

A CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF SPEECH ACTS OF GREETING IN TWO PERSIAN AND ENGLISH SOAP OPERAS WITH REGARD TO THE LEVEL OF FORMALITY, STRUCTURE AND FREQUENCY

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ABSTRACT

Many people who communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries have experienced communication breakdowns with interlocutors who are from different first language backgrounds. Sociolinguists recognize that such intercultural miscommunications are partly due to different value systems that underlie each speaker's cultural background. In fact, different value systems are reflected in speech acts. This study attempted to explore the structure, formality level and the frequency of the greeting speech acts in two Persian and English soap operas in a contrastive way in order to find out probable differences in this particular type of speech acts. Searl's (1979) classification of speech acts was applied to accomplish the purpose of the study. The study focused on the interactions among the characters and those interactions containing the speech acts under discussion were transcribed. In the end, the results were contrasted and the findings revealed that some significant differences exist in a way that speech acts of greeting are realized in two Persian and English soap operas in terms of the structure, formality and frequency. The findings of this survey can provide some insights into the importance of teaching culture as well as making learners aware of the functional roles of a language. Since culture, people and the history and their undeniable effects cannot be secluded from language, the maximum effort and perseverance must be invested while teaching them.

KEYWORDS: Speech Acts, Value Systems, Social Interactions, Teaching

INTRODUCTION

Modern linguistics has been referred to the study of language as a system of human communication. A main observation is that language can be used not only to describe the reality but also to change the existing reality. In simple words it can be asserted to speak is to act. Linguistic acts that intend to influence the reality are commonly called speech acts. As functional units, speech acts play an important role in effective communication. Having been the basic ingredients of pragmatics, the principles of speech act theory provide an account of how some apparently formally unconnected utterances go together in conversational discourse to form a coherent sequence. However, the effects of different factors such as cultural norms, situation of speech, linguistic context of an utterance and the role relationship between participants in interpreting an utterance should not be underestimated.

Orthodox speech act theory suggests that all speech acts, in any language anywhere in the world, fall into five categories: *Assertives*, *Directives*, *Commissives*, *Expressives* and *Declarations* (Searle, 1979, as cited in Schiffrin, 1994). This Searle's (1979) classification of speech acts is the basis for analyzing the data in this study. Speaking to others is a

social activity. Individuals learn the skills necessary for everyday life by virtue of their membership in a particular society. The use of language is so closely and uniquely tied to the cultures and often rules of speaking vary across languages.

People use language to accomplish such functions as greeting, apologizing, drawing attention, forgiving, etc. These functions, basically, are speech acts that would manifest themselves as speech events in a particular discourse environment that is a real life instantiation of that speech act. It has been generally observed that EFL learners in most situations tend to translate these speech acts (in their real-life manifestations) from their first language (e.g., Persian) to the target language (e.g., English). Such expressions may create pragmatic failure in communication with native speakers of English. So, an understanding of speech acts as they are realized in the English language contributes a lot in achieving communicative competence in the target language.

This study is an attempt to contrast the particular speech acts in two Persian and English soap operas with regard to the level of formality, structure and frequency to find out the probable differences.

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, this area has been an under-researched area of studies; so, there is room for further research and analysis in this regard.

As Woods (2006) points out, it is a fundamental principle that language is more than just sounds, words and sentences. In fact, when we speak or write, not only do we say something, but we also do something and not merely in the trivial sense that speaking and writing involve physical actions or movements. Furthermore, in using language, we intend to convey particular meanings, and our utterances have a certain force that has consequential effects on our addressee(s). As a result getting learners, especially EFL learners, more familiar with the functional and applied aspects of the language and helping them out express their intended meanings via their utterances will develop their communicative competence which is a significant factor for effective communication.

As it is clear, language is a means of communication. People use language to accomplish such functions as ordering, promising, arguing, complimenting and so on. However, any communicative function needs to be carried out within a context, which may either be transactional or social. Social context focuses on sociolinguistic aspect of language and according to Levinson (1984), interpersonal context should be studied in sub-disciplines such as pragmatics, conversational analysis and discourse analysis. Levinson (1984, p. 24) holds that "pragmatics refers to the study of the ability of language users to pair sentences with the contexts in which they would be appropriate".

Also, as stated by Hatch (1994), Levinson asserts that pragmatic meaning is that which comes from the context rather than from syntax and semantics. Pragmatics can be defined as "The study of language use, or the study of linguistic phenomena from the point of view of their usage properties and processes" (Verschueren et al., 2003, p. 112).

DIFFERENT KINDS OF MEANING

It seems necessary to make a categorization of different kinds of meaning:

- **Word Meaning or Lexical Meaning**

Lexis consists of *content words* and *function words*. In terms of lexical meaning, lexemes have different kinds of relationship with each other, called as paradigmatic relationship as homonymy, polysemy, synonymy, etc. Content words are words which refer to a thing, quality, state, or action. These words have meaning (lexical meaning) when they are used

alone. Content words are mainly nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. Content words convey information about the feelings of language users. But, function words are words which have little meaning on their own, but show grammatical relationships in and between sentences (grammatical meaning). Conjunctions, prepositions and articles are function words. Function words are also called *form words*, *empty words*, *functors*, *grammatical words*, *structural word*, and *structure words*. Content words are also called *full words*, *lexical words*. The main focus of traditional semantics was on word meaning while modern semantics focuses on sentence meaning (Pomerantz, 1984).

- **Sentence Meaning Vs. Utterance Meaning**

In simple words, we can say utterance meaning has sentence meaning in itself, or utterance meaning includes it. As it is known, by sentence meaning we mean the meaning which derives from the linguistic elements contained in the sentence, divorced from its (social) context. However, by utterance meaning we mean the meaning which is materialized through an interaction of the linguistic and extra linguistic factors.

- **Prosodic Meaning**

Crystal (1987) defines prosodic meaning as: “The way a sentence is said, using the prosody of language, can radically alter the meaning. Any marked change in emphasis, for example, can lead to a sentence being interpreted in a fresh light” (p. 107). The prosody informs us of what information in the sentence can be taken for granted (is given) and what is of special significance (is new).

- **Grammatical Meaning**

It is a kind of meaning which shows grammatical relationship in and between sentences. A sentence such as: *Mary bought a purse yesterday*, consists of subject as an *actor* performing an *action* on a *goal* of a certain *time*, according to case grammar.

- **Pragmatic Meaning**

As Yule (1996) states, pragmatic meaning is the speaker meaning as it is distinct from word or sentence meaning. Widdowson (2007) puts it in another term and defines it as what language users make of language use, i.e., what a first person means by a text and what a text means to a second person. He further mentions that the ability to understand another speaker’s intended meaning is called pragmatic meaning. Making sense out of the pragmatic meaning, depends not only on the linguistic knowledge (e.g., grammar, lexicon etc.) of the speaker and listener, but also on the context of the utterance, knowledge about the status of those involved, the inferred intent of the speaker, and so on.

- **Social Meaning**

This kind of meaning is in relation with language use for identifying certain social identity of speakers, social roles and social relation.

- **Propositional Meaning**

It is widely used in philosophy, linguistics and semantics. The proposition is a semantic unit which may be true or false and it has a declarative form. In speech act theory it is contrasted with illocutionary meaning.

- **Semantics**

As a simple definition provided by Lakoff (1971, p.87) “semantics is the scientific and philosophical study of meaning”. It deals with the meaning relationships that exist between linguistic forms. Linguists today study three levels of language: the *phonetic*, the *syntactic*, i.e., grammatical combinations of words and *semantic* levels as well as the social aspects in verbal interactions (Lakoff, 1971).

- **Pragmatics**

As Yule (1985) claims in many ways, pragmatics is the study of invisible meaning, or how we recognize what is meant even when it is not actually said or written. In order for that to happen, speakers and writers must be able to depend on a lot of shared assumptions and expectations. Furthermore, Levinson (1983, p. 21) states that: “Pragmatics is the study of the relations between language and context that are basic to an account of language understanding”.

Speech Act Theory

The speech act theory concerns the functions of language. Also, as stated by Hatch (1992), philosophers like Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) have shown that it is possible to classify utterances into a very small set of functions, called acts. Speech act theory originates from Austin’s (1962) observations that while sentences can be used to report states of affairs, the utterances of some sentences in specified circumstances must be treated as the performance of an act. According to Verschueren (1999), Austin made a distinction between constative and performative utterances. In this dichotomy, constatives, such as *we went down to Como* are utterances which can be evaluated along a dimension of truth. Performatives, on the other hand, are utterances, such as *I promise to go to Como* in which something is done which cannot be said to be true or false, but which can be evaluated along a dimension of *felicity*. Cook (1989) maintains that felicity conditions are conditions that must be fulfilled so that words function as acts. As stated by Coulthard (1985) later, instead of claiming two classes of utterances, Austin asserted that in saying anything, one is performing some kind of act having demonstrated that all utterances are performatives. Austin concluded that in issuing an utterance a speaker performs three acts simultaneously: a locutionary act which is the act of saying or as Cook (1989) discusses the formal meaning of the words is the locution; an illocutionary act which is an act performed in saying something, and a perlocutionary act which is the act performed by or as a result of saying.

Also, as stated by Verschueren (1999, p. 24) orthodox speech act theory suggests that all speech acts, in any language in any part of the world fall into five categories:

- **Assertive:** expressing a belief, making words fit the world and communicating the speaker to the truth of what is asserted (e.g., statements such as *We went down to Como*).
- **Directive:** expressing a wish making the world fit the words, and counting as an attempt to get the hearer to do something.(e.g., requests, such as *Please, go down to Como with me*, or orders, such as *Go down to Como tomorrow!*)
- **Commissive:** expressing an intention, making the world fit the words and counting as a commitment for the speaker to engage in a future course of action. (e.g., promises, such as *I promise to go to Como*, or offers such as *We offer you the job of official tourist guide for the city of Como.*)

- **Expressive:** expressing a variety of psychological states, having no direction of fit between words and world, and simply counting as an expression of a psychological state. (e.g., apologies, such as *I'm terribly sorry*, or thanks such as *We greatly appreciate what you did for us*.)
- **Declaration:** not expressing any psychological state, making both the words fit the world and the world fit the words, and the point of which is to bring about a change in institutional reality. (e.g., baptizing, abdicating, and declaring war).

Aside from these classifications, there are a number of studies which approach speech acts through variety of different aspects. Nastri, Pena and Hancock (2006) investigated the extent to which communicative goals are reflected in the language structure of away messages, by examining the speech acts performed through the production of 483 away messages crafted by 44 participants. The messages were also analyzed for the use of non-standard orthography and humor. The results showed that the messages were constructed primarily with assertives, followed by expressives and commissives, but rarely with directives, confirming that away messages tend to reflect both informational and entertainment goals. Non-standard orthography and humor were also common, although experienced participants used fewer non-standard forms than less experienced participants. These findings are discussed in terms of computer-mediated discourse and online.

Also, Akram (2008) conducted a contrastive study of speech acts in Urdu and English. His aim was to analyze Urdu and English languages from sociolinguistic and socio-pragmatic perspectives. The results revealed some significant contrasts in the speech acts of English and Urdu in terms of the range, gender, structure, politeness and formality level. The most important finding was the different level of politeness in both languages. English language seemed much more polite in this regard. Urdu was less polite because most of the speech acts seemed to be direct, abrupt and blunt. Regarding the gender there was seen no particular and significant difference in two languages. However, there were some significant differences in terms of the structure of the speech acts in two Urdu and English languages.

Another similar study regarding speech acts was conducted by Hou-xiang and Yue (2010) using discourse completion tasks, to investigate gender differences between Chinese and American college students and within each group in realization patterns and implement strategies of threats. Chi-square tests indicated that there were no significant differences between genders within each group in both aspects, and between male subjects from each country in implement strategies. However, the tests demonstrated that differences between the same or mixed genders from two countries reached significant level.

Farnia, Buchheit, and binti Salim (2010) also conducted a cross-cultural contrastive pragmatic study of the speech act of complaint between American native speakers of English and Malaysian native speakers of Malay. Data were analyzed using Rinnert and Nogami's (2006) taxonomy of complaint, examining the main components of complaints, level of directness, and amount of mitigation used in American and Malaysian respondents. The findings revealed that American and Malay respondents showed significantly different behaviors to express complaints in the research situations.

To sum up, the present study is an attempt to investigate the structure, formality level and the frequency of speech acts of greeting in two Persian and English soap operas in a contrastive way in order to find out the probable differences in them. Searl's classification of speech acts (1979) is applied to accomplish the purpose of this study. The study focuses on

the interactions among the characters and those interactions which contain the speech acts under discussion are transcribed. In the end, the results are contrasted.

This study addresses the following research questions and hypotheses:

- Are speech acts of greeting realized differently in terms of the level of formality in two Persian "همسایه ها" and English "Desperate Housewives" soap operas?
- Are speech acts of greeting realized differently in terms of the level of structure in two Persian "همسایه ها" and English "Desperate Housewives" soap operas?
- Are speech act of greeting realized differently in terms of the level of frequency in two Persian "همسایه ها" and English "Desperate Housewives" soap operas?

Based on the above-mentioned research questions and in order to find the differences (if any) between the considered speech acts in two Persian and English soap operas in terms of the level of formality, structure and frequency, the null hypotheses can be formulated as the followings:

H01: There is no significant difference in speech act of greeting in two Persian "همسایه ها" and English "Desperate Housewives" soap operas with regard to the structure.

H02: There is no significant difference in speech act of greeting in two Persian "همسایه ها" and English "Desperate Housewives" soap operas with regard to the frequency.

H03: There is no significant difference in speech act of greeting in two Persian "همسایه ها" and English "Desperate Housewives" soap operas with regard to the level of formality.

METHODS

Design

The design of this study was descriptive and contrastive. Since it was important that the soap operas analyzed in this study be comparable, an effort was made to select the soap operas which according to the knowledge of the researchers, were on general topics and accordingly could be treated as being similar in some respects. That is, regarding the genre it will not be far-fetched to categorize two soap operas as being social. And in terms of language, again it can be claimed that the language used in both English and Persian corpus was the same as unmarked variety of language which is comprehensible for ordinary Iranian and English audiences. In order to accomplish the purpose of the study, which was identifying probable differences between the use of speech acts of greeting in two Persian "همسایه ها" and English "Desperate Housewives" soap operas in terms of the level of formality, structure and frequency, Searle's classification of speech acts (1979) was applied. The classification includes: Representatives (e.g., asserting), Directives (e.g., requesting), Commissive (e.g., promising), Expressives (e.g., thanking), and Declarations (e.g., appointing) (Searle, 1979, as cited in Schiffrin, 1994). The study has focused on the interactions among the characters, and those interactions containing the speech acts under discussion have been transcribed for further analysis. The unit of analysis in this study is an *Utterance* which according to Verschueren (1999) is defined as "any stretch of language, no matter how long or short and no matter how many voices it may contain" (p. 115).

Examples range from one-word sentences, over speech acts constituting a turn in a conversation, to multi-volume novels. Finally, the results were contrasted to find out if there were any significant differences.

Data

The data was collected through transcribing the conversations containing the speech acts under analysis in twelve episodes of Persian soap opera " همسایه ها " by Hossein Pakdel each about 56 minutes and fifteen episodes of English soap opera "Desperate Housewives" by Marc Cherry each about 45 minutes. Then the obtained data was classified based on Searle's classification of speech acts (1979).

Data Analysis Procedures

To analyze the data obtained from the transcribed scripts, chi-square measure was applied. Chi-square analysis is usually applied when the data consists of frequencies. Consequently, in order to find out if there was any significant difference between the use of previously mentioned speech act in two English and Persian soap operas in terms of structure, formality and frequency, chi-square tests as appropriate nonparametric statistical tests were administered.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

At first, it should be mentioned that based on Searle's classification (1979), the under discussion speech act of greeting is a kind of *Expressives*. The following examples show some *Expressives* taken from English and Persian data.

Some samples of English scripts:

Hey what's up? (sentence)

It's nice to finally meet both of you in person (sentence)

Hey (word)

Hi (word)

Hey Dave (phrase)

Hey Buddy (phrase)

Welcome to my home (idiom)

Some samples of Persian scripts:

سلامیکم حالتون چطوره؟(جمله)

خوش آمدین(جمله)

سلام(کلمه)

سلامیکم(کلمه)

آقا سلامیکم(عبارت)

سلام عزیزم(عبارت)

TABLE 1 clearly illustrates the structural level (i.e. word, phrase, sentence, and idiom) of the speech acts of Greeting in a contrastive form in both English and Persian corpus.

Table 1: A Contrastive View of Structural Level of the Speech Acts of Greeting in Persian and English Corpus

Structure	Greeting	
	Persian	English
word	57.2%	47.9%
phrase	28.9%	43.8%
sentence	13.8%	6.9%
idiom	0	1.4%

According to Table (1) and considering the classification of Searle (1979) it appears that the percentage of the use of Expressives as words in Persian data is higher than that of English. With respect to phrases the percentage of the use of Expressives in English data is higher than that of Persian. With respect to sentences the percentage of the use of Expressives in Persian data is higher than that of English and regarding the idioms, the percentage of the use of Expressives in English data is higher than that of Persian. Generally, it means that Iranians used more sentences and words compared to Americans, while Americans used more idioms and phrases than Iranians in greeting someone.

Table 2: The Results of Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	p
	11.462(a)	3	.009
X²			

As it is indicated in Table 2 the p-value is lower than the significance level in this study (0.05). Thus there is seen a significant difference in speech act of 'greeting' in two Persian and English soap operas in terms of the structural level.

It means that, based on the obtained results, the first null hypothesis saying that: there is no significant difference in speech acts of greeting in two Persian and English soap operas in terms of the structure, was rejected.

To test the second null hypothesis saying that: there is no significant difference in speech acts of greeting in two Persian and English soap operas in terms of the frequency, the chi-square test was applied.

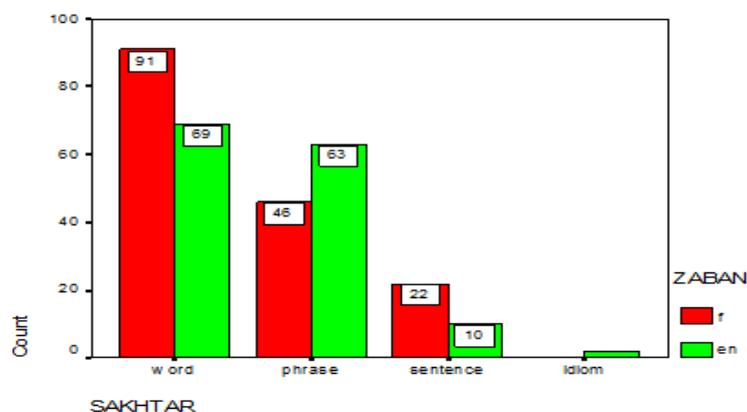


Figure 1: A Contrastive View of Frequencies of the Speech Acts of Greeting as Words, Phrases, Sentences and Idioms in Persian and English Corpus

According to figure (1), the frequency of speech act of (*Greeting*) in the studied Persian soap opera is as follows: 91 times in the form of a word, 46 times in the form of a phrase, 22 times in the form of a sentence and no frequency in the form of an idiom is seen. Contrastively the frequency of speech act of (*Greeting*) in the English soap opera is: 69 times in the form of a word, 63 times in the form of a phrase, 10 times in the form of a sentence and 2 times in the form of an idiom.

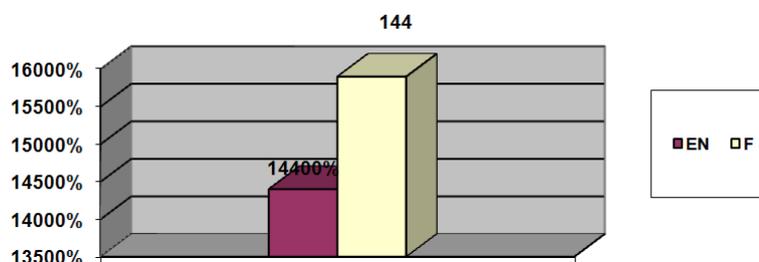


Figure 2: A Contrastive View of Frequencies of the Speech Acts of Greeting as a Whole in Persian and English Corpus

As it appears in Figure (2) in total, Iranians in comparison to Americans used more utterances in greeting someone. As a result there is seen a significant difference in speech act of ‘greeting’ in two Persian and English soap operas in terms of the frequency.

So, based on the obtained results the second null hypothesis saying that: there is no significant difference in speech acts of ‘greeting’ in two Persian and English soap operas in terms of the frequency was rejected.

To test the third null hypothesis saying that: there is no significant difference in speech acts of greeting in two Persian and English soap operas in terms of the formality, a chi-square test was applied.

The following examples were taken from English and Persian data.

Some samples of English scripts:

Hey (informal)

Hey mom (informal)

Hey guys (informal)

Hello Mrs. Solis (formal)

Morning ladies (formal)

Some samples of Persian scripts:

آقا سلام عرض شد رسمی

سلام خانم خوش آمدید رسمی

سلام عرض کردم رسمی

سلام حسن جان غیررسمی

سلام بابایی غیررسمی

سلام عزیزم غیررسمی

According to Table (3) it could be argued that the percentage of the use of formal expressions regarding the particular speech act (greeting) in Persian data is higher than that of English. And the percentage of the use of informal expressions in English data is higher than that of Persian.

Table 3: A Contrastive View of the Formality Level of the Speech Acts of Greeting in Persian and English Corpus

Formality Level	Greeting	
	Persian	English
formal	49.0%	20.9%
informal	51.0%	79.1%

As it is indicated in Table 4 the p-value is lower than the significance level in this study (0.05). Thus there is seen a significant difference in speech act of 'greeting' in two Persian and English soap operas in terms of the formality level.

Table 4: The Results of Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	p
	31.999(b)	1	.000
X²			

So, based on the obtained results, the third null hypothesis saying that: there is no significant difference in speech acts of greeting in two Persian and English soap operas in terms of the formality was rejected.

CONCLUSIONS

As to the analysis of the speech acts of "greeting the inclination is to use shorter utterances i.e. *words* rather than phrases, sentences or idioms. In this case it is assumed that the speaker is cleverly aware of being sufficiently informative uttering just a single word in greeting someone, or saying hello. Furthermore, the speaker is obliged to adhere to the quantity maxim of Gricean principles for not making his/her contribution more informative than is required. As a result the very choice of this grammatical structure i.e. *word* is justified.

Also, regarding the speech acts of "greeting" *idioms* were applied as the least favorite grammatical structures. Taking into account the manner maxim of Gricean principles, one could claim that to avoid ambiguity and unnecessary prolixity that might have happened in the case of inappropriate application of idioms, both Americans and Iranians preferred using them as the least favorite structure.

With respect to the formality, one of the most striking features of the formality chart is that the percentage of the use of formal expressions regarding the Persian data outstripped those of English. It is assumed that the tendency to use more formal expressions by Iranians might originate from applying particular strategies such as negative politeness strategies in their daily conversations. It means that, based on the cultural conventions and shared values of the community a face-saving act is more commonly preferred among Iranians. To put it in another words, Iranians tend to use a type of

expressions that are less direct, more polite, potentially less clear, longer, and with more complex structures which means that the speakers are making a greater effort, in terms of concern for face, i.e., politeness, than are needed simply to transfer the basic message across efficiently. It is thought that there is something cultural that pushes Iranians forward to be more polite, courteous and occasionally loquacious than is required in social talks. Generally, Iranians are inclined to overstate and the concept of “Taarof” might be seen relevant here. By contrast, Americans tend to use a type of positive politeness strategies that emphasize closeness between the speaker and the hearer, and it can be considered as kind of solidarity strategies. Linguistically speaking, such strategies include communicating personal information, frequent use of nicknames and even sometimes abusive terms and shared dialect or slang expressions; hence, leading to using less formal language. Basically, it seems that in countries in which the loyalty to traditional roots and old cultural conventions and backgrounds are valued (like Iran), people are more concerned about issues like social distancing, non-encroachment communication, using apologetic language, applying hedging, being indirect and generally being more polite. On the other hand, in more modern and developed countries like America people seem to be less worried about politeness matters, or maybe their definition of a polite behavior might be something different. To Americans, the primary concern could be showing solidarity, using first names and indicating common interest etc. As a result, they would like to adhere more to the cooperative maxims than Iranians.

The findings of this survey can provide some insights into the importance of teaching culture as well as making EFL learners aware of the functional roles of language. Since, it has been observed that Iranian EFL learners in most situations tend to translate speech acts from their first language (Persian) to the target language (English), such expressions may create pragmatic failure in communication with native speakers of English; hence, an understanding of speech acts as they are realized accurately in English language will contribute a lot in achieving communicative competence in the target language.

One important point is that communicative competence, certainly, does not mean just the linguistic competence of the local or target language alone, but the socio-cultural implications are also there. Furthermore, from the sociolinguistic point of view, the findings show that there is an absolute need to instruct EFL learners the particular foreign language norms and rules in order to make them aware of social communication strategies in foreign contexts. It means that, raising the awareness of cultural values and conventions and making EFL learners more familiar with the acceptable social behavior or the etiquette of the foreign discourse community have got to be the central part of the EFL pedagogy and education.

Furthermore, since culture, people, and the history and their undeniable effects cannot be secluded from language, the maximum effort and perseverance must be invested while teaching a foreign language. It should also be mentioned that the findings of this study, will encourage material developers and teachers to consider not just the cultural differences existed in two languages in teaching and designing syllabi, but also pay attention to EFL learners' common mistakes resulted from inappropriate translation of the speech acts from their first language (Persian) to the target language (English).

Finally, the study at hand could be further developed by investigating other communicative speech acts such as fear, worry, requesting, promising, etc. By the thorough examination of these speech acts and also adding new facets such as gender, acceptability and politeness level, new findings and promising results could be obtained. In addition, for those

researchers who are interested in comparing languages and focusing on the areas of overlapping, this study can provide a great insight into the various functions of a language. As a result, the need for conducting more research and studies seems undeniable.

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