Refusing ostensible offers and invitations in Persian

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Abstract: This study explores a specific kind of refusals to ostensible offers and invitations in Persian language. The offer-refusal and invitation-refusal sequences, forming part of ritual politeness system in Persian known as *taarof* are gathered through ethnographic approach to communication. The refusal pairs of the sequences are analyzed from the perspective of speech act theory. The results have implications for intercultural communication and speech act theory.

Keyword: Persian, speech act, refusals, ostensible act

1. Introduction

Some speech acts in Persian include both sincere and insincere acts. Of such acts are offers (Koutlaki, 2009) and invitations (Eslami, 2005; Nodoushan, 2006). This paper explores the ways Iranian speakers of Persian refuse these acts. Ostensible or simply insincere acts are defined as the acts by which speakers do not have commitment to their propositional content (Pinto, 2011). Such acts are realized by Persian speakers insincerely (ostensibly) to abide by the norms of ritual politeness, which is glossed as '*taarof*' (Sharifian, 2007; Koutlaki, 2009; Beeman, 1976). Refusals to these acts are also part of the convention of *taarof*. With the exception of Koutlaki (2009), no study to date has examined this specific kind of refusals in Persian.

2. Taarof in Persian

'*Taarof*' has been addressed as a backbone of Persian politeness system (Don and Izadi, 2011; Koutlaki, 2009; Sharifian, 2007; Beeman, 1976) and seems to be dominant in a majority of interactions between Iranians in different settings. The meaning and the concept of '*taarof*' is broad and multidimensional. Functionally, ostensible and genuine invitations, ostensible and genuine repetitive offerings , a particular kind of refusal rejoinder to an act of offer and invitation along with expression of thanks, and let the companion go ahead as a kind of respect are all encompassed in the functional meaning of '*taarof*' (Koutlaki, 2009). Koutlaki (2009) shows that refusals to insincere offers are not only not face threatening, as claimed by Brown and Levinson (1987), but also face saving. The offers and refusals are repeatedly cycled in several turns in the interactions to end up with a resolution.

3. Data

The study draws upon ethnographic approach to communication with the data fieldnoted by the researchers. They were vigilant every time and everywhere to fieldnote any refusals to ostensible offers and invitations they heard. Upon hearing a refusal, they did their best to take notes of that refusal as well as its initiating act. Then, they asked the refuser and the refusee for their demographic information and permission to use the noted refusal for a research purpose. The refusals were mainly gathered in family settings, workplaces and taxis. The data are analyzed qualitatively.

4. Analysis

25 sequences of invitation-refusals and 30 sequences of offer-refusals were analyzed. The analysis shows that Iranians frequently expresses thanks and gratitude to refuse ostensible offers and invitations. Also, it is clear from the analysis that the offer-refusals and invitation refusals are cycled in several turns so that a resolution ensues. Generally, four strategies were very common in the refusals to the ostensible acts of offers and invitations. They are gratitude, reason, returning the act and showing consideration for the speaker's comfort. In the majority of cases, a combination of different strategies is employed to refuse an act. In the following example, the refusal act comprises several strategies. The interaction is between two male speakers in their 30s, and was noted in a university campus. The two interactants are two colleagues who have ongoing family relationship with each other.

*S1: Jom'e bache ha ro Vardar biayd khuneye ma (*pick up the family and come to our house on Friday)

S2: mersi lotf darin (thanks, it's a kind of you)

S1: be khoda, taarof nemikonam (by God, I'm not doing *taarof*: I'm serious)

S2: ghorbane to, mozahem nemishim, ye meghdari karham daram (your sacrifice, I won't bother you, I've got some business too.

S1: be har hal ma dar khedmatim (any way, I'm at your service)

S1 initiates the invitation very informally, which indexes close relationship with S2. S2 first refuses using a conventional strategy of expressing gratitude *(mersi).* Then S1 insists on his invitation by saying that he is serious and not inviting simply to comply with the ritual norm of *taarof.* In the next turn, S2 has to provide a more forceful refusal, so he provides reason (I've got some business too) and expression of *mozahem nemisham*, meaning I won't bother you. This shows S2's concern about S1's comfort and privacy. S1 concludes by expressing his willingness to receive S2 anytime he wishes.

Although S1 explicitly states that he is serious in his invitations, these sequences are glossed as insincere invitations and refusals. Native speakers of Persian well know that the wordings of this invitation are not enough to be considered a sincere invitation. S2 uses a combination of strategies in different turns to refuse this invitation, knowing that it should not be taken as real.

5.   Conclusion

The study examined refusals to the acts of offers and invitations which are taken as ostensible in Persian language. The findings can highlight a very important fact that nonnative speakers of Persian must be aware of these ostensible acts in Persian while communicating with Persian speakers. More studies may want to explore this phenomenon.

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