

# Iranian Wedding Invitations in the Shifting Sands of Time

*Elham Sadri*

Sheikhbahaee University, elhamsadri@shbu.ac.ir

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## **Abstract**

As a distinct socially constructed genre, wedding invitations (WIs) offer a fruitful site for investigating how two areas of genre knowledge (i.e., form and content) change over time under the influence of sociocultural forces. Through the examination of 100 Iranian WIs dating from 1970s to the present time, the study investigated the trajectories of change through time within the social semiotics framework. Findings revealed that although the generic structures of Iranian WIs have remained the same, their mode contents have undergone remarkable changes across time. These changes are discernable in the nonverbal features of color, size, design, and typography as well as the verbal features including text length, formality, reference terms, and mood. Findings suggest that in today's sociocultural climate of Iran, creativity prevails over conventionalization, informality is favored over formality, and solidarity tends to replace power in the hierarchical dimensions of gender differentials and parental domination.

**Keywords:** Wedding Invitation (WI); Genre Analysis; Hierarchical Culture; Sociocultural Change

## **1. Introduction**

In any country and within any culture, wedding invitations (WIs hereafter) serve as the formal announcement of a marriage and are a significant index and a critical element of wedding rituals. From a scholarly point of view, WIs have been considered as being among what Miller (1984) calls *homely discourses*: Texts of everyday life that are not high-flown or literary and are familiar to everyone. Johns (1997) argues that because WIs, on the one hand, follow specific content and organizations, and, on the other hand, share certain communicative purposes, they should be regarded as "genre exemplars" (p. 38).

In traditional literary studies, genre was a concept used to classify or categorize texts according to their content and formal properties (Bhatia, 1993). However, in 1990s, researchers in rhetoric and linguistic anthropology shifted the attention from texts to discourse practices through which people produce and understand texts (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Bhatia, 2008). Building on the work of

Bakhtin (1986), researchers reconceptualized genres as conventionalized frameworks to which people orient in producing and interpreting discourse. Whereas theories of genre as discourse practice still pay attention to the formal features of discourse, they situate those features in relationship to the functional purposes of the discourse, the situational context in which it is produced, and the wider sociocultural milieu (Günthner & Knoblauch, 1995).

Approaching genres as orienting frameworks for discourse practice draws attention to how genre intersects with social and contextual considerations in any given genre performance. According to Bawarshi and Reiff (2010), a proper understanding of genre reveals the complex regularities underlying communicative action and social situation, and also sheds light on manifold associations of discourse with society, economy, governance and culture. Moreover, if genre is taken as reflective of the ways in which social relations are exercised and social identities are manifested, then intergeneric variations that occur in genre over time would give a window on wider processes of social change, especially major sociocultural shifts in the locus of public sphere. A historical account of genre, thus, brings much evidence to bear on how social relations and collective identities are reproduced and restructured throughout time (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Bateman, 2008).

The present study takes this postulation as its point of departure. Assuming that the particular genre of WIs as a discourse practice is a mirror of sociocultural practices at any point of time, the study seeks to investigate the trajectories of sociocultural change echoed in WIs in the course of time. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Has the Iranian wedding invitations genre undergone changes in terms of form and content over a time period of over four decades?
2. In what ways have the form and content of Iranian wedding invitations genre changed, if at all?

## **2. Literature Review**

Despite its richness and potentiality, WIs genre has not received due scholarly attention. One of the few studies focusing on WIs is that of Al-Ali (2006) who through the lens of genre analysis and critical discourse analysis distinguished certain obligatory and nonobligatory generic components in Jordanian WIs and demonstrated that these generic patterns shape under the influence of religious affiliation and masculine kinship authority.

Taking a pedagogical stance, Clynes and Henry (2004) provided the opportunity for Bruneian students in a tertiary context to study WIs in their L1 to stimulate access to their subconscious knowledge of their own language and culture.

As for the Iranian body of literature, two published articles have investigated Iranian WIs from different perspectives. In one study, Mirzaei and Eslami (2013) first identified the prototypical generic regularities in Iranian WIs and then, drawing on a critical discourse analysis, demonstrated that religious beliefs and sociocultural values such as ethnicity, education, socioeconomic status, profession, and age influence young couples' preference and choice of WIs. In another study, Sharif and Yarmohammadi (2013) adopted Swales' (1990) model of genre analysis to identify and characterize the move structures of WIs and established that the organizational details of Iranian WIs are embedded in the religious beliefs, cultural values, and social norms of the Iranian society. In sum, these studies propose a number of textual moves for WIa genre which could be summarized as follows:

- Opening by God's name
- Bride and groom's names
- Invitation text
- Wedding host's name
- Date, time, reception type, and address

Notwithstanding the informative findings of the previous studies, one very important point seems to have been overlooked. These studies have treated WIs as a textual type, and much attention has been merely given to analyzing the textual features of this genre. However, in addition to the textual features, there are other (even more important) resources that enable WIs to communicate meaning louder and faster than the verbal texts. The style, format, size, color, and typography of WIs are the first things that meet the eyes of the receiver. These are the real indices of a WI that remain in the minds and put across lots of messages in a much more straightforward and effective way than the words inside it can. Therefore, the present study draws on a multimodal analysis which takes a combination of textual and visual modes of meaning-making into account.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

The multimodal analysis of WIs in the current study is based on social semiotics which views meaning-making as a social practice and investigates interactional practices in specific social and cultural circumstances by integrating the use of verbal and nonverbal semiotic modes which result in semiotic products or events (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

The descriptive account of multimodality within the social semiotics framework is created by Halliday (1978) in his systemic functional linguistics (SFL) theory, which provides a model of how the contextual variables of field (what the text treats), tenor (who is communicating), and mode (by what means the message is transmitted) determine the choices in the linguistic system, organized in three

metafunctions of the language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Halliday's thesis is extended to visual and nonverbal realm of communication by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) who establish that, like linguistic structures, visual structures and the visual processes within them are associated with participant roles and with specific circumstances.

In general, a social semiotic approach to multimodality entails the analysis of "socially shaped and culturally given resource for meaning making" (Kress, 2009, p. 54). This means that the codeployed modes, such as language and design, are shaped by both social situation and culture. The organization of verbal and visual content in a layout and the signaling of their interrelations involve semiotic choices that are strongly under the influence of social and cultural norms. But this articulation of enunciative modalities is historically specific and open to historical change (Jewitt, Kress, & Mavers, 2009). Therefore, paying attention to the mechanisms and social conditions under which modalities are transformed is a significant part of researching multimodality in relation to social change. As Fairclough (1992) notes, any change at the collective level is change in the networking of social practices; importantly, it includes change in the relations of recontextualization and genre chains. Based on this, a probe into how social change is realized through and reflected in WIs genre would be an informative endeavor which is the aim of the present study.

#### **4. Method**

##### **4.1 Materials**

The 270 WIs came from the researcher's personal collection. The invitations belonged to couples from the city of Isfahan who were among the researcher's relatives and friends. The couples came from different socioeconomic status, occupation, level of education, approximate age, commitment to religion, adherence to traditions, and so forth. This variability posed a potential threat to generalizability of the findings. Therefore, based on the researcher's acquaintance with the couples' backgrounds, from among all the invitations, only those were singled out that belonged to middle-class couples who aged between 20-35 and were moderate in adherence to religious and traditional norms. This provided a sample of 200 invitations published from 1970 to date. This sample was further divided into two corpora: one dating from 1970 to 1990 and the other from 1990 to present. Then, from among these two corpora, 100 samples (50 from each) were randomly selected which shaped the two groups under analysis: Group A (1970-1990) and Group B (1990-present).

The reason behind choosing the year 1990 as the turning point was that this decade marks a watershed moment in the history of Iran. The Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988 left behind a hard legacy for thousands of families who lost their loved ones

during the war. Also, most people faced hardship and economical challenges during the times of the war. In the beginning of 1990s—a little while after the ceasefire—postwar reconstruction and development started off all over the country and economic situation began to improve. In this thriving climate, the issues that had faded into oblivion in the people’s minds (e.g., throwing elaborate parties and wedding ceremonies) began to come under consideration. As a result, new patterns of social interaction flourished among which were the new norms in marriage ceremonies including sending out WIs.

#### ***4.2 Procedure***

For the multimodal analysis of the WIs within the social semiotics framework, features of form and appearance as well as characteristics pertaining to content were chosen to be analyzed. Formal features were analyzed in terms of color, size, and shape based on Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) grammar of visual design. In addition, typography as a formal feature was analyzed based on Stockl’s (2005) toolkit for typeface analysis.

To investigate the linguistic features of the WIs, the interpersonal metafunction based on tenor was chosen to be analyzed in light of Halliday’s (1978) SFL. The rationale behind choosing tenor was that the study aimed to address the social change throughout time as reflected in the WIs, and because tenor deals with the ways in which people interact with each other and concentrates on social roles and relations, analysis of tenor seemed a good way of examining the shift in social practices. Based on Halliday’s (1985) insights, tenor was analyzed in terms of categories of formality, length of text, referentials (i.e., terms used to refer to God, bride and groom, and wedding ceremony’s hosts), and mood (i.e., whether declarative, imperative, or interrogative).

Through the combined use of qualitative and quantitative data, the analysis was directed toward comparing these features between the two groups to find out which features have changed over time and in what directions these changes have taken place.

## **5. Results**

### ***5.1 Appearance***

As presented in Table 1, the results of the analysis of formal features demonstrate that almost all the WIs in Group A have simple and plain design, are white in color, and are in the form of traditional solid square-shape card and envelope. They have just a few recurrent decorative patterns. Differently, the WIs in Group B have a wide range of different colors, shapes, and forms. The paper used in these invitations varies from plain traditional pages to various graphic designs such as dots, strips, textured, and vellum overlay.

It is interesting to note that contrary to the WIs in Group A that are all white in color, in Group B, a huge variation in color is observed. Although the color white is still prevailing, colors such as brown or purple which were never seen before are extensively employed in recent WIs.

Considerable variation was also noticed in the design and shape of the WIs: Traditional simple solid design which is the dominant form of Group A has lost its popularity and has been replaced by fanciful and ornamental styles, especially scrolls and layered designs. Furthermore, a great number of various creative designs and decorative accents are used in assembling the WIs in Group B, such as colorful ribbons around the top, bottom, or middle of the card; multicolored beads and stones; embossed and thermography features; flowers in different sizes and made of different materials such as paper, china, lace, fabric, wood, and so on. Interestingly, signs such as bells, doves, carriages, hearts, and rings which are extensively used in Group A no longer appear in Group B.

As for the size, the WIs in Group A are typically A5 sized or smaller. In Group B, the WIs are larger in general, varying from A4 sized scrolls to other large sizes:

Table 1. *Formal Features of WIs in Groups A and B*

Mode	Feature	Group A (1970-1990)		Group B (1990-Present)	
		N	%	N	%
Color	white	39	78	21	42
	cream	8	16	5	10
	pink	3	6	5	10
	brown	-	-	11	22
	other	-	-	8	16
Size	A4	-	-	6	12
	A5	5	10	27	54
Shape	smaller than A5	45	90	17	34
	simple solid	46	92	10	20
	multiple fold	4	8	12	24
	scroll	-	-	6	12
	layered	-	-	9	18
Decorative motif*	creative cuts	-	-	12	24
	flowers	24	48	6	12
	hearts	6	12	-	-
	rings	4	8	-	-
	bride & groom	8	16	-	-
	carriage & horses	15	30	-	-
Embellishment**	doves	4	8	-	-
	ribbons	5	10	36	72
	stones & beads	-	-	12	24
	handmade flowers	-	-	28	56
	thermography	-	-	21	42
	other	-	-	9	18

\*Some features are shared (e.g., bride and groom riding in a carriage or birds carrying rings).

\*\*Some features are shared.

## 5.2 *Typography*

This stage of the analysis revealed that the WIs in Group A are embodied in a limited number of classic typefaces. Besides, little variation was observed within a single WI, that is, a very limited number of letter fonts (one or two) are used consistently throughout the text. Conversely, the WIs in Group B enjoy significant variations in typeface and a broad range of fonts are used for different parts of each invitation. Basically, bride and groom's names are set in fancy decorative fonts which are bold in terms of font-weight and relatively large in size in order to draw the viewers' attention. The main body of wedding announcement and invitation text is set in classic fonts which are light in weight and normal in size, reasonably because the body of a formal invitation requires eligible and easy to read fonts. Overall, the typography in the former WIs has a subdued, formal, and serious look, whereas in Group B, thanks to technological advancements, the typographic composition enjoys a more flexible and informal tone.

## 5.3 *Tenor*

### 5.3.1 *Length of text*

Text length was analyzed by determining the number of characters in the string of the invitation text. The text length of the WIs in Group A appears to be much shorter than that of Group B. With the considerably larger page dimensions of the WIs in Group B, it has been possible to include lengthier texts which flow within the entire page.

### 5.3.2 *Degree of formality*

In comparison, the WIs from Group A follow a far more classic and formal style than the WIs in Group B. Generally speaking, the invitation texts in Group A are mainly of two recurrent types: either a classic poem (mostly by Hafiz of Shiraz) or a short piece of literary prose. The WIs in Group B come in a broad range of various kinds of patterns from classic poems to lyrical and rhythmic phrases, modern poem, and colloquial/informal wordings. Table 2 portrays the distribution of these patterns in the two groups:

Table 2. *Formality Degree of the WIs in Groups A and B*

Wedding Invitation	Classic Poem		Literary Prose		Modern Poem		Colloquial/ Informal Wording	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Group A (1970-1990)	28	56	22	44	-	-	-	-
Group B (1990-present)	11	22	10	20	13	26	16	32

### 5.3.3 Mood

The analysis of mood was performed at the clause level to identify the choice of declarative (statement), interrogative (question, offer), and imperative (command). Table 3 summarizes the results of the mood analysis:

Table 3. *Distribution of Mood in the WIs of Groups A and B*

Wedding Invitations	Declarative	Interrogative	Imperative
Group A (1970-1990)	44%	56%	-
Group B (1990-present)	28%	55%	17%

The results show that the prevalent mood in both groups is interrogative which fulfills the purpose of asking questions or making offers. Because the basic function of an invitation is politely requesting the presence of the recipients, the prevalence of interrogative mood is plausible. The declarative mood is also observed in both groups, reasonably because before inviting the recipients, the invitation provides information and makes statements about the ceremony. Some examples of the choice of mood in former WIs (Group A) are as follow:

(1) آغاز زندگی نوین خود را جشن می گیرند. با چهره ی گشاده به پای شما گل میریزیم و انتظار داریم گل روی شما زینت افزای جشن و شادی ما باشد.

[They celebrate the beginning of their new life. With rapturous greetings, we throw flowers at your feet and expect that your honored presence will grace our ceremony.]

(2) در خانه کوچک قلبشان سروری بر کرده اند. خواستاریم که تابش مهر حضور و فروغ نگاهتان به شادی بزمشان بیفزاید.

[They have thrown a party in the small house of their hearts. We request the honor of your presence that will add to their joy.]

(3) فرخنده پیمان همسری خود را جشن می گیرند. چشم انتظاریم که ورودتان را خیر مقدم بگوییم و مقدمتان را گلباران کنیم.

[They celebrate their prosperous union. We look forward to greeting you and throwing flowers at your feet.]

(4) پیوندی ملکوتی می بندند. امید آن داریم که گل وجود شما محفل دوستانه ما را عطر آگین سازد.

[They make a heavenly promise. We hope our amicable ceremony will be fragrant with the scent of your presence.]

What is interesting in the data is that in the WIs of Group A, no choice of imperative mood is observed, but in the WIs of Group B, a number of clauses (17%)



use the imperative mood to invite the guests. In other words, instead of offers or requests, the invitation takes the form of a command. This choice was observed in the WIs with the informal tone. The following examples may clarify this point:

[Don't bring flowers because you are flowers yourselves.  
Don't compliment Azadeh (the bride) because Kaveh (the groom) has already complimented her.  
Don't bring kids because they'll fall asleep.  
Warm up the ceremony because it belongs to you.  
By the way, don't sympathize with Kaveh because the water is under the bridge now!]

(5) گل نیارید چون خودتون گلید  
تعریف آزاده را نکنید چون کاوه از قبل ستایش کرده  
بچه نیارید چون خوابشون می بره  
مجلس را گرم کنید چون از خودتونه  
در ضمن به کاوه دلداری ندید چون آب از سرش  
گذشته

[Swear you to God, get a hurry on and move  
because there is a party  
from near dusk till dawn  
still more, you'll be served, too  
before we forget, let us give the address: ...  
Okay, we'll see you then.]

(6) تو رو خدا پاشین بیان  
واسه یه جشن  
از دم غروب تا دمدمای صبح  
تازه پذیرایی هم میشین  
راستی تا یادمون نرفته بذار آدرسشم بدیم: . . .  
خوب دیگه می بینمتون

[Together, we sing the song of flourishing  
in a garden of aspiration.  
Join us in this chorus of love.]

(7) با هم نغمه ی شکفتن را در باغی از آرزومی سراییم.  
در این همسرایی عاشقانه با ما و همراهمان باشید.

[Remember when we were kids,  
you'd say: "God willing, your wedding!"  
It's time now!  
Please come to our wedding!]

(8) یادتونه بچه بودیم می گفتین  
ایشالا عروسیتون  
حالا وقتشه تشریف بیارین

### 5.3.4 Referentials

Three categories of referentials were recognized in the WI genre, namely terms or phrases used for referring to God, to bride and groom, and to the wedding ceremony's hosts.

### 5.3.4.1 Reference to God

The analysis revealed that both groups of the WIs start with referring to God—a typical religious behavior of Iranians to put themselves in divine will and seek God’s guidance, protection, and support. In this sense, no difference was observed in the linguistic strategies used for referring to God: In both groups, God is referred to in majestic terms and titles which bear absolute sanctity and highlight the power of God as the sole creator and ruler of the universe, the only source of all authority, and the only one who can put love and passion in people’s hearts and bring them together. In addition, in both groups, God is addressed in third-person singular form which is a sign of high respect and reverence. Table 4 provides examples of phrases used to refer to God in both groups of the WIs:

Table 4. *Instances of Referring to God in WIs of Group A and B*

Group A (1970-1990)	Group B (1990-Present)
با تاییدات . . . متعال [With the endorsement of the omnipotent . . .]	به نام آن که آتش عشق را در جانها افروخت [In the name of the one who lit the fire of love in the soul]
به نام خداوند بخشنده مهربان [In the name of God, the compassionate and the merciful]	به نام آن که مروارید عشق را در صدف دلها نهاد [In the name of the one who put the pearl of love in the shell of heart]
به نام خالق عشق [In the name of the creator of love]	به نام یکتا آفریدگار هستی [In the name of the only creator of existence]
به نام پیوند دهنده قلبها [In the name of the connector of hearts]	به نام تنها معمار کاخ عشق [In the name of the only architect of the palace of love]
به نام خداوند مهر آفرین [In the name of the creator of compassion]	به یادش و به یاریش [In his memory and with his assistance]
در پرتو مهر پروردگار [In the light of the creator’s compassion]	به نام نامی عشق [In the acclaimed name of love]

### 5.3.4.2 Bride and groom’s names

In introducing the bride and groom, all the WIs in Group A (100%) follow the recurrent pattern below, where the groom’s name comes in the form of first and last name accompanied by آقای (Mr.) and the bride’s last name accompanied by دوشیزه (Miss.):

*(bride's last name)* و *دوشیزه* و *(groom's first & last name)* آقای

But in almost all of the WIs in Group B (98%), both the bride and the groom are introduced with their first names. This finds explanation in the traditional taboos surrounding public display of Iranian women's names in the past. In former times, naming women by their first name in public was a taboo, and women were addressed by terms other than their first name, such as teknonyms (especially that of their eldest son), kinship terms (especially that of their brothers), or even contempting terms (e.g., *عیال ضعیفه*; Aliakbari & Toni, 2008). Obviously, that traditional taboo has lost its sting today and in recent WIs women and men are identically addressed by their first names.

Another interesting point relates to the order in which the groom and bride's names appear. In the past, the only possible order has been the groom's name first, followed by that of the bride. Today, this conventional order has changed, and in many samples from Group B (33%), the bride's name is mentioned first as a sign of love and respect.

#### 5.3.4.3 *Wedding hosts' names*

In all the WIs in Group A (100 %), at the bottom of the invitation text, the full names of the couples' fathers were mentioned, indicating that they were issuing the invitation and they hosted the wedding ceremony. In many cases (32%), the fathers' names were preceded by the socioreligious titles of Hajj (indicating that they had already made a pilgrimage to Mecca), Karbalaii (a pilgrim of Karbala) or Mashhadi (a pilgrim of Mashhad).

In Group B, this convention was less observed. Statistically speaking, only in less than one fourth of the recent WIs (19%), the fathers' names were mentioned as the hosts and inviters, and in the majority of the WIs, only the surnames of future couples were mentioned, with no preceding titles.

## 6. Discussion

The main focus of this study was to address the trajectories of change in the genre of the WIs across a time period of over 42 years and investigate what these changes reveal about transformations at the broader level of society and culture throughout this time period. From the current findings, it could be concluded that WIs genre has maintained its generic move structure, whereas the components of the moves have undergone vast alterations. Although the recent WIs are still very similar to the old ones in terms of move order and organization, they exhibit a considerable variation in terms of size, color, decoration, typography, and the other formal features, as well as wording, tenor, tone, and language style. This relates to the fact that modes of communication in any given society and at any point of time

are produced by people who continue to develop and use them in response to social and cultural demands (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Royce & Bowcher, 2007). At the level of discourse, relationships among and boundaries between discourse practices in an institution or the wider society are progressively shifted in ways which accord with directions of social change (O'Halloran & Smith, 2011). In this view, the observed changes in WIs genre could be evidence of shifts in certain aspects of sociocultural practices.

First of all, the findings reveal several manifestations of interaction between conventionalization and creativity throughout time in WIs genre. Traditional WIs offer a similar classic look with a simple design, indicating adherence to already established conventions. In contrast, contemporary WIs exhibit strong tendency toward creativity reflected both in the form and language of such WIs. The wide range of forms with many matching motifs and innovative embellishments is evidence for such a tendency. Another piece of evidence is the shift in the choice of the WIs' color. Whereas in the former WIs, a monotone white color was conventionalized to express the message of happiness, in the recent WIs, colors like dark brown and purple never used before have been ushered in the genre and have taken on a new identity and voice. As van Leeuwen (2011) notes, color is a wonderful site to study semiotic change. In the case of WIs, semiotic change of color indicates a rapid shift from a quite traditional and dyed-in-the-wool ethos to an ethos of flexibility and innovation (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002).

The same shift toward more creativity in the WIs genre was observed in typography. The findings demonstrate a progress in complexity and variability in typeface. In the old WIs, no differentiation in fonts or sizes is observed—only plain texts within the same font family are used. Moving to the recent WIs, the content is presented in multiple type fonts in various sizes. In many recent WIs, distinct parts of the page (i.e., the opening phrase, bride and groom's names, invitation text, and address/date of the wedding) are set in different fonts. In Stockl's (2005) terms, typeface in recent WIs seems to be acting like a separate entity conveying impressions in its own right. For instance, it was observed that in the recent WIs, the bride and groom's names are displayed in very large decorative and visually salient letterforms to convey a especially different kind of salience; for poems or literary wordings, the literary feel of calligraphic typeface (e.g., Nastaligh font) is used; address or date are set in plain typeface (e.g., Titr font) to make sure they are transparent, straightforward, and unambiguous. To sum up, it appears that typeface in the old WIs has been conventionalized as just a physical conveyor to store the written language. But in the recent WIs, thanks to technological innovations and digital typography, typeface represents a mode/code in its own right, which not only

adds to the decorative characteristics of the WIs but interacts with all other textual signing modes as well.

Another manifestation of moving toward creativity is the wordings of the invitation texts. The old WIs appear to have followed conventional short texts and prefabricated recurring phrases: Not even a single sample violated this convention. However, the recent WIs seem to exhibit a growing taste for diversity and creativity, especially the emergence of contemporary poetry and casual language is conspicuous.

According to Halliday (1985), the incorporation of the features of spoken interactive mode into written mode reduces the formality and minimizes the distance inherited in the written form. Therefore, the basic tendency in the recent WIs toward the use of colloquial or humorous language in invitation texts is evidence of the second significant form of sociocultural change, that is, the shift from formality toward informality. This seems to be in line with the global trends of language change and moving toward adopting less rigid and formal discourse styles (Wardhaugh, 2006). According to Fairclough (2006, 2013), since the early 1990s, with the advent of a more westernized structure, there has been a shift from formal language use to a more informal discourse in the public sphere across the world. Fairclough (2006) finds this transformation directly linked with the notion of *globalization*, the ongoing process of global change which is defined by Giddens (1990, p. 64) as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.” Thanks to today’s rapid technological advancements, the level of communication technology has reached hitherto unknown height and speed. As a result, the various processes of globalization are more accelerated and occur on multiple levels, connecting far-away cultural territories (Maira, 2004). This diffusion has a predominantly Western design, content, and language which has facilitated the proliferation of Western cultural patterns upon local cultures including dispensing with the formalities and moving toward informal language and lifestyle (Fairclough, 2006).

As Halliday (1985) suggests, informal discourse entails that the interactants are at equal levels of power, and the formality of discourse is an overt display of unequal power. Thus, the discerned shift from formality toward informality entails a third aspect of sociocultural change, that is, the shift from unequal power toward solidarity and equality. This is strongly supported by the results of the analysis of mood. The difference between the two groups in terms of mood indicates how the patterns of power have changed over time. The interrogative/declarative mood of the former WIs is an example of the kind of formality and distance which used to be considered appropriate in the past. But the fact that the imperative mood has been

ushered in the recent WIs offers an example of attempts to minimize the distance and nonauthoritative solidarity.

Along similar lines, comparing the terms of reference between the two groups of the former and recent WIs provides interesting information about how power relations have evolved over time. This comparison indicates one point of similarity and two points of significant difference. In both groups, the linguistic patterns for referring to God have remained the same over time. This relates to the strong roots of religious beliefs in the Iranian culture. Religion and culture in Iran are fully and inextricably interwoven and religious practices are traceable in the Iranians' everyday routines and activities (Zarei & Sadri, 2012). The observation that the line of habitual use of this linguistic strategy has not diverged from its original direction throughout time represents the Iranians' commitment and persistence in their belief in God as the absolute power.

The results of the analysis of the other referentials (i.e., bride and groom's names and wedding hosts' names) echo remarkable shifts in the hierarchical patterns of power and solidarity in respect of gender and age. The shift in positioning toward gender differentials is evident from the striking change in the way women (brides) have been referred to in the past (Miss + surname) and present (first name). Modes of address and reference, as Dickey (1997) observes, are keyed to the social hierarchy, and in such a hierarchical structure, addressing and referencing practices are clear indications of power differentials—the use of last name accompanied with honorific titles signals maximum distance, whereas first name with no preceding titles marks solidarity, equality, and intimacy (Wardhaugh, 2006). On the other hand, the shift in the use of reference forms reflects social, political, and economic changes in a given society (Trudgill, 2011). Hence, it could be concluded that the shift in linguistic strategies for referring to women exhibits a shift at the sociocultural level, or more precisely, a move away from traditional adherence to power toward seeking solidarity and equality.

Aside from the shift in gender-related differentials, a shift in parental domination was also discerned in the findings. It was found that as opposed to the former WIs which were issued from the vantage point of future couples' fathers, in the recent WIs, the couples' surnames have taken the place of the fathers' names. It appears that the old wedding etiquette that parents or older family members were organizers and supporters of every marriage has changed today and, at present, the young generations arrange their marriage more independently of their families and probably foot the bill themselves.

### 7. Conclusion

Drawing on the social semiotics framework, the current study sought to address the trajectories of change in the genre of the Iranian WIs over a time period of four decades. In the first place, the findings revealed that although the generic structures of the Iranian WIs genre have remained the same, its form and content have undergone remarkable changes across time. First and foremost, these transformations should be viewed as clear indication of an obvious aspect of the contemporary world, that is, the technology. Technology has moved at a rapid pace, and the production of WIs has boomed with the rapid development of new graphic and computer technologies. In the past, the options that computer technology and graphic design provide us today were not available; therefore, couples had no choice other than purchasing ready-made prefabricated WIs. Needless to say, creativity and innovation had little chance to thrive under such constraints. However, thanks to the technological advancements in computer design, today's brides and grooms have remarkable freedom of choice to buy or design their favorite WIs in the way they prefer with spending a minimal effort.

Another endeavor of the study focused on investigating the characteristics of change in the form and content of the WIs. The findings demonstrated shifts from conventionalization toward creativity, from formality toward informality, and transformations in the hierarchical dimensions of gender differentials and parental domination. These changes are indices of sociocultural shifts in the current Iranian society. Today, in line with global trends, the winds of change have begun to blow in Iran. The Iranian society is moving toward egalitarianism, and hierarchical attitudes are gradually shifting toward moderation (Moghaddam, 2011). The Iranian women are becoming increasingly determined to achieve equal status with men. The young generation contempts for authority and patriarchy. This growing egalitarianism of modern Iranian lifestyle makes the younger generations seek more solidarity and equality.

Despite the transformation in power relations, the strategies used for referring to God have not changed across time, indicating that WIs genre has kept its religious orientation and local roots. In other words, although the effects of global tendencies are noticeable both on societal and discoursal levels, countercurrents of these tones are also present and still definite threads of national traditional values are at play. This echoes Fairclough's (2006) apt words that social change do not simply dispense with the past; on the contrary, change coexists with continuity, and the ways in which things change in particular places depend upon the social and historical context. That is why WIs genre should be viewed not as a static category of stylistic features, but as an open resource whose users creatively shape and extend its sign repertoire and the signs' functions in accordance with their own values.

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