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"MAY GOD FORGIVE HIS SINS": IRANIAN STRATEGIES IN RESPONSE TO AN OBITUARY NOTE[1]

Research in speech act studies has only focused on those that are regularly performed in one's daily life (e.g. apologies, requesting, complaints) (Elwood, 2004). Compared with other speech acts, few studies have attracted researchers' attention on how people express their feelings to an obituary. The present study is an attempt to find out the strategies Iranian native speakers of Farsi used when responding to an obituary note. Data were collected and analyzed from the condolences notes on a deceased contemporary Iranian actor in 2008. Two hundred comments were analyzed to examine the strategies used in expressing condolences. The findings are anticipated to add to the body of research in speech act and pragmatic studies.

Key words: *condolence, strategies, responding to obituary note, Iranians*.

1. Introduction

According to speech act theory, speech is a kind of action. People do things by saying words. For example, the one who expresses his condolence, he says something. S/he performs some (locutionary) acts like uttering or writing some sentences. However, there is something further s/he does; namely, by uttering or writing some sentences in the appropriate context, s/he expresses condolences. But what kind of speech act, or more precisely, illocutionary acts, does s/he perform?

As these questions indicate, the aim of this paper is to give an account of expressing condolences from the point of view of the speech act theory. This study utilizes a pragmatic approach in analyzing the data. It aims to identify the types of strategies used in expressing condolences for the death of a famous contemporary Iranian actor.

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2. Review of literature

Speech acts are defined as actions performed via utterances in an actual situation of language use bringing the functions the speaker intends the hearer (S) to take or to interpret. According to Austin (1962), what is said has three different meanings, i.e. locutionary (what is said), illocutionary meaning (the intended meaning) and perlocutionary meaning (the effect of one's words on the listener).

In "A classification of illocutionary act", Searle (1976, 1-16) elaborated on the taxonomy of actions that can be performed by speaking, Searle classified five categories of speech act: 1) representatives (the description of states or events, e.g. reports, assertions, claims), 2) directives (e.g. requests, orders, suggestions, commands, inviting, i.e. asking the listener to do something in the future), 3) commisives (e.g. promises, threats, offers, swearing, i.e. committing oneself to do something in the future), 4) expressives (e.g. apologies, expressing gratitude, congratulating, i.e. expressing one's psychological state of mind), and 5) declaratives (e.g. declaring, appointing, i.e. bringing about a change).

Speech act studies have mostly focused on those which occur in one's daily life (e.g. requests, apologies, complaints, expressing gratitude, refusal, etc.). Research on how different speech acts are realized in different cultures is useful for second language learners who wish to interact successfully in a community which is not their own. Yet there are some speech acts which have not been explored as extensively as others. The speech act of condolences is one of them. Speakers are fortunate to not be called on frequently to express sympathy after someone's death. However, outsiders to a given culture, specifically language learners, may not know what is appropriate to say in such a context. According to Elwood (2004), this also concerns native speakers who admit they feel uncomfortable and are at a loss for words when they meet a bereaved person. Elwood (2004) further explains:

> "This is compounded by the fact that the news of a death may be announced without prior indication, leaving the speaker with no time to prepare. Bereavement is a time when people may be particularly vulnerable. Because of this, failure to express condolences appropriately can damage personal relationships if the expression of sympathy is perceived as insensitive or inadequate. For this reason, study of the speech act of condolences is vital." (p.252)

3. Significance of the Study

One may be able to find information about how to write an obituary but not how people in different cultures write and express their condolences in response to an obituary. It might be assumed that writing and expressing condolences in such situation is derived from one's own feeling and intuition and/or also depends on how close to the speaker the death of an individual was, but there appears to be many more issues to be considered when writing the letter of condolence. Going through the comments or notes people leave in a memorial book in different cultures and languages, one can see that besides the intimacy (where the two were friends, acquaintances, student - teacher, etc.) there is some more specific wording as to what to write and what not to write, i.e. what is acceptable and what is not. Similar to other speech acts, expressions of condolences are culturally-specific and may differ in terms of strategies people use to express their condolences across cultures. The aim of this study is also to realize the culturally-specific strategies Iranians used in response to an obituary. It is assumed that this analysis would help to highlight the important cultural elements for a given community, i.e. Iran, when expressing condolence. This study is significant in terms of choice of speech act and population under study. Studies on speech act of condolences are rather scarce compared to other speech acts. In addition, this issue has not extensively explored among Iranian population. The main objective of this study is to figure out the strategies Iranian native speakers of Farsi use when expressing condolence.

4. Background to the deceased

The deceased whose notes to his obituary are analyzed is Khosro Shakibaei (March 27, 1944, Tehran, Iran – July 18, 2008, Tehran). Khosro Shakibaei was a celebrated Iranian stage and cinema actor who ranked amongst the most accomplished actors of his generation. Shakibaei appeared in more than 40 films such as *Hamoon*, *Kimia*, *Pari*, etc. He won three Fajr Film Festival awards for best actor. Shakibaei died in a Tehran hospital of liver cancer. He was laid to rest in the Artists Section of Behesht-e Zahra Cemetery in Tehran.

5. Methodology

This is an exploratory study of Iranian speakers' of Farsi responses to an obituary. Data were collected from the comments posted to an obituary for the late Khosro Shakibaei, a well-known actor in Iran who died in Iran in 2008. Two hundred comments were examined and analyzed in order to find the strategies used in writing to an obituary in Farsi.

5.1. Coding scheme

The data were analyzed and examined to develop a coding scheme. After going through all the utterances, five major strategies were identified. Each strategy was defined based on the following operational definition:

1. Expressions of condolences
   Using condolences words or expressions to convey condolence

2. Expressions of regret and grief
   Using words to express grief or regret upon reading the news

3. Praying for God's mercy and forgiveness
   Using words to pray for God' mercy for the deceased

4. Expressions of positive feelings and compliments about the deceased

Using works to describe the good deeds, works, relics, personality, etc. of the deceased

5. Using poems, sayings, proverbs

Using Persian poems, proverbs and sayings to expresscondolences

The utterances were then coded based on the above classification.

6. Data analysis

Data were analyzed according to the coding scheme explained earlier. Some examples are as follows:

1. Expressing condolence

<div dir="rtl">درگذشت این هنرمند توانمند را به ملت ایران تسلیت می‌گویم.</div>

I express my condolences on the death of this great artist to all Iranians.

<div dir="rtl">درگذشت بزرگ مرد سینمای ایران را به همه هنر دوستان تسلیت می‌گویم.</div>

I express my condolences on the death of this great Iranian cinema artist to all art lovers.

2. Expressions of regret and grief

<div dir="rtl">باورم نمیشه!!</div>

I cannot believe it happened!

<div dir="rtl">شوکه شدم از خواندن این خبر.</div>

I'm shocked after reading this news.

<div dir="rtl">افسوس...</div>

Alas…

<div dir="rtl">آخه چرا؟</div>

Why it happened…..

3. Praying for God's mercy and forgiveness

روحش شاد و یادش گرامی

His soul rests in peace.

خدا رحمتش کند.

His soul rests in peace.

4. Expressions of positive feelings and compliments about the deceased
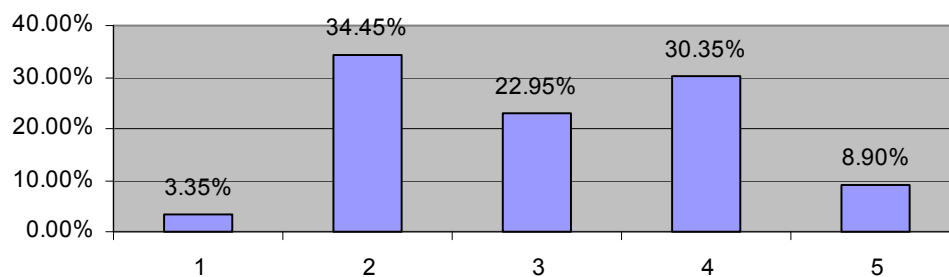
یادش همیشه زنده باد

He won't be forgotten.

بازیگر خیلی خوبی بود. به راستی از دست دادن این چنین هنرمندان بسیار سخت است.

He was a great actor. It is truly hard to lose such great artists.

5. Using poems, saying, proverbs

مرده آن است که نامش به نکویی نبرند   سعدیا مرد نکونام نمیرد هرگز

Those people whose names are mentioned in good faith are always alive.

Note: 1. Expressions of condolence, 2. Expressions of regret and grief, 3. Praying for God's mercy and forgiveness, 4. Expressions of positive feelings and compliment about the deceased, 5. Using poems, saying, proverbs

The findings show that expressions of regret and grief were the strategies most frequently used by the respondents. In addition, expressions of positive

feelings and compliments about the deceased were second frequently used strategy. The findings display that the respondents prayed for God's mercy and forgiveness for the deceased. As the fifth most frequently used strategy, the respondents used poems, proverbs and sayings which depict the remembrance of the deceased and his shortage of life. The use of expressions of regret and condolences were also used as the least frequent strategy among others.

7. Discussion

This study was an attempt to determine the strategies used to respond to an obituary note by Iranian native speakers of Farsi. The findings show that expressions of regret and grief were the most frequently used strategies among the respondents.

The findings show that expressions of positive feelings and compliments for the deceased are the second most frequently used strategies by the respondents. This is in line with the findings elicited for the speech act of thanking. As it is a country with 98% Muslim population, using Islamic words or expressions is very common in Iranian people's daily life. For instance, saying "Ensyallah" to express that something occurs if God alows it is a common expression among Iranian people. Likewise, expressing condolence, in an Islamic context, the use of expressions which denote a prayer for God's forgiveness or mercy on the deceased is also common practice. As a language full of metaphor and idiomatic expressions, Farsi poems, sayings and proverbs are frequently used to convey the speakers' meaning. All poems and sayings used in this study denote the permanency of arts and artists and good works by great people. It is not surprising that unlike the results of speech act of condolences in which data is collected through DCT or other common pragmatic research instrument and shows *expressions of condolences* as the most frequently used strategy, the findings of this study show the use of these expressions as the least frequently used strategy. The subjects' addressee in expressing condolences were either general (e.g. Iranian people), or specific (e.g. his family).

8. Implications

Within the framework of communicative competence, the findings of speech act studies provide insight to obtain sociolinguistic knowledge of the rules of the target language. Research into speech acts such as request, condolence, thanking, etc. can help language teachers to instruct students in the socially appropriate uses of those speech acts in a target language community. However, due to the transfer of sociolinguistic rules from their first language to the second language, language learners may find it difficult to be communicatively competent (Nelson & Bakary, 1996). Studies on language learners' L1 and then compared to target language can provide useful insights to acquire the similarities and differences in two language communities. Specifically, the findings of this study provide useful insights for second language teaching and learning as to know the sociolinguistics within the Iranian context in expressing condolence. These findings can provide materials developed for teaching particularly in teaching pragmatics and sociolinguistics.

9. Conclusions

This exploratory pilot study was a sociopragmatic study of responding to an obituary note by Iranian native speakers of Farsi. The findings cannot be generalized due to the limited number of samples and exploratory nature of the study. Despite these limitations, the findings of the study provide some useful insights. First, among 200 sample utterance analysis, five general strategies of responding to an obituary by Iranian native speakers of Farsi were elicited. The findings show that expressions of regret and grief, praying for God's mercy and forgiveness, and expressions of positive feelings and compliments about the deceased were the three most frequently used strategies among the respondents. More studies, however, with various contextual factors and different methods of data collection are recommended to acquire a more complete knowledge of the possible strategies used for expressing condolences in an Iranian context.

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