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Research Paper

"To the Life of Your Child!": Conceptualizations of Oath in a Persian Film From the Cultural Linguistics Perspective

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Abstract

The present study aims at exploring the cultural conceptualizations of oaths in Persian as reflected in an Iranian film, called Qasam 'Oath'; a film whose theme centers on oath-taking, and its characters frequently take conversational oaths in various scenes. Analysis of the dialogues and visuals of the selected film utilizing the analytical framework of cultural conceptualizations revealed 3 different conceptual layers of oath-taking. The first layer, that is, 'worldview' seems to be the fundamental building block to construct the second layer, namely 'cultural conceptualizations' of oath-taking, including GOD AS WITNESS, SACRED INDIVIDUALS AND TEXTS, FAMILY, and WOMEN AS INFERIOR GENDER in both oath referrals and conditions. At the third layer, these conceptualizations are encoded linguistically in the dialogues and visuals of the film. It can be concluded that the analytical framework of cultural conceptualizations enables researchers to trace cultural schematization, metaphorization, and categorization hidden in films produced in particular cultures.

Keywords: Oath; Cultural Conceptualizations; Films; Cultural Linguistics; Persian.

1. Introduction

The concept of culture is a complex and multifaceted notion that has been defined from various perspectives. Considering the ever-changing nature of the current social life around the globe, culture is no longer viewed as a predetermined way of life within a society, but is pondered as "portable schemes of interpretation of actions and events that people have acquired through primary socialization" (Kramsch, 2015, p. 409) within different speech communities.

As a medium that portrays social actions and encounters, films can be considered as windows to the culture of the speech community in which they are produced (Mubarakshinha, Abdrakhmanova, & Fattakhova, 2019; Nurullina & Ramazanov, 2020; O'Connell & Kowal, 2006; Summerfield, 1993). More specifically, films represent cultural conventions, norms, values, and expectations of behavior (Dahl, 2004; Mallinger & Rossy, 2003) within a particular society though the nonspontaneous and scripted nature of their language might result in reflecting a limited and interested perspective of particular groups of people. Accordingly, there has been mounting literature with regard to the cultural analysis of films (e.g., Ergul, 2010; Guillot, 2010; Keshavarz, 2022; Mallinger & Rossy, 2003; Tognozzi, 2010). In the context of Iran, scholars have probed the influence of culture in Iranian films about cultural taboos (Mehrabi, 1984), Islamicizing films (Naficy, 2005), politics and film production (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010), representation of women (Derayeh, 2010; Viviani, 2019), and marriage ceremonies (Koutlaki, 2020). However, these studies have considered culture in its objective and essentialist notion, ignoring its subjective and dynamic conceptualization highlighted by Kramsch (2015) above.

Such a dynamic perspective on culture can be found within underlying tenets of the multidisciplinary field of cultural linguistics. Exploring the nexus between language and cultural conceptualizations, which are manifested in cultural schemas, cultural metaphors, and cultural categories, cultural linguistics allows researchers to analyze the



dynamic and heterogeneous representation of culture in language, considering both social and cognitive aspects (Sharifian 2011, 2017). Despite being a new field of inquiry, this multidisciplinary analytical model has been utilized widely in the analysis of language from different angles, including, but not limited to, intercultural communication (Sharifian, 2010), translated texts (Kianbakht, 2020), religious texts (Lu, 2017), literary texts (Derakhshan, Dabbagh, & Shakki, 2024; Sharifian, 2020), emotion language (Bagheri, 2021), paremiology (Dabbagh, 2017; Dabbagh & Babaii, 2023), political discourse (Ansah, 2017), and national policy documents (Dabbagh, Babaii, & Atai, 2022). As can be seen, though films consist of various semiotic resources, such as language and visuals (Hirvonen & Tiittula, 2010) that can transfer cultural conceptualizations and portray the way culture functions within various speech communities (Supiarza, Rachmawanti, & Gunawan, 2020), analysis of films from a cultural-linguistic perspective has remained under-researched. More specifically, Cultural linguistics can provide a deeper understanding of films via unveiling cultural schemas, cultural categories, and cultural metaphors attributed to different concepts in the cultural context of different societies. One of the complicated concepts that has attracted the attention of scholars, as a cultural keyword (Wierzbicka, 1997), is oath, particularly with regard to oath-referents in different linguacultures (see Abd el-Jawad, 2000; Arab, 2022; Khajeh Gir et al., 2019; Masagara, 1997; Pishghadam & Attaran, 2015; Shimoyama, Shadpayam, & Parhizgari, 2017). However, almost all of these studies have dealt with the notion of oath from semantic and pragmatic aspects, taking an essentialist perspective and ignoring the underlying dynamic conceptualizations that cause the differences in oath referents and oath functions cross-culturally. Because oath referents can reveal the cultural values and norms dominant in a speech community (Abd el-Jawad, 2000; Masagara, 1997; Mercier, 2020), examining conceptualizations underlying oath referents can clearly “reveal dominant sociocultural themes, values, norms, patterns, and beliefs of the community under study” (Abd el-Jawad, 2000, p. 223), particularly in multicultural societies like Iran. Consequently, to overcome this lacuna, the current study seeks to scrutinize cultural conceptualizations of oaths as represented in an Iranian locally produced film titled *Qasam ‘Oath’* directed by Mohsen Tanabandeh in 2018. The movie attempts to highlight dynamicity of oath-taking in the Iranian society from taking an oath to acquit an accused person of his or her possible committed crime(s) to oath-taking for infinitesimal issues.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Nature of Oath

In real life situations, people do not always tell the truth; they sometimes resort to telling lies for economic, judicial, or political reasons, or in order not to lose face and social desirability (Masagara, 1997). Therefore, taking an oath is considered as an assurance for the truth of one’s speech. According to Abd el-Jawad (2000, p. 218), through taking an oath, “a person binds himself to do or not to do a certain specific physical or juridical act, by invoking the name of God or one of the divine attributes.” This definition restricts oaths to the domain of religion (e.g., holy books, prophets, and holy places) while in many cases oaths are founded on environmental and cultural features, hence the object and form of oaths may vary from culture to culture. As Mercier (2020, p. 163, our emphasis) asserted, an oath is a “*culturally accepted* way of unambiguously signaling a maximum degree of commitment.” That is, oath objects and entities vary cross-culturally. They might include swords, heads of father, idols, and social ideals in the pre-Islamic Arab community (e.g., the honor and chastity of one’s mother or sister, divorcing one’s wife; Abd el-Jawad, 2000), family members (e.g., parents, children), rulers (e.g., king, constitution), social events in Africa (Masagara, 1997), food, fire, and water in Bakhtiari tribe in Iran (Khajeh Gir, Ganji, Zolfaghari, & Aghakhani Bijan, 2020), salt (Arab, 2022), and the spirit of the dead (Pishghadam & Attaran, 2015) in Iran.

Though, according to Clackson (2007), the Indo-European root of oath is not clear, there is evidence that the ancient Iranian sacred ceremony of *var* has influenced oath-related expressions in Indo-European languages (Shimoyama, Shadpayam, & Parhizgari, 2017). As a test for verification of “the guilt or innocence by the subjection of the accused to severe torture, whose survival was taken as divine proof of innocence,” *var* is considered as the root for different oath-related words in different languages, including *vór* ‘pledge’ in Old Norse (Grimes, 2010) and *will* in English (Mallory & Adams, 2006). This etymological overview reflects the significance of studying oath-taking norms and conventions in the Persian language because “modern Persian is derived from ancient Iranian languages and has preserved their various cultural values” (Shimoyama, Shadpayam, & Parhizgari, 2017, p. 218).

The success of expressing the degree of commitment in taking an oath depends on the alignment of episodic memory between the oath taker and that of the oath receiver, especially in high-stakes social contexts (Mahr & Csibra, 2017). That is, both sides should consider the oath referent as significant enough for the content of that particular oath. Another important factor impacting the acceptance of an oath by the oath receiver is the ‘power move’ that allows the oath-taker to “force the audience’s overt assent” (Mercier 2020, p. 167). That is, the content and referent of the taken oath allow no one to question, at least overtly, the truth of the oath taker’s claim.

According to Abd el-Jawad (2000), oaths can be categorized into three main domains: ‘judiciary oaths’ taken in courts, ‘office oaths’ taken when achieving a professional position such as a medical doctor, and ‘conversational oaths’ uttered mechanically and routinely in daily interactions. Of the three categories, formal judiciary oaths come with particular regulations, particularly in Islamic law, such as inequality of men and women in taking an oath and using oath as the last resource for rendering a verdict when there is inconclusive evidence (*Civil Code of Procedure of Iran*, Clauses 203, pp. 270-279). Currently, oaths are prevalent in many contexts including courts, initiation ceremonies, and even daily dealings (Mercier, 2020). Such a commonality has transformed the nature of oaths from ‘legal obligations’ to ‘routine fillers’ and ‘conversational spices’ (Abd el-Jawad, 2000), particularly with regard to conversational oath, which consequently leads members of a speech community to sometimes consider them with incredulity and skepticism.

2.2. Previous Studies on Oath in Iran

The prevalence of conversational oaths among Iranians has attracted the attention of linguists to investigate the nature of oath in the Persian language from various perspectives. For example, Kiani (1991) explored the reasons for oath taking among Iranians and found the following motives: emphasizing an issue, making a point in a speech believable, assuring others, proving guiltiness, proving a claim, and warning/threatening others. In another study, Mansouri (2011) found that oaths with family members, death, and religious attributes (i.e., God, The Holy Qur’an, and Prophet Mohammad) were the most frequent oaths among Iranian Kurdish speakers. Confirming Mansouri’s (2011) findings, Aliakbari, Heidarizadi, and Mahjub (2013) added imams, the chaste woman (i.e., sister, wife, or mother of imams and prophets), holy places (e.g., Ka’ba), holy times (e.g., praying time), food (e.g., sacred offering, bread, and salt), and body parts (e.g., hair, moustache, and head) as the most frequent oath referents. More recently, Khajeh Gir et al. (2019) analyzed rituals of oath taking among Bakhtiari people, a tribe in south-west of Iran, and found fire stoves, fire, temples, sun blades, and running water as specific oath referents common in this tribe. These studies were limited to enumerating the oath referents while the underlying developmental process of such referents was ignored. Shimoyama, Shadpayam, and Parhizgari (2017) compared ‘taking an oath by God’ cross-culturally between Persian and Western languages. Their findings revealed that, in contrast to western languages, Persian oath-taking commonly involves references to God. They discussed their findings in light of the differences of developmental processes of oath expressions in the two contexts. While “the Judaic-Christian religious taboo about using God’s name in vain has paradoxically caused the modern linguistic phenomenon that the word ‘God’ is often uttered as offensive swearing” (p. 216), the Persian language has preserved the original meaning of God expressions in taking an oath as nonoffensive that can perform various functions.

With regard to the representation of oath in films, Pishghadam and Attaran (2015) compared 50 Persian and 50 English films utilizing Hymes’ (1967) SPEAKING model. Their analysis revealed 17 functions for the speech act of oath-taking in Persian films and only six functions for this speech act in the English films. Due to this difference of oath-taking pattern observed in Persian and English films, the authors discussed that oaths have been lowered down to become fillers in daily conversations in Iran, particularly religious oaths, which consequently shows that religious beliefs are being attenuated among Iranian people.

Although there have been some studies on oaths in the context of Iran, to the best of the authors’ knowledge, no study has been conducted to unveil the different conceptualizations hidden in oaths taken by Iranian people. Therefore, as the multidisciplinary field of cultural linguistics allows researchers to investigate dynamic conceptualizations hidden in language, the present study attempts to fill the aforementioned gap via exploring conceptualizations of oath in the Persian language through analyzing a locally produced Iranian film.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Data

The data for this study come from an Iranian film called *Qasam 'Oath'* written and directed by Mohsen Tanabandeh, which was released in 2019. The language of this film is Persian. The film lasts 84 min and narrates the story of the murder of a woman named Rezvan, whose family and relatives strongly believe that her husband, Bahman, has murdered her hence they seek to prove that he is guilty. After a few hearings, the court procedure postpones the conclusion of the murder case for 5 years. In the last judicial proceeding, the judge orders that in the final court 40 adults should take an oath to testify that Bahman is the murderer, and if the oath is not taken, the verdict will be rendered for the acquittal of Bahman. The whole family believes that Bahman is the murderer, so Razieh (the deceased's sister) gathers the family to travel by Khalil's (Razieh's brother-in-law) bus from Gorgan to Mahshad for the ceremony of oath-taking in the holy shrine of Imam Reza, the eighth Imam in the Shiite sect of Islam. Meanwhile, Khosrow, Razieh's husband, joins them and opposes the decision of retribution for Bahman, and even threatens Razieh with divorce. The rationale for the choice of this film was that its theme centers on oath-taking and the characters frequently take conversational oaths in various scenes of the film ($n = 52$).

3.2. Analytical Framework

The present study employed cultural linguistics to unveil conceptualizations of oaths in the selected Iranian film. Cultural linguistics originated from Palmer's (1996) proposal to explore the relationship between imagery and language. Later, Sharifian (2011) expanded this proposal via introducing multidisciplinary to the analysis of the interrelationship between language and human cultural experience, manifested in cultural conceptualizations. Drawing on anthropology, cognitive linguistics, distributed cognition, and complexity science, Sharifian (2015, 2017a) introduced theoretical and analytical frameworks for cultural linguistics. The theoretical framework views human cognition as an 'enactive cognition' (Stewart, Gapenne, & Di Paolo, 2011) that emerged from the interaction among members of a particular speech community. More specifically, cognition is no longer viewed as the property of individual minds (Clark & Chambers, 1998), and it is considered as "more than the sum of the cognitive systems of the individual members" (Sharifian, 2015, p. 476) of a speech community. That is, members of a cultural group might not have the same conceptualization of a particular human experience because cognition is heterogeneously distributed among individuals (Hutchins, 1994; Sharifian, 2017a, 2017b). These heterogeneously distributed cultural conceptualizations are represented and recorded in human verbal and nonverbal communication across time and space, which, in turn, forms the 'collective memory bank' (wa Thiong'o, 1986) of human experience. Therefore, studying language use in its different forms can unveil the underlying conceptualizations.

The analytical framework of cultural conceptualizations models the interaction between language and cultural schemas, cultural metaphors, and cultural categories (see Figure 1). According to Sharifian (2017a, p. 7), cultural schemas are "beliefs, rules, and expectations of behavior as well as values relating to various aspects and components of experience," which are common among members of a cultural group and are abstracted from their experience (Sharifian, 2015). Examples include Iranian cultural schema of DEVOTION TO RELATIVES (Dabbagh, Babaii, & Atai, 2022), TA'NE 'sarcasm' (Chahkandi, 2017), and Hungarian TRADITIONAL VERSUS MODERN FAMILY schema (Kóczy, 2021). The second element of cultural conceptualizations, that is, cultural metaphor, encompasses "cross-domain conceptualizations grounded in cultural traditions such as folk medicine, worldview, or a spiritual belief system" (Sharifian, 2017a, p. 7). TIME AS A TEACHER (Dabbagh, 2017) and NATION AS A BODY (Musolff, 2017) are examples in order. Finally, cultural categories are classifications of human experience including events, mental states, relations, and objects that are formed via exposure to daily interaction among members of a cultural community (Glushko, Maglio, Matlock, & Barsalou, 2008). These categories can be instantiated in lexical items that might show subordination or opposition of concepts as in WESTERN-CHRISTIAN WEDDING, DINING OUT, and ENGAGEMENT (Sharifian, 2017a).

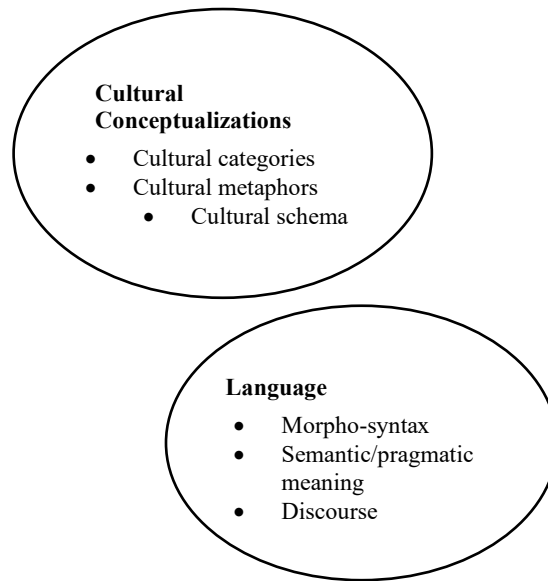


Figure 1. The Analytical Framework of Cultural Linguistics (Taken From Sharifian 2017a, p. 8)

3.3. Data Analysis and Procedure

To explore the Iranian oath referents represented in the Iranian locally-produced film of *Qasam* ‘Oath,’ ‘ethnographic-conceptual text/visual analysis’ (Dinh, 2017) was utilized (see Table 1). This 4-staged framework allows researchers to extract and interpret cultural conceptualizations in texts and visuals. At the first stage, Iranian cultural conceptualizations of oath represented in the selected film were identified. To do so, deductive coding procedure (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was employed in order to identify cultural schemas, cultural metaphors, and cultural categories underlying the oaths taken by the film characters. Next, the literature on cultural studies, anthropological studies, and sociological studies related to the identified cultural conceptualizations were reviewed in order to gain a deeper understanding of the conceptualizations within the context of Iranian culture and society. Because both of the authors of this study are originally from Iran, their insider knowledge regarding the extracted cultural conceptualizations was taken into account. Finally, the visuals in the selected film, including eye contacts and character moves were semiotically analyzed to scrutinize their correspondence with the extracted cultural conceptualizations.

All the aforementioned stages were followed through careful viewing of the film and the coded scenes, using MAXQDA software (version 2020). This software was employed for the data analysis because “using a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) can improve the credibility of the coding process” (Baralt 2012, p. 228). The unit of analysis for these stages was scenes. According to Phillips (2009), a scene is a part of a film that produces a continuous action in a continuous time and place. In the present study, temporal and spatial unity was set as the criterion feature of a scene. To ensure the intercoder agreement of the identified codes, the data were analyzed and coded by the first researcher and a Ph.D. holder of applied linguistics, who is experienced in working with qualitative data, both individually and jointly. The intercoder agreement, estimated through Krippendorff’s alpha (α), was found to be 0.87:

Table 1. *Stages of Identifying Cultural Conceptualizations in Films (Adopted From Dinh, 2017)*

| Stage | Description |
|---------|--|
| Stage 1 | Detect cultural conceptualizations in films: (Recognize chief cultural conceptualizations manifested in the dialogues and conversations of the actors/actresses) |
| Stage 2 | Conduct an ethnographic survey: (Review the literature germane to the recognized chief cultural conceptualizations in sociology, cultural studies, and anthropology texts; researcher’s intuition, as insiders to the culture under investigation, can be relied on; discuss other available individuals) |
| Stage 3 | Conduct a conceptual/ethnographic analysis: |

| | |
|---------|--|
| Stage 4 | (Consult results of the ethnographic survey in stage 2 to define and discuss the extracted cultural conceptualizations) Conduct a film analysis: (Do a scrutiny of films to scrutinize how they manifest the detected cultural conceptualizations) |
|---------|--|

4. Results

Analysis of the locally-produced film titled *Qasam 'Oath'* using the adopted version of 'ethnographic-conceptual text/visual analysis' (Dinh, 2017) revealed 52 instances of oath-taking wherein the characters of the film draw upon a number of Persian cultural conceptualizations in relation to the concept of oath-taking. Table 2 provides the frequency of occurrence of the identified cultural conceptualizations, which were verified via conducting stages 2 and 3 of Dinh's (2017) adopted framework. In what follows, a detailed analysis of the film is reported accompanied by sample dialogues and images in which the Persian cultural conceptualizations were identified:

Table 2. *Frequency of Occurrence of Cultural Conceptualizations of Oath in Qasam 'Oath'*

| Cultural Conceptualizations | Frequency of Occurrence | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|----|
| Cultural Metaphors | GOD AS WITNESS | 11 |
| | SACRED TEXTS | 5 |
| Cultural Schemas | BREAD AS A SCARED ENTITY | 3 |
| | SACRED INDIVIDUALS | 9 |
| | QIBLAH | 6 |
| Cultural Category | FAMILY | 13 |
| | WOMEN AS INFERIOR GENDER | 5 |
| Total | 52 | |

Conceptualizations of oath taking in *Qasam 'Oath'* are manifested through 'oath referents' and 'oath conditions.' Most of the oath referents are religious with an Islamic orientation. For instance, in the scene in which all the family members are in a restaurant on the road to Mashhad, Razieh is showing the others how to take an oath in the court. She takes a loaf of bread and asks others to imagine it as the Holy Qur'an. Then, she puts her right hand on it and says:

(1)

Razieh:

| | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------|------------------|-----------|---------------|-------------------|-------------|
| <i>Vallāhe,</i> | <i>bellāhe,</i> | <i>tallahe,</i> | <i>Qasam</i> | <i>mi-xor-am</i> | <i>ke</i> | <i>Bahman</i> | <i>Rezā'ei</i> | |
| God to, | God to, | God to, | Oath | PRS-eat-1SG. | that | Bahman | Rezaei | |
| <i>Be</i> | <i>amd</i> | <i>Rezvān</i> | <i>Rabiei</i> | <i>rā</i> | <i>be</i> | <i>qatl</i> | <i>resānd-e</i> | <i>ast.</i> |
| To | intention | Rezvan | Rabiei | OM | to | murder | reach-3SG.PRS.PRF | is.3SG. |

'To God, to God, to Go, I take an oath that Bahman Rezaei has murdered Rezvan Rabiei on purpose.'

As can be seen, in this excerpt, God is used as the referent in taking an oath in the court. The schema of god as an oath referent is also manifested in other scenes through the expressions of *be xodā* 'to God', *vallāh* 'to God,' and *xodā Šāhede* 'God is my witness.' Particularly, the latter example reflects that the oath-taker perceives God as an omnipresent power who observes one's actions as if God can testify the truth of one's utterances, hence the cultural metaphor of GOD AS WITNESS.

The frequent use of the cultural metaphor of GOD AS WITNESS as the oath referent for various oath subjects ($n = 11$), even insignificant ones, reflects that Iranian people tend to draw upon this metaphor as a persuasive device to convince the interlocutor(s) of the truth of their utterances, as in (2) below. In this scene, Razieh's brother is kneeling down in front of Razieh to take an oath and convince her that Khosrow did not kill Rezvan. The perspective of the camera, which is top-down, and the facial posture of Razieh's brother in Figure 2 reflects this act accompanied oath-taking for convincing purposes. This scene, and the similar ones in which the oath referent is God, shows that God is not a just a power to be worshiped; rather He is conceptualized as an ultimate power whose testimonial is acknowledged and respected by the interactants due to their religious beliefs:

(2)

Razieh’s brother to Razieh:

Bābā! Rāzi jān! vaqti man mi-g-am ye chiz-i hast, yani hast.
 Father Razi dear, When I PRS-say-1SG. one thing-ART is.3SG.PRS means is.
 voc,

Be ki Qasam be-xor-am tā bāvar-et beše?
 To whom.Q oath PRS-eat-1SG so that believe-2SG become.2SG.PRS

Bābā! inā magz-e qāzi ro be xodā dār-an mi-bar-an
 Father these brain-of judge OM To God have-3PL PROG-take-3PL.PRS
ye taraf dige tā zamān bexar-an.
 one direction other until time buy-3PL.PRS

‘Look dear Razi, I know what I am saying. Who should I take an oath to so that you believe me? To God, they are distracting the judge to buy time.’



Figure 2. Kneeling to Take an Oath for Convincing Purposes

Another religious oath referent that is used for persuasion purposes is The Holy Qur’an. Like the previous examples, this oath referent is used to ascertain others about the validity of an utterance through reference to the cultural schema of SACRED TEXTS ($n = 5$). The belief of the interlocutors in the sacredness of The Holy Qur’an acts as a strong shared knowledge that supports the oath takers’ assertion. In the following excerpt, when Khosrow intends to dissuade Razieh and all the other family members from taking an oath against Bahman in the court, Razieh takes an oath to The Holy Qur’an stating that all her family members have come to take an oath willingly and she did not force them to come:

(3)

Khosrow to Razieh:

Pas çerā panj sāl tul-eš dād-eh? çerā qesās-eš na-kard-eh?
 Then why.o five year elongate- give-3SG. Why.o vengeance- not-do.3SG.PRS.PRF-
 3SG.OBG PRS.PRF? 3SG.OBG

‘So why has he [the judge] elongated the case for five years? Why didn’t he take the decision for vengeance?’

Razieh to Khosrow:

Khosrow! sad bār in-o goft-i, vakil ham javāb-et ro dāde.
 Khosrow. hundred Time this-OM said- lawyer in response answer-2sg OM give.
 voc 2sg. PRS.PRF.
 PST,

Alān dame dādgāh umad-i çi beg-i?
 Now near court come-2sg.PRS.VOC what.o say-2sg.PRS?

Umad-i inā ro betarsun-i?
 Come-2sg.PRS.PRF.VOC these OM intimidate-2sg.PRS.o

Be Qor'ān man kasi ro zur na-kard-am.
 To Qur'an I anyone OM force not-made-1sg.PRS.PRF.

'Khosrow, you said this a hundred times and the lawyer told you the reason. What do you want to say now that the court session is about to begin? Did you come to intimidate them? I swear to the Qur'ān, I did not force anyone to come.'

In the Iranian culture, sacred texts, particularly The Holy Qur'an, hold a significant position on different occasions and in rituals, including Norouz (as one of the objects on Haft-Seen tablecloth¹), buying a new house (putting The Holy Qur'an and a mirror in the new house before moving in; Rouholamini, 2018), travelling (enacting the whole journey under God's protection via walking under the Holy Qur'an for three times and kissing it; Koutlaki, 2010), and evil eye avoidance (Hedayat, 2001; Zolfaghari, 2015). Therefore, taking an oath to this sacred text shows that the oath-taker talks about a highly significant issue. However, in (1) above, because there was no Holy Qur'an in the restaurant, Razieh used a loaf of bread, as a symbol for The Holy Qur'an, to show her family members how to take an oath, as illustrated in Figure 3. Such a substitution reflects the sacredness of bread in the Iranian culture, which makes the cultural metaphor of BREAD AS A SACRED ENTITY, which was shown visually in three instances in this film:



Figure 3. Using a Loaf of Bread as a Substitution for the Holy Qur'an in Taking an Oath

Also, the film represents that Iranian people take an oath to The Holy Qur'an in order to earnestly ask for a big favor. In Iran, in the case of retribution (qisas), the family of the accused may resort to the holy book to seek forgiveness from the victim's family. In another scene of *Qasam 'Oath*, Razieh takes an oath to The Holy Qur'an to beseech a police officer not to stop the bus. Her bent-forward body and her begging eyes, as the accompanying physical posture to the verbal statement of oath, intensify the expression of her request (see Figure 4):

(4)

Razieh to the police officer:

Sarkār, to ro qor’ān!
 Officer. voc, you OM Qur’an!

Panj sāl-e dār-am in masir-e dādghāh ro mir-am-o miā-m.
 Five year-is have-I this path-of court OM go-1SG.PRS.PRF.PROG-and come-1SG.PRS
In āxarin dādghāh-e. Jān-e baç-at. To ro qor’ān.
 This last court-is. Life-of child-2SG.POSS. You OM Qur’an

‘Officer, to the Qur’an! I have been travelling this path for five years. This is the last court session. To the life of your child! To the Qur’an.’



Figure 4. Physical Poster of Razieh While Taking an Oath to the Holy Qur’an

Taking an oath to Shi’i SACRED INDIVIDUALS is the third most frequent religious oath referents ($n = 9$) observed in *Qasam* ‘Oath.’ For example, when Razieh is questioning her brother-in-law about Rezvan’s gold, he takes an oath to Abbas ibn Ali, also known as Abolfazl al-Abbas, martyred in Karbala, that he does not know anything about that jewel. Abbas ibn Ali is sacred to Iranian Shi’i Muslims because he helped Imam Hossein, the third Imam in the Shi’i sect of Islam, in the Battle of Karbala and fought against the Army of Yazid, to bring water for Imam Hossein while he was utterly thirsty (cf., Aghaie, 2011):

(5)

Razieh to her brother-in-law:

Goft-i bābat-e hamun talā Bahman kotak-eš zad?
 Said.PST-you for-of that Gold Bahman beat-3SG.OBG struck.PST?

‘Did you tell others that Bahman beat her because of that very gold?’

Razieh’s brother-in-law to Razieh:

Be Abolfazl man ruh-am-am xabar na-dāšt.
 To Abolfazl I spirit-1SG.POSS-also news not-had.3SG.PST

‘I swear to Abolfaz, I was totally ignorant about it.’

Razieh to her brother-in-law:

| | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------|------------------|------------|------------|------------------|----------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|------------------|
| <i>Be</i> | <i>Abalfazle</i> | <i>çi?</i> | <i>Age</i> | <i>mi-xā-i</i> | <i>qasam-e</i> | <i>dorugh</i> | <i>be-xor-i</i> | <i>dādgāh</i> | <i>nayā.</i> |
| To | Abolfazl- of | what.o? | If | PRS- want-2SG | oath-of | False | PRS-eat-2SG | court | not-come. IMP |

‘To Abalfazle, what? If you want to take a false oath, do not come to the court.’

It is worth noting that Razieh’s reaction to her brother-in-law’s oath implies that the latter is not sincere in his oath. This is reflected in Razieh’s question *Be Abalfazle çi?* ‘To Abolfazle, what?’, demanding him to be more specific and elaborate on the subject and content of his oath. It is also possible to assume that she is asking him to utter the complete name of the Imam (i.e., Abolfazl al- Abbas, Imam Ali’s son) given that Abolfazl can be the name of any male Iranian. It must be noted that in Shi’a Islam, an Imam is a divinely appointed leader endowed with spiritual authority, infallibility, and profound knowledge.

The final religious cultural schema of oath referents observed in this film is QIBLAH ($n = 6$), which is the direction to Mecca wherein the Islamic sacred house of Ka’ba is located and Muslims stand to that direction when they want to say their prayers. This cultural schema is identified in *Qasam ‘Oath’* in the scene in which Bahman is retelling the murdering scene to the police officer:

(6)

Bahman to the police officer:

| | | | | | | | |
|-----------|-----------|--------------|------------------|-----------|-----------------|------------|-----------------|
| <i>Be</i> | <i>in</i> | <i>qeble</i> | <i>Mohammadi</i> | <i>in</i> | <i>hāleš</i> | <i>xub</i> | <i>na-bud,</i> |
| To | this | qiblah | Mohammad | this | health-3SG.POSS | well | not-be.3SG.PST, |

| | | | | |
|-------------|----------------|-----------------|------------|-----------------|
| <i>Xoda</i> | <i>šāhed-e</i> | <i>hāleš</i> | <i>xub</i> | <i>na-bud.</i> |
| God | witness-is | health-3SG.POSS | Well | not-be.3SG.PST. |

| | | | | | |
|--------------|---------------------|-----------|-----------------|------------|--------------|
| <i>Hički</i> | <i>na-did-e</i> | <i>in</i> | <i>hāl-eš</i> | <i>xub</i> | <i>bāše.</i> |
| Nobody | not-see-3SG.PRS.PRF | this | health-3SG.POSS | well | be.3SG.PRS. |

‘To this Mohammadi Qibla! she was not well. God is my witness that she was not well. Nobody saw that she was well.’

Other identified oath referents in *Qasam ‘Oath’* are related to family members, both dead and alive ($n = 13$), which was the most frequent cultural conceptualizations drawn upon while taking an oath in this film. Setting one’s child as the oath referent is observed to be functioned as a serious oath taken for vital issues. Beside what is reported in (4) above in which the life of one’s children is set as an oath referent for persuasion purposes, in a scene in which Khosrow wants to dissuade Razieh from retaliating Bahman, he threatens her and takes an oath to the life of his only daughter:

(7)

Khosrow to Razieh:

| | | | | | | |
|-----------|--------------|-------------|---------------|------------|--------------|---------------|
| <i>Be</i> | <i>jān-e</i> | <i>Niāz</i> | <i>qasam,</i> | <i>age</i> | <i>qesās</i> | <i>bexā-i</i> |
| To | life-of | Niaz | oath, | if | retaliation | want-2SG.PRS |

baçe ro az-at mi-gir-am talāq-et mi-d-am.
 child OM from-2SG PRS-take-1SG divorce-2SG PRS-do-1SG

Jun-e yedune doxtar-am ro qasam xord-am
 Life-of only daughter-1SG.POSS OM oath eat.PST-1SG

ke motma'en bāš-i in kar-o mi-kon-am.
 that certain be.PRS -2SG this work-OM PRS-do-1SG.

‘To Niaz’ life, if you want retaliation, I will get the child and divorce you. I took an oath to my only daughter to ensure that I will do so.’

As can be seen, the life of one’s child is so precious for Iranian people that they take an oath to their lives in order to show the certainty of the occurrence of an event. Similar oaths were observed in *Qasam* ‘Oath’ which set the spirit of the passed-away family members as an oath referent, such as the following excerpt in which Razieh is taking an oath to her sister’s spirit that she will not be offended if anyone who is in doubt that Bahman is the murderer do not want to accompany her to the court and take an oath in the court against Bahman:

(8)

Razieh to all her family members in the bus:

Be hama-tun dār-am mi-g-am.
 To all-2PL have-1SG PRS.PROG-tell-1SG.

Age hatm dār-id Rezvāno šohar-eš košt-e biā-id.
 if sure have.PRS -2PL Rezvan-OM husband-3SG.POSS kill- PRS.PST come-2PL.IMP

Be ruheš age narahat beš-am.
 To soul-3SG.POSS If upset become-1SG.FUT

‘I am telling this to all of you. Come to the court only if you are sure that Rezvan is killed by her husband. To her soul, I won’t get upset.’

Excerpts (7) and (8) show the significance of family members in the Iranian culture to the extent that their lives or spirits are set as oath referents. As Koutlaki (2010, p. 22) asserted, family plays a “major role in Iranians’ daily life and sense of self.” This worldview reflects the cultural schema of FAMILY in the Iranian culture.

Two main oath conditions are referred to in *Qasam* ‘Oath,’ namely the location of taking an oath and the eligible oath takers. As for the location, it is mentioned in *Qasam* ‘Oath’ that the judge has selected Imam Reza Holy Shrine, the shrine of the eighth Imam in Shi’i tradition, to hold the ceremony of oath-taking. This choice reflects the cultural schema of SACRED INDIVIDUALS previously referred to in (5).

The eligible oath-takers are introduced to the audience in a scene in which the family members in the bus are discussing that some of them should take an oath twice so that the sum of oath-takers becomes fifty, as the required

number of oath-takers. Meanwhile, one of the ladies asserted that she would take an oath one hundred times if she was allowed to. Then, the following conversation took place:

(9)

Razieh's brother-in-law:

| | | | | | |
|-------------------|------------|---------------------|--------------|------------------|------------------|
| <i>Ne-mi- še.</i> | <i>zan</i> | <i>ne-mi-toun-e</i> | <i>qasam</i> | <i>bo-xor-e.</i> | <i>qānoun-e.</i> |
| Not-PRS-be.3SG | woman | not-PRS-can-3SG | oath | PRS-eat-3SG | law-be.3SG.PRS |

'You can't. Women cannot take an oath. It's against the law.'

A boy:

| | | | | |
|------------|----------------|---------------|-----------|-----------------|
| <i>Pas</i> | <i>xanum-ā</i> | <i>barāye</i> | <i>çi</i> | <i>umad-an?</i> |
| So | women-PL | for | what.O | come-3PL.PRS? |

'So, why are the women coming with us?'

A man:

| | | |
|--------------|----------------|-----------------|
| <i>Toure</i> | <i>tafrihi</i> | <i>umad-an!</i> |
| Tour-of | recreation | come-3PL.PRS |

'They are coming on a recreational tour.'

Another man:

| | | | | | | | |
|---------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|------------|--------------|---------------|----------------|
| <i>Tafrih</i> | <i>çi-e?</i> | <i>Mašin</i> | <i>xāli</i> | <i>bud</i> | <i>miān</i> | <i>Mašhad</i> | <i>ziārat.</i> |
| Recreation | what-is? | Bus | empty | was | come.3PL.PRS | Mashhad | pilgrimage. |

'What recreation? The bus has some empty seats so they come to visit the Holy Shrine.'

A lady:

| | | | | | |
|---------------|--------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------|
| <i>Faghat</i> | <i>man-o</i> | <i>Rāzieh</i> | <i>ejāze-ye</i> | <i>qasam</i> | <i>dār-im.</i> |
| Only | I-and | Razieh | permission-of | oath | have-1PL.PRS |

'Only me and Razieh are allowed to take an oath.'

Razieh:

| | | | | |
|-----------|------------|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Mā</i> | <i>ham</i> | <i>oliā-ye</i> | <i>dam-im,</i> | <i>mi-tun-im.</i> |
| We | also | avengers-of | blood-be.1PL.PRS, | PRS-can-1PL |

'We are allowed as well since we are avengers of blood.'

Reference to women's lack of having the right to take an oath, which was accompanied by a humiliating comment, reflects the inferiority of women in comparison to men in this scene, hence the cultural category of WOMEN AS INFERIOR GENDER, which was repeated in other scenes ($n = 5$). This categorization is rooted in the belief that, in many cases, women are not equal to men in Iran (cf., Viviani, 2019). However, this cultural conceptualization is modified considering the right dedicated to Rezvan's sisters, as avengers of blood, to take oath in the court.

From what is presented, it can be said that there are three different conceptual layers in relation to the notion of oath-taking in this movie, namely worldview, cultural conceptualizations, and linguistic manifestation of cultural conceptualizations. The first layer, that is worldview, is the fundamental building blocks to construct the second level of

cultural conceptualizations, where the underlying worldview has been narrowed and been associated with a particular experience, image, or event in the form of metaphorization, categorization, and schematization. Finally, the third layer is the linguistic encoding of those cultural conceptualizations, which is manifested in the dialogues in *Qasam ‘Oath.’* More specifically, Iranian people’s worldview takes the form of particular cultural categories, cultural schemas, or cultural metaphors, represented in different wordings of oath-taking. That is, a particular worldview can be represented by different cultural conceptualizations and different linguistic expressions. For instance, the strong belief in Islamic traditions, as a worldview, is conceptualized through the cultural schemas of SACRED INDIVIDUALS, GOD AS WITNESS, SACRED TEXTS, and QIBLAH. The schema of SACRED INDIVIDUALS is reflected in oath-taking practices verbally both as oath referents (e.g., *Be Abolfazl!*) and oath conditions (i.e., taking an oath only in front of Imam Reza Holy Shrine):

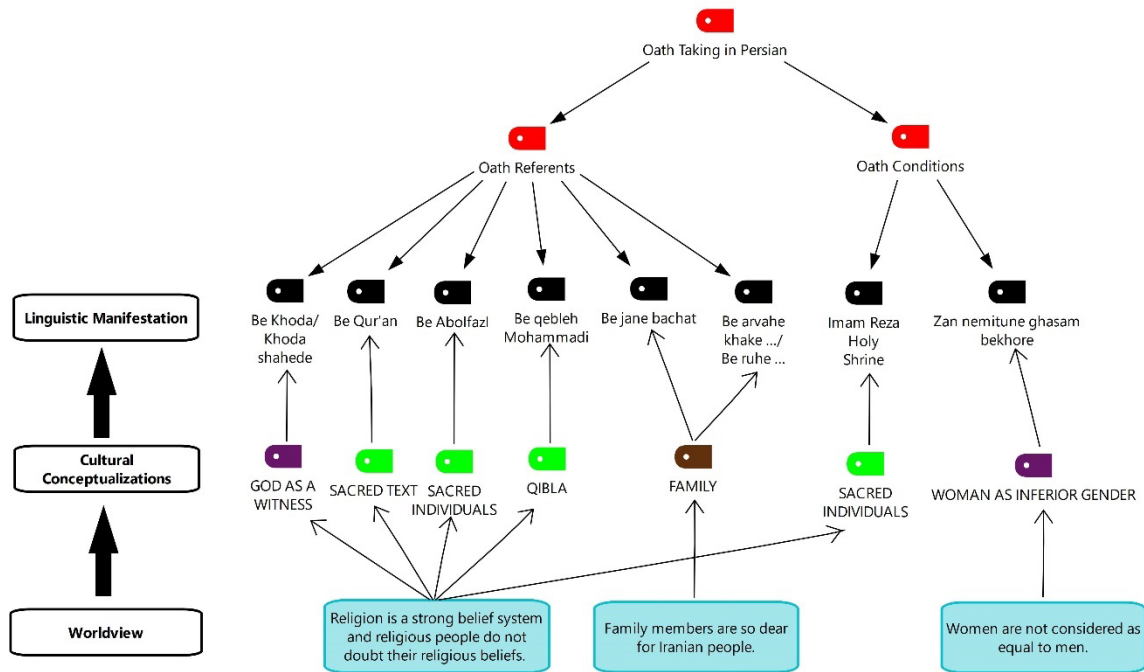


Figure 5. Worldview, Cultural Conceptualizations, and Their Linguistic Manifestations of Oath-Taking in the Film *Qasam ‘Oath’*

5. Discussion

The present study investigated cultural conceptualizations of oath-taking in an Iranian film titled *Qasam ‘Oath.’* As is expected from the title of the film, a number of oaths with varied conditions and referents are used in *Qasam ‘Oath.’* Adopting and implementing Dinh’s (2017) approach to the identification of cultural conceptualizations in texts, three different layers of ‘worldview,’ ‘cultural conceptualizations,’ and ‘linguistic manifestation’ were unveiled with regard to the concept of oath-taking in Persian. Such a bottom-up movement from the underlying worldview active in a speech community to how people actually use them conceptually in their language highlights that language functions as the memory bank of cultural conceptualizations (Sharifian, 2017b). Borrowing Wierzbicka’s (2015, p. 2) words, in such cases “a whole drop of culture [is] condensed into a drop of semantics.” In light of this finding, the present study provides support for the effectiveness of the cultural-linguistic approach to cultural analysis of films. Particularly, in the case of the present study, the cultural-linguistic approach broadens the scope of the previous studies that introduce films as reflections of the culture of a society (e.g., Mallinger & Rossy, 2003; Supiarza, Rachmawanti, & Gunawan, 2020), in that it unveils the underlying cultural cognitions of various Persian oaths. In other words, instead of focusing on the representation of the general notion of culture in films that might be “too abstract to be useful in explicating the relationships that link beliefs and behavior to language use” (Sharifian, 2015, p. 477), cultural linguistics provides an analytical framework that enables researchers to examine in detail the interrelationship among the representation of culture, conceptualizations, and language in films.

As was reported in the findings, some of the conceptualizations are rooted in religion, including the cultural schemas of SACRED INDIVIDUALS, SACRED TEXTS, QIBLAH, and the cultural metaphors of GOD AS WITNESS, and BREAD AS A SCARED ENTITY. Such a resort to sacred issues on the observed oath in *Qasam 'Oath'* is most probably rooted in the religious background of Iranians (Daniel & Mahdi, 2006; Pishghadam & Attaran, 2015; cf., Shimoyama, Shadpayam, & Parhizgari, 2017). Most Iranian people have always had religious orientations and, therefore, they tend to draw upon religious cultural conceptualizations while taking an oath. This finding supports Abd el-Jawad (2000) and Mansouri (2011) who found similar oath referents in the context of Arab countries and Iran, respectively. It seems that the oaths with underlying religious cultural schemas or metaphors provide the oath taker with an induction power to force his or her ideas on the interlocutor(s) (cf., Mercier, 2020) because few people doubt religious beliefs in speech communities with a strong religious worldview, such as Iran. Such a power can be clearly seen in the cultural metaphor of GOD AS WITNESS because the oath-taker sets God as the witness to the action that is being taken an oath on, and no religious person casts doubt upon God's testimony.

Another cultural conceptualization that underlies Persian oaths observed in *Qasam 'Oath'* is the cultural schema of FAMILY. According to the findings of the present study, this cultural schema is drawn upon in oaths with persuasive as well as threatening functions. Echoing the results of Masagara (1997) in the contexts of Africa, the present findings highlight the significance of family members, particularly children and siblings, to Iranian people. According to Koutlaki (2010), for Iranians, family members are of top priority and their lives are the most precious thing in the world. This significance is to the extent that Iranian people take their oaths to the inestimable *life* or *souls* of their parents and children to make their statement acceptable and believable. However, in the African context, according to Masagara (1997), oath-taking to kin members is conceptualized as forbidden and incestuous relationships, which is not at all acceptable for Iranians to verbalize.

The final identified cultural conceptualization in relation to oath-taking in Persian was the cultural category of WOMEN AS INFERIOR GENDER. Drawing upon this cultural category can be ascribed to Islamic laws as the foundation for the oath-taking regulations in Iran, which stipulates that either one man or two women can act as oath-takers, hence equating the testimony of two women to that of one man (*Civil Code of Procedure of Iran*, Clauses, 203, pp. 270-279). However, it must be acknowledged that such legal provisions may not necessarily reflect the conceptualization and attitudes of individuals towards women in contemporary Iran (cf., Talebzadeh, Baziyar, & Ghafar Samar, 2019). This supports Sharifian's (2017b, p. 89) argument stating that cultural conceptualizations encoded in language might be "current in the minds of the speakers of the language," or it is possible that they are "ancient worldviews 'frozen' in the features of the language, with no parallel conscious awareness in the minds of contemporary speakers."

The overuse of oaths with religious and family-related conceptualizations represented in *Qasam 'Oath'* signifies that oath-taking functions as conversation fillers in daily interactions in Iran. Such refunctioning results in taking oaths to God or family members in less severe situations and that, in effect, extenuates religious beliefs among Iranians (cf., Pishghadam & Attaran, 2015). In light of this argument, it can be speculated that the film attempts to criticize oath-taking behavior in the Iranian culture and the Persian language.

6. Conclusion

The present study explored how oath-taking is conceptualized in the Persian language by Iranians as represented in the film titled *Qasam 'Oath.'* Application of the analytical framework of cultural conceptualization reveals three interrelated layers for the realization of the concept of oath-taking, namely worldview, cultural conceptualizations, and linguistic manifestation. The findings of the present study help our understanding of the Iranian culture with respect to oath-taking rituals. Specifically, the results revealed that the characters in the film resorted to different conceptualizations in taking oath-taking, namely the cultural schemas of religion and family as well as the cultural category of women as the inferior gender. However, the frequency of religious oath-taking outweighs that of the other two conceptualizations (i.e., family and the female gender) due to the significant role religion has traditionally played in the life of the Iranians. In fact, the common thread in the findings was the frequent religious conceptualizations of oath (e.g., GOD AS WITNESS, SACRED INDIVIDUALS, SACRED TEXTS, QIBLAH). This prevalent conceptualization in Persian oath-taking highlights that the religious worldview of Iranians has found its way to the pragmatic level of the Persian language. In addition, the findings of the present study unveiled new conceptualizations, namely GOD AS WITNESS, BREAD AS A SCARED ENTITY, and WOMEN AS INFERIOR GENDER that highlights Iranian people's worldview reflected in the oath they take.

The findings of the present study indicate that cultural conceptualization is an appropriate analytical framework to analyze films with regard to culture representation in relation to what Carbaugh's (2007) termed as *hubs of cultural meaning*. The usefulness of this framework lies in modeling conceptualizations in terms of schematization, metaphorization, and categorization that cannot only be realized in different layers of language (including lexical items, discourse, and pragmatics) but also in visuals. Therefore, future researchers can apply this framework in investigating other concepts represented in films both linguistically and visually.

As to the limitations of the present study, because cultural conceptualizations extracted from a film, or a text, might not adequately reflect contemporary conceptualizations of a specific concept, future studies can focus on collecting natural data on the way Iranian people actually engage in oath-taking in different situations and perceive this phenomenon. By conducting comparative analyses between such studies and the present findings one can unveil the extent to which filmmakers accurately depict social realities in the dialogues they write for their films.

Notes

¹According to an Iranian tradition, by the arrival of Norouz (Iranian New Year), Iranian people set a table and decorate it with seven objects beginning with س (s). These objects include *sib* (apple), *sabzeh* (green herbs), *samanu* (a brown paste made of germinated wheat), *serkeh* (vinegar), *somaq* (sumac, a sour spice), *sir* (garlic), and *senjed* (dried lotus fruit). As Koutlaki (2010) reports, “most Iranian Muslims also place the Holy Qur’an on the New Year spread and read a special supplication (Du’â Sâl-e No) in Arabic” (p. 67).

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Author Contributions

Ali Dabbagh: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft

Mohammad Hossein Keshavarz: Overall planning, Writing – reviewing and commenting on the original draft and subsequent revised versions, Glossing the dialogues

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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