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Congratulations across cultures: English versus Armenian and Persian speakers

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Abstract

The proper use of speech acts plays a vital role in the development of pragmatic competence. Whereas some speech acts such as apologies, requests, compliments and complaints have been extensively studied, the speech act of congratulations has not been as widely perused. The present study compared the strategies native Americans utilize for offering congratulations with the ones used by Armenians and Iranians. To this end, the data were gleaned through a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) to which 40 native Americans responded. Analysis of the data revealed several similarities and differences between the three groups which will be discussed in the paper.

Keywords: congratulations; speech act; DCT; English; Armenian; Persian

1. Introduction

Hymes' (1974) notion of communicative competence has become a remarkable landmark in the history of language teaching. Although communicative competence is a suitable model for illustrating how native speakers use language, it fails to consider what is called intercultural competence. Intercultural competence can be defined as the knowledge of communicating appropriately in cross-cultural encounters. In the light of the augmented interest in the notion of English as an international

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language, and taking into account the significance of cultural differences in communication, the present study attempts to make a comparison among three languages of English, Persian, and Armenian with respect to a relatively understudied speech act, i.e. congratulations.

2. Literature Review

Since research has recently shifted attention from grammatical to communicative competence, a growing number of researchers have investigated speech acts performed by speakers of different languages. The premise of all these studies is that learning a new language goes beyond acquiring grammatical knowledge and encompasses the ability to use new vocabulary and grammatical rules in a way that suits the demands of social contexts. As an illustration, if the speaker says "It is cold here", his utterance could imply a request for closing the window, a complaint, or just a statement denoting a fact about weather. Therefore, for the speech act to be successful, it should be taken into account that mere knowledge of linguistics does not suffice and the meaning cannot be acquired through a one-to-one relationship of the form and function. Consequently, L2 learners need to learn categories of speech acts, their contextual distributions as well as their corresponding norms in the culture of the target language (Kasper, 1989).

There is a good number of research investigating different speech acts from a cross-linguistic pragmatics perspective. Several studies have been carried out with the purpose of investigating cross-cultural differences between Persian and English language in terms of the realization of various speech acts. For instance, Afghary (2007) investigated the speech act of apology, EslamiRasekh (2004) is an example of research on complaints. Invitation was another speech act, which was studied by Salmani Nodusahn (2006b) and the speech acts of request and refusal were investigated by a number of researchers such as Jalilfar (2009). However, to the best of our knowledge, there has been no research on the differences between Persian and English language with respect to the speech act of congratulations. Moreover, no researcher has investigated the ways speakers of Armenian language offer their congratulations in different situations.

Based on the early classification of speech acts there exists five major categories such as representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. According to Austin's (1962) categories, congratulations fit into the category of expressives, which express a manifestation of attitudinal disposition.

Although there are a satisfactory number of studies on speech acts, the speech act of congratulation has not received enough attention. There is paucity of research investigating the realization of congratulations across different languages. In a comparative study, Coulmas (1979) investigated the situational frames of participants, setting, why and wherefore, contextual restrictions, and concomitant activity for English *congratulations* and Japanese *omedetogozaimasu*. Elwood (2004) compared the strategies implemented by Americans for offering congratulations in seven situations with the ones Japanese speakers use in the same situations. The results showed that while Americans used less offers of good wishes Japanese speakers were much less likely to use an expression of happiness and make requests for information.

The speaker, moreover, may not be sincere in his/her congratulations. Issac and Clark (1990) referred to the concept of "ostensible congratulations". As an illustration, when the rivals compete in a game, the loser is not wholly glad at the other's good fortune but conveys respect and a lack of resentment through his offer of congratulations.

The present study is an attempt to investigate the speech act of congratulation by making a comparison among three languages; namely, English, Armenian, and Persian with respect to offers of congratulations in four situations (see appendix).

The following questions will be addressed in the study:
1. How do the American English, Armenian, and Persian speakers differ in the frequency and content of semantic formulas in the situations which require congratulations?
2. Is there any shift of semantic formulas on the four situations based on the status of the hearer?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 120 male and female university students: 40 native speakers of Persian, 40 native English speakers, and 40 native Armenians whose age ranged between 19 and 30. The participants were all willing to participate in the study.

3.2. Material

Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was used as the material for collecting the required data. The DCT consisted of four natural situations (see appendix). Similar to other data elicitation methods, DCTs have their own advantages and disadvantages. As Hinkel (1997) aptly stated, although the negotiations elicited from DCTs may not exactly mirror natural utterances between interlocutors they still denote norms of appropriateness.

3.3. Procedure

Prior to collecting the data, 15 speakers were chosen from each of the three languages. They were required to indicate the situations in which they express congratulations. Later, the most frequent situations were chosen as the items of the DCT. The situations included marriage and birth of a baby. According to Nureddeen (2008), there are different levels of social distance which represent different degrees of familiarity between participants.Closeness (situation1), distant relationship (situation4), and a middle status of social distance represented by acquaintances (situations 2&3). Power was also represented by three levels: high-low (situation3), low-high (situation 2), and equal (situations 1&4).

The unique social context represented in each situation aimed at eliciting various strategies.

4. Data Analysis and Results

After analyzing the obtained data, we followed Elwood (2004) for classifying our strategies. However, due to the existence of some new strategies in our data some modifications were applied in Elwood's model. As an illustration, we classified wishing or expressing hope for someone's happiness, contrary to Elwood's model, as one of the main strategies. Moreover, in some situations the Persian speakers had asked the hearer to give him/her some sweets (it is part of the Persian culture to distribute some sweets among friends or relatives when something good happens). Therefore, this strategy was added to Elwood's list. Consequently, the following category of strategies was put forward:
I. illocutionary force indicating device (IFID)
II. expression of happiness
a. expression of personal happiness

b. statements assessing the situation positively
III. an offer of good wishes
IV. request for information
V. sweets
VI. self-related comments: an expression of envy and longing
VII. joke

It is beyond the scope of this study to have a thorough analysis of each semantic formula; therefore, we are going to discuss the main points.

4.1. Frequency of semantic formulas

Table 1 depicts the frequency of semantic formulas used for the speech act of congratulations in the four situations.

Table1. Frequency and shift of semantic formulas used by the three groups of respondents in each situation (1,2,3,4)

Semantic formulas	American English				Armenian				Persian			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
IFID	50	100	80	75	46	61	53	61	54	48	88	80
Expression of happiness	25	0	0	16	23	15	25	07	12	08	06	05
An offer of good wishes	25	25	0	0	61	46	53	30	51	40	10	12
Request for information	23	10	41	18	07	0	07	0	36	04	36	0
Sweets	0	0	0	0	05	0	0	0	06	04	04	02
Self-related comments	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	0	04	0
Joke	0	0	0	0	0	07	0	0	16	0	0	0

*The situations are shown by numbers 1-4

The most frequent formula, as table 1 indicates, was that of *IFID*. One of the semantic formulas observed among the Armenians and Persians was *asking the hearer for the sweets*. In their culture, when a person hears another one's good news such as marriage he/she asks the hearer for sweets by using questions such as:
Nemixai be ma shirinibedi? (Don't you want to give us sweets?)

Another strategy which was found among the Armenian and Persian respondents is the use of humorous statements which was not observed in the American data.

As table 1 shows, the most salient formula among all groups is the *IFID*. The second most frequent formula for the Armenian and Persian speakers is that of *offer of good wishes* but it was the *request for information* for the Americans. The most salient difference among the groups was related to *offer of good wishes* which had the highest frequency among the Armenians and the lowest frequency among the Americans. Another important difference among the groups, as the table indicates, is that of request for

information which the Armenians used significantly less than the other groups. Overall, based on the results of this study one can infer that for the Americans *IFID, request for information* and *expression of happiness* were the three most frequent formulas, while it was *IFID*, *offer of good wishes*, and *request for information* for Armenians and Persians.

4.2. Shift of semantic formulas

Having a look at table 1, one can find out that *offer of good wishes* shifted in frequency based on the status of the hearer. Americans utilized this strategy when addressing hearers of equal and higher status. Although the fourth situation was also related to a hearer of equal status, the social distance present in this situation impeded the speakers from the use of such formulas. As for the *request for information,* the Americans were sensitive to the status of the hearer. In other words, 41% of the Americans asked some questions when congratulating hearers of lower status, while only 10% requested for information in the second situation, which addressed a person of higher status. Thus, it appears that the Americans were sensitive to the status level.

The Armenian participants' data also revealed their sensitivity to the status level of the hearer, though in a reverse direction, i.e., they used more offers of good wishes for the lower status hearer. However, for asking questions, all groups asked the most questions when addressing the low status hearer. In contrast to Armenians, Persians were seen to offer good wishes more when talking to a higher person and less when addressing a person of lower status. Therefore, shift of semantic formulas based on the status of the hearer was observed among all groups.

4.3. Content of semantic formula

IFIDs provide interesting examples of different realizations of the same semantic formula in different languages. As an illustration, a culturally specific IFID was observed by Persian speakers when congratulating a person on having a new baby. They say "Cheshmetroshan" which can be literally translated as "May your eyes be bright". As for the offer of good wishes for someone's marriage Persians would say "Be paye ham pirbeshid", literally translated as "may you become old together". Armenians, on the other hand, were observed to use cultural-specific expressions in the situations related to news of marriage:
May you become old on the same pillow!
Other observed differences were not noticeable and we ignore them here for reasons of space.

5. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

In this paper, the speech act of congratulations was investigated cross-culturally by making a comparison among the three groups of American English, Armenian, and Persian. Our findings revealed that *IFID, request for information* and *offer of good wishes* were the most frequent formulas utilized by the American participants. This is in contrast with Elwood (2004) who found *IFID, expression of happiness, and self-related comments* as the most frequent strategies. This difference may be partly due to the fact that the situations of this study were not the same as the ones used by Elwood. More patterns of similarity were spotted between the Persian and Armenian groups. Both groups had the IFID and *offer of good wishes* as the most frequent semantic formulas. However, Armenians' third formula, in terms of frequency of use, was *expression of happiness* while it was *request for information* for the Persian speakers. Asking for sweets and utilizing humorous statements were the strategies, which, although with a low percentage, were only observed among the Persian and Armenian data. Sensitivity to the status of the hearer was found as a determining factor in the choice of strategies among all the three groups. All groups

used more requests for information when addressing the hearers of lower social status. The frequency of *offers of good wishes* was higher among the American and Persian respondents in the situations, which require an offer of congratulations to the hearers of higher social status.

Although such a simple comparison does not lead us to conclusive statements about the differences and similarities among the three groups, it support Wierzbicka's (1985b) position that speech acts are language-dependent and are based on culture specific communicative routines.

The present study may shed lights on the cross-cultural similarities and disparities with regards to the speech act of congratulations. Considering the limitations of the study such as the number of situations and lack of natural data, there will be windows of opportunity for other investigators. The study provides implications for language teachers and syllabus designers. In a communicative syllabus, the syllabus designers and material providers should consider the differences between the target language and the learners' first language. To be successful in the production as well as understanding of speech acts, second language learners require the knowledge of speech act categories and their relevant norms in the culture of the target language.

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Appendix A: (the English DCT)

Instruction: Please read the following situations. After each situation you will be asked to write a response in the blank in order to congratulate a person. Please respond as naturally as possible and try to write your response as you feel you would say it in the situation. The data will be used for research purposes only.

1. While waiting in the bus stop, you see one of your friends. It's a long time you haven't seen him/her.

You: hey, how are you? How is everything with you?

Your friend: Well, my big news is that I got married three months ago.

You:………

2. You are an employee in a company and you have been informed that your employer got married recently. At noon, you see your employer and you want to congratulate him/her.

You say:…………

3. You are a clerk. You see the janitor of the office.

You: you weren't at work for a few days. What's up?

Janitor: Well, my child was born three days ago!

You say:……..

4. You work in a company. While working in your office Mr. X with whom you are not intimate enters and wants to speak with your colleague at the same office. Your colleague says: Mr. X's child was born yesterday. You say to Mr.X:………

<div align="center">Thanks for your time and effort</div>