A contrastive study of compliment responses among Persians and Australians: The effects of exposure to a new speech community

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Abstract

In this paper, the authors investigate whether Persians who have been exposed to Australian culture are still affected by their cultural norms—in particular by the politeness system *taarof*—in responding to compliments in an intercultural interaction. Compliment responses were elicited—through a Discourse Completion Task—from thirty participants (five males and five females in each of three groups): Persians in Iran, Persians in Australia, and Anglo-Australians. These responses were categorised according to Herbert's (1986) taxonomy and the results show that although there are similarities in the choice of compliment response types by Australians and Persians living in Australia, there are still some differences. This paper aims to contribute to knowledge of potential areas for miscommunications in intercultural interactions, and also to find ways to improve language teaching and learning.

Keywords: compliment responses; Persian; Australian English; pragmatic transfer; intercultural communication.

Introduction

Below is a made up example of the type of awkward situation that can happen when Persians interact with non-Persians:

A (non-Persian): What a nice bag!

B (Persian): Oh, Thank you. It isn't worthy in front of someone

as great as you. For you! Take it really!

A: Really?! Oh, um…thanks. I love it.

Persians commonly make formulaic offers such as these, but they can be misunderstood as real offers and be accepted by people from other cultures. The English speaker might also feel awkward for being offered a

gift for no reason and feeling obliged to accept to be polite.

This is an example of the use of a culture-specific compliment response in another culture–something often experienced by Persians, or anyone in a cross-cultural situation–that can lead to an unsuccessful communication experience. The Persian speaker has transferred her/his L1 pragmatic conventions in responding to the compliment given by a native English speaker, and the English speaker has responded in the way appropriate to their cultural background, both being unaware of each other's cultural norms and conventions.

Communicative interactions are highly influenced by cultural values. As observed by Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (2010), looking at cultural values is important in all human interaction, but it is even more crucial in intercultural communication. In an intercultural communicative exchange, people of different ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds usually do not have sufficient linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge of the language of their interlocutor, and this may lead to conflicts, uncomfortable interactions and/or misunderstandings.

The first author, Motaghi-Tabari, has been residing in Australia for several years, but originally comes from Iran, where complimenting is a common speech act in people's daily interactions. She has observed that Australians seem not to be as comfortable with compliments. The second author, an Anglo-Australian, feels that it can be due to uncertainty over how to react to compliments. Although taught to say "thank you", since rejecting the compliment might be seen as discourteous, this conflicts with a

desire not to seem immodest. Herbert (1986) and Pomerantz (1978) also observed this conflict.

Persians are accustomed to respond formulaically to compliments, and are taught such behaviour when very young, and so do not feel this discomfort. A parent will, for example, exhort a child who is not responding to respond and will at times say the words with the intonation of the child, for example "say 'thank you Auntie! Your eyes see everything as beautiful!'"

The patterns of giving and receiving compliments—like any speech act—vary among different languages and cultures. Lack of awareness of them can cause problematic intercultural communication, even for advanced learners of a second language. Despite this, second or foreign language classes usually focus on differences at the lexical or morpho-syntactic level (A. Eslami-Rasekh & Mardani, 2010; Z. Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Rose & Kasper, 2001), placing much less focus on pragmatic competencies. This is despite the fact that knowledge of pragmatic and sociolinguistic rules of a language is equally or more important for successful intercultural communication, as these pragmatic rules are closely tied to cultural conceptualisations (Sharifian, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a 2009b, 2011; Sharifian & Palmer, 2007).

In this paper, we discuss the culturally specific Persian politeness system and investigate whether Persians who have been exposed to Australian culture for a certain amount of time are still affected by their cultural norms in responding to compliments in an intercultural interaction. By exploring similarities and differences between Persians

in Iran and Persians in Australia, and Anglo-Australians, we can recognise the potential areas for miscommunications in intercultural interactions, and also find ways to improve second language teaching and learning. This type of research contributes to the area of pragmatics and to finding ways to help L2 learners be aware of the occurrence of misunderstanding, misjudgement and even offence in intercultural communication and have successful communication with the L2 native speaking community in a shorter time.

Background of the study

Cultural schemas and miscommunication

Cultural schemas are rooted in our past interactions. Our social and linguistic interactions are strongly guided by the communicative interactions we have as children, and the cultural frameworks we learn (Agar, 1994; Goffman, 1986). These frameworks act as filters and affect the way people perceive, analyse and interpret communicative intentions. Sharifian (2005, 2011) discusses how these cultural schemas are associated with the pragmatic aspect of language. He claims that when interlocutors do not share the same cultural schemas, miscommunication is likely to take place, even if their morpho-syntactic skills are good.

When exposed to a new culture, people encounter unfamiliar social rules and interpersonal communicative norms. L2 learners, unaware of the sociolinguistic norms of the target language, tend to transfer their L1 sociolinguistic patterns when interacting with native speakers of the target language, and this leads to miscommunications and social interaction

breakdowns (Agar, 1994; Sharifian, 2005, 2011). Chick defines sociolinguistic or pragmatic transfer as "the use of the rules of speaking of one's own cultural group when interacting with members of another group" (1996, p. 332). Because the speakers behave in the ways natural to their own cultures, which may be different in the culture of their interlocutor, there is the potential for conflict (Carroll, 1988). In this situation, individuals start realising the linguistic differences, and pondering their own social norms which used to be taken for granted; they may then discover that these norms seem to be inadequate for smooth communication in the new society (Agar, 1994).

This process does not happen overnight. As Cohen states, "acquisition of native-like production by non-natives speakers may take many years because the socio-cultural strategies and the sociolinguistic forms are not always 'picked up' easily" (1996, p. 409). Indeed, Triandis proposes a four-stage process for this process of acculturation (2000, p. 149):

Unconscious Incompetence:

Interlocutors are not aware of any miscommunication as they assume that they have relatively similar communicative behaviours.

Conscious Incompetence:

Interlocutors realise there has been a miscommunication, but are not aware of the source.

Conscious Competence:

Interlocutors are aware of the cultural differences that cause miscommunication and attempt to adjust their language behaviour.

Unconscious Competence:

Interlocutors adopt and take the new cultural concepts for granted and so they use the new ways of communication effortlessly.

Until new communicative patterns are acquired, intercultural miscommunications may occur, leading to discomfort and people making wrong assumptions about their interlocutors. Thus, it is important to identify these problematic areas (Carroll, 1988). The choice of language for successful communication across cultures necessitates both linguistic and pragmatic knowledge of the target language.

Politeness – the case of Persians

Whereas Brown and Levinson (1987) discuss the universality of politeness, many scholars acknowledge the possibility of cross-cultural variability (Fraser, 1990; Leech, 1983; Meier, 1995a; Sifianou, 1992). Sifianou asserts, "in general, when we talk about politeness, what we have in mind is relative politeness, based on what we think is appropriate behaviour in particular situations. These norms, however, vary from culture to culture" (1999, p. 29). Persian politeness is a case in point.

The Persian politeness system is intimately tied to a Persian culture-specific behavioural phenomenon called *taarof*. *Taarof* encompasses a wide range of inescapable rituals in Persians' interactions. "Inescapable" in that any violation from the

maxims defined within the framework of *taarof* would be considered discourteous, rude, impolite, disgraceful and disrespectful. Tyler, Taylor, Woolstenhulme, and Wilkins (1978 cited in Assadi, 1980) claim that without using *taarof* in Iran for social and business interactions, communication seems blunt and uncivil to Iranians. Many Persian and non-Persian scholars have shown interest in scrutinising this complex politeness phenomena (Crystal, 1987; Davis, 2008; Hillmann, 1981; Holmes & Brown, 1987; Moosavi, 1986; Sharifian, 2005, 2008b, 2011; Sharifian & Palmer, 2007; Wierzbicka, 1985; Wolfson, 1981). Beeman (1986) defines *taarof* as the language of politeness and praise in Persian culture, and he claims that the notion of *taarof* goes back to Persians' religion in the pre-Islamic era– Zoroastrian–of which one of the basic principles is "kind words". Persian literature has many texts urging people to care about others more than one's self and not to speak about one's achievements (Ahmadi & Ahamdi, 1998 cited in Sharifian, 2009). Underlying this ritual are some Persian culture-specific politeness features such as *adab* (good manners)[1], *ehteram* (courtesy, respect), *shaxsiat* (character–positive face), *tavazo* (modesty, humility), *aberu* (roughly synonymous with credit or prestige– implying the concept of face and how people judge a person), and *shekasteh-nafsi* (literally breaking self, meaning putting oneself down).

Sharifian (2005, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b, 2011; 2007) has elaborated extensively on the concept of *taarof* and the cultural schemas *shekasteh-nafsi* and *aberu*. These politeness

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[1] The English glosses are not exact translations, but the first author's best attempts at matching the Persian concepts with a similar term in English.

features underlie much communicative behaviour of Persians, for example, the speech act of responding to compliments. The accompanying schemas for compliment responses guide Persians as to whether they should return back the goodwill of the compliment giver, or deflect the complimentary force and reassign it to a third party/object like family members, God or luck. In this way, Persians are urged to "make use of any compliments or praise that they receive to enhance the *aberu* of their interlocutors, their family, or whoever might have directly or indirectly contributed to a success or achievement" (Sharifian & Palmer, 2007, p. 42). Based on the cultural schema of *shekasteh-nafsi*, there are many formulaic expressions used by Persian speakers to show a high degree of modesty. An example of this kind as presented by Sharifian is the construction *ghabel nistim,* which means, "we are not worth it" (2007, p. 44). He explains, however, that Persians may not necessarily use the literal translation in an intercultural communication, but put themselves down by using other expressions like "I don't think my food is cooked well".

Compliments and compliment responses

Holmes defines a compliment as "a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some 'good' (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.), which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer" (1988, p. 486). Compliments are, by nature, speech acts that are usually welcomed. As such they are regarded by many scholars as social lubricants to maintain solidarity (Holmes, 1988; Wolfson, 1981). However, compliments can negatively affect social interactions. Many factors such as the complimenter's intention, complimentee's perception and cultural norms will influence whether the compliments are perceived as a face-threatening acts or a face-saving behaviour (Farghal & Haggan, 2006).

Golato argues, "it is the position of a compliment turn within the larger interactional and sequential context that determines its function" (2005, p. 203). She maintains that compliments can be used to perform actions other than complimenting—such as "reproaching", "criticizing" and "interrupting—which cannot be described as appealing to an interlocutor's positive face. For example, flattery when used insincerely: it is often paid by the speaker for a specific purpose and might be positively valued neither by the speaker nor by the hearer. Compliments may also be used sarcastically to make the hearer feel uncomfortable. For example, a man might comment sarcastically on a newly bought car of a friend who owes money to him, saying 'Gee, you have a nice new car there!'

Further, compliments can sometimes be embarrassing due to cultural differences. As Tang and Zhang exemplify, "while 'you look lovely today' may make an English woman's day, it may well make a Chinese woman uncomfortable and even somewhat resentful" (2009, p. 326). Further issues affecting whether a compliment might be seen as face-threatening are the concepts of envy or "eyeing" (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Holmes, 1988). That is, in some cultures a compliment may be an expression of envy by the complimenter.

Yu also maintains that compliments can be "an act of judgement", and so, people may feel "uneasy, defensive, or even cynical with

regard to the compliments they receive, and thus may have trouble responding to such compliments appropriately" (2003, p. 1687).

For all of these reasons, compliments are a multi-faceted speech act with various types and features, and the acts can be regarded as either face-saving behaviour or face-threatening (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

After a compliment speech act, the next turn (usually) responds to that compliment in some way and thus is called a compliment response. It is this response that may reveal the main function of the compliment and it is as important as the compliment speech act, since a proper response plays a strong role in maintaining solidarity, and an inappropriate response can lead to a communication breakdown (Yu, 2003).

The compliment responding behaviour may also differ depending on the object being complimented. Researchers have narrowed down compliment topics to a few main categories. For example, Wolfson (1981), Holmes (1988), Manes (1983) and Knapp et al. (1984)—who studied varieties of English—found that compliment types mostly fell into four categories: appearance, possessions, ability, and performance. In a study of English and Chinese compliments, Yu suggested a category of "other" for examples which did not fit well into the other four categories: such as complimenting a person on who they are, as in "I'd sure hate to lose you" (2005, p. 107).

Pomerantz (1978) was the first researcher to conduct an extensive study on compliment responses from a pragmatic perspective. In her study of compliment responding behaviours of Americans, she proposed that a recipient of a compliment faces a difficult situation in responding to the compliment: to accept the compliment while avoiding self-praise. In order to cope with this tight spot, compliment recipients use different strategies to alleviate the situation: acceptance; rejection; and self-praise avoidance (Nelson, Al-Batal, & Echols, 1996). Building on Pomerantz's studies, Herbert (1986) proposed a more detailed categorisation of compliment responses. He studied 1062 compliment responses collected from American students of the State University of New York over three years, and suggested that compliment responses fall into twelve types, as detailed in Table1 (Herbert, 1986, p. 79).

Table 1: Herbert's taxonomy of compliment responses (Herbert, 1986, p. 79), modified by the authors

Macro-categories	Micro-categories		Example response to "Your shirt is nice".
Agreement	*Acceptance*		
	Appreciation Token		Thank you [smile]
	Comment		Thanks, it's my favourite too.
	Upgrade	Praise	It brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn't it?
	Comment History		I bought it for the trip to Arizona.
	Transfers		
	Reassignment		My brother gave it to me.
	Return		So's yours.
Non-agreement	*Scale down*		It's really quite old.
	Question		Do you really think so?
	Non-acceptance		

	Disagreement	I hate it.
	Qualification	It's all right, but Len's is nicer.
Other	*No acknowledgement*	[Silence]
	Request	You wanna borrow this one too?

Since the first studies, many researchers have conducted studies on compliment responses from a cross-cultural perspective and examined how different communities use different strategies in responding to compliments. Table 2 lists some of the major scholars and the languages they focussed on.

Table 2: Some cross-cultural studies on compliment responses

Holmes (1988)	New Zealand English and Malay
Herbert (1986)	American English and South African English
Han (1992)	English and Korean
Chen (1993)	American English and Chinese
Nelson and Echols (1996)	American English and Arabic
Yuan (1996)	English and Chinese
Lorenzo (2001)	British English and Spanish
Yu (2003)	American English and Chinese
Sharifian (2005, 2008a)	Australian English and Persian
Tran (2007)	Australian English and Vietnamese
Tang and Zhang (2009)	Australian English and Mandarin Chinese
Bu (2010)	English and Chinese
Dongmei (2011)	American English and Chinese

The current study

The current study investigates the compliment-responding behaviours of Persians in Australia in their interactions with Australians and examines how exposure to Australian culture affects Persians' choice of compliment response strategies. Specifically, we are interested in finding answers to the following questions:

1) Do the English compliment responses of Persians residing in Iran and Persians residing in Australia differ? If so, how?

2) Do the English compliment responses of Persians residing in Australia and monolingual Anglo-Australians differ? If so, how?

3) What does this level of difference have to say about the effect of exposure to a culture on pragmatic performance?

Methodology

In this study, we build on the methodology used in Sharifian's 2005 study, though with some modifications. Firstly, we analyse the effect of exposure to the Australian community by analysing the compliment responses of Persian speakers in Australia as well as in Iran; and secondly, we control for an equal amount of compliment types for the data elicitation tool. Following Wolfson (1981), Holmes (1988), Manes (1983) and Yu (2005), we used five types or topics of compliments: appearance, skill/ability/talent,

performance/achievement,possession/belong ings, and personality (which we thought might inspire different compliment responses). We first discuss the participants, then the elicitation tool used, and finally the method of analysis.

Participants

Three parallel data sets need to be compared for this type of study: the learners' L1 data; the same learners' inter-language data; and the data by native speakers of the target language (Kasper, 1992). Thus, we gathered data from the following groups:

- Persians in Iran speaking in English

- Persians living in Australia as they would interact with Australians in English

- Anglo-Australians in Australia

For the Persians' L1 data we relied on previous studies in the literature as well as the first author's native speaker knowledge. In total, there were thirty adult participants—five males and five females in each of the three groups. All of the participants had at least a high school diploma or equivalent and were more than thirty years-of-age. The first group consisted of ten Persians living in Iran with little or no experience of living in any English speaking country, but with sufficient English knowledge to fill in the questionnaire. Considering the variation of cultural behaviours among Persians based on geography, all the participants in Iran were selected from Tehran or those who have lived in Tehran for over ten years. The second group–the main focus of this

research–consisted of ten Persians who had been living in Australia for at least five to ten years, and who had at least a medium level of interactions with Australians; that is, they either worked or socialised with Australians, or did both. Finally we had a control group of ten Anglo-Australians, who were all born in Australia. Table 3 shows the spread of participants in this study.

Table 3: Distribution of participants by cultural background, location and gender

	Persians in Iran	Persians in Australia	Anglo-Australians
Male	5	5	5
Female	5	5	5

Data elicitation: a discourse completion task

Data was collected via a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) designed and used by Sharifian, though with some modifications. Sharifian's methods were replicated in part to enhance the ease of comparison of our data set with his, though also because of the advantages of DCTs. Namely, a DCT allows researchers to control variables, narrow down the scope of the research and obtain quantitative data in a short time frame. Like all research methods, there are weaknesses to DCTs—for example, DCT responses do not always correspond to natural data (Golato, 2003)— however, given the constraints of this project, a DCT was the most effective tool for data collection.

The DCT we used was comprised of fifteen scenarios involving the compliment speech act. These scenarios are listed in Appendix. We controlled for topics by ensuring there were 3 compliments to be responded to for

each of the five compliment types (Yu, 2005):

- appearance
- skill/ability/talent
- performance/achievement
- possession/belongings
- personality

In order to have an even spread of questions from each topic area, two questions were removed from Sharifian's DCT and seven were added. Table 4 below shows the modifications made to his questionnaire.

Table 4: Comparison of the spread of questions with respect to compliment types from Sharifian (2008a) and this study

Compliment Topics	Sharifian's DCT	Motaghi-Tabari & de-Beuzeville's modifications	New spread of questions
Appearance	--	3 questions added	3
Skill/ability/talent	5	2 questions removed	3
Performance/achievement	2	1 question added	3
Possessions/belongings	3	--	3
Personality	--	3 questions added	3

In addition, we added introductory questions to ascertain some important social and linguistic information about each

participant: gender; length of stay in Australia; and level of contact with Australians.

Data analysis

Responses to each question from each participant were coded for the following factors:

- Category of response, using Herbert's taxonomy (1986). When participants responded with more than one type of compliment response, we scored each type they used.
- Types of Compliments being responded to (of the five categories)
- Gender of speaker

Thus, the dependent variable was category of compliment response, using Herbert's taxonomy (1986). The main independent variables were:

- Compliment type (appearance, skill, performance, possession, personality)

- Nationality: Persians in Iran, Persians in Australia, and Anglo-Australians.

- A secondary independent variable was Gender (male, female).

Results and Discussion

In this section, the findings from the three sets of data are analysed based on Herbert's taxonomy (Herbert, 1986). We will first

discuss the results from a macro-perspective: in terms of agreement versus non-agreement of responses across all compliment types; and then we analyse the types of agreement used. Next, we look at the results in more detail according to type of compliment being responded to. Finally, we look at how the participants responded to the entire compliment topics in more detail.

Overall, we had 670 compliment responses; removing 4 problematic answers (that were ambiguous for coding) we were left with 666 compliment responses across all participants. Thus, the sample size for this project was small. Statistical significance was not tested for, so as such we offer only general comments on the data.

Macro analysis of all compliment responses

From a macro-pattern perspective, we can see that all three groups strongly favour agreement strategies when responding to compliments.
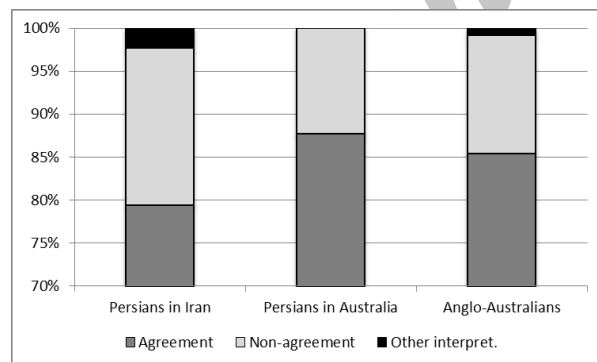

Figure 1: Agreement versus non-agreement in compliment responses of Persians in Iran and Australia and Anglo-Australians.

In Figure 1 we see what percentage of responses were agreement, disagreement or other by each group of participants, as a proportion of all responses from that group. We can see that both groups residing in Australia were more likely to use agreement than the Persians in Iran. Although the Persians in Australia responded with slightly more agreement than the Anglo-Australians, this is likely due to small sample size. These findings thus give weight to Sharifian's claim that Persians have a strong tendency to deny or downplay a compliment in line with the cultural schema of *shekasteh-nafsi*. Additionally, the difference between Persians in Australia and Persians in Iran gives weight to the claim that cultural norms are negotiated and re-negotiated across time and space (Sharifian, 2008b).

When analysing those responses that were in the macro category of agreement, we see that the three groups differed in the strategies for agreement used. Between 70-75% of all agreement responses were categorised as acceptance for all three groups. Further, when using agreement methods apart from acceptance, all three groups are most likely to transfer the credit of a compliment. Figure 2 illustrates, however, that Persians in Iran do this more often than either group living in Australia. Additionally, both groups living in Australia responded with a comment history more frequently than the Persians in Iran. The difference between the two groups of Persians can likely be attributed to two reasons: the Persians' assimilation into the new communicative norms in Australia; and their increased English language efficiency.
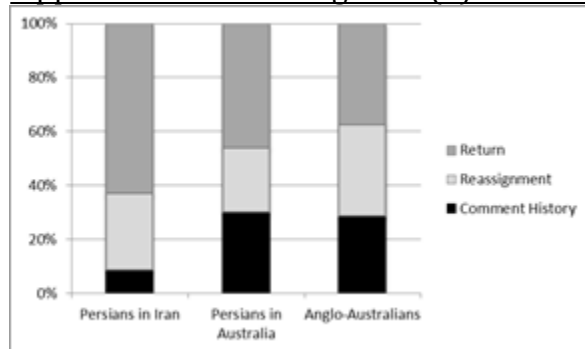
Figure 2: Distribution of types of Agreement strategies other than Accept by cultural group and location

Figure 3: Micro analysis of compliment responses for appearance topics, minus appreciation tokens

Interestingly, when looking at the compliment responses using a transfer strategy, the two groups of Persians more commonly returned the compliment force to their interlocutor, whereas the Anglo-Australians more often re-assigned the credit to someone not present. Although only speculation, this may be due to Australian's discomfort with compliments because of the conflict of not disagreeing while maintaining modesty (Herbert, 1986; Pomerantz, 1978).

We now consider the findings with respect to each of the five compliment types, presenting both quantitative and qualitative data.

Micro-analysis by compliment type

Responses for compliments on appearance

Approximately half of the respondents from all three groups responded with an appreciation token to start their response for compliments on appearance. Of responses that were not appreciation tokens, there were some similarities and some differences between the groups. The findings are shown in Figure 3.
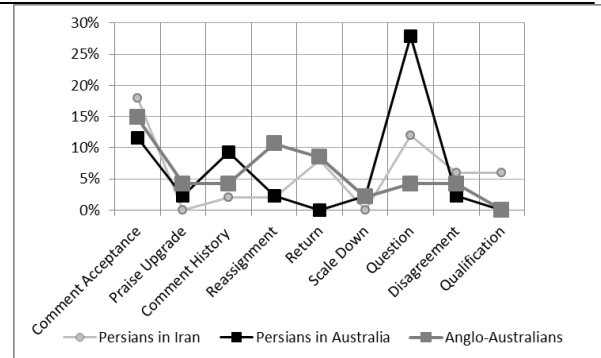
Anglo-Australians used reassignment in response to appearance compliments more frequently than either of the other two groups. Australian females in particular had a higher tendency to use reassigning strategies wherever possible, compared to Persian females in both groups. Persians in Australia more often used questioning responses, such as "really?" or "Am I?" In the case of "new haircut" in which a third party could be imagined by the participants, this difference was more conspicuous. For this scenario, most of the Anglo-Australian females tended to directly reassign the compliment to the hairdresser by saying, for example, "my hairdresser Ross does a good job"; however, the Persian women in Iran and in Australia usually responded with a question. The Anglo-Australian and Persian males, on the other hand, had more similar patterns of distribution for reassignment, questioning and comment history as in "I just got it done for 20$".

Humour was also used—particularly by Anglo-Australian males—as a means to implicitly disagree with the compliment (disagreement strategy) and mitigate the complimentary force, as in "I think you have

drunk too much John!" This may be indicative of a higher degree of discomfort with appearance compliments in Anglo-Australian males' compared to Persian males.

The difference in responding to appearance compliments between Persians in Australia and Anglo-Australians supports the claim that the acquisition of communicative norms of the target community may take many years as the socio-cultural and sociolinguistic norms are not always picked up easily (Cohen, 1996). Though it is important to remember that the sample size is small; in addition when looking at each type of compliment being responded to, we are dealing with only a fifth of all compliment responses elicited. These observations are thus preliminary in nature.

Responses for compliments on a skill, ability, or talent

For compliments of skill, ability or talent, Australians tended to reassign the complimentary force where possible, as they did for compliments of appearance. For example, in responding to a compliment on cooking, many Anglo-Australians attributed the complimentary force to the recipe, and for a compliment on handwriting to their mother. Persians in Iran used more disagreements or scale downs than Persians in Australia. This also can be attributed to *shekasteh-nafsi* which bans people from speaking about one's "I" and achievements (Sharifian, 2005, 2008a). Persians who have not been exposed to another culture are likely to be highly affected by this cultural schema. Most Persians in Iran will insincerely disagree with compliments to avoid self-praise. Anglo-Australians also tend to use disagreement, but it appears to

happen mostly in situations where they genuinely mean to disagree. Persians in Australia, on the other hand, seem to use more comment acceptance and less disagreement strategies. This preference could be a result of assimilation. However, it seems that the original norms of the target community are sometimes overshot. Some of the Persians commented on their questionnaire that they attributed disagreement to being very Persian and thus avoided it to sound more like a native English speaker.

Responses for compliments on performance or achievement

Figure 4 shows the responses used by all three groups for compliments on performance or achievement. From the data we can see that Anglo-Australians and Persians in Australia used slightly more comment acceptances compared to Persians in Iran. Comment history is another strategy used the most by Anglo-Australians and the least by Persians in Iran. This, as described above, is likely due to the constraint of *shekasteh-nafsi* as well (Sharifian, 2005, 2008a, 2011).
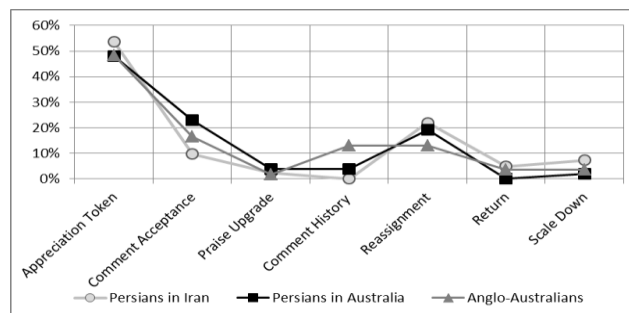

Figure 4: Micro-analysis of compliment responses for performance/achievement compliment types

The data in Figure 4 show that there is a difference in using reassignment in response to performance compliments by the three groups, based on the power differential between the complimenter and the responder. In the scenarios based on performance or achievement, the compliments were given by a teacher, a mother and a friend. Although overall the results look similar, when looking at the individual scenarios, we see that the Persians in Iran did not use comment acceptance or reassignment in response to compliments on their achievements given by a teacher or their mother; however, they would when responding to a friend. This could reflect the influence of social factors, such as position, power and solidarity on the choice of compliment responding strategies. Anglo-Australians, on the other hand, seemed much more comfortable in accepting the performance compliment given by a teacher.

As for the Persians in Australia, although they showed more inclination to accept the compliments given by a teacher or their mother compared to Persians in Iran, they nevertheless more often accept the compliment from a friend on their achievements rather than a teacher or mother's.

These differences illustrate the way that cultural conceptualisations of social relations manifest themselves in language choices. Further research on a larger pool and taking into account social relations would illuminate this issue further.

Responses for compliments about possessions or belongings

Persians in Iran often offer the physical object of a compliment to a complimenter. This is classified as "other interpretations–Request" by Herbert (1986). Herbert (1986) asserts that the compliment recipients use this type of response when they perceive the complimenter's comment as a request and not a compliment. We maintain that Persians offer the object of compliment not necessarily because they perceive the compliment as a request, but due to a Persian culture-specific politeness system called *taarof*. In line with *taarof*, Persians use a formulaic expression *ghabeli nadareh* which means, "it does not have any value in front of someone as nice as you, so you can take/have it". Interestingly, Persians in Iran tended to transfer this formulaic expression into their English responses, whereas, Persians in Australia avoided offering the object, presumably because they have realised its culture-specificity.

Persians in Iran also tried to transfer the Persian formulaic responses into their English responses in order to return the compliments. For example they used formulaic expressions like "your eyes see it as beautiful" (in the case of "a new car") or "[the] presence of friends makes it much more beautiful for me" (in the case of a new house). Anglo-Australians, on the other hand, tended to use disagreement and scaling down as their most common type of response to compliments about possessions. Examples of this type are:

Disagreement to "You have a very smart child."

Anglo-Australian: I am not sure about that, but she has some other great strengths.

Scale Down to the compliment "You have a very nice car".

Anglo-Australian: Thank you. It's leased!

All three groups also used praise upgrade. However, their intention for using it appeared to differ. Only one Persian in Iran used praise upgrade, but it appeared to be in a humorous way, in order to redress the force of the compliment. An Anglo-Australian and a Persian in Australia genuinely upgraded the force of compliments given to their car. The examples below can imply these different intentions.

A: you have a very smart child!

B: It's in our genes! (haha)

A: you have a very nice car!

B: we should go for a drive so you could see and feel the performance. It is great!

Responses for compliments on personality

Both Persian groups—in Australia and in Iran—are much more likely than Anglo-Australians to acknowledge and return compliments on personality. Anglo-Australians, on the other hand, mostly tend to evade the force of compliment by ignoring the main compliment, when possible. For example, in reply to the compliment, "*what am I going to do without you?! I'll hate not having you around! You're such a good friend!*" most of the Australians responded only to the first part

"*what am I going to do without you?*" as if to find a way to solve this problem and did not acknowledge the main compliment "*you are such a good friend*". Some examples of responses are:

Anglo-Australians:

- *OK, I'll email you and anyway, I'll be back soon.*

- *I'll be back. Call me while I'm gone if you want to chat.*

Persians:

- *That's sweet; I'll miss you too!*

- *Thank you, you were the same for me, you are such a good friend too.*

Most Persians acknowledged and responded the main compliment by an appreciation token and return and even with a heightened return as in "*I'll miss you too; I'll miss you so much*". This difference gives weight to our intuitions that Persians are more accustomed to and comfortable with compliment speech act and responding to compliments than Anglo-Australians.

Micro-analysis by response category

In order to have a better idea of how the three groups differed, we carried out a more in-depth analysis on their responses to all compliments.

Table 5 shows that overall there are some differences between the groups. Most of these differences seemed to occur when participants were disagreeing with the compliment. As no tests of statistical significance have been carried out, we cannot know which differences are

significant. However, we have bolded the font of the figures that have a difference of 4% or more between the groups.

For example, both groups in Australia gave a comment history just under 7% of the time, whereas the Persians in Iran did so just under 2% of the time. In addition, 4.7% of Anglo-Australians didn't acknowledge a compliment, whereas this occurred in only 2.4% of Persians in Iran, and 0.9% of Persians in Australia. A plausible reason for the latter difference is the conflict Anglo-Australians feel between maintaining modesty, while not rejecting a compliment. More research is needed in this area to test this hypothesis.

Table 5: Distribution of responses for each category as a proportion of all responses for that cultural group

Macro categories	Macro Sub-categories	Micro categories	Persians in Iran (%)	Persians in Aust (%)	Anglo-Australians (%)
Agreement	Acceptances	Appreciation Token	39.8	41.2	41.2
		Comment Acceptance	**17.1**	**21.7**	**18.9**
		Praise Upgrade	0.9	2.3	1.7
	Comment History	Comment History	**1.9**	**6.8**	**6.9**
	Transfers:	Reassignment	6.2	5.4	8.6
		Return	**13.7**	**10.4**	**8.6**
	Scale Down	Scale Down	3.8	2.7	3.0
Non-Agreement	Question	Question	**4.7**	**6.8**	**2.1**
	Non-acceptances	Disagreement	**5.7**	**1.4**	**3.0**
		Qualification	1.4	0.5	0.4
	No Acknowledgement	No Acknowledgement	**2.4**	**0.9**	**4.7**
Other Interpretations	Request	Request	2.4	0.0	0.9

According to the figures shown in Table 5, all three groups tended to say "thank you" or appreciation token of this kind in response to compliments on appearance, ability, performance, possession, and personality.

Because saying an appreciation token was by far the highest response type, we removed this from the data. Table 6 presents the participants' most preferred response type—as a proportion of all of their remaining responses (after removing the appreciation tokens from the data).

Table 6: The most preferred category of response by each group (apart from appreciation token) for each type of compliment

	Appearance	Ability	Performance	Possession	Other
Comment Acceptance		◊ ●	●	◊ ● ○	
Praise Upgrade		○			
Comment History			○		
Reassignment	○	●[2]	◊		
Return					◊ ● ○
Scale Down					
Question	● ◊				
Disagreement					
Qualification					
No acknowledgement					
Request					

[2] For ability compliments, the Persians in Australia had an equal frequency of comment acceptance and reassignment responses.

It is apparent from the data analysed here that a higher exposure to the target culture can have a positive effect on assimilation. However, as discussed, there is still a potential for miscommunication between the Anglo-Australians and Persians–even those with higher levels of contact with Anglo-Australians.

Conclusion

Returning to the first of our research question, the compliment responses of Persians residing in Iran and those in Australia did differ; our results revealed that Persians in Iran are more likely to use a disagreement strategy than those in Australia. However, both groups still preferred agreement than any other strategy. Within agreement strategy, Persians in Australia used comment acceptance more often than those in Iran, while Persians in Iran more often returned the compliment to their interlocutor than Persians residing in Australia. However, there were ways in which the two groups of Persians performed more similarly to each other than the Anglo-Australians: for example they disagreed with a question more often than Anglo-Australians. The results also revealed that while Persians in Iran tended to use request strategy–offering the object of compliment–none of the Persians in Australia did so.

We then look at whether Persians in Australia perform the same as, or differently to, monolingual Anglo-Australians. Again, there were both differences and similarities. Patterns of agreement were more similar for the groups residing in Australia than the Persians in Iran, commenting on the history of the complimented object frequently, and returning a compliment less often. Both groups also used comment history and

comment acceptance to a greater degree and disagreed to a lesser degree. Some of the differences were a disinclination to simply not acknowledge a compliment and a greater use of questioning as a response to a compliment.

So, what does this level of difference have to say about the effect of exposure to a culture on pragmatic performance? The data presented here—while only from a small sample—is consistent with the view that Persians who have lived in Australia for a considerable period of time and had some contact with Australians begin to respond to compliments similarly to Anglo-Australians, despite continuing to have some differences in their frequency of compliment response type choices. This suggests that exposure to a new culture influences the pragmatic skills of ESL learners which can in turn help with assimilation; however, the role of teachers and ESL classes in teaching also could be vital, as even the Persians with high level of contact with Australian natives, have shown differences in using some compliment response types. This can be indicative of the fact that being exposed to the new community on its own does not necessarily help the non-native speakers acquire pragmatics of the target language (Bouton, 1994; Rose & Kasper, 2001). By teaching pragmatic and the sociolinguistic aspects of the target language, ESL/EFL teachers can help learners in the new community use socially appropriate language in their interactions with the native speakers in a shorter period of time.

As we see from the results of this research, the interlocutors' choice of language is affected by their cultural norms. Research of this type, not only help to raise the awareness of speakers of a language of their different sociocultural and pragma-linguistic norms, but also can be used as guidelines for ESL pedagogical purposes.

Limitations and suggestions for further research

This research project had a very small sample size research. The results may not, therefore, be generalised to the whole population of the speech communities under study. Future research on a larger scale would be beneficial so that tests of significance could be carried out and the results thus generalised.

Further research could also include several other independent factors in the analysis: gender of imagined interlocutors, age of participants, length of stay and level of contact with Australians, and issues of power and solidarity. Although we gathered data from an even number of male and female respondents, we did not specify the gender of the person with whom they were communicating. To do so, four sets of data would need to be gathered: female responding to a female; female to male; male to male; and male to female. Age is also an influential factor in the choice of language. Due to resource limitations, the participants in this study were all chosen from the thirty years of age and above. Further research could elicit compliment responses from participants in different generations to identify any differences

Length of stay and level of contact with locals would need to be taken into account in a larger study. Because of the confounding of these two factors, and the small number of participants in this study, we simply chose only participants who had

been living in Australia for at least five years, and had at least a medium to high level of interaction with Australians. It would be worthwhile to study groups who were here for more and less time. Finally, this study did not include the social variables of power and solidarity. However, the analyses of compliment responses revealed that these variables could affect the participants' choice of language. Further studies may demonstrate the effects of these variables on compliment response types.

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APPENDIX

You are invited to imagine yourself in a situation where you are being complimented and write down what you would say back to the compliments.

1. You have recently made an impressive achievement such as passing the University Entrance Examination and you come across one of your previous teachers. He/She is so happy to hear the news and congratulates you on your success as follows: Congratulations! You did a great job. Well done!!

2. A family friend compliments your cooking after dinner by saying "Your food is so delicious. You're a fantastic cook!"

3. Your friend praises your child by saying, "You have a very smart child".

4. Your friend is visiting your newly built house and says, "What a beautiful house!"

5. You have bought a brand new car. Your friend likes your car and says to you, "You have a very nice car!"

6. After reading your essay, your friend/classmate says to you, "You're very intelligent and knowledgeable!"

7. You have received a prize for your outstanding work and your mother says to you, "Congratulations! Well done!"

8. You have an admirable talent such as a very good handwriting or a beautiful voice and a friend says to you, "What beautiful handwriting!/What a beautiful voice!"

9. You have recently had your hair cut. A friend says to you, "What a beautiful hair cut!! It is just perfect on you!!"

10. You have had a coffee and chat with one of your friends in a coffee shop. Your friend says, "it's always good to talk to you!!"

11. You are attending a party. A friend (of the same gender) says, "How good/beautiful you look tonight!!"

12. You are going to a trip. One of your friends says "What am I going to do without you?! I'll hate not having you around! You're such a good friend!"

13. You are wearing a tight dress/shirt. Your friend (of the same gender) says, "You're looking in good shape!!"

14. You clean the whiteboard for your teacher for a few times. Your teacher says "Thank you! You're so kind/caring!"

15. You win a competition in your favourite sport. Your friend says, "Well done! You did a great job!!"