

Investigating condolence responses in English and Persian

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Abstract

This study intends to investigate condolence responses in Persian and English. The data collection instrument was movies. The movies were utilized to study the responses native speakers employ when someone offers condolences to them. Since there was no model of comparison, the researchers had to make one based on the nature of responses collected from movies. Seven categories of responses were recognized. The categories are: token of appreciation; expressing sorrow; sharing feeling; comment on the deceased; topic avoidance; self-blame statement; and divine comment. The Chi-square formula was then employed to find out whether there are any significant differences between the observed frequencies. The findings showed that Persian responses are more celestial and collectivist in nature while English condolence responses are more terrestrial and individualistic. Finally, the results were discussed and some suggestions were made.

Keywords: pragmatics; speech acts; condolence responses; movie analysis; Chi-square

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1. Introduction

With the advent of communicative approaches toward language learning, a more focused attention was directed toward using the language in authentic situations (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). At the heart of these communicative paradigms was the use of language appropriately. Therefore, specific circumstances must be taken into consideration for every utterance (Austin, 1962). It can be concluded that saying does not make that thing happen. Hence, the concept of *appropriateness* comes to the forefront which is one of the underlying elements of speech act theory. The idea of appropriateness is in the same line with *felicity conditions* which was first proposed by Austin (1962). According to Hudson (2000), grammatical well-formedness does not guarantee an illocution to take place appropriately.

With the widespread acknowledgement of Communicative Language Teaching, a great shift of attention from the study of language in a vacuum to investigating the actual use of language in a purposeful context was developed in which the communicative competence was the main concern (Brown, 2007). With the growing emphasis on linguistic variation and appropriateness of the language being used, language turned to a labyrinth of mysterious puzzles, solving each of which requires seeing the issue with different glasses. It was not any more the language that mattered the most. Every language, to be sure, has users. It is the users of a language, among other factors, that has given the language its intricate feature. For instance, knowing how it is possible to define *good* or how much obligation is behind a *must* requires a familiarity with the two interlocutors communicating the words as well as the situational factors.

When the focus of attention changed in favor of language use, and when researchers tried to investigate types of variability found in learner language (Ellis, 2008), knowledge of *pragmatics* gained importance. Riley (1981) mentioned that every discourse has specific features which can contribute to the meaning of the utterances. These features which are *formal structure*, *illocutionary structure*, and *interactive structure* put emphasis on communicative and pragmatic aspects of learning a foreign language. Therefore, in the following section, pragmatics is discussed and its different subcategories are defined which is an introduction for starting the investigation on speech act theory. Pragmatics has not a clear-cut definition (Ellis, 2008); however, the general concept of pragmatics refers to the consideration of linguistic features in relation to users of the language (Levinson, 1983). Richards and Schmidt (2002) defined pragmatics as “*the study of the use of language in communication, particularly the relationships between sentences and the contexts and situations in which they are used*” (p. 412).

The knowledge of pragmatics plays an important role in conversations between individuals since pragmatics is the relation between the language and its users. As it is put forward by Levinson (1983, p. 284), “conversation may be taken to be that familiar predominant kind of talk in which two or more participants freely alternate in speaking, which generally occurs outside specific institutional settings like religious services, law courts, classrooms and the like.” Conversations are linguistic interactions which have different structural properties and can be influenced by many cultural and societal factors (Verschueren, 1999). Therefore, every particular situation will surely impose some limitations on the sentences. For instance, norms of politeness, humor, irony, and many other factors require the interlocutors to use specific linguistic structures.

The theory of speech acts describes how one can use language to do things (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2003). For instance, using language to *request* or *promise* is related to the theory of speech act. Verbs are not neutral in nature. Using them can bring change to the environment and, hence, it can be said that utterances speak by themselves. It was claimed that speech acts are the basic building blocks based on which the linguistic elements could be interpreted; nevertheless, pragmaticians do not believe the case to be like that (Verschueren,

1999). It has been claimed that utterances should be investigated in conversations of various kinds. For example, does *requesting* have the same features in conversations in different situations such as classroom or court?

Having said that, there are different ways to interpret the meaning of an utterance (Yule, 2006), but a more focused analysis is needed to investigate the ways interlocutors verbally fulfill the intended meaning and verbally communicate it to the hearer. For example, how different individuals request, ask questions, or warn? Speech act theory can help to find the answer of these and many other similar questions. Human life is replete with many situations of death and bewailing. As a bereaved or as a condoler, one may be in various situations. We may receive condolences from others and there is a need to acknowledge the condolence comment. Sometimes we ourselves should respond to others' condolences. Various cultures may have different ways of responding to condolences. As Parkes, Laungani, and Young (1997, p. 30) put it, "Each culture has its own approaches to dealing with loss. These may be more or less standardized but almost always involve a core of understandings, spiritual beliefs, rituals, expectations and etiquette." There is no study to verify the argument. Therefore, this study aims at investigating responses to condolences in Persian and English. The findings can be useful to reach a universal pattern of investigating condolence responses. The body of research on speech act (e.g. Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010) shows that there is lack of research done on condolence and condolence responses. Thus, the present study proposes a classification for comparing Persian and English condolence responses. Besides, this study aims at dealing with the following questions:

1. Are there any significant differences among condolence responses in Persian?
2. Are there any significant differences among condolence responses in English?
3. Are there any significant differences between Persian and English with respect to condolence responses?

1.1 Significance of the Study

Searle (1979) pointed out that there are five general classes of speech acts: assertives (which commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition); directives (which are attempts by the speaker to get the addressee to do something); commissives (which commit the speaker to some future course of action); expressives (which express a psychological state, the attitude or feelings of the speaker); and declarations (which affect immediate changes in the institutional state of affairs and which tend to rely on elaborate extra-linguistic institutions). Out of these five groups, offering condolence and its responses both belong to *expressives* which refer to how speakers deal with situations of grief and condoling.

The importance of this study is fourfold. First, it is useful for the EFL learners in that they will be familiar with the way native speakers respond to condolences. Furthermore, the findings of this study may be a fruitful source for EFL learners in order to be acquainted with the way condolence responses are used. When learning L2, most students resort to their mother tongue in order to come up with different speech acts (Delen & Tavit, 2010). This may cause miscommunication when interacting. This cross-cultural study would shed light on the way natives use condolence responses. The findings can help EFL learners to overcome the difficulty of using appropriate condolence responses in various situations. Second, teachers as the conductors of the class can use the findings in order to instruct learners and also predict where students may have difficulty using responses to condolences.

This study also helps teachers find out why some students have problem learning and applying the speech acts appropriately. Third, this study may be of interest for material developers. Students interact most of their time with their books. Textbooks are also a road map for most teachers and students. Material developers can use the findings of this study to classify different situations in which condolence and condolence responses take place. Material developers can also provide beneficial exercises in order to increase the pragmatic competence of

learners concerning condolence and condolence responses. Learning particular speech acts will increase the quality of interactions among individuals. Fourth, researchers can use the classification presented in this study to compare condolence responses in other cultures. It is also of great help to those who want to investigate the discursual features of language. Moreover, it is possible to reach a universal pattern of condolence and condolence responses. The existing body of research concerning speech act theory shows that there is a gap in literature about condolence speech act. In this research, a comparison is made between Persian and English condolence responses to find the similarities and discrepancies between the two cultures. Since there is not much at hand about the condolence speech act, this study can be used as a model for further cross-cultural studies on condolence speech act.

2. Methodology

2.1 Corpus

In order to compare condolence response types among Persian and English movies, 200 movies were chosen randomly and the way Persian and English speakers respond to others' condolences were investigated. Since there was no method of comparison proposed in the literature, the researchers had to design one and to verify the classification a team of experts analyzed the results. For making the model, first the selected movies were observed and the way Persian and English natives expressed their responses to others' condolences in different situations were transcribed and then analyzed.

2.2 Research Process

The researchers classified the strategies into 7 generic categories. The categories are: (1) *Token of appreciation*; (2) *Expressing sorrow*; (3) *Sharing feeling*; (4) *Comment on the deceased*; (5) *Topic avoidance*; (6) *Self-blame statement*; and (7) *Divine comment*. In the first category, strategies such as 'yes, I know' and 'thank you' were recognized. In the second category, sentences such as 'I am sorry' and 'I am so sorrowful for your loss,' were found. In the third category, sentences such as 'too bad she is not beside us any more' and 'I have missed him so much' were placed. As it can be recognized, using words such as wishing and hoping are common in this category. In the fourth category, compliment sentences and talking about the deceased are observed. In the fifth category, the bereaved tries to change the topic of condoling. In the sixth category, sentences such as 'it was my fault' and 'I should have been more careful with her' were recognized. Finally, in the seventh category, which is divine comment, sentences such as 'God bless him/her' are used. Therefore, it is possible to compare condolence responses in Persian and English cultures via using the aforementioned classification. Table 1 shows the classification of comparison:

Table 1

The Cross-cultural Classification of Condolence Response

Category	Examples
<i>Token of appreciation</i>	C: I'm so sorry. Please accept my sympathy. R: It's so nice of you.
<i>Expressing sorrow</i>	C: I am very sorry about the death of your father. R: I am sorry for your father too. God bless him.
<i>Sharing feeling</i>	C: God bless your father soul. I wish he were here. R: I have missed him so much.
<i>Comment on the deceased</i>	C: He will be in our minds forever. God bless him. R: He was a wonderful man.
<i>Topic avoidance</i>	C: I came only to express my condolence. R: Why don't you come in and talk about yourself.
<i>Self-blame statement</i>	C: I'm sorry to say that she must be dead now. R: It was my fault. I decided not to go after her.
<i>Divine comments</i>	C: I'm so very sorry for your loss. R: God bless him/her.

In the next phase of the study, the frequency of each observed category was counted and in the second phase, the Chi-square test was employed to find out whether there are any significant differences between Persian and English corpuses.

3. Results

This study intended to compare and contrast condolence responses in Persian and English. Table 2 reveals the model of comparison and the frequency of each category in English and Persian:

Table 2

Distribution of Condolence Response Types in Persian and English

Categories	Persian (f)	English (f)
Token of appreciation	82	65
Expressing sorrow	39	61
Sharing feeling	54	83
Comment on the deceased	70	96
Topic avoidance	18	31
Self-blame statement	12	25
Divine comment	123	71
<i>Total</i>	398	432

As it can be observed, most Iranians referred to divine comments ($n= 123$) as the most common response to the condoling sentences. However, in English the most frequent category is comment on the deceased ($n= 96$).

Table 3

Results of the Chi Square Test for the Condolence Response Types in Persian

Categories	Observed N	Expected N	df	Sig.	χ^2
Token of appreciation	82	56.9	6	.000	158.799
Expressing sorrow	39	56.9	6		
Sharing feeling	54	56.9	6		
Comment on the deceased	70	56.9	6		
Topic avoidance	18	56.9	6		
Self-blame statement	12	56.9	6		
Divine comment	123	56.9	6		
<i>Total</i>	398	-	-		

After investigating the frequency of each category in two languages, the significance of the differences in each language was analyzed (Table 3). According to Table 3, there is a significant difference between Persians' condolence response types ($\chi^2=158.799$, $p < .05$). Another point which is characteristic of Persian condolence response types is that Iranians use divine comment, token of appreciation, and comment on the deceased ($n= 123$, 82, 70) more than expected ($n= 56.9$).

Divine > Appreciation > Deceased > Feeling/Sorrow/Self-blame/Avoidance

With respect to English condolence response types, there is a significant difference observed in the corpus ($\chi^2=65.097$, $p < .05$). The most frequent response types are related to comment on the deceased, sharing feeling, divine comment, and token of appreciation respectively ($n= 96$, 83, 71, 65). In addition, these response types were observed more than the expected frequency ($n= 61.7$). Comparing Tables 3 and 4, it can be recognized that self-blame statement is the least used strategy conducted by Persian and English speakers.

Deceased > Feeling > Divine > Appreciation > Sorrow/Avoidance/Self-blame

Table 4*Results of the Chi Square Test for the Condolence Response Types in English*

Categories	Observed N	Expected N	Df	Sig.	χ^2
Token of appreciation	65	61.7	6	.000	65.097
Expressing sorrow	61	61.7	6		
Sharing feeling	83	61.7	6		
Comment on the deceased	96	61.7	6		
Topic avoidance	31	61.7	6		
Self-blame statement	25	61.7	6		
Divine comment	71	61.7	6		
<i>Total</i>	432	-	-		

Table 5*Distribution of Chi-square Formula in Condolence Response Types in English and Persian*

Categories	English		Persian		Sig.	χ^2
	Observed	Expected	Observed	Expected		
Token of appreciation	65	73.5	82	73.5	.161	1.966
Expressing sorrow	61	50.0	39	50.0	.028	4.840
Sharing feeling	83	68.5	54	68.5	.013	6.139
Comment on the deceased	96	83.0	70	83.0	.044	4.072
Topic avoidance	31	24.5	18	24.5	.063	3.449
Self-blame statement	25	18.5	12	18.5	.033	4.568
Divine comments	71	97.0	123	97.0	.000	13.938
<i>Total</i>	432		398			

The results of the Chi-square test revealed that there is a significant difference among Persian and English response types except for token of appreciation and topic avoidance. With regard to token of appreciation, the difference between English and Persian is non-significant ($\chi^2= 1.966, p < .05$). It shows that using response types such as 'thank you' can be a universal pattern since it is a common way of responding to condolence comments. Although Persian speakers used more appreciating responses, there is not a significant difference between English and Persian. English speakers expressed their sorrow more than Persian speakers when responding ($\chi^2= 4.840, p < .05$). As it is related to sharing feeling, English cases were more than Persian ones with a significant difference observed between them ($\chi^2= 6.139, p < .05$). The self-enhancement quality of Western societies is advocated through these condolence responses. With respect to comment on the deceased, English speakers outperformed Persian speakers with a significant difference ($\chi^2= 4.072, p < .05$). The second category with a non-significant difference is related to topic avoidance. Though English speakers' use of topic avoidance was more frequent, the difference was not significant ($\chi^2= 3.449, p < .05$). Self-blame response type was employed with different frequencies by the two cultures and Table 5 shows a significant difference between them ($\chi^2= 4.568, p < .05$). Divine comment response type is the category in which the highest significant difference was observed ($\chi^2= 13.938, p < .05$).

4. Discussion

This study was a cross-cultural investigation into the Persian and English condolence responses. The results showed that there are some discrepancies among Persian and English condolence response types. Unlike most speech act studies, this paper used movies as the main source of compiling the corpus. Movies can be utilized to provide researchers with a good pile of authentic data with little reactivity effect.

The first question of this study dealt with the differences between Persian condolence response types. The findings revealed that Persian speakers used divine comment, token of appreciation, and comment on the deceased more than the other response types. Iranians are among those cultures which are highly dependent on tradition. The findings of this study are in line with Persians' traditional culture since most Persian speakers

referred to God in their responses. Traditional societies try to be more pluralistic and dependent. In the case of Persian speakers, God is one of the sources which can contribute to this pluralistic feature. The pluralistic orientation was proposed by Wirth (1945). One of the key features of pluralistic orientation is the assimilation between individuals. Persian speakers have a high assimilative orientation in their condolence responses. Individuals mostly respond in a way that shows their strong bond to cultural conventions and through sticking to these cultural conventions they tend to increase the unity between the condoler and themselves—to be as influential as possible.

With regard to the second question of this study which took into account the differences among English condolence response types, it was revealed that English speakers used comment on the deceased, expressing feeling, divine comment, and token of appreciation more than the other response types. English speakers represent a particularistic orientation in their response types in which transmitting of the self and the personal attitudes take outmost importance. Moreover, English speakers represent a ‘secessionist’ society, to use Wirth’s (1945) word, in which ‘I’ and the ‘self’ are emphasized. Some authors have commented on this transmitting feature. As it is postulated by Rosenblatt (1997, p. 41):

A standard way of dealing in the West with grief is to talk. Therapists, nurses, clergy, etc., ask the bereaved to talk and offer them listening and talk. Talk about a death, one’s feelings, or one’s past relationship with the deceased is appropriate for some people from some cultures.

Finally, the third question of this study investigated the significant of differences among Persian and English condolence response types. Table 5 revealed that Persian and English speakers are significantly different in their condolence response types except for token of appreciation and topic avoidance. It shows two features of Persian and English cultures regarding condolence response types. Firstly, both cultures use appreciation comments frequently as a way of gratitude, although Persian speakers used more appreciation responses. Appreciation responses are readily accessible for the bereaved which need little psychological pressure to verbalize. At the times of high psychological pressure, the bereaved, having lost a beloved, is not so ready mentally to prepare more sophisticated response types such as topic avoidance or self-blame statements. Therefore, a comment such as ‘thank you’ would be both sufficient and polite. Thus, there was not a significant difference between the two cultures. In other words, appreciation may not be culture-based. Secondly, topic avoidance was employed non-significantly by the two cultures which represent that Persian and English speakers use topic avoidance less frequently.

Another point which can distinguish between Persian and English societies is the orientation. As Amersfoort (1978) differentiated between *universalistic subordinates* vs. *concentrated subordinates* societies, with regard to the results of this study, it can be concluded that Persian speakers tend to be more universalistic and English speakers are more concentrated. Amersfoort pointed out that universalistic subordinates aim at participation in society and they demand equality. Persian speakers mostly referred to God, appreciated, or referred to the deceased in their response types which imply that Iranians take into account common grounds (e.g., God), hearers’ feeling (thanking), and mutual involvement (comment on the deceased). Therefore, it can be deduced that Persian speakers represent a universalistic subordinate society. On the other hand, in concentrated societies, individuals try to see the world with their own particularistic value system in which their own feeling and thoughts are of paramount importance. In this orientation, the condoler is placed at the lower levels of attention and transmitting feeling and experiences come to forefront. In the case of English speakers, they used comment on the deceased and expressing feeling as the most frequent response types. Both of these response types originate from Western concern for particularistic attitudes in which the self and transmitting of this self is of key importance.

Kagitcibasi (1990, 1996) has distinguished between a relational self and a separated self. Persian speakers represent a relational self which in turn shows the collectivist feature of Iranian culture. There have been studies that have shown that most Eastern societies are collectivist in nature (Berry & Wilde, 1972; Fontaine, 1999;

Hofstede, 1980). On the other hand, English speakers represent a separated self. The results of this study showed that most English speakers used responses which mostly put the speaker at the focus of attention. For instance, sharing feeling and expressing sorrow are the responses in which pronoun 'I' and the possessive adjective 'my' are mostly used.

Moreover, the results of this study revealed that the major amount of condolence responses in Persian corpus was related to utterances that included the hearer or referred to God as one of the sources of unity in Islamic countries. Divine comments and tokens of appreciation are two responses which are mostly employed by Persian speakers. In collectivist societies, there is a strong bond to tradition. Persian speakers, with most of the time referring to God-related comments, try to increase their connection with the people around since spiritual comments are common themes for most Iranians. 'I' is something personal but 'God' is something which implies mutual connection. In Eastern societies, individuals try to represent themselves as being part of the 'whole' (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This concept forces the speaker to relate to others in a way the society accept—a feature of traditional societies. Every individual is a social unit, part of a puzzle. Therefore, in independent societies (English speakers), individuality and self-expression are valued while in interdependent societies (Persian speakers), belonging and common grounds are emphasized.

5. Conclusion

This article aimed at investigating condolence response types among Persian and English speakers. The results showed that Persian and English speakers are significantly different in their condolence response types except for token of appreciation and topic avoidance. The findings also revealed that cultural factors are going to alter how speakers perform specific speech acts such as condolence. In the other words, in Eastern societies an emphasis is on collectivism and traditional way of behaving but in Western culture there is a tendency toward secularism and individualism. In the end, we believe that this study can be replicated in other settings to confirm the findings of the study. Moreover, it will be helpful to triangulate condolence speech act through other instruments such as discourse completion tasks. In addition, we can examine condolence responses among EFL learners.

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