

# The Persian Side of Face

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Iran is one of the guiding nations in the Middle East that has an enlightenment history both in culture and civilization, but has not received much attention in the area of communication. Face is a central concept in communication and the concept of face relates to the picture that people project of them to the world. According to Erving Goffman, it is their most intimate and valuable possession, the source of their security and pleasure, but it does not belong to them unconditionally. It is lent to them by society on condition that they behave in ways appropriate to the face they project. He also spotlights the protective of one toward the speaker's own face and toward the face of others, which is frequently simultaneous, even in the case that one of them may be more predominant at times.

In Persian, politeness has a very strong normative aspect and Iranian's face has two main aspects and managing polite communication in Persian needs consideration for both aspects and for both interlocutors:

- *Shakhsiat*: personality, social standing, self and others respect.
- *Âberu*: respect, credit, prestige, honour.

Although the concept of face is claimed to be universal (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Spencer-Oatey 2000), research has revealed significant cross-cultural dissimilarities in the nature and the commonness of the concept (e.g., Hill et al 1986; Ide 1989; Matsumoto 1988). Brown and Levinson consider face in the context of politeness, and identify two aspects, positive and negative. Based on the pioneering works done by Salmani Nodoushan (1995, 2006a), this paper is going to argue that their model of politeness cannot account satisfactorily for the Persian data collected for this research and that a more broad-ranging frame needs to be conceptualized to present a picture of Persian notion of Face.

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**Keywords:** Face; Politeness; Persian; Communication

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## Introduction

The idea of this investigation has been formed by seminal politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) and 'face' concept. This research set out to discover whether, and to what extent, the notion of 'face' applied to Persian communication.

The method for this research is ethnographic tradition, and my sister was asked to tape-record spontaneous conversation in an acquaintance gathering for the duration of 3.5 hours in Tehran, Iran. The data had been transcribed and analyzed. The participants belonged to a different range of ages and educational and professional backgrounds.

In case of data analysis, a complicated picture of Iranian politeness and face came up, in which certain features of Brown and Levinson's theory appeared to have little relation in Iranian face notion in communication. But the more important issue that should be considered is that Persian face comprising two interrelated aspects, *Shakhsiat* and *Ehteram* (also referred as *Aberu*). Although the first one is more individual based and the second is more dynamic, both should be counted into full realization in interaction.

## The Concept of 'Face' in the Literature and Iranian Culture

Goffman's (1972) concept of face can be applied to the description of face in Persian communication, as it described 'face' as an individual's 'most personal possession and the

center of his security and pleasure'. Although face belongs to the individual, it 'is only on loan to him from society'; it will be taken away from him if he, through inappropriate behavior, shows he is unworthy of it (Goffman, 1972:322).

An individual's position in society places certain limitations on behavior, in order to manifest face, a person is expected to live up to their self-image, to show self-respect and not to carry out actions or take part in activities that are out of keeping with that self-image (Goffman, 1967:7). Such limitations in behavior stem from pride ('from duty to himself' Goffman, 1967:9) or honour and, in effect, render the individual his own 'jailer', albeit in a cell of his liking (Goffman, 1972: 9-10). In the same way that an individual is concerned with his or her own face, s/he is also expected to show consideration for others' faces and to work towards upholding their faces because s/he identifies emotionally with them and their feelings (Goffman, 1972: 9-10).

Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) seminal politeness theory turning to Goffman's ideas, defined as 'the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself'. On the basis of this universal theory, face consists of two aspects, negative and positive face, defined respectively as a model person's 'want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded,' (Brown and Levinson, 1987:129) and '[his] perennial desire that wants (or the actions/ acquisitions/values resulting from them) should be thought of as desirable' (Brown and Levinson, 1987:101). In polite communication, strategies applied to redress interlocutor's negative or positive threatens face.

Although Goffman was not concerned with politeness, his 1959 work introduced the concept of face, which became the basis of Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) most influential and comprehensive theory of politeness. Goffman conceptualized 'face' as a person's 'most personal possession and the center of his security and pleasure', which, however, 'is only loan to him from society' and 'it will withdrawn unless he conducts himself in a way that is worthy of it' (Goffman, 1972:322).

Similar to Goffman's pride and honour, Persian face consists of two sides: *Shakhsiat* ('personality', 'character', 'self-respect', 'social standing') and *Ehteram* ('respect', 'esteem', 'dignity'). It was argued by Koutlaki (2009) that *Shakhsiat*, despite some differences, is similar to Brown and Levinson's notion of positive face. The main difference is that Brown and Levinson's notion of positive face refers to an individual's want to be desired, respected and liked, and his want shared by others; in other words, it is rooted in the individual (Koutlaki, 2009). Conversely, the Iranian concept does not detach of the group and pick up the real meaning in connection with it. However, it is worthy to mention that *Ehteram* is almost ever-present in Iranian interaction and it is often, although not always, dependent upon a person's *Shakhsiat*. In other words, a speaker addressing an interlocutor of a high social position or educational background (high perceived *Shakhsiat* ) will show a high degree of *Ehteram* too. Though, this does not mean that a person of a lower social standing will not receive *Ehteram*. Koutlaki (2009), postulate that *Ehteram* is one of the primary inspirations behind polite behavior in Persian.

Face can be threatened, lost or enhanced in interaction and, following on from Goffman's description of face, every rational person is interested in maintaining or enhancing an interlocutor's face in order to have his face similarly maintained or enhanced and the greater the risk of face loss involved, the higher numbered strategy will be chosen by a speaker. Face-threatening acts (FTAs), acts that inherently damage the face of the addressee or the speaker by acting in opposition to the wants and desire of the other, are at times inevitable based on the terms of conversation.

### **Negative face-threatening acts**

When negative face is threatened, freedom of choice and action are impeded. For example an act that affirms or denies a future act of the hearer creates pressure on the hearer to either perform or not perform the act. Examples: orders, requests, suggestions, advice, reminding, threats, or warnings. Or those acts that expresses the speaker's sentiments of the hearer or the hearer's belongings. Instances: compliments, expressions of envy or admiration, or expression of strong negative emotion toward the hearer (hatred, anger, lust). Offers and

promises can also be FTAs if the pressure has been put on the hearer to accept or reject the act and possibly incur a debt.

### **Positive face-threatening acts**

Positive face is threatened when the speaker or hearer does not care about their interlocutor's feelings, wants, or does not act what the other wants, positive face threatening can also cause damage to the speaker or hearer. When an individual is forced to separate from others so that their well being is treated less importantly, positive face is threatened. For example, an act that expresses the speaker's negative assessment of the hearer's positive faces or an element of his/her positive face. The speaker can display this disapproval in two ways. The first approach is for the speaker to directly or indirectly indicate that dislikes some aspects of the hearer's possessions, desires, or personal attributes. The second approach is for the speaker to express disapproval by stating or implying that the hearer is wrong, irrational, or misguided. Examples: expression of disapproval (e.g. insults, accusations, complaints), contradiction, disagreements, or challenges. Those acts that expresses the speaker's indifference toward the addressee's positive face. The addressee might be embarrassed for or fear the speaker. Examples: excessively emotional expressions or the speaker indicates that he does not have the same values or fears as the hearer: disrespect, mention of topics which are inappropriate or in the context. Belittling or boasting when the speaker indicates that he is willing to disregard the emotional well being of the hearer.

The speaker increases the possibility that a face-threatening act will occur. This situation is created when a topic is brought up by the speaker that is a sensitive societal subject. For example, topics that relate to politics, race, religion. The speaker indicates that he is indifferent to the positive face wants of the hearer. This is most often expressed in obvious non-cooperative behavior. Instance: interrupting, non-sequiturs.

FTAs can be either accidentally or intentionally: the speaker misidentifies the hearer in an offensive or embarrassing way. Generally, this refers to the misuse of the address terms in relation to status, gender, or age. Example: addressing a young woman as "ma'am" instead of "miss".

In polite communication, every act that potentially threatens face is usually accompanied by strategies directed at redressing interlocutor's negative or positive face. After several criticisms made by researchers of different cultures (de Kadt 1998; Hill et al., 1986; Ide, 1989; Koutlaki, 1997; 2002, Mao, 1994; Matsumoto, 1988; 1989; Nwoye, 1992), at the notion of negative face, ongoing thoughts favour the revising and reconsidering of Goffman's concept of face (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003), which, being dependent on others, 'is only realized in social interaction' (Watts, 2003: 107) and is therefore mutually constructed (de Kadt, 1998: 176) or co-constituted (Arundal, 2006: 196) rather than being rooted in the individual, as Brown and Levinson postulate.

### **Data description and analysis**

The approach applied for this study, ethnography approach, initially employed by researchers of anthropology, which means direct observation of linguistic practices of a community without any intervention on the part of the researcher. Ethnographic approach adopted through recording of naturally-occurring conversations in an acquainted family gathering in Tehran. The speakers represented different range of backgrounds and ages.

In this study, I was not present in the gathering, where the participants being aware they had been recorded on their normal interactions. The focus of this study has not been gender or age differences in politeness patterns, but in some examples some information relating to the interlocutors gender and age has been supplied, so the reader can have a clear picture in the mind. Analyzing the conversations, have led into the description of the notion of *Tarooft*, some issues of social values in Iranian community, the perception of face and politeness system, and the analysis of the components of Persian face.

### **Tarooft**

The pioneering researcher who studied tarooft in Persian was Salmani Nodoushan (1995, 2006a), who distinguished between ostensible invitation, insincere invitations or Tarooft, and

sincere invitations. This enabled him to conduct a good number of studies in other areas of Persian communication including Greetings (Salmani Nodoushan 2006b), complaints (Salmani Nodoushan 2007a,b, 2008a), requests (Salmani Nodoushan 2007c, Salmani Nodoushan & Allami 2011), genre analysis (Salmani Nodoushan 2011, Bhatia & Salmani Nodoushan 2015), death rites (Salmani Nodoushan 2013a, 2016), reported speech (Capone & Salmani Nodoushan 2014, Salmani Nodoushan, 2015), and refusals (2016b)—(See also Salmani Nodoushan 2007c, 2008b, 2012, 2013b, 2014a,b,c, 2015b).

Several other authors have noted the importance of the notion of *Tarooft* in Persian, as an applicable communicative strategy (Koutlaki, 2002; Hodge, 1957; Hillmann, 1981; Asdjodi, 2001; Assadi, 1980; Eslami Rasekh, 2005). *Tarooft* can be regarded as a cultural schema that forms a large part of everyday social interactions in Persian. “Its realization in conversations may be in the form of ‘ostensible’ invitations, repeated rejection of offers, insisting on making offers, hesitation in making requests, giving frequent compliments, hesitation in making complaints, etc. (Sharifian, 2011)”. Even in a single conversation, all the parties may use of a combination of these realizations in different degrees, although it can be not a genuine communicative act. That is why speakers constantly ask each other not to engage in *Tarooft*. The following extract is from the tap-recorded data from an acquainted gathering in Tehran, Iran, (note: H stands for host and G stands for guest):

H: *Az in salad ham befarmayin.*

From this salad eat:polite.form  
‘Please test this salad as well.’

G: *Mamnoon sarf shodeh.*

Thanks I have.had  
‘Thanks, I have had some.’

H: *To ro khoda befarmayin,ghabel-e shoma ra nadareh.*

For God’s eat:polite.form , worthy-of you it.is.not  
‘For God’s sake have some. They are not worthy of you.’

G: *Sahebash ghabel-e, dast-e-toon dard nakoneh.*

The.owner worthy-is, hand-of-your pain doesn’t  
‘You are worthy, thanks.’

H: *Shoma k chizi nakhordin, befarmayin, namk nadareh.*

You nothing eat, eat:polite.form, salt doesn’t have  
‘You eat nothing, please have some, it has no salt’.

G: *Tarooft nemikonam, kheyli khordam.*

Tarooft don’t-I, eat a lot-I  
‘I don’t do Tarooft, I eat a lot’.

H: *Ye ghashogh be oonjaha nemikhoreh.*

One spoon is not too much  
‘One more spoon wouldn’t be that much.’

G: *Chashm, dast-e-toon o kootah nemikonam.*

Ok hand-of-your marker short will-not-I  
‘Ok, I won’t turn down your offer.’

Sharifian (2011), explained the general aim of the cultural schema of *Tarooft* as “to create a form of social space for speakers to exercise face work and also to provide communicative tools to negotiate and lubricate social relationships”. Besides, the interlocutors have chance to construct certain identities and social image, for example as a welcoming, helpful or open-handed and sociable.

Various labels had been used to describe *Tarooft* concept in English, “including ‘communicative routine’ (Koutlaki, 2002: 1741), ‘ritual courtesy’ (Beeman, 1986:56), ‘ritual politeness’ (Koutlaki, 2002:1740), and ‘polite verbal wrestling’ (Rafiee, 1992:96), cited in Sharifian, 2011: 145.

*Tarooif* is closely tied to the concept of *Shakhsiat*, which has been translated into English as ‘character’, ‘personality’, ‘pride’. Koutlaki (2002:1742) defined *Shakhsiat* as “a complex concept which could be rendered as ‘personality’, ‘character’, ‘honour’, ‘self-respect’, ‘social standing’”. She relates *Shakhsiat* to politeness and believes who observe politeness is considered to have *Shakhsiat*. It is also depending on variables such as family background, level of education, social status, financial level, etc. *Shakhsiat* ties to *Tarooif* in the sense that applying *Tarooif* as an appropriate communicative strategy is an indication of heightened *Shakhsiat*. Unlike *Aberu*, which, is conceptualized as a social image and status of person and/or family and friends/ social norms/ relationship and networks, *Shakhsiat* is constructed as a result of individual endeavor at constructing socially acceptable image of person in the eyes of others. By exercising appropriate communicative strategy, *Tarooif*, one can gain *Shakhsiat* and by not applying it correctly, one can lose it. So, *Shakhsiat* is a dynamic concept.

Koutlaki (2002) quoted that giving *Shakhsiat* “to an addressee has to do with society’s injunctions about paying face, and also with group face wants.” As it is recognized by her, *Shakhsiat* is something that a speaker can give or get from the addressee. Following is an excerpt from the leave-taking conversation in the mentioned gathering, in which the interlocutors tried to keep up their own *Shakhsiat* by also maintaining the other interlocutor’s *Shakhsiat* too.

G: *Bebakhshid zahmat dadim.*

Forgive trouble gave-we  
‘Sorry for giving you a trouble’.

H: *In che harfiyeh, Khahesh mikonam, inja manzele khodetone.*

What statement, please, here house yours-is  
‘Do not mention it. Please, it is your house.’

G: *Merci babate zahamat-I ke baray sargarmi bache-ha keshid-id.*

Thanks for troubles-the that for entertainment kids went.through-you  
‘Thanks, for entertaining the kids’.

*Ham-e ja ro ham be ham rikhtan, jamojuram nakardim.*

Everywhere mess up-they, tidy-up-too not did  
‘They did mess everywhere, I didn’t even help you tidy up’.

H: *Ey baba, bache-an dg, bebakhshin age bad gozasht.*

Oh, kids they-are, you forgive if bad passed  
‘Oh, no problem. They are just little kids. I am sorry if you had a bad time’.  
*Az kadoye ghashangeton ham kheyli mamnoon.*  
From present nice-of-you very thanks  
‘Thank you for your lovely present’.

G: *khahesh mikonam, in ghabeli nadare, khahesh mikonam.*

Request I-do, this worth not, has request I-do  
‘You are welcome, it was nothing really, you are welcome’.

H: *Zahmat keshidin.*

Trouble you took  
‘Thank you for coming’.

G: *Zahmat dadim, Shoma ham tashrif biarin.*

Trouble we-gave, you anyway honor you bring  
‘Sorry for the trouble, but you will also come’.

H: *bashe, enshallah.*

Let-it-be, God willing  
‘Okay, hopefully’.

G: *Khob dg, Khoda hafex.*

Well, God protector  
‘Well, bye then’.

H: *B-e salamat, khosh omodin.*

In good health, well come-you  
'Goodbye, you are welcome'.

Very many apologies developed by the host and the guests in utterances, which set up a complex facework sequence. Guests expanded superficial apologies for the trouble they have given for their visit. The hosts also expressed nominally apologies for the bad time the guests have spent with them. The net result of this compounded interaction is that all participants tried to pay face both to the other interlocutors and themselves at the same time.

Other various politeness strategies applied simultaneously by Persian interactors to develop and keep face. The example provides from the extract of the taped- conversation, when the hostess asked the guests to join for the dinner:

H: *Befarma-id sar-e miz ta az dahan nayoftadeh,*  
Please-you to the table since it mouth not-fall  
'Please start, since it does not become cold,'  
*Albatte be ghazaha-ye Nasim joon k nemireses.*  
Surely at foods Nasim dear does-not reach.  
'Surely this is not as good as dear Nasim's cooking'.

G: *Ekhtiar darid, ma-ro sharmandeh mikonid.*  
Freedom have-you, us embarrass do-you  
'You are free to say anything you like, but what you say embarrasses me'.

H utterances can be regarded both as praise and a practice of apology because she presents the guest's cooking as superior to hers and exhibit her humility. The motive behind this utterance is to raise the guest in deference and expecting the enhancement of both (the guest and her own) faces. Consequently, the guest's response reflects the host satisfaction in function.

In Persian, even though a speaker humbles himself by elevating an interlocutor, he does not expect the interlocutor to confirm the compliment. In this occasion the same occurs on behalf of the interlocutor: he also elevating the speaker by humbling his self.

A very usual response to such a compliment is *ekhtiar darid* which means "you are free to say anything you like, (but the compliment is not true)". The interesting point is that Iranians characterize a speaker haughty and impolite if he accept a compliment and says thanks!

### **Implications and conclusion**

The present work tried to illustrate important triads of Persian facework. The Persian face is realized and worked out through verbal behaviors, which had been taped-recorded in an acquaintance gathering in Tehran, Iran. The discussion is based on Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory due to the fact that it is the most complete account of politeness theory, which, unlike previous theories, it also recognizes politeness as intrinsically related to 'face', which defined as 'the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself' (1987:61).

As cited in Koutlaki (1997), the fact that politeness is closely linked with face considerations has been confirmed by research on many cultures like Chinese (Gu, 1990, Chen 1993, Mao, 1994), Japanese (Matsumoto, 1988, 1989, 1989, Ide, 1989, Hill et al, 1986), Greek ( Sifianou, 197, 1992, 1993) and Igbo of Nigeria (Nwoye, 1992). Brown and Levinson's 'face' construction is deeply generated in an individual's desires, while Persian face (*Shakhsiat*) does not only rooted in one's individual positive or negative face wants. Persian face recognized as "collectivist" by Koutlaki (1997), since it underpins all social relationship and communication among speakers. So, it also includes group face wants, which can be maintained, enhanced or lost through adherence to agreed social conventions.

As it has been shown in extracts, in Persian, some speech acts which have been characterized as Face Threatening Acts (FATs) by Brown and Levinson function as Face Enhancing Acts. According to Brown and Levinson acts like offers, compliments, expression of thanks, unwilling offers, and apologies threaten the addressee's or speaker's face. But it is not the case in Persian. These acts are used to maintain interactants' and their extended group's face.

One of the most important verbal ritual politenesses in Persian is *Tarooif*, which has been examined in this paper, attend to a speaker's face, his family and group's face, and also very importantly, to an addressee's and his family/group's face simultaneously. That's why the discussion of Iranian face is corresponds to Goffman's (1967) views, in which he described face as two-sided. As it has been shown in the extracts, the Persian participants in the conversations operated with consideration towards their own face and at the same time other's face. So, as an individual tries to maintain his face, he is also aware that he is expected to try to preserve other's faces. The other side of the face based on Goffman's (1967) conceptualization of face is related to a person's face that is on loan to him from society: "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact". Iranian society is a collectivist society. So, it is rational to accept the fact that the individual cannot hold on to his face and others without adhering to social norms and avoiding blame worthy behaviors. Thus, Persian native speakers experience politeness by adhering to social conventions and attending to both an individual's and group face wants. Positive and negative face wants are not beginning and end of Persian face. Rather it established by conformity to the social norms and correct socialization.

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