PERSIAN FAVOR ASKING IN FORMAL AND INFORMAL ACADEMIC CONTEXTS: THE IMPACT OF GENDER AND ACADEMIC STATUS

Hooman Saeli

Abstract

The investigation of speech acts has been of interest, especially in cross-cultural pragmatics, to many L1/L2 researchers for many years (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper 1989). Favor-asking, as an important speech act, is centered upon having the other party of conversation do a specific act (Goldschmidt 1999). Although some research has been done on favor-asking in different contexts, studies on this speech act are still scarce, if any, in Persian settings. The main thrust of the current study was to investigate favor-asking among a sample of 20 native speakers of Persian (10 women and 10 men). The participants were selected from graduate students, since the employed oral DCT scenarios were designed to elicit favors asked from three different academic statuses: *Higher*, *equal*, and *lower* (professors, peers, and students, respectively). A total of 240 responses were then analyzed to identify the recurring patterns under the three open-coded categories of **pre-favor**, **favor**, and **post-favor**. The examination of the responses illustrated some variation triggered by gender and academic status differences, namely, the length of favors, frequency of some (sub)themes, and formality degree. Additionally, some relevant syntactic issues were explored (e.g. plural/singular pronouns/verbs), which contributed to the formality/informality of the favors, depending upon the contexts in which they were incorporated. Finally, some insights into Persian sociocultural interactions, favor-asking in particular, were provided.

Keywords: Favor-asking strategies; Oral DCTs; Politeness theories; Gender differences; Academic status differences.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The rate of communication among people, in both intra- and international settings, is witnessing an increasing rate, since physical distances are shrinking in today's world. Effective communication in such settings heavily relies upon the competency interlocutors manifest. In particular, Koike (2003: 279) stresses the importance of pragmatic competence in effective communication, and defines it as "the speaker's knowledge and use of rules of appropriateness and politeness which dictate the way the speaker will understand and formulate speech acts." Coulmas (1981) and Cohen (1995) define speech acts as the smallest meaning-carrying unit of discourse which are used to perform an action that goes beyond the constraints of words in many communicative situations. Therefore, speech acts are generally regarded as pivotal in the exploration of

communication patterns in social interactions. As Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) state, the studying of speech acts has been of interest to many cross-cultural pragmatics researchers for a long time. Speech acts research, thus, has its roots in scrutinizing the ways in which people interact and interpret such interactions in various social/cultural settings. In fact, in contexts where words and sentences generally convey concepts beyond their literal meanings, possessing the knowledge to decipher such strings of words can help people communicate with higher efficacy. Consequently, exploring the ways people ask and interpret favors is central to the current study.

1.2. *Favor-asking*

In order to study speech acts more effectively, they are generally broken down into more specific ones (Bach and Harnish 1979), primarily based on their communicative purposes (Cohen 1995). Some examples of speech acts are apologies, requests, suggestions, and refusals. Of the most commonly-occurring types of speech acts in social settings is favor-asking. Although favors and requests might seem to be fulfilling similar pragmatic functions, the two are different in “inference” and “intention” (Goldschmidt 1998: 130). Goldschmidt (1998: 130), in a similar vein, asserts that what differentiates favors from requests “is beneficence, indebtedness, reciprocity, and imposition, which suggest that both concepts [favors-asking and requesting] exist as different psychological realities.” As a matter of fact, communicators ask for and respond to favors in order to sustain the success and reciprocity of communication (Greenberg and Shapiro 1971), and in doing so, they try to “minimize perceived imposition and to maximize self-presentation” (Goldschmidt 1998: 151). The principal purpose in favor-asking is, therefore, to have the other party of communication, without losing face that is, do a specific act.

Review of the existing literature brings to light that favor-asking has received little attention in speech acts research. Nonetheless, there are a few studies that have been centered upon the examination of this speech act. In her influential study, Goldschmidt (1998) investigated favor-asking among American speakers of English in a US context. She analyzed 200 tokens of naturally-occurring data, gleaned from daily conversations. As a result, Goldschmidt reported four essential defining features of favors, and also broke down favors into three main components of pre-favor, favor, and favor response. She finally examined the main grammatical features of each component, along with any differences caused by gender and social status differences. In an earlier analysis, Innes and Gilroy (1980) also investigated the speech act of favor-asking, asking for help in particular, in three Australian, US, and British contexts. Their research focus, however, was on the ultimate favor success and the factors that affected it. They, therefore, concluded that the sociocultural contexts of asking favors considerably influenced the production, interpretation, and success of favors.

The pragmatic success of favor-asking can be determined by the extent to which favors are asked within the sociocultural boundaries of communication. This, therefore, might be evaluated and interpreted in light of context-bound, sociocultural variables. As Grice (1975) puts it, there are four instrumental maxims in defining boundaries for the pragmatic and sociocultural efficacy of communication. The following are Grice’s four maxims:

- The maxim of quantity, according to which one attempts to convey as much information as necessary, and no more.
- The maxim of quality, according to which one attempts to uphold truthfulness in conversations; that is, the information communicated should neither be false nor not supported by evidence.
- The maxim of relation, according to which one attempts to adhere to the principle of relevancy; that is, saying things which contribute pertinently to the conversation.
- The maxim of manner, according to which one attempts to adhere to the principles of clarity, brevity, and rationality of organization; that is, the information should be communicated in a comprehensible fashion based on the aforementioned principles.

The four maxims of Grice are also meaningfully applicable to favor-asking. Hence, an effective, and probably successful, favor is of appropriate length, is truthful, pertinent to given circumstances, and mutually comprehensible by communication parties. These parameters might, however, vary in distinctive contexts, and across different genders and social groups (e.g. academic statuses). It is, for instance, reasonable to hypothesize that interlocutors ask favors differently in a Persian context. In particular, people of different genders and statuses in such a context might define effective favor-asking behavior differently based upon the governing sociocultural parameters.

1.3. *Speech acts research in Persian contexts*

Review of the available literature brings to light that a body of research has examined pragmatic issues in Persian contexts. In fact, a number of studies have investigated the speech acts of apology (Shahrokhi and Jan 2012), request (Ghavamnia, Tavakoli and Rezazadeh 2012), suggestion (Farnia, Sohrabie and Abdul Sattar 2014), refusal (Babai and Sharifian 2013; Kazemi Zadeh 2013), and compliment (Yousefvand 2010), among others. For instance, Shahrokhi and Jan reported similarities between how Persian males apologized and how westerners did (predominant use of action verbs, namely, *apologize*), thereby attesting to the universality of many apology strategies. Additionally, Babai and Sharifian teased out the incorporation of similar strategies in Persian and English by Persian-speaking learners of English, and therefore, observed cases of L1 pragmatic transfer. Their analysis revealed that the use of indirect refusal strategies was very common among the participants, probably because of the less face-threatening nature of indirect strategies. The authors also revealed the use of pre- and post-refusal strategies (e.g. through the expression of regret and empathy) as a pragmatic tool to minimize the danger of losing face. Finally, Farnia et al. reported findings from a study conducted to probe the speech act of suggestion/advice. The participants of that study exhibited a stronger preference toward direct strategies in giving suggestions (i.e. use of imperatives and negative imperatives). The authors, however, deemed their findings contrastive to those of Allami and Naeimi (2011), since

the latter revealed a more predominant incorporation of indirect suggestion strategies among Persians.

The above studies on Persian speech acts are interesting in four aspects. First, the majority of them emphasize the importance of face-saving endeavors in Persian contexts through the use of more indirect strategies. This comes to further light when accounting for other variables in pragmatic studies. For instance, examining the impact of gender and social-class differences can illustrate whether, and if so, how Persian speech acts are affected by such differences. Second, the existing results still remain inconclusive, to some extent. Referring back to the two studies by Allami and Naeimi (2011) and Farnia et al. (2014), it is noticed that the results can be somewhat contrastive, in that, different suggestion strategies are reportedly preferred by various participant groups. This reminds us of the need to further the exiting knowledge on Persian speech acts. Thirdly, whereas various speech acts have been examined in Persian contexts, favor-asking still remains an under-explored area. Therefore, a study supplementing the current insights vis-à-vis Persian speech acts can be beneficial. Furthermore, the results of such a study can bring to light whether, and if so, why and how Persian favor-asking is different from other speech acts, and the extent to which asking a favor threatens askers' face can be probed into by scrutinizing sample favors. Finally, the exiting research on Persian speech-acts generally fails to account for the impact of moderating variables (e.g. participants' gender and social status). Thus, a carefully designed study can help illustrate how such variables might lead to differential strategy use. In particular, gender and academic status differences were included in the current study to help recognize any variations in favors.

1.4. *Politeness theories*

A relevant theoretical concept that can be applied to favor-asking, and other speech acts in general, is politeness theory. As Brown and Levinson (1987) state, in social interactions, people try to save face. Speech acts, such as requests, refusals, and suggestions, might jeopardize the face people strive to build and maintain. As Mao (1994) and Spencer-Oatey (2000) state, the universality of this theory is, however, questionable. That is, approaches to saving face and the extent to which speech acts might be viewed as face-threatening are subject to variation in different sociopolitical contexts. Janney and Arndt (1993) add to this debate and claim that Brown and Levinson's politeness theory might have embedded some bias against non-Western cultures in which standards to be regarded as "polite" might differ from the prevailing ones in Western countries. Watts, Ide, and Ehlich (1992), in the same vein, cast doubt on the universality of politeness norms and call for more cross-cultural investigations of them. A review of the existing literature on politeness theory brings to light that our definition of politeness and politeness norms might have been culturally-biased and hegemonic, to a certain extent. This, in turn, draws our attention to the need for the re-examination of holistic and over-encompassing claims about politeness and the construct of face. In order to facilitate a more complete understanding of these concepts, conducting context-specific research is needed.

Mao (2000) brings up two ingesting examples in an attempt to question the universality of politeness theory. He differentiates between the nature of politeness

found in China and Japan, and the ones that Brown and Levinson put forth. Mao then concludes that, in China and Japan, people strive to save a socially acceptable face. This kind of face is different from what Brown and Levinson describe as face; their face, on the other hand, is more concerned with a public self-image, Mao elaborates. A relevant study was also conducted by Spencer-Oatey and Xing (2000). The results of this study showed that, while interacting with each other, British and Chinese interlocutors tended to gear the communication towards the politeness standards of the other party. A possible conclusion is that the construct of face is not necessarily personal, but social, in many cases. Therefore, Spencer-Oatey (2002) asks a fundamental question about the focus of face-saving concerns: “are they personally oriented (i.e. oriented to the speaker and hearer as individual participants), are they group oriented (i.e. oriented to the speaker and hearer as group representatives), or a mixture of the two?” (p. 4). Eelen (2001) takes a similar position toward Brown and Levinson’s definition of “politeness” and questions the personal self-image that is promoted by this theory. Instead, he suggests that hearers, as the receiving end of speech acts, are often ignored by this personalization of politeness.

Since favor-asking, in nature, is imposing and might necessitate out-of-ordinary tasks, those asking favors might lose face and be labeled as “impolite.” Therefore, it would be interesting to see how the two sides of the politeness argument might explain favor-asking and its strategies in a Persian context. In fact, it is worthwhile to examine whether Persians would stick with saving a *personal* face or they would attach more importance to a *socially acceptable* face.

1.5. Gender and social status differences in speech acts research

Speech acts are generally analyzed in a complicated, interrelated network of addressers, addressees, and contextual variables. Of particular interest in the current study are gender and social (academic, in particular) status differences of interlocutors in favor-asking situations. Previous research on speech acts has acknowledged the impact of differences in gender (e.g. Bataineh and Bataineh 2006; Baxter 1984; Chen, He and Hu 2013; Holmes 2006) and social status (e.g. Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz 1989; Gonzales et al. 1990) in production, interpretation, and efficacy of speech acts. Holmes (1989), for instance, analyzed naturally-occurring conversations in New-Zealand, and concluded that women tend to apologize more often than men. She also reported that apologies differed in accordance with the social status of interlocutors. In another study, which is directly related to the present one, Goldschmidt (1998: 151) concluded that the construction of favors is dependent upon “relative social status, social distance, and gender,” thus ascertaining the effect of gender and social status differences on favor-asking. With that being said, there still is a strong need to further our understanding of the effect of gender and social status differences in speech acts research, favor-asking in particular. Also, given the fact that Persian contexts have received inadequate pragmatic attention, the investigation of Persian favor-asking behavior can augment the existing literature and possibly provide insights into favor-asking patterns of Persians.

1.6. *The present study*

As Bowe and Martin (2007: 13) point out, “we might assume that each language/culture may have different settings for Quantity, Quality, and Manner.” In other words, the constructs of *sufficiency*, *truthfulness*, *clarity*, and *brevity*, of favors in particular, may differ across cultures and contexts. Although some research has been conducted on Persian speech acts (refer back to Section 1.2.), to my best knowledge, there still exists a strongly-felt gap vis-à-vis the Persian speech act of favor-asking. Review of the existing literature, thus, reveals a number of shortcomings:

- A general lack in favor-asking research
- A lack in research on favor-asking in Persian contexts
- A total lack of research on favor-asking in Persian academic contexts while examining gender and academic status differences

Of many contexts in which favors are asked, academic settings are the locus where people have numerous interactions with their professors, peers, and students. Drawing upon the claims of Bowe and Martin (2007), Cohen (1995), and Holtgraves and Yang (1992) concerning the impact of context, it can be hypothesized that the nature of favors and their underlying constituents might vary between academic and non-academic contexts. Another important objective in the current study is the examination of politeness norms and face-saving strategies while asking favors. In fact, the present study also aims to determine whether the participants save a personal or socially-acceptable face.

The exploration of Persian favors in an academic setting can help provide insights as to what the main constituents of such favors are and how interlocutors' different genders and academic statuses might impact on the construction of favors. In addition, taking account of grammatical intricacies embedded in favors can further our understanding of the relationship between syntactic and pragmatic features. Also, the potential results are hoped to provide further insight into politeness norms and whether they are personally or socially oriented. Taking the aforementioned shortcomings into consideration, the current study was aimed at exploring favors in a Persian academic context and also investigating the effect of gender and academic status. However, the ultimate success of favor asking was not a main focus in the current study. The following research questions were, therefore, answered at the end of the current study:

- What are the main constituents of Persian favors in an academic setting?
- How do gender differences affect such favors?
- How do academic status differences affect such favors?
- How do gender and academic status differences cause variation in formal and informal favors?
- How do Persians save personal or socially-acceptable face?
- How do favor constituents and syntactic considerations function as face-saving strategies?

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

20 native speakers of Persian were recruited to participate in the study. In order to investigate the impact of gender, the sample included an equal number of men and women, thus facilitating comparisons of favor-length and components. The participants' age ranged from 25 to 30. They were all graduate students in different fields at a university, and the time they had been studying as a graduate student varied from 1 to 5 years. They all reported having prior experience of working as a teacher assistant (TA), instructor, and/or tutor. Since the scenarios included situations about asking a favor from a professor, a classmate, and a student (thus instilling academic differences into the scenarios), the graduate student body of native-speakers of Persian was considered to be the best representative sample. Owing to the relative small number of Persian speakers who would meet the criteria mentioned above, the incorporated sampling method was convenience. As expected, all the participants acknowledged the need for and frequent use of asking academic and non-academic favors from people of different genders and academic statuses. They were, therefore, assumed to be competent in opening, sustaining, and terminating favor-asking exchanges in the Persian language.

2.2. Instruments

Oral discourse completion task (DCT) was employed as the main data collection method in the current study. There is ample positive evidence for using oral DCTs to collect data on speech acts. Although not as authentic as naturally-occurring conversations, oral DCTs can still be relatively valid and very practical. In particular, they can elicit significantly longer responses and the responses they produce can be regarded as more authentic representations of real-life social interactions (Jucker 2011; Yuan 2001). Oral DCTs were deemed to serve the main study objectives for two reasons:

1. Favor responses generally present in naturally-occurring data were unnecessary;
2. Oral DCT responses were hypothesized to be more authentic, compared to written DCTs.

The oral DCTs used in the present study comprised two different scenarios, both of which occurred in an academic context. Each scenario was manipulated to help determine the role of gender and academic status differences in Persian favor-asking. The first scenario was about asking for an **article**, to which only the addressee had access. The participants were told to ask the addressee to email/find/download them the article. This scenario was assumed to entail more formal favor-asking. In the second scenario, on the other hand, the informants were required to ask for a **ride** in a late

evening after the last bus had left. The second scenario represented a more informal instance of favor-asking. The two written scenario descriptions were:

1. Suppose you are looking for an article you intend to use in your work. Although you do not, some people you know have access to that article. You go to see them to get the article. How do you ask each of these people to email/find/download it to/for you?
2. Suppose you need to work late to finish an assigned project. After you leave your office, you realize that the last bus has already left. You accidentally run into someone you know in the university parking lot. How do you ask each of these people for a ride to the nearest cab station?

What both scenarios had in common, as mentioned earlier, was the manipulation of the two variables of *gender* and *academic status*. Therefore, each scenario was broken down into six situations. In both scenarios, the participants were told to ask the favor from the following people:

- A male professor (higher status)
- A female professor (higher status)
- A male classmate (equal status)
- A female classmate (equal status)
- A male student (lower status)
- A female student (lower status)

The final version of the DCT was thus composed of 12 individual situations. As a result, the collected data were an interrelated network of gender and academic status differences, thus showing how such variables might have altered the favors. It should finally be noted that the male-female order of the DCT scenarios was luck of the draw.

2.3. Procedure

Before the participants responded to the scenarios, a thorough oral explanation, accompanied by the written description of the scenarios, was prefaced. The **article** and **ride** scenarios, along with the 12 situations, were thus introduced. A short period of time was spent on ascertaining that the participants understood the differences in gender and academic status in each situation. The researcher also clarified that classmate (the *equal*-status counterpart in the situations) is not synonymous with friend. Next, it was stressed that the participants imagine each situation as happening in a typical academic context and that they should draw upon their *own* pragmatic knowledge to respond to the situations. It was hoped that it would augment the authenticity of the data and make them closer to typical Persian favor-asking interactions.

If necessary, the informants were asked to record a sample response to make sure they were familiar enough with the situations. However, no feedback was provided on the content of the favors to maintain the authenticity of the data. In a few cases, some responses were re-recorded due to technological failure. Finally, the researcher left the respondents alone to facilitate further mental comfort for them. Each recording session

was done independently from the others to minimize the participants' learning and halo effects. It is also of note that the entire data collection process was done in accordance with the stipulations of the institutional Review Board of Oklahoma State University.

2.4. Data analysis

In total, 240 favors were elicited by the DCTs (12 individual situations) from the participants. The recorded favors were analyzed in a few related steps. First, the coding scheme was developed and recursively revised. In doing so, feedback was also gained from a scholar with sufficient knowledge on Persian pragmatics. Although another coding scheme could have also been adopted and adapted for the purpose of the present study (i.e. Goldschmidt 1998), it was noticed that it might be leaving out some significant culture-bound components of Persian favors. Finally, after the open- and axial-coding, each complete favor was broadly broken down into **pre-favor** (PRF), **favor** (F), and **post-favor** (PTF) categories. Also, under each category, a number of sub-categories were identified. This coding scheme was hoped to help capture the culture-specific intricacies of favor-asking in a Persian context.

Secondly, incorporating the scheme, the data were analyzed to find any similarities/differences across four gender-oriented categories: Man→man, man→woman, woman→man, and woman→woman. In doing so, the frequencies of the identified favor-asking strategies in each situation were tallied, with the aim of comparing and contrasting the employed thematic patterns. Finally, the responses were syntactically scrutinized in order to illustrate how syntactic features might have affected favor formality in the four categories of man→man, man→woman, woman→man, and woman→woman.

In the third step, the possible similarities/differences across various academic statuses were examined. The analysis helped illustrate how the respondents asked favors from *higher*, *equal*, and *lower* academic status interlocutors. Also, the most commonly reported favor-asking strategies used in each gender-oriented category were tallied to shed light on the impact of academic status on changing favor length and formality. In the same vein, a flow-up syntactic analysis revealed how favor formality might have been influenced by changes in syntax (e.g. singular/plural pronouns/verbs). Finally, any possible variation in favor length, formality, and main constituents were explored in the formal (i.e. article) and informal (i.e. ride) contexts.

2.4.1. Coding scheme

Table 1 presents the coding scheme incorporated in the current study. As mentioned earlier, all the elicited favors were coded under three broad categories of **pre-favor**, **favor**, and **post-favor**. The following provides detailed information about each category and respective sub-categories:

Table 1

Coding Scheme for Persian Favors

Thematic categories			Examples
Pre favor	Opening	Salutation	“Hello” “Hi”
		Greeting	“How are you?” “What’s up?” “How are you doing?” “How is life?”
	Apology		“Excuse me” “I’m really sorry” “I apologize to bother you”
	Backstory		“I’m working on a project” “I’m involved in a project” “I need to finish my thesis before deadline” “I was working late” “I was in the office working”
	Problem statement		“I need an article” “I cannot find the article” “I didn’t drive today” “I missed the last bus”
	Solution proposition		“I thought you might be able to find the article” “I thought you might have it” “I thought maybe you can help me”
	Early existential inquiry		“Do you have two minutes?” “Do you have some time to help me out with a problem?” “Are you also going to X street?” “Did you drive today?” “Will you be at your office today?”
Favor	Conditional	Possibility	“If possible, please download the...?” “Is it possible for you to...?” “If you can, will you...?”
		Time	“If you found some time, could you...?”
		Imposition mitigator	“If not, no problem at all.” “Don’t bother yourself if you don’t have the time.”
	Non-conditional		“Please download the article ...” “Drop me off at...” “Give me a ride to...”
Post favor	Gratitude		“Thanks a lot.” “I really appreciate your help.” “Thanks, man.”
	Apology		“Again, I’m really sorry to ask for this.” “I’m sorry for bothering you.”
	Promise of reciprocation		“I’ll return the favor.”
	Favor follow-up		“I’ll call soon to remind you to...” “I’ll email you about...” “Do you want me to send you a reminder email?”

The **pre-favor** category was the first identified category. Under it, the following sub-themes were identified:

- *Opening: Salutation and greeting*
- *Apology*
- *Backstory*
- *Problem statement*
- *Solution proposition*
- *Early inquiry about the availability of time, willingness, and existential possibility* (e.g. having a car, having access to the Internet, having some free time, etc.).

As expected, the majority of the favors were opened with a short form of *greeting*. *Apology* mainly functioned as showing embarrassment because of taking someone's time and/or asking for resources (e.g. a car ride). *Backstory* was used to set the scene and prepare the addressee for the main favor. *Problem statement* was utilized to highlight the very rationale behind asking the favor, namely, needing an article or a ride. *Solution proposition*, in addition, included some hypothetical solutions, on the side of the addresser, in order to solve the problem, namely, downloading an article or dropping one off at a destination. In other words, the addresser put forth some suggestions as to how the addressee could help solve the problem. Finally, the *early inquiry* category was employed to evaluate the very existential possibility of doing a favor, without which the favor-asking process would be abortive, otherwise (e.g. availability of time, willingness, a computer, and a car).

Second, the **favor** category was categorized into *conditional* and *non-conditional*. While the former referred to the honoring of the favor under some conditions (e.g. the availability of time, energy, a car, etc.), the latter was more directive/imperative, thus putting more imposition on the addressee. Therefore, it was hypothesized that the conditional favors were more likely interpreted as a face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson 1987), as opposed to the non-conditional ones. The differentiation between the two favor types was mainly accomplished through syntactic (e.g. addition of subordinate clauses) and lexical (e.g. imposition-mitigating words) manipulations. Finally, the favors in the form of a question were also categorized under *conditional*, since many were asked to set up a condition. For instance, "Is it possible for you to give me ride?" was hypothesized to be still enquiring about addressees' ability, possibility, or willingness. On the contrary, all the non-conditional favors were (imperative) statements.

The **post-favor** part was the last category identified within the favors of this study. The following sub-themes, as a result, were identified:

- *Gratitude*
- *Apology*
- *Promise of reciprocation*
- *Favor follow-up*

Gratitude was used to show appreciation for the honored favor. It should be reminded again that favor outcome (e.g. success or failure) evaluation was not a focus in the current study. Also, some cases of *apology* were observed, which, similar to the *apology* sub-theme in the **pre-favor** category, functioned as showing embarrassment because of the imposing nature of the favors (e.g. non-routine time and effort allocation). Moreover, a few instances of *promise of reciprocation* were identified, which were employed to, at least verbally, offer compensation for the inconvenience caused by the favor. Finally, some informants reported the use of *favor follow-up*. That is, after asking the favor, they finalized the response by stating some form of follow-up, such as calling and sending an email to remind the addressee to do the favor. This sub-theme was almost exclusive to the article scenario, though.

3. Results and discussion

The following sections present the findings as falling under four gender-oriented classifications: Man→man, man→woman, woman→man, and woman→woman. Under each category, favor length and underlying favor components will be discussed across the three academic statuses. The findings will then be furthered by the provision of sociocultural underpinnings that might help understand the rationale behind potential differences across academic statuses and genders. As mentioned earlier, the male-female order of the presentation of the findings was luck of the draw.

3.1. Man →man favors

Table 2 presents the favor-asking (sub)themes and respective frequencies for the man→man category.

Table 2

Man →Man Favor-Asking Strategies (N = 10)

Thematic patterns			Article			Ride		
			High stus	Equal stus	Low stus	High stus	Equal stus	Low stus
Pre favor	Opening	Salutation	10	9	9	10	9	9
		Greeting	9	7	7	8	9	8
	Apology		3	0	0	5	1	1
	Backstory		9	9	7	7	2	4
	Problem statement		9	6	4	6	7	8
	Solution proposition		4	2	2	0	0	0
	Early inquiry		3	0	0	3	2	4
Total			47	33	29	39	30	34
Favor	Conditional	Possibility	9	6	7	10	4	7
		Time	0	0	0	0	0	0
		Imposition mitigator	3	0	0	4	1	0
	Non-conditional		1	4	3	0	6	3

Total		13	10	10	14	11	10
Post favor	Gratitude	10	10	10	9	8	8
	Apology	1	0	0	8	0	0
	Promise of reciprocation	0	1	0	0	0	0
	Favor follow-up	2	0	1	0	0	0
Total		13	11	10	17	8	8
Grand total		73	54	49	70	49	52

Note. Stus = status.

The three academic statuses were, accordingly, shown to cause some variation. As also seen in Table 2, the favors asked from *higher*-status addressees generally tended to be longer than the other two groups. On the other hand, the ones asked from addressees of either *equal*- or *lower*-status had somewhat similar lengths. This probably occurred because the participants wished to set the scene more properly when communicating with an academically *higher*-status interlocutor. Similarly, excessive brevity in favor-asking from *higher*-status addressees might have been regarded as impolite. Consequently, adhering to the Persian politeness norms was possibly reflected in the higher number of strategies, especially in the **pre-** and **post-favor** parts. For instance, the relatively frequent use of *backstory*, *apology*, and *gratitude* is indicative of this fact. Another observation was the more extensive use of non-conditional favors when addressing people of *equal*-status in both scenarios. Presumably, saving face and/or sounding imposing was not regarded as important while dealing with same-gender peers.

Additionally, comparing favor-asking length and (sub)themes in formal (i.e. asking for an article) and informal (i.e. asking for a ride) contexts did not indicate any striking length differences. However, it was seen that the participants generally tended to have more *backstory* and *solution proposition* elements in the article scenario across all the three statuses. This might have happened because the participants needed to elaborate on the rationale to make sure the addressees honored the favors. On the other hand, more frequent use *apology* was reported in the ride scenario, especially from *higher*-status individuals. The informants possibly chose to apologize, since giving a ride was viewed as some kind of inconvenience. In the Persian culture, *apology* is usually incorporated into speech when the communicative purpose is to soften up such instances of inconvenience.

3.2. Man → woman favors

Table 3 shows the favor-asking (sub)themes and frequencies for the man→woman category.

Table 3

Man → Woman Favor-Asking Strategies (N = 10)

Thematic patterns			Article			Ride		
			High stus	Equal stus	Low stus	High stus	Equal stus	Low stus
Pre favor	Opening	Salutation	10	10	9	10	10	9
		Greeting	9	8	6	8	9	10
	Apology		3	0	0	5	1	0
	Backstory		9	9	6	6	3	3
	Problem statement		8	6	4	7	4	8
	Solution proposition		2	1	3	0	0	0
	Early inquiry		1	0	0	2	3	5
Total			42	34	30	38	30	35
Favor	Conditional	Possibility	9	8	7	10	5	9
		Time	0	1	0	0	0	0
		Imposition mitigator	3	0	0	3	3	0
	Non-conditional		1	1	3	0	5	1
Total			13	10	10	12	12	10
Post favor	Gratitude		9	10	9	9	9	10
	Apology		0	0	0	4	1	2
	Promise of reciprocation		0	0	0	0	0	0
	Favor follow-up		2	1	1	0	0	0
Total			11	11	10	12	9	12
Grand total			66	55	50	62	51	57

The findings suggested that changes in addressees' academic status could give rise to variation in favor length and strategies. Similar to the man→man category, favors asked from *higher*-status addressees tended to be relatively lengthier, whereas those asked from *equal*- or *lower*-status women were of somewhat the same length. The more frequent elements of *apology* and *problem statement* in *higher*-status favors, for instance, contributed to this observation. The possible explanation for such observations was provided in section 3.1.

Also, the (in)formality of the contexts did not noticeably change the favor length and components. Nevertheless, although *higher*- and *equal*-status favors were slightly longer in the article scenario, such a trend was reversed in the case of *lower*-status favors. One possible explanation is the interrelationship between quite strict social norms about student-teacher interactions and a ride favor from a female student. This is why more elements of *problem statement* were reported in the ride scenario to justify this socially unacceptable favor. Finally, similar to the man→man category, the participants generally favored the more frequent use of *apology* in the ride scenario. The possible explanations for these observations were offered in section 3.1.

3.3. Woman → man favors

Table 4 presents the identified favor-asking (sub)themes and respective frequencies in the woman → man category.

Table 4

Woman → Man Favor-Asking Strategies (N=10)

Thematic patterns			Article			Ride		
			High stus	Equal stus	Low stus	High stus	Equal stus	Low stus
Pre favor	Opening	Salutation	10	10	10	10	10	10
		Greeting	9	9	10	8	9	9
	Apology		5	1	0	8	2	0
	Backstory		9	9	7	8	1	0
	Problem statement		9	6	4	10	7	7
	Solution proposition		4	2	2	0	0	0
	Early inquiry		2	0	2	4	6	7
Total			48	37	35	48	35	33
Favor	Conditional	Possibility	8	6	5	9	7	6
		Time	1	1	0	0	0	0
		Imposition mitigator	1	0	0	3	1	0
	Non-conditional		1	3	5	0	2	4
Total			11	10	10	12	10	10
Post favor	Gratitude		10	10	10	10	9	8
	Apology		0	0	0	9	0	1
	Promise of reciprocation		0	0	0	0	0	0
	Favor follow-up		6	5	2	0	0	0
Total			16	15	12	19	9	9
Grand total			76	62	57	79	54	52

The findings indicated that the scenarios involving *higher*-status addressees elicited longer responses. In general, the participants used more *backstory* and *apology* elements when asking a favor from a *higher*-status addressee. The possible explanations for such longer responses were provided under section 3.1. Also, the favors asked from *equal*-status individuals tended to be slightly longer from the ones asked from those of *lower*-status. One possible explanation is because the women participants simply wished to be more polite and indirect when asking a favor from their male peers. Therefore, they employed more **pre-** and **post-favor** strategies.

Unlike the previous categories, it was seen that the formal and informal contexts differed in length. In fact, the article favors asked from addressees of *equal*- and *lower*-status were quite longer than the ride counterparts, whereas the favors asked from *higher*-status interlocutors remained quite similar. Further analysis brought to light the longer article favors were mainly caused by *favor follow-up* in the article scenario. Therefore, it can be assumed that the other strategies were kept comparably constant between the formal and informal contexts. Additionally, the respondents generally used

more *backstory* elements in the article scenario, but were more *apologetic* in the ride scenario. The potential rationale was offered under 3.1.

3.4. Woman → woman favors

Table 5 includes the woman → woman favors' (sub)themes and respective frequencies.

Table 5

Woman → Woman Favor-Asking Strategies (N=10)

Thematic patterns			Article			Ride		
			High Stus	Equal Stus	Low Stus	High Stus	Equal Stus	Low Stus
Pre favor	Opening	Salutation	10	10	10	10	10	10
		Greeting	10	10	10	10	10	7
	Apology		0	0	0	3	0	0
	Backstory		9	6	6	2	2	0
	Problem statement		8	6	3	9	4	4
	Solution proposition		4	2	0	0	0	0
	Early inquiry		1	2	1	1	4	4
Total			42	36	30	35	30	25
Favor	Conditional	Possibility	9	4	3	10	3	3
		Time	1	0	0	0	0	1
		Imposition mitigator	1	0	0	2	1	0
	Non-conditional		0	6	7	0	6	6
Total			11	10	10	12	10	11
Post favor	Gratitude		10	10	10	10	10	10
	Apology		2	2	0	10	0	2
	Promise of reciprocation		0	0	0	0	1	0
	Favor follow-up		4	4	2	0	0	0
Total			16	16	12	20	11	12
Grand Total			69	62	52	67	51	48

Similar to the previous categories, the general finding that *higher* academic status elicited longer favors was observed here, as well. It was also found out that the favors asked from *equal*-status interlocutors were usually longer than the ones asked from *lower*-status people. Analysis of the data indicated that such differences were mainly caused by more frequent *backstory* and *favor follow-up* strategies. The possible rationale was offered under 3.1.

Next, some variation was observed in the favors length of formal and informal contexts. In particular, the length of the favors asked from *equal*- and *lower*-status addressees were longer in the formal (article) scenario. As mentioned above, such a difference was partly caused by *favor follow-up* strategies, which was only present in the article scenario. Similar to the prior categories, the *backstory* theme was very frequent in the formal context across all the three academic statuses. On the contrary,

the *apology* subtheme was again observed more often in the ride scenario. The other subthemes were, however, noticed to be quite similar in frequency.

3.5. Summary of gender differences

The findings suggested that the gender differences between addressers and addressees could affect the length and underlying constituents of the favors. The following summarizes a number of gender-driven observations:

3.5.1. Favors asked by men

Overall, the man→man favors were slightly longer than their man→woman counterparts. In particular, the favors asked from male professors included more strategies as opposed to the ones asked from female counterparts. Such longer favors were reported probably because of the vaster sociocultural differences between male professors and students in Persian academic contexts. On the other hand, female professors are generally regarded as more approachable. Therefore, shorter favors might have not been regarded as face-threatening. The length differences between the *equal*- and *lower*-status categories were, on the other hand, minimal. The (in)formality of the contexts did not seem to noticeably change the length and main components of the favors, although, overall, the article favors were slightly longer. The following summarizes the strategy frequencies across the three academic statuses in both scenarios:

- Favors from *higher* academic status addressees (man→man, total of 143 sub-themes; man→woman, total of 128 sub-themes);
- Favors from *equal* academic status addressees (man→man, total of 103 sub-themes; man→woman, total of 106 sub-themes);
- Favors from *lower* academic status addressees (man→man, total of 101 sub-themes; man→woman, total of 107 sub-themes).

3.5.2. Favors asked by women

Likewise, the woman→man favors tended to be relatively longer than the woman→woman ones. Particularly, the favors from male professors were reportedly longer than the ones asked from the female counterparts. The possible explanation for such a difference was provided under 3.5.1. Similar to the favors asked by men, the length and main constituents of the favors women asked from *equal*- and *lower*-status addressees did not differ notably. The length of the favors was not significantly affected by the (in)formality of the contexts either. The following points summarize the frequencies of strategies used by the women participants in both scenarios:

- Favors from *higher* academic status addressees (woman→man, total of 155 sub-themes; woman→woman, total of 136 sub-themes);
- Favors from *equal* academic status addressees (woman→man, total of 116 sub-themes; woman→woman, total of 113 sub-themes);
- Favors from *lower* academic status addressees (woman→man, total of 109 sub-themes; woman→woman, total of 100 sub-themes).

3.6. Recurring observations

Analysis of the data disclosed some thematic patterns across the four categories of man→man, man→woman, woman→man, and woman→woman. The following points summarize such observations:

- Favors from *higher*-status addressees were generally longer;
- Opposite-gender, *lower*-status favors were generally longer than their same-gender counterparts;
- More *backstory* elements were used in article scenario;
- More elements of *apology* were used in the ride scenario.

A number of noticeable gender-driven difference were also notified. The following summarizes them:

- Overall, the women participants asked longer favors;
- Women tended to employ more *favor follow-up* strategies in the article scenario;

The women participants' longer favors possibly imply that they did not intend to be as direct as men when asking for favors, thus setting the scene more elaborately. This can also be regarded as a face-saving strategy for women.

4. Discussion

The current study aimed at investigating the speech act of favor asking among Persian native speakers in an academic context. In order to so, 20 native speakers of Persian, 10 women and 10 men, were invited to participate in the study. They responded to 12 oral DCT situations, and their responses were recorded for further analysis. The analysis proved the impact of gender and academic status on the length and constituents of the elicited favors. Finally, the possible distinctions between formal and informal contexts were investigated. Though favor length and constituents played an important part in determining the formality degree, syntactic features also stood out as significant formality modifiers. Such syntactic features will be discussed in-depth in the ensuing sections.

The following revisits the initial research questions in light of the findings and provides sociocultural explanations for them:

4.1. *The main constituents of Persian favors?*

The coding of the oral DCT responses divided the favors into three main constituents: **pre-favor** (*opening, apology, backstory, problem statement, solution proposition, and early inquiry about the availability of time, willingness, and existential possibility*), **favor** (*conditional and non-conditional*), and **post favor** (*gratitude, apology, promise of reciprocation, and favor follow-up*). The themes and sub-themes identified in the present study are, to some extent, comparable with those of Goldschmidt's (1998), who reported American favors as falling under three main categories of pre-favor, favor, and favor response. The main difference between the two studies is, however, that the present study was not aimed at examining favor success, thus lacking the favor response category. The two studies also differed in the reported sub-themes. Such variations might be explainable in light of the differences between the American and Persian cultures. For instance, Persians tended to focus more on *backstory* to sound more justified and save face, and could also be more *apologetic*, both before and after asking a favor. Comparing and contrasting the two cultures is, however, beyond the scope of the present study. Also, what the findings of the present study helped identify was the **post-favor** constituent.

4.2. *The effects of gender and academic status differences*

4.2.1. *Addressee gender in higher academic status situations*

Comparing the man→man and man→woman favors revealed that the men participants tended to ask longer favors from male professors, compared with female ones. Such an observation was made again, in the case of woman→man and woman→woman *higher-status* favor-asking. When the female participants asked favors from a male professor, they used longer favors, especially the **pre-** and **post-favors**, than when they did so from a female professor. Also, almost all the favors asked from professors were conditional, thus augmenting the formality and minimizing imposition.

The Persian stereotype that women are generally less strict and more approachable characters was observed in the case of female professors. Given that professorship was kept constant between the two genders, the only variable having caused the observed differences is presumably the social, stereotypical gender attributes. The longer favors from male professors can also be construed as the stronger social support they have in Iran as academic/administrative figures. In the majority of academic contexts, they are depicted as authoritative teachers who generally project the image of a rather strict, bossy character. On the contrary, female professors are generally regarded as more flexible, which might have given rise to shorter favors asked from them; that is, less explanation might have been required by female professors. As a result, when the participants asked a favor from a male professor, they usually set the scene more appropriately and elaborately; contrastively, the female professors might not

have been viewed as strict, and as a result, the **pre-** and **post-favor** categories were not very lengthy.

Syntax was also a differentiating factor in the formality degree of the favors. The Persian language has two different second-person pronouns used to address both genders: *to* (you-singular) and *shomaa* (you-plural). Both of these pronouns can be used to address one singular individual. Singular pronouns can only be used with single verbs, whereas the plural ones might be used in conjunction with either plural or singular verbs. These syntactic structures have important pragmatic meanings in different contexts. Singular/plural pronouns and verbs are generally utilized as tools to highlight social/academic/personal status differences. For instance, if interlocutors wish to maintain social differences and uphold politeness norms, they generally incorporate plural pronouns *and* verbs into their speech. A more thorough discussion of the Persian pronouns and verbs will ensue in the following sections.

In the case of the current study, when the participants were asking favors from their female/male professors, they used plural pronouns (*shomaa*) *and* plural verbs in *all* the situations – a combination which is interpreted as highly formal. Therefore, the favors asked from professors were aimed at increasing politeness and maintaining academic status differences. Here is another quick note that the Persian verbs are pluralized by suffixation. See Example 1:

- (1) *Shenidam shomaa in maqalaro dar-id, ostad.*
 Heard you-2PL this article have-2PL professor
 ‘I heard that you have this article, professor.’

It should be added that only second-person markers will be highlighted in the provided examples in order to avoid any further confusion. The complete deictic discussion of Persian pronouns and verbs is, however, beyond the scope of this article (for further information, see Keshavarz, 1988); therefore, I will solely adhere to the contextualized usages of grammar in Persian favor-asking.

4.2.2. Addressee gender in equal academic status situations

The analysis of the man→man and man→woman *equal*-status favors revealed that, overall, the two categories elicited quite similar favors in terms of length. The same observation was made in the case of the woman→man and woman→woman favors. That should not, however, be interpreted as similar levels of formality. That is, the extent to which the favors were (in)formal was chiefly determined by the syntactic construction of the favors, and not the favor lengths. Follow-up syntactic examination illustrated that favors from opposite-gender individuals tended to be more formal. It is of note that many opposite-gender student peers still call each other using titles and last names (e.g. Mr. Rad or Ms. Rad). On the contrary, *all* the 40 *same*-gender, *equal*-status favors in both scenarios were asked using singular pronouns *and* verbs, which indicates fewer social barriers among same-gender peers. See examples 2 and 3:

- (2) *Agha, mitoon-i in maqale ro behem bed-i?*
 Hey can-2SG this article to me give-2SG
 ‘Hey! Can you give me this article?’
- (3) *Mitoon-i mano ta istgahe taxi beresoon-i?*
 Can-2SG me to station cab drop off-2SG
 ‘Can you drop me off at the cab station?’

In the case of the opposite-gender classmates, on the other hand, some grammar-driven differences were observed. The following combination in Example 4, for instance, was intended for the highest degree of formality:

- (4) *Bebaxshid, shomaa in maqale ro dar-id?*
 Sorry you-2PL this article have-2PL
 ‘I’m sorry, do you have this article?’

The following discusses the syntactical considerations and some respective frequencies in the two gender-driven categories:

4.2.2.1. *Man* → *woman* equal-status favors

The following presents the frequency of the syntactic structures identified in the *man* → *woman* favors in both scenarios:

- Five singular addresses; see Example 5:

- (5) *Emkanesh has mano ta istgah bebar-i?*
 Possible is me to station take-2SG
 ‘Is it possible to take me to the cab station?’

- 10 plural addresses; see Example 6:

- (6) *Age mishe lotfan mano ta istgahe taxi bebar-id.*
 If possible please me to station taxi take-2PL
 ‘If possible, please take me to the cab station.’

- Five combined addresses; see Example 7:

- (7) *Momkene shomaa in maghale ro baraam peyda kon-i?*
 Possible you-2PL this article for me find-2SG
 ‘Is it possible for you to find this article for me?’

A new grammatical pattern in Example 7 is the combination of *shomaa* (plural *you*) and a *singular* verb. Such a combination is quite often used when an addresser desires to maintain some social/personal distance in a conversation. The plural pronoun in this combination functions as a (social/academic/personal) distancing tool, whereas the singular verb might imply *equal* or *lower* academic statuses. The respective frequency of using plural pronouns/verbs in this category is, therefore, indicative of the

fact that several male participants still tended to maintain the social distance with their opposite-gender peers. It might have been caused by the norms that limit inter-gender social interactions.

4.2.2.2. Woman → man equal-status favors

The case of the women participants is also indicative of the aforementioned syntactic features and their pragmatic functions:

- Four singular addresses; see Example 8:

(8) *Mishe manam ba khod-et bebar-i?*
Possible me with yourself-2SG-reflexive take-2SG
‘Can you (implied) take me with you, too?’

- 12 plural addresses; see Example 9:

(9) *Emkanesh has shomaa in maghale ro vasam*
download kon-id??
Possible is you-2PL this article for me
download-2PL
‘Is it possible for you to download this article for me?’

- Four combined addresses; see Example 10.

(10) *Mishe shomaa in maghale ro vasam peyda kon-i?*
Possible you-2PL this article for me find-2SG
‘Can you find this article for me?’

The high frequency of using either plural pronouns/verbs and plural pronouns/singular verbs suggests that the women participants also wished to follow the Persian sociocultural norms about interacting with peers of the opposite gender.

Another interesting observation in both the man → woman and woman → man categories was that the favors including *to* (second person, singular) happened to be non-conditional. In many cases, *to* was implied by the suffixation of verbs. See Example 11:

(11) *Manam ba khodet bebar!*
Me with yourself-2SG-Reflexive take-2SG
‘Take me with yourself, too!’

That is, the use of singular *to* decreased the formality, thus the distance between the interlocutors, and gave rise to more informal, non-conditional favors. Therefore, losing face and sounding imposing because of asking more direct favors did not seem to be a concern to some participants, possibly because of the same academic statuses.

4.2.3. Addressee gender in lower academic status situations

The analysis of the situations involving *lower*-status individuals led to a number of interesting observations. First, overall, the shortest favors were asked from the *lower*-status addressees. It might have occurred because the respondents did not possibly need to give lengthy justifications or set the scene exhaustively to their students. Thus, in many cases, the **pre-** and **post-favor** categories were relatively short. This did not, however, mean that they were being informal. A comparison between the same- and opposite-gender favors also revealed that the latter ones were generally longer in both scenarios. For instance, while asking for a ride from an opposite-gender student, the participants still needed to strive to set the scene more properly, since asking for a ride from an opposite-gender student in a late evening is quite out-of-ordinary and stigmatized in the Persian culture. The participants might have, accordingly, felt the need to lengthen the **pre-** and **post-favor** categories to appear more justified and possibly not lose face.

Syntax also played a distinguishing role in the *lower*-status favors, and the pragmatic functions of syntactic distance-markers were observed again. The following points will shed light on such syntactic structures and their respective frequencies:

4.2.3.1. *Man* → *man* lower-status favors

- 10 singular addressees; see Example 12:

(12) *Mitoon-i mano ta istgahe taxi beresoon-i?*
 Can-2SG me to station cab drop off-2SG
 ‘Can you drop me off at the cab station?’

- Five plural addressees; see Example 13:

(13) *Vasa-toon momkene mano ta istgahe taxi bereson-id?*
 For you-2PL possible me to station cab drop off-2PL
 ‘Is it possible for you to drop me off at the cab station?’

- Five combined addressees; see Example 14:

(14) *Shomaa miton-i in maqale ro vasam girbiar-i?*
 You-2PL can-2SG this article for me find-2SG
 ‘Can you find this article for me?’

The analysis showed that, although the men participants were generally more comfortable with their male students, some still tended to maintain a social/academic distance in a teacher-student relationship through using five cases of plural pronouns *and* verbs, as well as five instances of plural pronouns and singular verbs combinations. As mentioned earlier, the combination of the plural pronoun, *shomaa*, and singular verbs is generally used in situations where the person asking a favor is of either *equal* or *higher* (here, academic) status. Therefore, the incorporation of singular verbs, in conjunction with the plural pronouns, implies the participants’ wish to maintain the social distance in a teacher → student favor-asking exchange.

4.2.3.2. *Man → woman lower-status favors*

The man → woman *lower-status* favors were very different from the man → man ones, as shown in the following:

- Four singular addresses; refer back to Example 12.
- 10 plural addresses; refer back to Example 13.
- Six combined addresses (the use of *shomaa*-the plural, second-person pronoun with a singular verb); refer back to Example 14.

Unlike the man → man favors, the existence of vaster gender-oriented sociocultural gaps probably caused the male participants to use more plural pronouns *and* verbs while dealing with their female students. This might also be the outcome of the combination of social (e.g. teacher-student relationship) *and* gender-driven barriers. Therefore, the majority of the participants tended to broaden/maintain the academic distance through using more formal language.

4.2.3.3. *Woman → man lower-status favors*

The analysis of the favors asked by the women participants revealed that they, to a large extent, tended to maintain a social/academic distance with male students:

- Three singular addresses; refer back to Example 12.
- 17 plural addresses; refer back to Example 13.
- No combined addresses (the use of *shomaa*-the plural, second-person pronoun-with a singular verb); refer back to Example 14.

The most frequent use of plural pronouns *and* verbs was observed in this category, where the female participants asked favors from male students. The result was 17 instances of plural pronouns *and* verbs, which indicates the vast social barriers between female teachers and male students. It is of note that friendly relations between female teachers and male students is highly stigmatized in Persian academic contexts.

4.2.3.4. *Woman → woman lower-status favors*

The findings for the same-gender, *lower-status* favors were somehow different, in that, the women participants showed fewer social and gender-driven barriers through the use of more singular pronouns and verbs, as shown in the following:

- Six singular addresses; refer back to Example 12.
- Eight plural addresses; refer back to Example 13.
- Six combined addresses; refer back to Example 14.

Quite dissimilar to the third category, the female participants reported more intimacy while asking a favor from their female students through incorporating fewer

plural, but more singular pronouns and verbs. This, I think, has arisen from the fewer barriers same-gender interactions might impose on interlocutors. However, as teachers, some respondents still reported an inclination toward maintaining the academic distance, which was shown by eight cases of plural pronouns *and* verbs. Finally, six instances of combined addresses were reported, which revealed the female respondents' wish to be closer to female students by using singular verbs, while still keeping them at a socially acceptable distance through incorporating plural pronouns.

Overall, the impact of gender was noticed to be significant in *lower*-status favors. That is, whereas more comfort was reported in asking favors from same-gender students, social barriers and stigmatization of opposite-gender social relations were still strongly prevalent. As a result, many respondents, especially the female ones, were still cautious about using singular pronouns/verbs in their favors.

4.3. Gender and academic status in formal and informal favors

The analysis of the data suggested that Persian favors of the current study were not, to a large extent, affected by the (in)formality of the contexts. That is, whether the favors were about an article (formal) or a ride (informal), their length, main constituents, and syntactic structures were generally similar. Overall, it was observed that the sociocultural rules governing gender and academic status differences, as well as the interactions between the two, were still stronger than the individual scenarios in which favor-asking occurred. A more in-depth examination of the differences between the formal and informal contexts was provided earlier.

4.4. Revisiting politeness norms in Persian favor-asking

The findings of the current study can augment our understanding of Persian favors-asking and such favors' principal components. The findings, however, need to be compared with those in other Persian speech acts studies (e.g. Allami and Naeimi 2011; Babai and Sharifian 2013; Farnia, Sohrabie and Abdul Sattar 2014), since the results of the present study disclosed that asking a favor might be influenced by such variables as gender and academic status differences. That is, both the length and formality of the favors varied when taking account of differences in gender and academic status. Additionally, syntactic analyses of the oral DCT responses suggested that, when gender and academic status differences are to be delved into, not only do these variables impact favors individually, but also they interact in interesting ways. As a result, the effects of gender and academic status usually materialize in the syntactic structure of favors (e.g. use of plural vs. singular morphemes and pronouns). For a complete discussion of the underlying sociocultural reasons, refer back to section 4.2. Overall, it is reasonable to claim that distinctive Persian sociocultural contexts can differentially contribute to how favors are asked, and therefore, any generalized description of Persian favors might fall short in unveiling what really goes into the asking of favors, especially in terms of the importance of saving face through various strategies (e.g. pragmatic and syntactic).

The coding of the collected data helped identify a number of recurring patterns in Persian favors. As mentioned earlier, one of the most significant drawbacks of politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1987) is the lack of universality of politeness norms (e.g. Mao 1994; Spencer-Oatey 2000). The findings of the present study, to a large extent, highlight the drawback, in that, the major constituents identified in favors are indicative of the highly culture-specific nature of favors. The favors were seemingly asked in accordance with the prevailing social standards; therefore, they were not necessarily aimed at saving a public self-image, as Brown and Levinson put it. A general unanimity in the favor constituents and prevalent syntactic features can be construed as the socially-acceptable nature of the elicited favors. That is, the participants were primarily striving to appear socially acceptable. In many cases, the self that is (over)emphasized in politeness theory was (totally) missing. Eslamirasekh (1993), in a similar vein, concludes that use of imperatives is a face-threatening act in Persian contexts. This helps explain the incorporation of pre-favor and post-favor strategies to minimize the imperativeness of the favors. It is also of note that very few imperatives were utilized when asking for favors, all of which were found when asking for a favor from a student.

The findings, thus, provide insight in the following aspects:

- Favor-asking is a face-threatening act in Persian, depending upon the gender and status differences;
- Favors, in many cases, shed light on interlocutors' attempts at abiding by the predominant social norms;
- Syntactic structures in favors are a means to showcase interlocutors' awareness of the dominant social dynamics;
- The universality of politeness theory and its tenets are not supported by the findings of the study, especially when gender and academic status differences come into play;
- The vast syntactic differences between Persian and American English, for instance, reveal the highly context-bound nature of favor-asking; that is, the fundamental differences in Persian verbs and pronouns are tokens of the existing sociocultural differences between the two countries.

What Mao (2000) states about the distinct orientations in Chinese and Japanese politeness with Western politeness is, to a large extent, in line with the findings of the current study. Similar to the Chinese and Japanese contexts, Persians generally prefer to stick with the social end of the social-personal continuum of politeness orientations. That is, the coding of the data and syntactic investigation of Persian favors illustrated that saving a social face usually comes first. This is also comparable with the results of Spencer-Oatey and Xing's (2000) study, in that, the interlocutors tended to attach more importance to the social aspects of politeness.

At the end, I want to revisit Spencer-Oatey's (2002) question about the focus of face-saving concerns in various contexts:

Are they (face-saving concerns) personally oriented (i.e. oriented to the speaker and hearer as individual participants), are they group oriented (i.e. oriented to the speaker and hearer as group representatives), or a mixture of the two? (p. 4).

What comes to mind regarding Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is that it is formed in a culture where individualism is highly valued. Therefore, promoting an image of *self* is a virtue. In such contexts, if individuals do not conform to socially-acceptable codes of conduct, repercussions might not be devastating. On the other hand, in cultures, such as Persian, respecting and following socially prescribed norms in interactions is of a much higher value and is generally demanded. Another point is the possible repercussions of not abiding by the predominant social prescriptions. In a context where there are fine lines between people of different genders and academic statuses, reflecting such ideologies in communication, favor-asking for instance, is primarily required. Failure to observe and follow such norms might result in social marginalization of individuals. Overall, it is interesting to see how numerous sociopolitical differences surface in favor-asking, and how culturally and socially valued ideals are reflected in asking for favors.

5. Limitations and future research directions

The current study can be regarded as exploratory, in that the very constituents of Persian favors in an academic setting were disclosed for the first time. Therefore, more confirmatory studies are still needed. Also, oral DCTs were incorporated as the primary data collection method. However, more data might be collected through employing naturally-occurring data and written DCTs. Ideally, triangulating the data collection methods might lead to more insights. Another shortcoming of the current study is the rather small sample of participants. Although 20 seems a fairly acceptable number for the studies using oral DCTs, larger samples might still yield more valid and reliable results.

It is also of note that, since inferential statistics were not utilized in the present study, generalizations might not be feasible. The conclusions drawn are merely the result of comparing the respective frequencies. The elicited favors might, however, shed light on the favor-asking exchanges between individuals of the same/opposite-gender belonging to various academic statuses. A final point is that the findings of prospective studies conducted in non-academic contexts can be juxtaposed with those of the current study's to illustrate how Persians ask favors in different contexts and how sociocultural norms might govern social relations, favor-asking in particular, in distinct physical and psychological settings.

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HOOMAN SAELI is a doctoral candidate in TESL at Oklahoma State University. His main research interests include written/oral corrective feedback, sociocultural perceptions toward English education, ESL/EFL pedagogy, language attitudes, and intercultural pragmatics. He is currently teaching undergraduate/graduate level ESL courses at Oklahoma State University. He has previously taught a variety of EFL courses and also served as English program director in language schools in Iran.

Address: English Department, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, United States. E-mail: saeli@okstate.edu