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## Research Paper

# Sarcasm Is the Key: A Gender-Based Study of Impoliteness Strategies in Persian and American Comedy Series

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## Abstract

Having their own unique characteristics, interactions in everyday communications are categorized as culture-dependent and universal. Whereas politeness and impoliteness, in general, are universal characteristics of interactions, they are considered to be culture-sensitive and gender-based. Although in recent years there has been an increasing interest in impoliteness and gender, little attention has been paid to the relationship between them across cultures. Therefore, the current study set out to investigate different impoliteness strategies employed by Persian and American male and female characters of 2 popular comedy series. The Persian comedy was regarded as a facsimile of its American counterpart. Analysis of the series helped develop a comprehensive framework in relation to the functions of impoliteness strategies. Findings suggested that both Persian and American male and female characters used sarcasm as their key tool mostly to spoil and ridicule the hearer. Findings showed that American male and female characters do not speak completely differently; however, Persian male and female actors exploit sarcasm to circumvent the religious and cultural limitations.

**Keywords:** Impoliteness Strategies; Gender; Comedy Series; Modern Family; Haft Sang

## 1. Introduction

Politeness and impoliteness are significant characteristics of everyday communication. Politeness is normally perceived as a series of social practices of good manners (Rong, 2009). More particularly, it is regarded as the actions taken by competent speakers in a community in order to attend to possible social or interpersonal disturbances (Meyerhoff, 2006). Politeness theories have focused on “how communicative strategies are employed to promote or maintain social harmony in interaction” (Culpeper, 1996, p. 349). On the other hand, impoliteness is defined as “the use of communicative strategies designed to attack face, and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony” (Culpeper, Bousfield, & Wichmann, 2003, p. 1545). In his early work, Culpeper (1996) examined the impoliteness strategies in the documentary *Soldier Girls*. He found two reasons for exploiting the impoliteness strategies in army recruit training discourse: first, the role of power in being impolite and, second, the existence of particular training philosophy (Culpeper, 1996). Based on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory, Culpeper classified the impoliteness strategies as bold-on-record impoliteness strategy, positive impoliteness strategy, negative impoliteness strategy, mock politeness (sarcasm), and withhold impoliteness strategy. He concluded that, in some circumstances, especially army training, impoliteness plays a key role, and an appropriate descriptive framework is needed in order to account for it.

In another study, revisiting Culpeper’s (1996) framework of impoliteness, Culpeper and his colleagues (Culpeper, et.al, 2003) used television documentary of disputes between traffic wardens and car owners as the main source of the data collection. They argued that “for impoliteness to be fully appreciated we need to move beyond the single strategy and examine both how impoliteness pans out in extended discourse and the role of prosody in conveying impoliteness” (Culpeper et.al, 2003, p. 1545).



One important aspect of politeness and impoliteness theories is the concept of *face*. Brown and Levinson refer to face as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 66). They also maintain that “face” has two aspects: (1) “Negative face means the right to freedom of action and freedom from imposition, and (2) positive face refers to the need to be appreciated by others and to maintain a positive self-image” (Black, 2006, p. 72). In relation to impoliteness and face, it is argued that the “definition of impoliteness tends to lean either toward the notion of face or the notion of social norms” (Culpeper, 2011, p. 47).

Owing to the importance of impoliteness, many studies have focused on the impoliteness strategies in television programs. For instance, in one study, *The Opposite Direction*, a television debate handling current events in the Middle East and the Arab world was examined in order to find frequent strategies exploited by interlocutors (Al-Dilaimy & Shahooth Khalaf, 2015). They argued that interlocutors resort to certain aggressive strategies (i.e., bold on record impoliteness, mock impoliteness, negative impoliteness, ignorance, showing disinterest and unconcern, using imperatives and direct sarcastic questions that do not seek answers, accusations and ridiculing and using profane language) to attack each other’s face in an attempt to hold the floor and instigate the other interviewee to react in a more offensive manner.

Focusing on the impoliteness strategies used by the characters of *Grey’s Anatomy* episode *Hard Day’s Night*, Sari (2011) concluded that bold on record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, and sarcasm were the strategies used by the characters. Sari found three types of patterns in the data: offensive-affirmative, offensive-defensive, and offensive-offensive. Along the same lines, Jalilifar and Karimi (2015) investigated the impoliteness strategies exploited by different characters in an American movie, *Crash*, and a Persian movie, *The Incident*. They found that whereas the American female and male characters had used the positive impoliteness strategies frequently in their exchanges, their Iranian counterparts mainly had relied on the mock politeness strategies.

Though sexist language seems to have been an established fact in sociolinguistic studies of conversation (e.g., Hey, 1999; Lakoff, 1990), the relationship between impoliteness and gender is not well grounded (Wei, 2013) and studies tend to overlook this very important area of inquiry. Furthermore, in spite of the wealth of studies conducted in the area of impoliteness (e.g., Haugh, 2010; Mugford, 2008; Rong, 2009), comparative studies on the impoliteness strategies have hardly been in the limelight of the researchers (Culpeper, 1996). These studies have not escaped criticisms for the paucity of attention to different aspects of impoliteness and variables like gender, age, social status, education, and cultural strategies despite the significant role they play in real and surreal (e.g., TV series or movies) interactions (Bousfield, 2008), leaving this area of research as another frontier to be discovered by researchers. Accordingly, the current study set out to investigate any possible differences in exploiting the impoliteness strategies between Persian-speaking Iranian and English-speaking American male and female actors in two popular television series, namely, *Haft Sang* (literally meaning, *Seven Stones*, a children’s game), and *Modern Family*. This study, thus, sought to answer the following questions:

1. What impoliteness strategies are frequently used by Iranian and American male and female characters in the abovementioned television series?
2. To what extent does gender have a bearing on impoliteness strategies use in the abovementioned television series?

## 2. Methodology

The present study adopted a multimethods design to compare the data both qualitatively and quantitatively. We started with different excerpts of the series to provide a qualitative account and, then, a quantitative analysis was conducted to present a more comprehensive image of how impoliteness works in the sample of television series.

### 2.1. Comedy Series

In order to gather the most “natural-like” data (Nemati & Bayer, 2007, p. 185), two Persian and American comedy series were chosen for this study: The Persian *Haft Sang* and the American *Modern Family*. *Haft Sang* or *Lagoori*, meaning a children’s game, produced in 2014, revolves around the lives of a couple of families with different histories. It is a 25-episode series, each episode lasts around 40 to 50 min long. The American counterpart, *Modern Family*, premiering on ABC in 2009, follows the lives of Jay Pritchett and his family in suburban Los Angeles. Featuring 8 seasons, *Modern Family*’s episodes last about 22 min. To have an equal sample, 22 episodes of each series were watched. The main criterion for choosing the movies was their standing in The Internet Movie Database (IMDb), which is claimed

to be “the world’s most popular and authoritative source for movies, offering a searchable database which includes more than two million films, television and entertainment programs and attracting more than 150 million unique monthly visitors” (Boyle, 2014, p. 31). A further reason in choosing these series was that the Iranian *Haft Sang* is a facsimile of *Modern Family*, with the same stage directions, props, and sight gags (Kedmey, 2014). It is also believed that “the advantage of choosing a television series to study offensive language is that it is possible to study the language over a period of time, within a changing context” (Pillière, 2013, p. 60).

## 2.2. Analytical Framework

Following Brown and Levinson’s (1987) framework of politeness strategies, Culpeper (1996) developed a model of the impoliteness strategies that caters for communicative strategies of attacking one’s interlocutor and causing disharmony. The study, therefore, took Culpeper’s impoliteness strategies as the basis for textual analysis. Being a comprehensive model, the framework categorizes the impoliteness strategies as follows: (1) Bold on record (the face-threatening act [FTA]) is performed in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way in circumstances where face is not irrelevant or minimized, (2) positive impoliteness (the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee’s positive face wants), (3) negative impoliteness (the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee’s negative face wants), (4) sarcasm or mock politeness (the FTA is performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere and, thus, remain surface realizations, and (5) withhold politeness (the absence of politeness work where it would be expected; Culpeper, 1996). Note the following examples (underlined and *italicized*) for further clarification. The impoliteness categories appear in **bold** type:

### # 1: Haft Sang

Amir: 12 gereftam!

(I got 12!)

Leila (his mother): Manzooret chie! Chera telegraph mizani?

(What do you mean? Are you telegraphing?; **sarcasm**)

Amir: Silence.

Shadi: Afarin pesaram! Pishraft kardi!

(Good boy! You have improved!; **sarcasm**)

Amir: Silence.

Leila to Shadi: ghazato bokhor.

(Eat your lunch!; **bold on record**)

Shadi: Silence.

### # 2: Modern Family

Gloria: Hi, I’m Gloria Pritchett.

A stranger: That man must be your dad! (**sarcasm**)

Jay Pritchett: No, I’m her husband.

A stranger: ..... (Silence).

### # 3: Haft Sang

Mohsen (Shahin’s father): Mikham azaret bedam! Vase hamin injam!

(I want to hurt you! That’s why I’m here; **negative strategy**)

Shahin: Shelik!

(Fire!)

Mohsen: Nemitoonam.

(I can't).

Shahin: Kheili asoone! Faghat masha ro bechekoon!

(*That's a piece of cake!* just pull the trigger; **sarcasm**)

Mohsen: in moheme ke to tarsidi!

(*What is important is you're scared enough!*; **bold on record**)

#### # 4: Modern Family

Phil (Luk's father): *It's supposed to hurt!* (**negative strategy**)

Luk: Please!

Phil: Oh, forget it! I can't do this. *Why are you so scared?* (**sarcasm**)

### 2.3. Procedure

The dialogs of the male and female characters of Persian *Haft Sang* and American *Modern Family* were explored for the use of the impoliteness strategies. It was assumed that comparing the strategies used by the male and female characters would usefully result in a better understanding of how the different genders interact within and between the two cultures. To identify the occurrences of impoliteness, we needed to choose and define the unit of analysis. The nature of the study and the elements to be specified called for the utterance to be the criterion measure though "it has proved very difficult to construct a satisfactory definition" of an utterance (Crystal, 2008, p. 506). An utterance is defined as "a sequence of words within a single person's turn at talk that falls under a single intonation contour" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 573). Similarly, Trask and Stockwell (2007) define an utterance as a particular piece of speech produced by a particular individual on a particular occasion. That is, an utterance is a single piece of speech marked off as a unit in some way, for example, by pause and intonation. Based on their definition, *are you telegraphing? That man must be your dad! Shut up!* are examples of impolite utterances in the studied series.

To begin the analysis, first, each series was watched a number of times by one of the researchers of this study in order to make sure that the language was adequately understood. Then, the utterances were enumerated and, based on Culpeper's framework (1996, 2003), the impoliteness strategies were coded and categorized. To guarantee the reliability of the analysis, about one-third of the whole corpus was reexamined by the same researcher 1 month after the first viewing. There were only minor differences between the two samples of analysis. Then, three university professors with an in-depth knowledge of the model rechecked the researcher's analyses to ensure the dependability of coding the data. Finally, to analyze the data quantitatively, the frequency of each strategy was counted and, then, chi-square was administered to find any significant differences in exploiting the impoliteness strategies between the male and female characters.

### 3. Typical Uses of Impoliteness Strategies by Male and Female Characters

Apart from gender differences, power, context, and culture are crucial factors that affect the use of the impoliteness strategies in different interactions. Power is a technical term playing an important role in pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and social psychology, in general, and politeness and impoliteness, in particular. It is stated that "the greater the speaker's power the less impoliteness is attributed to them, while the lower the speaker's power, the more impoliteness is attributed to them" (Spencer-Oatey & Žegarac, 2017, p. 132). Considering Dunphy's family, the following extract happened at their home. Luke, the youngest person in Dunphy's family, was wearing unusual glasses. As he was coming downstairs, his family members reacted differently to his glasses. The bold on record strategy was exploited when Haley said *What's with the fake glasses?* to ridicule him. It might be noted that, although Haley is the oldest child in the family, Alex, the middle child, is the most powerful because she is a genius. The second and third impoliteness strategies were exploited by Alex. She utilized bold on record and sarcasm for the purpose of blaming and ridiculing Luke. It is worth mentioning that deploying two impolite utterances boosts the effect of these strategies and, as a result, attack interlocutor's face severely. It should be considered that, although Luke's sisters used the bold on record strategy to show their tendency toward his outdated glasses, the intention and function of this strategy were completely

different. To put it differently, both Haley and Alex exploited the bold on record strategy; however, Haley exploited this strategy to ridicule his brother, and Alex deployed it to blame Luke.

## # 5

Luke: Hey, all y'all.

Haley: What's going down? *My opinion of you what's with the fake glasses?* (**bold on record**)

Alex: As an actual glasses wearer, *this is offensive*<sup>1</sup>. *It's like nondisabled people who park in handicapped spaces*<sup>2</sup>. (**1. bold on record/2. sarcasm**)

Claire: I was in and out in 3 min, young lady, and it was your style medication I was picking up. *That's a lot of bracelets there, buddy.* (**sarcasm**)

Clearly, exploiting the term *bracelets* is a sarcastic way to emphasize Luke's girlish taste in wearing the glasses. As an illustration of the positive strategy, by saying *ignore them*, Phil utilized this strategy toward his wife and daughters to save his son's face. However, as Phil saw Luke's friends, he exploited the negative impoliteness strategy by saying *Are you in a boy band?* to ridicule his son. After a short conversation between Luke and his friends, they said *deuces* and, as he did not understand the meaning of this utterance, he exploited another positive strategy. The role of power in exploiting the impoliteness strategies was clearly illustrated in this example. Phil seemed to be the most powerful person in the family because no impoliteness strategy was exploited toward him.

## # 6

Phil: *Just ignore them.* They're being sheep. If I'd listened to what other people said, I'd never have rocked my '90s frosted tips. We've got pictures. (**positive strategy**)

Claire: No, we don't.

Phil: You're an original, son. When they made you, they broke the mold.

Luke's friend: What's good, Luke.

Phil: Luke, um, there's no easy way to ask this. *Are you in a boy band?* (**negative strategy**)

Luke's friend: So, we're gonna go hang at the pier. You in?

Luke: Sounds cool, but I don't know if I can.

Phil: That's right. We got a big day planned. He's coming to work with the old man.

Luke: Sorry.

Luke's friend: Next time. Deuces.

Luke: Deuces.

Phil: *Word to your mothers.* (**positive strategy**)

With the undeniable role of power in utilizing the impoliteness strategies, the following example considers the role of power in *Haft Sang*. This example took place at Mohebn and Leila's home, as they were doing the chores. Amir, their oldest child, got a D in chemistry and this made his family frustrated. The difference between his mother and father in exploiting the impoliteness strategies is noticeable. Traditionally, male domination is considered normal in every angle of the Iranian family. However, the following extract weakens this belief in that Leila, the mother, is more powerful in exploiting strategies toward her family members:

## # 7

Leila: Chie?

(What?)

Mohsen: Chie?

(What?)

Amir: Shimi 10!

(I got a score of 10 in chemistry.)

Leila: Aval salam.

*(Say hello first!; sarcasm)*

Amir: Salam. Shimi 10.

(Hi. I got a score of 10 in chemistry!)

Leila: Vaghty behet migam ke beshin dars bekhoon, hey migi baladam baladam, 18 roo shakheshe! Biar shakhato paeen bebinam chi roo shakhete!

*(I told you thousands of times to study harder!<sup>1</sup> You told me getting 18 is a piece of cake!<sup>2</sup> Come on, show me how it's a piece of cake!<sup>3</sup>; 1. bold on record/2. sarcasm/3. bold on record)*

Mohsen: Biar shakhato paeen bebinam chi roo shakhete! Hads bezan chi gharare bebini! Age gofty in kilidaye kojast?)

*(Come on, show me how it's a piece of cake! Guess what you are going to see! Can you guess what these keys are?; sarcasm)*

Clearly, the first impoliteness strategy occurred when Leila blamed Amir for his indolence in studying. However, his father did not use the impoliteness strategies and he solely imitated his wife. While Leila was blaming her son, his father showed him a bunch of house keys and, this time, Amir exploited the bold on record strategy to depreciate his father. From this example, it can be inferred that both mother and father deployed the same strategies; however, the mother's intention was completely different in that she was more serious in exploiting these strategies. Stated differently, Leila used the sarcasm and bold on record strategies to blame and ridicule Amir. On the other hand, Mohesn just imitated his wife and no serious intention can be inferred from his impolite utterances:

#### # 8

Amir: Khoun Tangsir. (Tangsir's home)

Leila: To az koja midouni? How do you know?

Amir: Mage momkene kilidi ro ke ye bar ghoortesh dadam yadam bere?

Is it possible to forget the key that I once swallowed?

Mohsen: Fek kon Tangsir 100 sale ghofle khoonasho avaz nakarde, bahal nist?

(Tangsir hasn't changed his house keys for 100 years. Isn't it cool?)

Amir: Chish bahale! Khoun be oun daghouni ye gherounam kharjesh nemikard!

*What's so cool about it?* He didn't spend any money on it! **(bold on record)**

The relationship between power and impoliteness is directly affected by context. In other words, as Spencer-Oatey and Žegarace (2017) argue, the relative importance of power, distance, and offensive language is strongly influenced by contextual factors. Similarly, Pillière (2013) stated that "any interpretation of the language of offence can be only made in relation to the context" (p. 62). The following interaction involves Jay Pritchett, his wife, and his two sons. Prior to this interaction, he ran into Cameron at the market and Cameron invited him to his daughter's soccer game. All Jay's family members blamed him for accepting Cameron's invitation. The first impoliteness strategy exploited by Gloria, Jay's wife, when he said *I shot myself in the foot*, Gloria exploited other idioms with the word *foot* to make fun of him. Next, as Jay was angry, he used the positive impoliteness strategy by saying *tattletale* to show his anger toward Joe because he revealed that he ate all the cronuts:

#### # 9

Manny: It's a tragedy. No other way to put it.

Jay: Such a beautiful day, too.

Gloria: We just have to accept that Lily has a soccer game and we all have to be there. You were supposed to make an excuse.

Jay: I'm sorry! I ran into Cam at the market. He asked if we could go. I panicked. I shot myself in the foot.



Gloria: Oh, yeah, you shot yourself on your foot<sup>1</sup>, you put your foot in your mouth<sup>2</sup>, you put the shoe in the wrong foot<sup>3</sup>. What is with you Americans and the foot? I hate that painting, by the way. **(1/2/3. sarcasm)**

Manny: I'm having the last cronut. I'm so depressed.

Jay: I'm sorry, kid. I think Andy ate it. So the game starts at 2:00, right?

Joe: Jay ate the last cronut.

Jay: No one likes a tattletale, kid. **(positive strategy)**

Gloria: Thank you, baby, for being so honest.

Jay: So we should leave in about an hour.

Gloria: What is this "we"? I have to go and register Joe for the winter camp.

Joe: Mommy's going to buy shoes.

Gloria: I did not raise a rat! Nobody gets out of this. **(positive strategy)**

Obviously, in the above example, Gloria deployed another positive impoliteness strategy to blame his son. As it is shown from the aforesaid example, Joe's parents exploited two positive strategies; however, his mother exploited these strategies to humiliate him, whereas his father used these strategies to threaten him.

The next extract is a conversation between Mehri and Nasir. To make his son happy, Nasir took Hamed to the movies. In this male-female conversation, Mehri exploited the first impoliteness strategy. She, first, exploited the bold on record strategy by saying *Where did you sneak out?* to show her anger. The undeniable role of context is noticeable in this impolite utterance. According to Fraser and Nolan (1981, as cited in Pillière, 2013, p. 63), "no sentence is inherently polite or impolite." Differently stated, they believed in the role of context in determining the meaning of politeness and impoliteness. In this example, no impolite meaning is invoked through these strategies; however, the way Mehri exploited the utterances is considered impolite. Following the conversation, she exploited sarcasm to spoil her husband's face. As she was angry at her husband, she exploited the bold on record strategy and sarcasm. As a final utterance, she exploited the positive impoliteness strategy by saying *Mr. Memorable* to humiliate her husband:

#### # 10

Mehri: Shoma 2ta yeho koja gheybetoon zad? In bache cheshe Nasir?

Where did you sneak out? What's wrong with Hamed? **(bold on record)**

Nasir: Filme khande dar dide keyf mikone!

He watched a horror movie and he really enjoyed it!

Mehri: Film khande dar bordi ya tarsnak?

Was it a horror or comedy? **(sarcasm)**

Nasir: Khande dar!

Comedy!

Mehri: Kheili eftezah dorough migi! Manam ke bache kouche dardar! Moghor bia!

You lie terribly! Am I a fool! Tell me. **(bold on record)**

Nasir: Khastam azam ye chiz-e moundegar tou zehresh bemoune!

I just wanted to make a memorable day for him.

Mehri: Akhe ba film-e tarsnak? Nasir in bache faghat 10 saleshe! Hala man chi kar konam ke in bache az sayeye khodesham mitarse Aghaie Moundegar!

With a horror movie? He's only 10. What can I do for him when he's even afraid of his shadow Mr. Memorable! **(positive strategy)**

Hamed picked up a wooden stick and went into the house.

Nasir: 2 rouz dige khoub mishe.

He'll be ok in 2 days.

Mehri: Nasir in bache 2 rouz injour bemoune be kola z dast rafte! Ta akhare emshab dorost mishe! Mafhome!

He has to be ok by tonight! *Got it?* (**bold on record**)

Nasir: Bale, chashm.

Yes!

It is believed that “context can always modify or reverse the meaning of a sentence” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2013, p. 19) In the above example, Mehri's utterances are considered impolite because she exploited them intentionally to threaten Nasir's face. However, the meaning of some utterances is not deemed impolite in other contexts. Although men and women have different tendencies in exploiting these strategies and, as it is shown in the quantitative analysis, they exploited different degrees of the impoliteness strategies; it is worth noting that context affects interlocutors in exploiting the impoliteness strategies. Apart from context, the role of culture has to be taken into account. According to Sharifian and Tayebi (2017), “certain instances of impolite linguistic behavior appear to be associated with culturally constructed conceptualizations drawn on by speakers/hearers” (p. 394). They maintain that “in certain contexts evaluations of impoliteness seem to be influenced by certain cultural conceptualizations that are heterogeneously shared” (p. 394). Bearing in mind the undeniable role of context in culture, Bar (2004) points out that communication between Iranians is highly contextual. Bar argues that “Iranian's communication is allusive and indirect not only in the choice of words utilized, but in the dependence of interpretation of the message on the context in which it is transmitted” (p. 30). On the other hand, “American style of communication places a high value on using lowest common denominators language in order to ensure maximum mutual understanding of the respective intents of both side” (p. 30).

### 3.2. Quantitative Analysis

To estimate the proportion of the impoliteness strategies to the total number of utterances in the dataset, the utterances in Persian and American series were calculated. On aggregate, the number of the impoliteness strategies used by the Persian characters was about 76,252 as compared to 109,384 utterances by the American characters. The ratio of the strategies to the total number of utterances was 0.0076 and 0.0053, respectively.

In order to identify the type and frequency of the impoliteness strategies exploited by the Iranian and American characters, the data were analyzed, and the frequency of occurrence and percentage of each strategy were calculated and tabulated in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 offers the frequency of impoliteness strategies exploited by the American male and female characters. As displayed, no marked difference was observed between the actors and the actresses in making use of the bold on record and negative impoliteness strategies. Conversely, differences bulked large in relation to the positive impoliteness and sarcasm or mock politeness strategies, though the American male and female characters relied strongly on sarcasm:

Table 1. *Impoliteness Strategies Exploited by American Male and Female Characters*

Strategy	Male	%	Female	%	$\chi^2$	p Value
Bold on Record	54	16.51	49	19.14	0.243	0.622
Positive	52	15.90	31	12.11	5.313	0.021
Negative	38	11.26	35	13.67	0.123	0.725
Sarcasm	183	55.96	141	55.08	5.444	0.02
Withhold	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	1
Total Number	327	100	256	100		

As shown in Table 2, although there was no major distinction in exploiting the positive politeness and sarcasm strategies, the female characters showed a greater tendency toward using these two strategies. In terms of quantity, sarcasm was the most frequently-used strategy among both male and female characters. However, gender-based differences between the Iranian characters appeared in using the bold on record and negative impoliteness strategies. The Iranian males relied on the bold on record strategy considerably more than the females in their conversations:



Table 2. *Impoliteness Strategies Exploited by Iranian Male and Female Characters*

Strategy	Male	%	Female	%	$\chi^2$	<i>p</i> value
Bold on Record	118	37.58	71	26.59	11.688	0.001
Positive	28	8.92	30	11.24	0.069	0.793
Negative	39	12.42	23	8.61	4.129	0.42
Sarcasm	129	41.08	143	53.56	0.721	0.396
Withhold	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	1
Total Number	314	100	267	100		

#### 4. Discussion

The relationship between impoliteness and gender is often a major controversy. That is to say, “there is a tendency to associate stereotypically feminine styles of talk such as collaborative, supportive, and indirect with women, and stereotypically masculine ways of talking such as competitive, aggressive, and direct with men” (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003, p. 573). However, this idea has been challenged by Mills (2003), as she believed that the relationship between impoliteness and gender is complex because of their abstract notions. She added that “gender and impoliteness are not concrete entities which can be traced in conversation: however, they are elements which are worked out within the course of interaction” (2005, p. 263).

Generally, in both groups, the male characters exploited more impoliteness strategies than the female characters. Early studies have however shown that the male characters in comedies exploited the impolite strategies and contestive humor to negotiate values, whereas the female characters used the impoliteness strategies to be more friendly and restrain their differences (Yating, 2014). In the following sections, we try to discuss, in detail, some of the reasons behind exploiting the impoliteness strategies by the Iranian and American male and female characters.

##### 4.1. American Male and Female Characters

The results showed that the differences in using the positive politeness and sarcasm were significant between the American male and female characters, whereas the use of other strategies did not make a noticeable change across the genders.

Generally, it is believed that men and women speak differently (Darani & Darani, 2013; Lakoff, 1975; Mills 2003). Gu (2013) argues that “gender difference is not only a reflection of the speeches between male and female, but also a reflection of their different lifestyles and attitudes” (p. 248). Furthermore, Xi (2013) noted that “men and women tend to choose different words to show their feelings” (p. 1486). As it was shown, the male characters exploited the sarcasm and positive strategies mostly to spoil and ridicule the interlocutors. However, Holmes (2008) points out that, in the Western urban communities where women’s and men’s social roles overlap, the speech forms they use also overlap. In other words, women and men do not use completely different forms. The following example may clarify the point because Jay and Gloria both exploited the same strategy to call their son:

# 11

Manny: I’m having the last cronut. I’m so depressed.

Jay: I’m sorry, kid. I think Andy ate it. So, the game starts at 2:00, right?

Joe: Jay ate the last cronut.

Jay: No one likes a *tattletale*, kid. (**positive strategy**)

Gloria: Thank you, baby, for being so honest.

Jay: So, we should leave in about an hour.

Gloria: What is this “we”? I have to go and register Joe for the winter camp.

Joe: Mommy’s going to buy shoes.

Gloria: I did not raise a *rat*! Nobody gets out of this. (**positive strategy**)

According to Holmes (2008), however, both social and linguistic patterns in these communities are gender-preferential, rather than gender-exclusive. Though both women and men use particular forms: One gender showed a greater preference for them than the other.

#### 4.2 Iranian Male and Female Characters

Regarding the Iranian male and female characters, sarcasm was the only strategy toward which both groups showed a marked tendency; however, the women used it more frequently than the men. Teimoori (2012) noted that men and women, particularly in Eastern societies, do not have equal freedom and limitations. In the Iranian society, some religious and legal gender-dependent prohibitions are exerted in addition to the custom gender-dependent limitations and, in this respect, make the gender factor more important. Apart from gender differences in the Iranian society, the role and function of culture should not be neglected. Beeman (1986, as cited in Sharifian & Jamarani, 2011) believes in verbal skills and language use in Iran. He maintains that this significance may be reflected in several Persian phrases such as *hormateh kalam* (deference of speech), *ghedasateh kalam* (sacredness of speech), and *efateh kalam* (chastity of speech). Given the role of culture, “in certain contexts evaluations of impoliteness seem to be influenced by certain cultural conceptualizations that are heterogeneously shared” (Sharifian & Tayebi, 2017, p. 394). In essence, it is not difficult to infer that sarcasm is a crucial factor in presenting intentions indirectly and being sarcastically polite. In the following example, both male and female characters exploited sarcasm to clarify their intentions:

# 12

Leila: Aval salam.

(*Say hello first!*; **sarcasm**)

Amir: Salam. Shimi 10.

(Hi. I got a score of 10 in chemistry!)

Leila: Vaghty behet migam ke beshin dars bekhon, hey migi baladam baladam, 18 roo shakheshe! Biar shakhato paeen bebinam chi roo shakhete!

(*I told you thousands of times to study harder!* *You told me getting 18 is a piece of cake!* *Come on, show me how it's a piece of cake!*<sup>3</sup>; **1. bold on record/2. sarcasm/3. bold on record**)

Mohsen: Biar shakhato paeen bebinam chi roo shakhete! Hads bezan chi gharare bebini! Age gofty in kilidaye kojast?)

(*Come on, show me how it's a piece of cake!* Guess what you are going to see! Can you guess what these keys are?; **sarcasm**)

Considering impoliteness strategies in other contexts, the results of the current study are not completely consistent with what Jalilifar and Karimi (2015) found about impoliteness strategies between the American and Persian characters in two drama movies of *Crash* and *The Incident*. Although the results of their study indicated that the American male and female actors tended to use more positive impoliteness strategies and the usage of the taboo words and inappropriate identity markers was easy to detect in their interactions, their Persian counterparts utilized sarcasm repeatedly in their conversations. However, the findings of this study concerning the Iranian male and female characters are in agreement with Mirhosseini, Mardanshahi, and Dowlatbadi (2017). They worked on the impoliteness strategies exploited by the male and female characters of the movie *Madar (Mother)*, directed by Ali Hatami. The results of their study revealed that the men utilized more impoliteness strategies than the women. These differences mark the infrastructure of the Iranian masculine society and the subsequent secondary status of women (Mirhosseini, Mardanshahi, & Dowlatbadi, 2017).

#### 5. Conclusion

Having “complex relationships” (Mills, 2005, p. 265), gender and impoliteness are elements that shape conversation interactions. The current study investigated impoliteness and gender in two comedy series. The results revealed that (1) generally speaking, the men exploited more impoliteness strategies, (2) the differences in exploiting the positive and sarcasm strategies were significant between the American characters, and (3) the Iranian characters relied strongly on the sarcasm and bold on record strategies. Although TV series were the main source of data in the current

study and due to some limitations, there is a huge difference in everyday conversations and movie interactions; the results are in consistent with the fact that “women speak more indirect and polite than men” (Lakoff, 1990, p. 47). However, Mills (2005) pointed out that “there are occasions when people do, indeed, attack rather than support their interlocutors, and sometimes those attacks are considered by others to be impolite and sometimes they are not” (p. 264).

The research undertaken in this study can contribute to a better understanding of the impoliteness strategies in the Iranian and Western cultures. In this regard, the study can help those interested in cross-cultural differences and sensitize them to culture-dependent and gender-inclusive/exclusive linguistic expressions. Further studies might take into account other sociolinguistic factors like social class, ethnic background, age in other contexts like TV shows, and the different genres of movies because they are believed to have close relationships with the impoliteness strategies. For instance, other studies can focus on social class as a variable and consider it in TV series cross-culturally because the previous works just considered the impoliteness strategies in one episode or one season of a TV series in only one culture.

Despite all the efforts put in doing this study and the fact that the research met its objectives, there were some unavoidable limitations: Gender, as the main variable of the study, was the major limitation as other variables like social class, age, ethnic background can play crucial roles in everyday interactions, in general, and impoliteness strategies, in particular. The impoliteness strategies are affected by all the aforementioned factors; however, controlling all these variables was not practical. Another limitation was the role of subjectivity in categorizing the impoliteness strategies, which was hard to avoid, meaning that categorizing, on the one hand, and interpreting the intended meaning of impolite utterances, on the other hand, were subjectively made by the current researchers. Reliable interpretations of the intended meaning of the impoliteness strategies should be further made by native speakers in real-life situations. The context of the data gathering was also considered as a limitation: The context of the current research was limited to comedy series; further studies might work on other genres and, possibly, in authentic contexts, too.

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