Fathoming the Cultural Schema of Ta'ne in Persian Language: A Cultural Linguistic Study

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Abstract
The aim of the present article is to probe the functions of the cultural schema of Ta'ne (sarcasm) in Persian. Results from 100 recorded instantiations of Ta'ne accumulated through ethnographic approach indicated that it served different functions including complaint, criticism, insult, contempt, humor, and compliment. The results were then discussed with reference to the cultural differences in the instantiation of the schema (use of the schema for humorous and complimentary functions) and the other schemas underlying the enactment of Ta'ne. In addition, some implications of the study were discussed with reference to the necessity of the cultural knowledge in order to prevent misunderstandings and miscommunications.
Keywords: Cultural Schema; Cultural Linguistics; Ta'ne; Sarcasm; Persian Language.

1. Introduction

Cultural Linguistics is a multidisciplinary area of research which examines the interface between language, culture, and conceptualization (Sharian, 2011). The basic premise in cultural linguistics is that cultural cognition is transmitted through language and can best be reflected in the use of cultural categories, schemas, and metaphors. Cultural schemas as the analytical tools of cultural linguistics are also developed as a result of collective cognition of a cultural group and based on their shared experience which enables storing, organizing, and interpreting information. They act as knowledge base for speakers to communicate semantic and pragmatic meanings (Sharifian 2011). Individuals acquire these schemas through interaction with the members of their cultural group over time and they are constantly negotiated and re-negotiated across time and space. Cultural schemas enable individuals to think, more or less, in a similar mind and allows fluid transfer of message and more homogeneous interpretations (Sharifian, 2003). They also promotes communicating pragmatic meanings through facilitating the process of inference making (Sharifian 2008).

Cultural schemas have been the subject of research in many cultural groups including Persian. For example, in his study, Sharifian (2013) gave an overview of several of such cultural schemas including salâm-o-ahvâlporsi (greetings) which contains the greeting device "salam" (hello) and a series of other exchanges inquiring about the health of the addressee's family members, relatives, close friends, and the latest news and issues. The most dominant schema in the Persian cultural cognition discussed in his article was âberu (face) which Sharifian

conceived of as a multifaceted concept since it was not only tied to the face of the individual person but also to the face of family and any other group to whom the person belonged. The next schema Sharifian explained was tǎ'ǎrof which is surfaced in people's conversations in repeated refusals of offers and invitations, hesitation in asking for favors, rejecting requests, and the use of plentiful hedges, honorifics, and forms of submissives. Shekasteh-nafsi was the last cultural schema described by Sharifian which is a way of showing modesty "through the denial or downplay of any praise or compliment that they receive while trying to reassign the praise either to the initiator of the praise/compliment, family members, God, or simply to luck." (p. 102).

Babai and Sharifian (2013) explored another Persian cultural schema including the refusal strategies Iranian English language learners used in their first (Persian) and second language (English) with a particular focus on gender and social power differentials between the interlocutors. They also probed the cultural schemas underlying refusals through focus group interview. Results revealed that irrespective of gender and social power differentials, Iranian English learners used more indirect than direct refusal strategies both in their first and second language. They also used reasons and explanations more than any other formula as a head act or supportive move. The frequency of refusal head act was similar in their L1 (Persian) and L2 (English). However, supportive move strategies were employed differently in English and Persian. Furthermore, the cultural schemas of tǎ'ǎrof and ru-dar-bǎyest underlined their use of refusal strategies.

In addition to the cultural schemata discussed above, Pishghadam and Norouz Kermanshahi (2012) explored the cultural schema of Insha'Allah (God's willing) and its functions through naturalistic observation of people in diverse contexts. They offered a 3-part classification of situations under which Persian speakers utter Insha'Allah with some functions under each category. The categories included being a Muslim, dealing with emotions, and showing indirectness.

Another instantiation of the cultural schemas in Persian is the study of Sharifian and Jamarani (2011) on sharmandegi (being ashamed) among Persian speakers while interacting with Persian native speakers and Australian English speakers. This cultural schema is commonly realized in Persian through formulaic expressions such as sharmand-am meaning I am ashamed and sharmandeh-am mikonin meaning you make me ashamed. The results indicated that the use of this schema served the enactment of several speech acts including expressing gratitude, offering goods and services, requesting goods and services, apologizing, accepting offers and making refusals, offer an excuse, and expressing sympathy and regret. However, the interpretation of the sentences by Anglo-Australian speakers was different from Iranian's intention. The sentences were interpreted as expressing guilt/awkwardness, shame, concern about imposition/face, distress because of

having done something wrong, apology, indebtedness, regret, embarrassment, gratitude, concern, discomfort due to accepting help from out-group members, and as a strategy used to fish for compliments. By comparing the intended and received functions, the authors concluded that there were potentials of miscommunications when Iranians draw on the sharmandegi schema.

Finally, Shirinbakhsh and Eslamirasekh (2011) probed the cultural schema of *ghesmat* among different age and educational level. This schema is employed to refer to situations in which individuals are unpleasant of what happened to them, acknowledge their lack of intervention and power, and attribute the results to God's will power and want.

Apart from the Persian cultural schemas discussed above, Sharifian (2013) provided examples of some of the cultural conceptualisations in Chinese English and Hong Kong English. He referred to *guanxi as* a dynamics of interpersonal relationships to secure favors in China. The concept was used to refer to mutual obligations, assurances, and understanding which governed Chinese long-term social and business relations. It was also considered as the underlying cause of some other schemas such as face. Although the cultural schema theory was first advanced in 1999 (Nishida, 1999), the concept has been only recently given attention. Yet, very few studies have explored the cultural conceptualizations in Persian and other cultures. This study aims to shed line on the functions and structure of the cultural schema of Ta'ne in Persian.

1.1. The Cultural Schema of Ta'ne

People are frequently involved in conversations and interactions of various types. To create particular purposes, they often manipulate language in one way or another. For instance, they often use ta'ne (sarcasm) to say the opposite of what they mean. It is often accompanied with a special intonation (Attardo et al., 2003; Bryant and Tree, 2005; Rockwell, 2007) or an incongruent facial expression (Muecke, 1978; Rockwell, 2003; Attardo et al., 2003). Bousfield (2007) defines sarcasm as "the use of strategies which, on the surface appear to be appropriate to the situation, but are meant to be taken as meaning the opposite in terms of face management. That is, the utterance which appears, on the surface, to maintain or enhance the face of the recipient actually attacks and damages the face of the recipient" (p. 127). As the definition demonstrates sarcasm involves a shift in the evaluative valence of the utterance; that is, a negative meaning is conveyed using the positive words or vice versa. This definition, while illustrative in terms of the function of sarcasm in response to offensive objects and situations (Gibbs, 2007), is limited in terms of some other functions of sarcasm (non-defensive and humorous) used in Persian. The current study aims to explore the functions of ta'ne in Iranian people's talk.

2. Method

2.1 Corpus

The study is based on an analysis of 100 recorded instantiations of ta'ne accumulated through ethnographic approach to data collection in the natural settings. Any time tokens of ta'ne occurred, the researcher recorded the conversation and then asked the interlocutors for their permission to use the recordings for research purpose. The participants were mainly females (63%) and between the ages of 22 to 50.

2.2 Procedure and Data Analysis

Naturalistic recorded samples were transcribed verbatim and the transcriptions were analyzed with respect to the speakers' purpose of ta'ne and the categories found were generalized into major ones incorporating the subcategories. Finally, frequency of each category type was calculated and comparisons were made among them.

3. Results

Ta'ne functions found as a result of the analysis of naturalistic conversations include expressing complaint, criticism, insult, criticism, humor, and compliment.

3.1 Complaint

The major function of ta'ne was to complain to the addressee due to a lack or a duty which was overlooked. Forty two instantiations of ta'ne (42%) were made to serve this function. As an example, a wife in response to her husband's question that why she has been so thin in the last few month said *why shouldn't I be thin? Everything is just according to my will; my husband, my kids, my home. I've been just thin as far as I'm too happy these days.* In fact, through these words the wife expresses her complaint towards her life conditions including her husband, kids, and the place they lived. In a second example, the same wife having been questioned by her husband that why the house was so messy answered *you should have come and seen what I was doing. I was eating and sleeping all the time.* This way she complaint to her husband that his question was out of place since she had been busy working.

3.2 Criticism

The second function of ta'ne is concerned with criticizing the addressee or a third party on a particular topic or issue. Twenty- eight percent of the data were found to serve this function. As an example, a family were talking about the food quality while having their meal. One of the daughters who was responsible for preparing the food asks others about the quality of the meal. Her sister answered with a sarcastic tone of voice *your cook is always this tasty. One likes to eat their fingers with it.* Another token of the function in our data includes a TV program discussing the results Fajr International Film Festival in Iran. The interviewer who believed the results were unfair said *it was the best judgment over the past 15 years. The judgments were completely political.*

3.3 Insult

Fifteen percent of sarcastic expressions were used to insult the speaker, the addressee, or a third person and the people associated with them. For instance, a group of PhD. students were talking about their university head group who was famous for being excessively strict in his work and who didn't permit the students to defend as he expected them to publish in high quality journal before defense. Students were complaining that he was ignorant of their objections and insisted on his own words. One of the students told others *it is not surprise he doesn't understand us. He is Turk.*

3.4 Contempt

This category of sarcasm (10%) is used to downgrade the addressee or the interlocutor. An example of this category includes a teacher who addresses his student as "genius" when his low student replied teacher's question with a silly answer. Another instantiation involves a man who in response to his wife's request for travelling abroad said *you've now come back.* Or, a young boy who informs his father about his car being broken down (his car was a Peykan) along this line *your Benz is broken down in the street. Come and take it.*

3.5 Humor

Unlike the previous functions, this function of ta'ne serves to create a positive atmosphere and conditions to laugh (3%). An example of this category contains a group of colleagues who, while waiting for the school bus, were talking about their low capability is speaking English. They were all trying to give examples to show their low proficiency. One of them who was watching the bus coming said to another colleague who had a PhD in English teaching *sorry, otobus dare miad* (sorry, the bus is coming) highlighting *sorry* with an exaggerated tone. The addressee colleague said in response *oh, great. I have to come to your class in case I have any problem in English.* Another example is related to a group of university students in the dorm who were studying the night before the final exam. One of them who was a student of philosophy and who was completely unfamiliar with math told her roommate who was an M.A. student in math *hey look, if in any case you had any problem regarding your exam, don't hesitate to let me know.* In the same vein, a man who had recently become a father was asked if he had selected a name for his child. He answered *not actually. It's as easy as accepting a PhD. proposal.*

3.6 Compliment

Although only a small portion of our data were used to enact this category (2%), the sarcastic expressions were used by Persian speakers to complement a second person while in the face of it they were downgrading him/ her. Examples include a mother who was complementing her daughter having been accepted in

M.A exam in this way "bachehaye man too in donya hichi nemishan" (my kids won't be as good as a chocolate teapot in this world).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the functions of the cultural schema of ta'ne in Persian language. Analysis of results indicated that the schema served the functions of complaint, criticism, insult, contempt, humor, and compliment. Our recorded instantiations of the schema were mainly between people with equal social status or by people in a higher rank. Examples of people being in a similar social status in our data included close friends, classmates, family members, and other people who had intimate and informal relationships. Moreover, people enjoying a higher social status who employed ta'ne in our data included teacher to students, parents to children, and bosses to their employees. In cases where the person who was the addressee of ta'ne was in a higher rank, the expression was used in the absence of the person being talked about and hence, the instantiation of the cultural schema of gheibat (backbiting). This shows that the cultural schemas in a language are interwoven together and the many functions used for one schema are shared by others as well.

Additionally, our results revealed that the realization of the cultural schema of ta'ne is different in our culture considering its functions in other cultural contexts. For example, the literature on sarcasm rarely refers to the humorous and complimentary functions of the schema and it is always interpreted that the schema is used as an offensive device to hurt the speaker. Nevertheless, our data revealed that the schema can serve both as a repulsive and an encouraging device. Our results in this part also indicate that while the schemas can be shared in diverse cultural contexts, their exact nature, interpretation, and functions can be cross-culturally different. Future lines of research can probe the realization of the schema in other cultural contexts and the probable similarities or differences with our culture.

This line of research into the cultural schema of tan'e is significant as it enhances people's awareness of different cultural values and practices and hence their meta-cultural competence (Sharifian, 2005). Additionally, it highlights different socialization processes that people undergo in different cultural group. Misunderstanding and at times miscommunication can result from a disparity in the cultural schemas that interlocutors bring to a communicative event. Yet, our results are limited in generalizability due to limitations in some aspects of methodology. First, our participants mainly contain females and the majority of ta'ne expressions were uttered by females. It may be that females are more inclined to use the schema than males or it may imply a limitation in our corpus. More research is needed to investigate gender differences in using the schema. Second, our recorded instantiations were mainly between interlocutors of the same status. Further research

can identify how the schema is employed by people of lower social rank to higher one.

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