Congratulation Speech Acts Across Cultures: The Case of English, Persian, and Arabic

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Abstract

The present study is an attempt to investigate the cross-cultural differences with regards to the production of a relatively understudied speech act, namely, congratulations. To this end, 48 American native speakers were asked to fill out a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) consisting of 4 situations on each of which the participants were asked to offer congratulations. Besides, the translated versions of the DCT were used to elicit data from 50 Persian native speakers as well as 44 native speakers of Syrian Arabic language. The corpus was analyzed to determine the congratulation strategies used and the frequencies of their occurrence. The content of semantic formulas as well as their shifts according to the status of the hearer were also investigated. Analysis of the data revealed several similarities and differences among the three groups, which will have implications for researchers as well as language teachers.

Keywords: speech act, DCT, congratulations, cross-cultural pragmatics, status, IFID

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades there has been a spate of papers investigating pragmatic competence in the field of language teaching. Thomas defines pragmatic competence as 'the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context' (Thomas, 198, p.94). It has been contended by numerous studies that the ability to use

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appropriate speech acts in a given speech event is a major component of pragmatic competence. As speech acts vary in conceptualization and verbalization across cultures and languages (Green, 1975; Wierzbicka, 1985), in order to establish their universal features it seems necessary to investigate their typical realization patterns within many languages.

The present study, within a cross-cultural perspective, aims to investigate the types of strategies native speakers of three different languages; namely, Arabic, English, and Persian, implement to fulfill the speech act of congratulation in different situations.

2. Background of the study

Recently, there have been moves toward what is known as intercultural competence, i.e. the ability to use language according to the pragmatic rules used by native adult speakers. This means that culture is a determinant factor in encoding and decoding utterances. Extensive studies have been conducted to discover a universal theory to be applied in diverse cultures and languages (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Grice, 1975; Leech, 1983). The idea that every culture has its own norms has attracted many pragmalingists who study cross-cultural pragmatics. A number of studies have demonstrated that there can be important cross-cultural differences in the speech act performance between two different speech communities (Blumkulka and House, 1989; Eslami Rasekh, 1993, 2004; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1985). These studies include how speakers use and understand speech acts and how speakers interpret and use utterances depending on the context. Speech acts have proved to be one of the attractive areas in pragmatics and sociolinguistics. The cross-cultural study of speech acts is important to interlanguage research. Unless the strategies of both the L1 and L2 are known, it is difficult to know whether pragmatic failure results from L1 transfer or from another source. Currently, much research on interlanguage pragmatics refers frequently to native speaker norms.

Whereas some speech acts such as requests, complaints, apologies and compliments have been extensively studied in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics, the speech act of congratulation has not been as widely studied.

2.1. Studies on congratulations

When fortune smiles on an acquaintance it is customary to remark upon. Failure to do so may suggest feelings of resentment and ill will. However, the patterns of responses in these situations are not necessarily the same among different cultures. Early classification of speech acts identified five major categories of speech acts: representatives (a perceived truth condition of an utterance), directives (a request to perform an action), commissives (a commitment to carry out future undertaking), expressives (a manifestation of attitudinal disposition), and declarations (an announcement that alters a state of

affairs). According to Austin's (1962) categorization, congratulations fall into the category of expressives, which express a psychological state such as thinking or apologizing. Searle (1969, p.67) laid out the preparatory conditions for the speech act of congratulations:

1. There is some event that is related to the hearer.
2. The event is in the hearer's interest and the speaker believes the event is in the hearer's interest.
3. The speaker is pleased at the event.
4. It counts as an expression of pleasure at the event.

In examining the speech act of congratulation, there were found differences in what types of events warrant the speech act and how the speech act is realized. Coulmas (1979) focused on the situational frames of participants, setting, why and wherefore, contextual restrictions, and concomitant activity for English *congratulations* and Japanese *omedeto gozaimasu*. His specification of the frames for the two expressions differs in the following ways:

1) Why and wherefore: the Japanese expression may be used for a seasonal holiday but the English expression may not. Therefore, the former may include events that are not only happy for the receiver of congratulations, but for others as well.

2) Contextual restrictions: the English expression may only be uttered once in referring to a given event unless explicit reference is made to the repetition, such as by adding "again" or "once again". However, repetition of *omedeto gozaimasu* is possible and the second person may reply to it with the same expression if the event is a happy one for the speaker as well as himself/herself.

The speaker, moreover, may not be sincere in his/her congratulations. Issac and Clark (1990) point to the possibility of "ostensible congratulations", for example those in which serious or friendly rivals compete in a game and the loser congratulates the winner. Here, it is understood that the loser is not wholly glad at the other's good fortune but conveys respect and a lack of resentment through the congratulations and the recipient also has a social requirement to collude in the ostensible congratulations.

Similarly, Leech (1983) classifies congratulations as convivial and includes this type of expression in his approbation maxim.

It is important to note that the speech act of congratulation may not necessarily be realized by an illocutionary force indicating device, rendering it difficult to distinguish congratulations and other types of approbation. In her analysis of the differences between Greek congratulations and "Bravo!", Maria-Tsilipakou (2001) notes that approving expressions such as praising and complimenting may often merge with congratulating so that without reference to the context it is impossible to assess their function.

The above studies generally focus on an analysis of what constitutes an act of congratulation and the function of congratulations in society. There has been scarce research uncovering the types of strategies beyond illocutionary force indicating device which fulfill the function of congratulations in different languages. However, just as the boundaries of the function of illocutionary force indicating device "congratulations" may differ, the way in which the speech act of congratulation is realized verbally may vary. Elwood (2004) compared the strategies Americans use for offering congratulations in 7 situations with the ones Japanese speakers utilize. Analyzing the results, she found that Japanese speakers were much less likely to use an expression of happiness and make requests for information whereas Americans used less offers of good wishes. G. Emery (2003) investigated the way old and young Arab speakers of Oman express congratulations on somebody's wedding, the birth of a baby, and religious Eves. The findings showed some differences between the way old and young people offer congratulations on the wedding occasions. Further analysis of the results revealed the differences between men and women's expressions. As an illustration, the female participants wished the couple to have a son as their first child. The study most relevant to the present study was the one conducted by Allami and Nekouzade (2011). In their study, the basic verbal congratulation strategies used by Persian speakers of Iran in 9 situations were investigated. The researchers further explored the positive politeness strategies in this speech act. Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID), offer of good wishes, as well as expression of happiness were found to be the most frequent strategies utilized by the Persian participants.

A culturally inappropriate way of congratulating may conversely suggest resentment or lack of respect, failing to fulfill the act's convivial function. Therefore, analysis of the strategies used to realize congratulations is vital. Speech act studies have been criticized as being ethnocentric in that most have investigated varieties of English (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Rose, 1994). The present study is significant ,in part, as it investigates the speech act of congratulating by making a comparison among three languages; namely, Arabic, English, and Persian and contributes to a better understanding of similarities and differences among the languages under investigation with respect to offers of congratulations in the following situations:

1. While waiting in the bus stop, you see one of your friends. It's a long time you haven't seen him/her. You: hey, how are you? How is everything with you?

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

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

3. You are a clerk. You see the janitor of the office.
   You: you weren't at work for a few days. What's up?
   Janitor: Well, my child was born three days ago!
   You say:……..
4. You work in a company. While working in your office Mr. X with whom you are not intimate enters and wants to speak with your colleague at the same office. Your colleague says: Mr. X's child was born yesterday.
   You say to Mr.X:………

2.2. Research questions

   Based on what was stated above, the following questions will be addressed in the present study:

1. Are there any differences among American English, Syrian Arabic, and Persian speakers with respect to the realization of the speech act of congratulation?
2. How do the three groups differ in the frequency and content of semantic formulas in the situations which require congratulation?
3. Is there any shift of semantic formulas on the four situations in focus based on the status of the hearer (lower, higher, equal)?

3. Methodology

This section reports on the research design of the study: the respondents, material, and data collection procedures.

3.1. Participants

   142 subjects participated in this study: 48 native Americans, 44 Syrians, and 50 Persian speakers. The Americans were 22 females and 26 males between 20 and 42 years of age; 28 MA undergraduates and 20 BA students. Arab subjects were 26 males and 18 females with the age range of 19-31. 40 Arab participants were BA undergraduates and the other 7 were MA students. Persian participants comprised 23 females and 27 males all of whom were BA undergraduates with the age range of 19-26.

3.2. Material

   The data for the present study were gleaned through a written Discourse Completion Test (DCT) in which 10 natural situations were presented and the respondents were asked to respond to them. It is worthy of mentioning that DCTs, not different from other data elicitation methods, have their own advantages. They yield a large number of responses, are easy to assess and

need not be transcribed. Besides, DCTs can control for various variables such as gender and status and establish the differences which are intralinguistically and cross-culturally significant (Olshtain, 1986). Another claim in favor of DCTs is related to Hill et al. (1986) who pointed out that DCTs tend to trigger subjects' mental prototypes, whereas more atypical items may be included in natural speech data. Al-zumor (2011) reported that DCTs are advantageous since respondents feel free to express themselves without any kind of intervention by the researcher. The problem with the role-playing technique, as he proposed, is that the subjects felt embarrassed when they were asked to role-play a situation. Having mentioned the above advantages for the DCT, the researchers were not unaware of the limitations of using a DCT as the primary sources of eliciting data. A lack of contextual variation (Rose, 1994,; Rose & Ono, 1995), a simplification of complex interactions (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Turnball, 2001), and the hypothetical nature of the situation are among the disadvantages of using DCT. Moreover, according to Nelson et al. (2002), what people claim they would say in a hypothetical situation is not necessarily what they actually would say in a real situation. However, naturalistic data collection for cross-cultural study are not without limitations. Problems of comparability (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), of controlling gender and status, of note taking that relies on the researcher's memory, of the time-consuming nature of data collection (Cohen, 1996), and of ethical issues related to recording in naturalistic situations (Hinkel, 1997) are among the problems Nelson et al. (2002) considered as the pitfalls of naturalistic data.

Considering the caveats of both naturalistic data collection and the DCT, we resort to Nelson et al. (2002) who claim that DCT provides appropriate pragmalinguistic responses and to Hinkel (1997) and Hudson et al. (1995) who assert that although DCTs may simplify the negotiations that occur between interlocutors they still represent norms of appropriateness.

3.3. Procedure

Initially, 13 American, 15 Persian, and 15 Syrian Arabic undergraduate students were asked to describe situations that require congratulations. This approach is based on Lipson (1994) and Batanieh & Batanieh (2008) in which respondents were asked to describe situations involving apologies. After collecting the participants' answers, the frequency of occurrence of each situation was tallied and the most frequent items were chosen and put into a questionnaire. The questionnaire was later piloted on 20 Americans, 20 Syrian Arabs, and 20 Persian students who were excluded from the sample of the research. The respondents were asked to respond only to the items they believed warrant the speech act of congratulations. Consequently, the least answered items were eliminated, and the 10 remaining ones were regarded as the final questionnaire. Of the 10 items used in the DCT, four were chosen to be analyzed for the present data (see appendix). They aimed at eliciting the way

people of different cultures offer congratulations on the occasions related to marriage and birth of a baby. All contexts in the test were controlled by situational variables, i.e. 'social distance' and 'power'. Following Nureddeen (2008), three different levels of social distance were used to roughly represent different degrees of familiarity between participants. Closeness was represented by the relationship between friends (situation1), distant relationship by participants who do not know each other (situation 4), and a middle status of social distance was represented by acquaintances (situations 2&3). Power was also represented by three levels: high-low, that is the speaker has power over the speaker (situation 3), low-high, i.e. the hearer has power over the speaker (situation 2), and equal, i.e. no participant has power over the other (situations 1&4). Each situation was designed to represent a unique social context in order to provide the potential for the research to elicit various strategies. To avoid language barrier, the questionnaire was administered in English to the American group, in Arabic to the Syrian group, and in Persian to the Persian group. The translation of each questionnaire was carried out by a native speaker of that language and was later validated and edited by two other highly educated natives.

4. Data analysis and results

In line with Nureddeen (2008), the analysis was based on the assumption that the collected responses approximated what the participants would say in real similar situations. One of the crucial aims of those who conduct research on speech acts is, as Cohen (1996) proposed, to arrive at a set of strategies which are typically used by native speakers of a particular language. This study followed the procedure utilized by Nelson et al (2002) for analyzing the data. Initially, the utterances were divided into idea units in order to come to the set of strategies used by each group of participants (Chafe, 1980). Below are the examples of idea units used by American subjects:

    i. Congratulations!
    ii. I wish you the best
    iii. Where did you meet?
    iv. I am so happy for you.

As the researchers were Persian native speakers and were also proficient in English language, (an English language Teaching (ELT) professor and an ELT PhD candidate), they were capable enough to transcribe and categorize the English and Persian data. However, for the Arabic data, two trained native Arab speakers helped the researchers in data analysis. They separately coded the data. For the items on which there was disagreement between the two coders, they were asked to reconsider the data until they reach an agreement. As it was mentioned in the background section, the only available study, to the researchers' knowledge, on the speech act of congratulations comparing different strategies cross-culturally, was that of Elwood (2004). After analyzing

the obtained data it was observed that the identified strategies were similar to some of those used in Elwood's model. However, as the situations of this study differed from the ones in Elwood's and by virtue of the fact that the participants had native languages different from hers, some modifications were needed to be applied in Elwood's model. As an illustration, she had categorized the strategy "an offer of good luck" in the "other types" strategy. However, the data of the present study showed that, wishing or expressing hope for the learner's happiness or pleasure was one of the highly frequent strategies used by the respondents. Therefore, it was, contrary to Elwood's model, coded as one of the main strategies. Moreover, another identified strategy which was not found in Elwood's categorization was the one used by Arab and Persian participants in which the speaker had asked the hearer to give him/her some sweets (it is part of their culture that when something good happens, such as marriage or birth of a child, etc., they distribute some sweets among their friends or relatives). Considering the above mentioned points and with caution about guidelines put forth by Krippendorf (1980), which indicated that the categories should be exhaustive and exclusive, the following category of strategies was proposed:

I. illocutionary force indicating device (IFID)
II. expression of happiness
    a. expression of personal happiness
    b. statements assessing the situation positively
III. an offer of good wishes
IV. request for information
V. Asking for sweets
VI. self-related comments: an expression of envy and longing
VII. joke

In order to compare the three groups, their responses to the four previously-mentioned situations were analyzed and compared. Since the responses on the situations differed, it was decided to separately analyze each situation. It is beyond the scope of this study to have a comprehensive analysis of each semantic formula; however, regarding the similarities and differences among the three groups of participants, the main points are going to be discussed. Differences with regard to semantic formulas can be found at three different levels including frequency, order, and content of semantic formulas each of which will be discussed below. The shift of frequency of semantic formulas relevant to the status of interlocutors and social distance (SD) between them was also considered. For example, one of the situations had asked the participants to suppose they are an employee at an office and they wanted to congratulate their employer on his marriage. Here, the status of the hearer was higher than that of the speaker and there was a social distance between the interlocutors (+SD).

4.1. Frequency of semantic formulas

The frequency of semantic formulas used for the speech act of congratulation in the four situations is shown in tables 1-5.

Table 1. Frequency of semantic formulas used in situation 1

	groups	IFID		Expression of happiness		an offer of good wish		request for information		Sweets		self-related comments		joke	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Addressee status: equal	American English	24	50	12	25	12	25	11	23	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Syrian Arabic	32	72	0	0	20	45	05	11	0	0	04	09	03	06
-SD	Persian	27	54	06	12	25	51	18	36	03	6	05	10	08	16

Having a look at table 1, one can discern that the most frequent formula among the three groups was that of *IFID* with the *offer of good wishes* coming next. As can be observed in the table, the three groups differed with respect to the *offer of good wish.* The Americans had the lowest frequency (25%). There was a similarity in the use of this formula between the Arabs and Persians with the means of 45% and 51% respectively. By comparing the three groups on the *request for information*, it becomes evident that the three groups used this formula with different frequencies. Arab speakers asked fewer questions and the Persian speakers asked the most, while the Americans held the middle position. Concerning the *expression of happiness,* the Americans used the formula more frequently than the Persian speakers. However, this semantic formula was not observed among the Arab respondents. By comparing the three groups on the *request for information*, it becomes evident that the three groups used this formula with different frequencies, i.e. the Persian speakers and Americans used the formula (36% and 23% respectively) much more frequently than the Arab group (11%). One of the semantic formulas which was, though with a low frequency, observed among the Arabs and Persians was *asking the hearer for the sweets*. In their culture, when something good happens to a person it is customary to buy some sweets and distribute it among one's relatives or friends. Hence, when a person hears another one's good news such as marriage he/she asks the hearer for sweets by using questions such as:

Nemixai be ma shirini bedi? (Don't you want to give us sweets?)

In the first situation, this strategy was only observed among the Arabs, with a low frequency (06%) though. As is evident from table 1, the Arab and Persian speakers had two other semantic formulas which were absent in the Americans' data; namely, self-related comments and joking. As mentioned before, self-related comments refer to expressions of envy and longing. For instance, one of the Arabs used the following statement for the first situation:

I wish God would give me a wife too.

Another semantic formula which can be regarded as a point of similarity between the Arab and Persian respondents is related to the use of humorous statements. Like the two previous semantic formulas, this formula was not found in the American data. Further elaborations on the content of this formula will be presented in part 4.3.

Table 2 below summarizes the frequency of different semantic formulas on the second situation.

Table 2. Frequency of semantic formulas used in situation 2

Addressee status	groups	IFID		expression of happiness		an offer of good wish		request for information		Asking for sweets		self-related comments		joke	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
status: high	American English	48	100	0	0	12	25	05	10	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Syrian Arabic	34	77	05	11	12	27	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
+SD	Persian	24	48	04	08	20	40	02	04	02	04	0	0	0	0

Similar to the previous situation, the responses of all groups most frequently contained IFID. As for the *offer of good wishes* the Persians were found to use the formula in 40% of the situations, while the Arab and Americans utilized it in 25% and 27% of their responses respectively. *Request for information* was the next semantic formula which was only observed in the American (10%) and Persian data (04%). However, in this situation the American data was not seen to include any *expression of happiness* while the frequency of this formula was 11% and 08% in the Arab and Persian data respectively. The only other observed formula for situation three was *asking for sweets,* which with a low frequency (04%), was only observed in the data obtained from the Persian speakers.

Table 3. Frequency of semantic formulas used in situation 3

Addressee status	groups	IFID		expression of happiness		an offer of good wish		request for information		asking for sweets		self-related comments		joke	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
status: low	American English	32	80	0	0	0	0	20	41	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Syrian Arabic	24	54	06	13	28	63	05	11	10	22	0	0	04	09
+SD	Persian	44	88	03	06	05	10	18	36	07	4	02	04	0	0

As can be observed in table 3, when the hearer had a status lower than the speaker, after the IFID, the most frequently used semantic formula among the Americans with an average of 41% and that of 36% among the Persian speakers was *request for information. Offer of good wishes*, although absent in the Americans' data, was the second frequent formula (63%) among the Arab group and was counted, with a great difference in frequency compared to the

Arabs, as the third frequent formula that the Persians used (10%). As for the rest of semantic formulas, the three groups were observed to be different in that the Arabs were the only group who used humor (09%), while the *self-related comments* were solely observed among the Persian group (04%). However, that was not the whole difference among the three groups since the Arab participants favored the formula of *asking for sweets* in 22% of cases while the Persians used this formula very infrequently (04%) and the Americans did not utilize it at all.

The last situation investigated in this paper was related to the one in which the respondents were asked to imagine themselves as clerks to congratulate another clerk on having a baby. Here again, the most frequently observed semantic formula among the three groups was the IFID. The noticeable differences among the three groups are related to other semantic formulas. For instance, the second frequent formula among the American English speakers was the request for information with an average of 18%. However, this was not the second most frequent semantic formula among the Arab and Persian speakers (06% and 0% respectively). The *offer of good wishes* was counted as the second most frequent formula among the Arab and Persian speakers. However, the two groups differed significantly in the frequency of use of the formula since the former had a percentage of 56 while the latter kept a percentage of 12. A summary of the above information is shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Frequency of semantic formulas used in situation 4

Addressee	groups	IFID		expression of happiness		an offer of good wish		request for information		Asking for sweets		self-related comments		joke	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
status: equal	American English	36	75	8	16	0	0	9	18	0	0	0	0	0	0
+SD	Syrian Arabic	27	61	0	0	25	56	03	06	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Persian	40	80	0	0	06	12	0	0	01	02	0	0	0	0

Figure 2 below sheds more light on similarities and differences among the three groups regarding the use of semantic formulas for congratulations. It shows the average frequency of semantic formulas used by each of the three groups of respondents in all situations. As the figure indicates, the most salient formula is the *IFID* which was used by all the three groups in more than 60% of the situations. The next most frequent formula for the Arab and Persian speakers is that of *offer of good wishes* but it was the *request for information* for the Americans. The most conspicuous difference among the groups was that of *offer of wishes* which the Arabs used the most and the Americans the least. This difference can be partly related to the culture of the Arab and Persian speakers. Since they are Muslims, offering good wishes, especially asking God's blessing, is of religious value (a more complete description of the

content of these formulas is provided in section 4.3). Another significant difference among the groups, as is evident in the table, is that of request for information which the Arabs used significantly less than the other groups. Thus, one can claim that Syrian Arabs asked fewer questions than the Americans and Persians. Overall, based on the results of this study, it is fair to say that for the Americans *IFID, request for information* and *expression of happiness* were the three most frequent formulas, while the Arabs and Persians used *IFID*, *offer of good wishes*, and *request for information* the most.
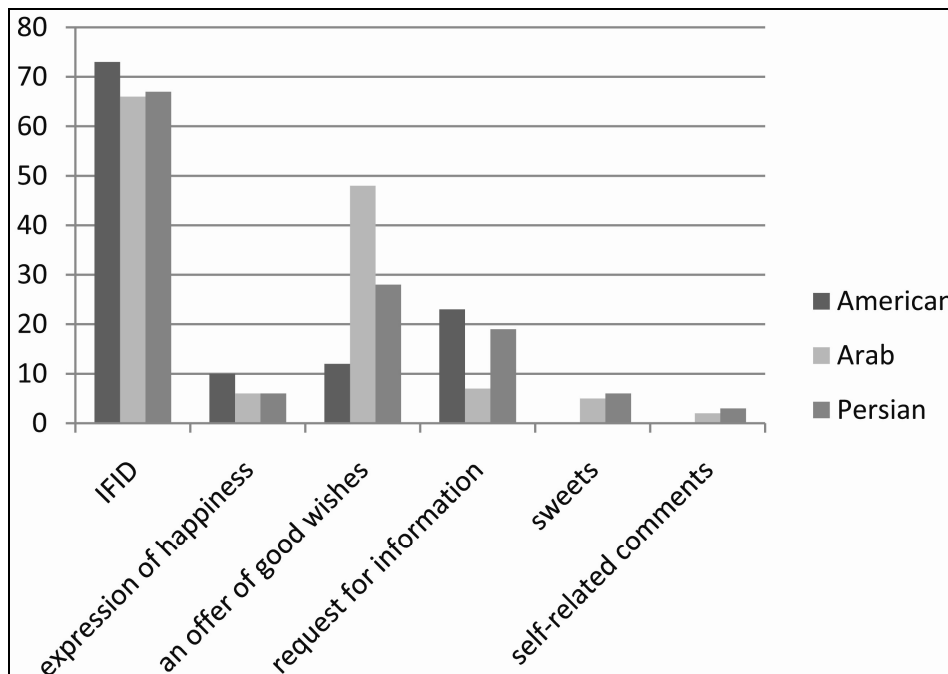

Figure 1. Average frequency of semantic formulas used by the three groups on all four situations

4.2. Shift of semantic formulas

In order to investigate the shift of semantic formulas among the three groups of the study; namely, the Americans, Syrian Arabs and Persians, it seemed necessary to bring all the responses of the three groups on all situations under investigation in one table. i.e. Table 5 below.

Table 5. Frequency and shift of semantic formulas used by the three groups of respondents in each situation (1,2,3,4)

Semantic formulas	American English				Syrian Arab				Persian			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
IFID	50%	100%	80%	75%	72%	77%	54%	61%	54%	48%	88%	80%
Expression of happiness	25%	0%	0%	16%	0%	11%	13%	0%	12%	08%	06%	05%
An offer of good wishes	25%	25%	0%	0%	47%	27%	63%	56%	51%	40%	10%	12%
Request for information	23%	10%	41%	18%	11%	0%	11%	06%	36%	04%	36%	0%
Sweets	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	22%	0%	06%	04%	04%	02%
Self-related comments	0%	0%	0%	0%	09%	0%	0%	0%	10%	0%	0%	04%
Joke	0%	0%	0%	0%	06%	0%	09%	0%	16%	0%	0%	0%

*The situations are shown by numbers 1-4

As represented in Table 5, IFID was the most frequent semantic formula among the three groups in all situations. However, other formulas had different distributions in various situations. For example, *offer of good wishes* was observed to shift in frequency based on the status of the hearer. Americans' use of this strategy was limited to the hearers of equal and higher status and they did not offer good wishes for a hearer of a lower status. Although one may claim that the fourth situation was also related to a hearer of equal status, the social distance present in this situation was regarded as a barrier for the use of such formulas. As for the *request for information,* the Americans were found to shift their frequency of use according to the status of the hearer. In other words, they asked most of the questions from the lower status (41%), then from the hearer of equal status (23% and 18% in situations 1 and 4), and fewer from the higher status hearer (10%). Thus, it appears that contrary to Allami et al. (2011), the Americans showed a high level of frequency shift of the use of semantic formulas based on the status of the interlocutor, and can, therefore, be regarded sensitive to the status level.

The Arab participants' data also revealed their sensitivity to the status level of the hearer, though in a reverse direction. While the Americans' data showed that when it comes to a hearer from a lower status they do not offer good wishes for congratulations, the Arabs used more good wishes for the lower status hearer. However, for asking questions, Arabs showed the same shift as Americans in that most questions were used when addressing the low status hearer and the least questions were asked when congratulating a person of higher status. As for the Persian data the same findings were obtained for the *request for information.* However, Persians were seen to offer good wishes more when talking to a higher person and less when addressing a person of lower status. Therefore, it shows their higher level of sensitivity to the status of the hearer. Another proof for this claim is (similar to the American and Arab participants) the use of less questions when addressing a higher person and more requests for information when it comes to   a person of lower social position.

4.3. Content of semantic formula

As witnessed in the results of this study, the most frequent semantic formula among the three groups was the IFID. However, participants used some modifications such as exclamations (e.g. Really? Oh my God, etc.) and intensifications (e.g. very) on these semantic formulas. Table 6 below shows the frequency of such modifications:

Table 6. Modifications of IFID

groups	Exclamations				Intensifications			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
American English	50%	0%	50%	25%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Syrian Arabic	09%	0%	0%	0%	32%	30%	34%	30%
Persian	24%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

As demonstrated in table 6, all the three groups used exclamations before the IFIDs in the first situation. This shows that expressing one's feelings is better manifested when confronting a person of equal status with whom you are familiar (-SD). However, as figures of the table indicate, Arabs were the only group who made intensifications on the IFIDs. They would say "alfe mabrook" which means "a thousand congratulations". The interesting point is that their use of intensifications did not vary according to the hearer's status. This is congruent with our claim, in the previous part, that Arabs are less sensitive to the status of the hearer than the Americans and Persians.

The differences between the three groups are identifiable not only at the level of frequency and shift of semantic formulas, but also at their content level. Arguably, even though two responses can be categorized into the same formula, the way they are verbalized can be culturally distinctive. In this respect, IFIDs provide interesting examples. As an illustration, Persian speakers had a culturally specific IFID used when congratulating a person on having a new baby. They say "Cheshmet roshan" which can be literally translated as "May your eyes be bright". As for the offer of good wishes, the Persians had a unique expression used for congratulating someone on his/her marriage. In such situations, Persians would say: "Be paye ham pir beshid", literally translated as "may you become old together". Arabs, on the other hand, had their own culturally specific expressions for offers of good wishes. For example, when congratulating a person on his/her marriage Syrian Arabs would say:

Nashaallah eqbal alzorriyat alssalehah "If God wishes, I hope you would have good children."

Nashaallah eqbala ebnok "If God wishes, I hope you would have good sons."

Since among Arab speakers it is believed that having a son is better than a daughter (partly because of the conditions of the traditional lives in which the

sons of family helped their fathers- a source of income), so they wished that a newly married person had a son. Another expression which was specifically used by the Arabs was the quote below which was used for the situation of "having a new baby":

Yorabbi be ezzeka va dalaalek (May s/he be brought up with your tender greatness)

Yajalaallah fi zorriaat asalehah (May God put him/her among the pious)

Persians would use humorous statements when hearing about some one's marriage. These expressions include "rafti ghatie morgha?" meaning "Did you join the hens?" and "gooshat deraz shod?" meaning "Did your ears get longer?" which means you were out of your mind. Another strategy is asking for sweets. Expressions such as

As for the other formulas, no noticeable difference was observed since they were used formulaically and did not have different realizations among the three groups.

5. Discussion

The current study was designed to investigate possible cross-cultural differences among the three groups of participants; namely, American English, Syrian Arabic, and Iranian Persian speakers with regards to the speech act of congratulations. For this purpose, data was gleaned through a written DCT and was further analyzed to find the patterns of similarity and difference among the groups. The first question asked about the areas of difference among the Americans, Syrian Arabs, and Iranians in employing strategies for congratulations which was discussed in the paper. Regarding the second research question, the most common semantic formulas used by the three groups on four different situations and the content of those formulas were elaborated on in parts 4.1 and 4.3. As Elwood (2004) claims, Americans' number one semantic formula is the IFID. However, the findings of the present study revealed that, contrary to those of Elwood, *request for information* and *offer of good wishes* were respectively the second and third most frequent formulas the American participants utilized. One of the reasons related to this discrepancy may be related to the fact that the situations of this study differed from the ones used by Elwood. As for the Arab and Persian respondents, more patterns of similarity were observed between the two groups. The participants in both Arab group and Persian group had the IFID, *offer of good wishes*, and *request for information* as the three most frequent semantic formulas used for offers of congratulation. Asking the hearer for sweets and using humorous statements were the strategies which, although with a low frequency, were only observed in the Persian and Arabic data. Congratulations, like many other speech acts, e.g. Refusals, Allami (2011), were shown to be subject to change based on the status of the hearer. This was the concern of the third question which was talked about in section 4.2. As the results indicated, all the three

groups were shown to be sensitive to the status of the hearer since their semantic formulas were differently represented based on the hearer's status. Arab speakers used more *offers of good wishes* for the lower status which can show their sympathy with the hearers of lower social status. The opposite was true for the other two groups, i.e. the frequency of *offers of good wishes* was lower among those respondents. The point of similarity among the three groups with respect to the shift of semantic formulas is related to the *request for information*. The data revealed that all the three groups asked fewer questions when addressing a higher status hearer and, predictably, the least number of questions belonged to the third situation in which the respondents addressed a lower status hearer.

6. Concluding remarks

Such a simple comparison is definitely not sufficient to make very conclusive statements, as it is based on three corpora of elicited (not natural) data. However, it represents certain patterns of similarity and differences which support Wierzbicka's (1985b, 19991) position that speech acts are not language-independent "natural kind" but culture specific communicative routines.

This paper is a contribution to a more detailed analysis of inter-language and cross-cultural pragmatics. It may also shed lights on the similarities and differences across cultures with regards to a relatively understudied speech act, i.e. congratulations. Variations of pragmatic strategies across cultures are very vast and obviously not so constrained. The findings are limited to three languages of American English, Syrian Arabic, and Persian. The findings are limited to the four situations mentioned. As a result, it leaves the opportunity for other researchers to investigate the speech act of congratulations across cultures by investigating other situations as well.

A final word is that speech acts reflect the cultural norms and values that are possessed by the speakers of different language backgrounds. Different cultures have different ways to realize speech acts. Differences like these might cause misunderstanding and pragmatic failure when people from different cultures need to interact with each other. If the socio-cultural and sociolinguistic differences are neglected in second language learning and teaching, the learners may encounter misunderstandings and conflicts of interaction in real-life situations. In order to avoid this problem, it is crucial for second language teachers to help learners enhance their knowledge and competence of appropriate use of speech acts in the target language. The enhanced sociolinguistic competence is necessary not only for avoiding communication errors, but also for establishing fertile ground for increased interaction between speakers of different language backgrounds.

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Appendix A: The Persian DCT

لطفاً موقعیتهای زیر را بخوانید. بعد از هر موقعیت از شما خواسته شده در جـای خـالی جـواب خود را برای تبریک گفتن به شخص مذکور بنویسید. لطفاً پاسخ های خود را به گونـه‌ای بنویـسید که در موقعیتهای واقعی پاسخ می‌دهید. پاسخهای شما فقط به منظور داده‌هایی یک تحقیق مـورد استفاده قرار می‌گیرند.

۱- در حالی که در ایستگاه اتوبوس ایستاده اید یکی از دوستانتان را می بینید. مدت زیـادی اسـت که او را ندیده اید. به او می گویید:

چطوری؟ اوضاع و احوال خوبه؟

دوست شما: خبر جدید اینه که سه ماه پیش ازدواج کردم.

شما: ......

۲- شما کارمند یک کارخانه هستید و به تازگی فهمیده اید که کارفرمای شما ازدواج کـرده ظهـر کارفرما را می بینید و می خواهید به او تبریک بگویید

می‌گویید: ......

۳- شما کارمند هستید و مستخدم اداره را می بینید. شما: چند روزه نیومدی سرکار؟ خبریه؟

مستخدم: سه روز پیش بچه دار شدم.   شما: ......

۴- شما کارمند یک اداره هستید. هنگامی کـه در دفترتـان مـشغول کـار هـستید یکـی دیگـر از کارمندان که زیاد او را نمی شناسید وارد دفترتـان مـی شـود تـا بـا همکارتـان صـحبت کنـد. همکارتان می گوید: آقای فلانی دیروز بچه دار شدند.

شما به آن کارمند می گویید : ......

با تشکر از همکاری شما

Appendix B: The English DCT

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

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

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

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

You:………

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

You say:…………

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

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

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

You say:……..

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

You say to Mr.X:………

Thanks for your time and effort

Appendix C: The Arabic DCT

تعليمات :

اقرأ الموارد الاثنا عشر الآتية و بعد كل مورد سوف تسأل لكى تكتب ردة فعلك مكان الفراغ عندما تهنئ شخص ما.

حاول الإجابة بشكل طبيعى بقدر المستطاع و حاول أن تكتب فى ما تظن أنك قد تقوله حقـا فـى مثل هذه الموارد.

سوف تستعمل المعلومات لغرض البحث فقط.

١- بينما تنتظر فى موقف الباص، ترى أحد أصدقائك لم تره منذ مدة طويلة.

أنت : كيف حالك؟ ما أخبارك؟

صديقك: أنا بخير. أهم خبر لدى هو اننى تزوجت منذ ثلاثة أشهر.

أنت : . . . .

٢- أنت موظف فى شركة و أخبرت أن رب عملك تزوج مؤخرا. فى فترة الظهر، ترى رئيسك و تريد أن تهنئه

فتقول : . . . .

٣- أنت موظف. ترى البواب الذى يعمل فى المكتب.

أنت : لم تكن فى مكتبك منذ بضعة أيام. هل هناك أى خطب؟

البواب : لقد رزقت بمولود منذ ثلاثة أيام.

أنت : . . . .

٤- أنت تعمل فى شركة. فى أثناء العمل، فى مكتبك، أحد العمال لا تعرفه كثيرا، يـدخل مكتبـك لكى يتحدث مع زميلك. يقول زميلك: السيد فلان قد رزق بولد البارحة.

أنت تقول للسيد فلان : . . . .