

Brown, P. and Levinson, S.C. (1987) *Politeness: some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eelen, G. (2001) *A Critique of Politeness Theories*. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing.

Eslami, Z. (2005) Invitations in Persian: Ostensible or genuine. *Intercultural Pragmatics,* 2(4), pp.453-480.

Heritage, J. (1984) A change-of-state token and aspects of its sequential placement. In: *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 299-345.

Ide, S. (1989) Formal forms and discernment: Two neglected aspects of universals of linguistic politeness. *Multilingua,* 8, pp.223-248.

Izadi, A. (2015) Persian honorifics and im/politeness as social practice. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 85, pp.85-95.

Izadi, A. (2016) Over-politeness in Persian professional interactions. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 102, pp.13-23.

Kadar, D. (2013) *Relational rituals and communication. Ritual intercations in groups*. London: Palgrave.

Koutlaki, S. (2002) Offers and expressions of thanks as face enhancing acts: Tae'arof in Persian. *Journal of Pragmatics,* 34(12), pp.1733-1756.

Locher, M. and Watts, R. (2005) Politeness theory and relational work. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 1, pp.9-33.

Nanbakhsh, G. (2009) Social Constraints on Persian *Politeness Ritual*: Taarof. *Linguistic politeness and rudeness conference*. UK: Lancaster University.

O'Shea, M. (2000) *Culture shock: Iran*. Portland, OR: Graphic Arts Publishing Company.

Pinto, D. (2011) Are Americans insincere? Interactional styles and politeness in everyday America. *Journal of Politeness Research,* 7(2), pp.215-238.

Richard J. Watts. (2003) *Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sharifian, Farzad (2008) Cultural schemas in L1 and L2 compliment responses: A study of Persian-speaking learners of English. *Journal of Politeness Research Language Behaviour Culture*, 4(1), pp. 55-80.

Spencer-Oatey, H. (2005) (Im)Politeness, face and perceptions of rapport: Unpacking their bases and interrelationships. *Journal of Politeness Research,* 1(1), pp.95-119.

Spencer-Oatey, H. (2011) Conceptualising 'the relational' in pragmatics: Insights from metapragmatic emotion and (im)politeness comments. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43, pp.3565-3578.

Taleghani-Nikazm, C. (1998) Politeness in Persian interaction: Preference of offers in Persian. *Crossroads of language, interactions and culture*, 1, pp.3-11.