

A Contrastive Study of Four Cultural Differences in Everyday Conversation between English and Persian

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Abstract

There are many differences in language and culture between native speakers of Persian and native speakers of English. There are certain attitudes and ideas and certain culturally prescribed rules of behavior that seem to be accepted by most Americans and Englishmen and certain ways of social interaction that are generally observed. The problem is similar in Persian when the language and culture have their local variations. Social scientists tell us that cultures differ from one another, that each culture is unique. As cultures are diverse, so languages are diverse. Understanding culture and its variations is not always easy. So it's very important to study the cultural differences between languages. The difference between daily conversations is only one part of it. This paper is concerned with four cultural differences in everyday conversation between English and Persian.

The international community has grown in size since World War II and has been demonstrating its significant role in handling international affairs. Along with it the interaction between peoples of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds has become increasingly frequent. Geographical distance has been greatly minimized as a result of the civil development of mankind, which includes the rapid advance of science and technology, the interdependence of economic and trading business, and the constant improvement of the means of transportation and communication. Today, no matter whether one travels overseas or lives within one's native territory, one has to deal with foreign people or those of other ethnic origins. Cross-cultural communication is becoming daily more common.

The relation between language and culture has its roots in the writing of a number of 19th and early 20th century linguists (eg. Wilhelm Von Humboldt, Franz Boas, Edward Sapir, and Benjamin Lee Whorf). This trend of investigation has been continued by other eminent linguists (eg. Hymes, Labov and Gumperz). Anthropologists (eg. Malinowski and Goffman) have also carried out research in the area of language and culture.

The differences in language and culture at times lead anyone who has taken a trip outside their speech community to have some experience of miscommunication based on cultural differences. According to Holmes (2000:305), these misunderstandings based on cultural differences are related to different assumptions deriving from the traveler's cultural environment.

Culture consists of all the shared products of human society. This means not only such material things as cities, organizations and schools, but also non-material things such as ideas, customs, family patterns, languages. Putting it simply, culture refers to the entire way

of life of a society, "the ways of a people." The term 'culture' here refers to the total pattern of beliefs, customs, institutions, objects, and techniques that characterize the life of a human community. Concerning culture, John Donne writes:

No man is an island, entire of itself" Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main" ... Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee. (Brown 2000:176)

The language of a culture is intimately tied to a member's feelings and activity. Culture is bound up with nationality, religion, and the feeling of self. Culture is used for work, worship, and play by everyone, be he beggar or banker, savage or civilized. So language is a part of culture and plays a very important role in the society. Some social scientists consider it the keystone of culture. Without language, they maintain, culture would not be possible. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture; it reflects culture. In the broadest sense, language is the symbolic representation of a people, and it comprises their historical and cultural backgrounds as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking (Brown, 2000:177).

Even the simplest operations in a given language are culturally dependent. White (1993) cites situations in which native speakers of Japanese misused the word of please creating conflicting signals, tension, offence, confusion, public misinterpretation, and interpersonal breakdowns leading to pragmalinguistic failure.

The vast majority of Iranians are culturally dependent as they share basic beliefs and values that cross ethnic or social boundaries. While Persians, Azeri, Kurds, and minority groups conform to their specific cultural patterns, it is very important for the Western observers to be able to identify cultural patterns and to distinguish them from individual behaviors. The four types of culturally dependent behaviors that are discussed below are: greetings and farewells; terms of address; compliments and praise; and other social amenities.

Greetings and Farewells

According to Holmes (1992:308) greeting formulas serve an affective function of establishing contact and rapport, but their exact content is obviously culture specific. "Salam" (Hello) or "salomon ?aleikom" (Hello to you) is a common Persian way of greeting. Fortunately, not all greetings sound strange or arouse displeasure. Many are similar. While greetings in many languages often indicate the time of day, there may be inconsistencies within a language. English has "Good morning," "Good afternoon" and "Good evening" but not "Good noon." And "Good night" is not a greeting at all (to most English-speaking people), but an expression of farewell. In Persian, "Good morning" (sobh be Xeir), and "Good evening" (asr be Xeir) are used but not "Good noon" (zohr be xeir) and "Good afternoon" (bad az zohr be Xeir). There is also a super ordinate term in Persian "Vaght be Xeir" (good time) which is used as a greeting no matter what time of the day it is. And when most English-speaking people meet for the first time, they often say something like "I'm pleased to meet you." And when they part, they are expected to remark "It was nice meeting you" or "It's nice to have met you" or something similar. When Persians meet for the first time, there is similar expression for the occasion (Xoshvaghtam or Az ashenaee ba shoma Xoshvaghtam), often accompanied by body language such as nodding, smiling and shaking hands too. The handshake is customary in Iran when arriving and leaving. Handshakes between men are soft and gentle, not a test of strength. They are not firm, but neither are they weak. Some Iranians

may place their right hands over their hearts and bow when meeting someone for the first time. This gesture simply means that the greeting is from the heart. If an Iranian makes this gesture, it is appropriate for the receiver to reciprocate.

When people part, they usually say “Good-bye,” “Bye-bye,” or “See you.” Similar expressions are found in almost all languages. But there may be interesting differences, as in Persian when a distinguished guest drops in for a visit or if the visitor is one with whom the hosts are not very familiar. The Persian custom when such a guest leaves is for the hosts to see the visitors to the door or gateway, where it is customary for the guest to say to his hosts “Zahmat nakeshid rah ra baladam” (don’t disturb yourselves, I know the way). The final words of the hosts are usually “hala tashreef dashted” (stay here). None of these should be translated directly. “Stay here” would sound strange, as would “Go slowly” or “carefully,” “Walk slowly” or “carefully” or “Ride slowly” or “carefully,” “Drive carefully” or “Careful when driving” would be equally so. A smile and a gesture of farewell would be enough.

Terms of Address

English-speaking people tend to address others by their first name—e.g. John, Michael, Linda, Jane—rather than calling the person Mr. Jackson, Mrs. Howard or Miss Jones. This usage is especially common among Americans, even when people meet for the first time. This usage applies not only to people of nearly the same age, but also of different ages.

It is also very common to hear a child calling a much older person Joe, Ben, May, Helen etc. This may even include the child’s parents or grandparents. People of different social status do the same. For example, many college students call their professors by their first names. Their professors do not regard this as a sign of disrespect or familiarity, but rather, as an indication that the professor is considered affable and has a sense of equality. The use of a person’s first name in North America, for example, does not necessarily indicate friendship or respect. First names are used among people who work closely together, even though they may not like each other (Wardaugh, 1986:260). This first name usage is unacceptable in Persian culture. One can imagine the reactions of adults if a child were to call a grandparent by his or her first name, or a student to do the same in addressing a teacher in such a “rude” manner. A quick reprimand and possibly even a spanking for the child would be sure to follow.

One can infer from the preceding discussion that the Persian behavior of addressing members of one’s family, relatives or close neighbors as “Hasan agha” (Mr.Hassan), “Zahra Xanom” (Mrs.Zahra), “Abjee Molouk” (sister Molouk), “Dadash Amin” (Brother Amin), and “Baba Reza” (Father Reza) should not be carried over into English. In English, the name alone, whether it is for man or woman, would ordinarily be enough. The main exceptions are addressing one’s parents (Dad, Mom, Mum or Mother), one’s grandparents (Grandpa, Grandma) and sometimes an older relative (Aunt Mary or Uncle Jim). Notice that the given name, and not the family name, is used. Even with relatives, Americans tend to use just the first name and leave out the term of relationship. It should be mentioned that in English “Brother Joseph” or “Sister Mary” would commonly be understood as referring to persons belonging to a Catholic group or some religious or professional society.

In English and Persian, forms of address are similar. A person’s title, office, or occupation is not used. One seldom hears English speakers addressing others as Bureau Director Smith, Manager Jackson, Principle Morris or in Persian Raees Karimnia, Modeer Khalaj. In English, only a few occupations or titles would be used: “Doctor” is common for

those who have qualified in the medical profession or those who teach at a university, and “Judge” for those authorized to try cases in law courts; “Governor” and “Mayor” may be used for those who hold such offices, although often without the name.

In military terms of address, it should be noted that in addressing military officers in Persian and English the rank is used and not the command or duties that he has been as signed: for example, “Captain Johnson” or “Capitan Mohammadi” (Sarvan Mohammadi), rather than “Company Commander Johnson,” “Admiral Benjamin,” rather than “Fleet Commander Benjamin.”

Terms of address in the teaching profession have long been a problem. Should it be “Teacher” or “Teacher Karimnia?” Neither of these is in keeping with English custom. The teacher is usually addressed by his first name. In Persian, one should simply call the teacher “Mr. Karimnia,” “Mrs. Mousavi” or “Miss Rahimi.”

In family structures, terms of address may change and cause problems in knowing how to address both old and new kin. Knowing how to address one’s father-in law (or mother-in-law) has often been a problem for many English people: “Mr. Smith” is sometimes felt to be too formal, “Bill” too familiar, and “Dad” pre-empted and unnatural. The arrival of grandchildren is sometimes seen as a way out, it being easier to call a father-in-law “Grandad” than “Dad.” Such a move may also be accompanied in some families with a switch in address for one’s own parents, so that one’s mother is addressed as “Grandma” rather than “Mom;” sometimes this usage appears to be intended only as a temporary help to the grandchildren in learning the right terms of address, but it can easily become a permanent change so that “Grandad” and “Grandma” are used for the maternal grandparents and “Gran” or “Nana” for the paternal one, or vice versa (Wardaugh, 1986:262). Persian employs what is regarded as kinship terms for use as address terms. According to Reza Zade (2002), in some cities such as Fasa, Darab, Jahrom in Fars province, one addresses his or her father-in-law with terms equivalent to English “uncle” (amou) and his or her mother-in-law, “Zan Amou” (uncle’s wife). In some other cities one addresses his or her father-in-law with term equivalent to English “father” (pedar) and his or her mother-in-law, “Maadar” (mother).

Interestingly, there is no general term in English for getting the attention of a stranger or of a person whose name we may not know. Then what do people do in English if such a need arises? Depending on the situation, English custom might suggest using some such expression as “Excuse me,” “Pardon me” or expressions like “Hey,” or “Hey you” or “you,” but are not considered polite. Often, people resort to a way that needs no language. They simply clear their throat loudly, or make some noise or gesture to attract the person’s attention. In Persian we say “Bebaxsheed” (excuse me), “Ozr meexam” (I am sorry), “Jenab” (sir), “Agha” (sir), “Hajji agha” (Mr. Hajji), “Xanom” (lady), “Hajji Xanom,” “Xahar” (sister) or “Baradar” (brother) but these terms are not considered impolite.

Compliments and Praise

“A compliment is a speech act which attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for something good (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer” (Holmes, 1998:446). In response to compliments there are differences for American English and Persian speakers. Americans tend to accept the compliment while Persian generally murmur some reply about not being worthy of the praise.

Consider the following two examples which are based on the writer’s personal observations:

(1) A young Persian woman was complimented by her neighbor for the lovely dress that she was wearing.

Cheghadr ghashange.

How much beautiful it is.

She was pleased but some what embarrassed. In a typical Persian response, she replied,

Jensesh xub nist. Faqat rang-o-ru daare.

The quality is not good. Only it looks good

(2) An acquaintance of a Persian scholar introduced him to another foreign friend. He said, "Mr. Jack, let me introduce Mr. Zahmatkesh, an outstanding chemist and one of the nicest people I know." Mr. Zahmatkesh offered his hand to the newcomer but looked at his host and said with a smile, "Should I blush, or should I tell him you don't really mean it?"

In both examples, words could have been interpreted as meaning "You're just saying that to be polite; you don't really mean that." So in one case, the person had poor judgment. In the other, the later case, the host was not sincere. Quite a gap between intention and message!

Compliments given only because of a situation may not be accepted as compliments. For example, certain remarks that might be fitting and proper in Persian could lead to similar negative results. When I (the writer) had translated a book and asked a friend of mine who is a good editor, to edit the book he agreed, but added that "I really know so little about editing". In the reply, I had to say, "Oh, come on, I know you're an expert on Persian literature and edition." Or I could have said "Well, I certainly don't know anybody who knows more than you do!" But these types of forced compliments sometimes leave a bad taste in the mouth.

The communicative strategy and frequency of compliments in Persian differ fundamentally from those in English (see Koutlaki, 2002; and Beeman, 1986). Take, for example, the following exchange into consideration:

Zahra: You are my guest, I will pay.

Alice: You are so kind.

Alice is visiting Iran, and Zahra takes her out to visit historical places. As usual, Zahra pays for tickets. It is not uncommon in Iran for hosts to be responsible for all the expenditure of their guests. However, they do not expect that the guest would easily accept the offer at all times. On the contrary, it is expected that the guest will refuse the offer several times, trying to stop the host paying. In addition, more elaborated compliments are required than simply saying 'you are so kind'. In this example, Jane may be judged inconsiderate or demanding from a Persian perspective. Thus the above example shows how communicative strategies for offers and compliments in Persian differ from those in English.

Cultural differences also exist in who can be complimented. It would be very usual to hear an American woman or Australian woman talking about a son or daughter of hers how bright he or she is, what good marks he or she makes in school, how active the child is in his or her stamp-collecting group, when and where he or she performed in a concert, etc. In Persian, this would be considered bad taste: one simply does not praise member of one's own family in front of others. Although, recently, there has been a tendency to do so in some Iranian families.

Another example of a Persian taboo is complimenting a man on his wife's looks. The remark "You have a lovely wife." or "Your wife is very beautiful." would be regarded as almost indecent by many Iranians. Yet the same compliment would be considered perfectly natural and even highly appreciated by Westerners.

One other difference between Persian and English occurs in invitations. If an Iranian acquaintance, for example, expresses a wish to entertain, or to invite an American to tea, the men will socialize with the men, and the women will socialize with the women. Separate-sex entertaining is the norm.

Different Social Amenties

Both Persian and English have expressions for gratitude, apologies, and remarks preceding a request; for example, there are: "Moteshakkeram, Moteassefam, Bebaxsheed..." (Thank you, I'm sorry, Excuse me). On the whole, they are quite similar and present no problem. However, even among these there are certain differences.

Both "Thank you" and "Please" are used more widely than the Persian "Moteassefam," and "Lotfan." For minor favors like borrowing a pencil, asking directions, requesting someone to pass on a message, calling a person to the telephone, etc, such polite expressions are often omitted by Persian speakers, especially among close friends and members of the family. The more frequent use of "Thank you" and "Please" by Westerners is often regarded as unnecessary and even tiresome by many speakers of Persian. On the other hand, the Persian attitude—that appreciation is understood and need not be expressed—is sometimes taken for rudeness or lack of consideration by Westerners.

Replies to "Thank you" are similar. The most common are "Not at all," "Don't mention it," "You're welcome," "Xahesh meekonam," "Harfesh ham nazaneed," "Ghabeli nadasht." But what reply should be given by guides and service people when a foreign person says "Thank you for a job well done?" This is a situation often met by hotel attendants, museum or exhibition guides and tour guides. To translate the Persian expression "Vazife ast," as "It's my duty" conveys the idea that the Persian attendant or guide didn't really want to do it, that he or she did it only because it was his or her duty. Quite a different message is conveyed! A proper reply might be "I'm glad to be of help" or "it's a pleasure."

The Persian term "Lotfan" is usually regarded as equivalent to "Please." However, in certain situations the English "Please" would not be used. When offering or urging another person to be first in going through a door or getting in a car, the expression is generally "After you" (not "You go first," or "Here you are," as some people not well-acquainted with English are apt to say). At the meal table, "Help yourself" is customary when urging someone to start eating, or take more of the food.

"Excuse me"—this is a general term preceding a request or interruption. In Persian, "Ozr meexam," or "Bebaxsheed" with the same domain of applications as "Excuse me." Also they are used when asking a person to step aside, or make room, or when asking for information or making a query.

The Persian "Xaste nabasheed" is a good warm expression showing concern. Or it may be used in recognition of the fact that a person has put in considerable effort or gone through some hardship to achieve something. To put "Xaste nabasheed" into proper English, however, demands care; there is no equivalent that can fit all situations. To translate it simply as "You've had a hard time" is hardly enough; in some circumstances it might even give the wrong impression. If used as a greeting to a person who has just completed a long trip, "Xaste nabasheed" could be expressed as "You must have had a tiring journey" or "You must be tired from such a long trip." When commending people who have finished a difficult task or are still working on it, one might say "Well done; that was (You've got) a hard job." None of these English expressions, however, carries as much meaning or warm feeling as the Persian.

The concept of “Taarof” is also an important one in Iranian culture which should be considered here. It is a cultural phenomenon that consists of refusing something out of politeness that has been offered to you even though you want it. On the giving end, it is offering something that may cost a lot in order to be polite, but not really wanting to give it away for free. Beeman (1986:56) argues that “Taarof” is an extremely difficult concept in Persian, “encompassing a broad complex of behaviors that mark and underscore differences in social status.” According to Amouzade (2001:9) “Taarof” constitutes the abstract basis of polite interactions. He claims that “Taarof” is the central concept of politeness in Persian. To elaborate the point in Persian, the following example will do:

A: Xaahesh mikonam befarmaa?id in keik chandan
 Please go ahead this cake that much
 xub ham nist ?qqallan yek keyk meyl befarmaa?id
 is not good at least one piece take

B: Ziyaad meyl nadaram. Haala ke ?esrar mikonid faqat yek tekke moxoram
 Much don't desire now that insist you do only one piece I eat
 (Yarmohammadi, 1995:60)

The host is using “xaahesh mikonam” and “befarmaa?id” to mitigate the force of the imposition being made. He expects that the guest comply with his request. Both the host and the guests attempt to conceal their true feelings and thought. Stating that he does not have any appetite for the food offered does not mean the guest is revealing his true feeling. The truth of what he says is open to question. However if one expresses his wishes, it will be regarded as impolite.

Some more examples may clarify “Taarof” much better. You go over to your aunt’s house and she makes a great dish for lunch, one which is your favorite. You help yourself to a healthy serving and at the end of it find that you are still hungry. Your kind, loving aunt will offer you another serving and you politely refuse. In this case you are “taarof’ing” because you would really like to eat more but you are too polite to say yes. But the Iranians have a solution for this. Your aunt will offer the food a second time and you refuse and then on the third try you can accept without looking like a glutton. Iranians tend to be very sensitive of what others will think of them so this sort of behavior is expected, although annoying and perhaps antiquated, it is an inherent part of the culture.

Another example of “Taarof” occurs when you go to buy a dress at the store and ask for the price. If it is a small boutique in Iran, the shopkeeper will inevitably, out of politeness, say it is worth nothing. What he is trying to say is that you are worth so much more than the dress and have put him to shame for asking. In reality, he would like to be paid for the dress and is just being polite. After a second or third inquiry, the shopkeeper will probably give you the correct price and offer to accept payment.

“Taarof” in the end becomes a ritual or a game that both participants are aware of playing. Some find it annoying, stupid, and a waste of time, even to the point of asking the guest not to “Taarof” (“Taarof Nakonid”) when he refuses something. This is a double-edged sword because maybe the offerer is “taarof’ing” himself. This is where “Taarof” can be misleading and land you in very sticky social situations. You never know the true intention of either party and you may not be sure if they really want to offer/take something or not. For example, if you are full and your aunt thinks you are “taarof’ing,” you are left having to eat the second serving of her food. And if you do not eat it, you may insult her and her cooking.

Some of us Persians wish we could do away with this tradition entirely and just be more like Westerners. Generally though, “taarof” at parties and social gatherings can be very charming, fun and completely harmless. It is truly one of the greatest distinctly Persian social behaviors that we can think of and is worth experiencing first hand.

Conclusion

Learning a foreign language well means more than merely mastering the pronunciation, grammar, words and idioms. It means learning also to see the world as native speakers of that language see it, learning the ways in which their language reflects the ideas, customs, and behavior of their society, learning to understand their "language of the mind". Learning a language, in fact, is inseparable from learning its culture.

Social scientists tell us that cultures differ from one another, that each culture is unique. As cultures are diverse, so languages are diverse. Understanding is not always easy. So it is very important to study the culture differences between languages and the difference between daily conversations is only one part of it.

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