LANGUAGE OF FLATTERY IN IRANIAN LETTER WRITING DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

This article concentrates on using flattery in Iranian discourse from a socio-pragmatic viewpoint. These forms have been studied in personal letters concentrating on the letters written by common people to President Ahmadi Nejad. The chief aim was to explore whether any generalizations can be made on the use of flattery and the factors which influence their use of flattery. The second purpose was to see what features these forms have for the addressee to be clearly identified? Furthermore, the study focused on how well the use of flattery in written material can be explained on the basis of contemporary theoretical views based on the spoken data, such as Brown and Levinson's and Comrie's politeness axes, and Bell's audience design. The aspects studied include the existence of flattery and its level, the relationship between the level of flattery and the writer's gender and age. It was concluded that there was a positive relationship between age and flattery but there was no significant relationship between gender and this speech act.

Keywords: flattery, audience design, politeness axes, socio-pragmatic

INTRODUCTION

Language is a means of communication. People use language to accomplish such functions as ordering, promising, arguing, and so on. However, any communicative function needs to be carried out within a context, which may either be interpersonal or social. In the process of communication the speakers of a language are expected to be in possession of two sets of capabilities: They should have knowledge of the forms of language they use. Moreover, they must know how to use this knowledge in negotiating meaning. In order to clarify meaning, the speakers and hearers or writers and readers should be able to interact.

The term context has two aspects: social and interpersonal. Social context is important in studies that focus on sociolinguistic aspects of language. Interpersonal context, however, should be studied, according to Levinson (1983), in such sub-disciplines aspragmatics, conversation (al) analysis, and discourse analysis. In the present study social context plays a critical role. In recent years, our understanding of language as a social phenomenon has increased greatly. In a recent survey of sociolinguistics and language teaching, McKay and Hornberger (1996) divide the field into four related areas: 1) studies of language and society—how large-scale social and political issues affect language use in a particular society, 2) studies of language variation—how the ―same‖ language varies from speaker to speaker, from place to place, and from situation to situation, 3) studies of language and interaction—how language is used in face-to-face communication, and 4) studies of language and culture—how particular cultures privilege some kinds of language over others. This study tries to focus on the influence of Iran's present social and political context on language use (number 1).

Also, the researcher has chosen written data (letter) rather than spoken one because it is easy to handle and readily lends itself to quantitative analysis. Letters are an intrinsic part of communication between people. The writer and the recipient have a central role in their correspondence, which is most often manifested through the word choices in the letter itself. In addition to the contents, the writer is supposed to take proper conduct into account in other parts of the letter as well —for example, when making decisions about the actual position of the greeting and the subscription. In de la Serre's opinion, a great distance between the greeting and the body of the letter itself signifies great respect.

The same is true of the position of the subscription in relation to the text (Goldberg 1990: 253; Chartier et al. 1997: 75–6).

Communication—letter-writing being no exception—often involves multiple participants. Bell's (1984, 2001) sociolinguistic model of language variation introduces the point of view in which style as an active and interactive phenomenon focuses on people instead of any mechanisms used as a means to produce it. Bell's basic dichotomy is between linguistic and extra linguistic variation, of which the latter is further divided into two separate categories.

Inter-speaker variation means the ‗social', underlying level of language differences between people, i.e., it may include factors like class, age, gender and ethnicity. Intraspeaker variation, on the other hand, is a ‗stylistic'side of language use, which includes e.g. the topic and the setting of discussion. The two categories are interdependent: variation in the ‗stylistic'dimension derives from and echoes the variation in the ‗social'dimension (the so-called ―Style Axioml; see Bell 1984: 151; 2001: 145).

The correlation between these two dimensions is the core of the audience design model. Speakers and hearers are considered equally essential in the dialogic process, which derives from the claim that speakers design their speech in response to their hearers. The main character in the audience is the addressee, who is typically known, ratified and addressed. This study will represent how letter writers adjust their speech according to their addressee.

The review of the literature shows that a large variety of social parameters and linguistic variables have been investigated by sociolinguists. In fact, there are a number of issues that have slipped the attention of sociolinguists and other scholars in the field. However, because a good number of social factors such as culture, ethnicity, and generation are not easy to process, researchers usually keep aloof from them. In other words, most researchers entertain themselves with the study of easy-to-handle factors and variables. There have been lots of studies on ‗requesting'(Economidou, 2002 and SangpilByon, 2004),‗taarof' (Koutlaki, 2002 and Salmani- Nodoushan, 1995),

‗Apologizing'(Darren Lingley, 2006), ‗greetings'(Akhimien, 2004),…in Persian and other languages such as: Japanese, Irish, and etc. but the researcher couldn't find any literature on flattery. Based on the present socio-political atmosphere in Iran where this speech act is prevalent, conducting a research on this new topic seems to be interesting.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

My material was drawn from thirty personal letters which were written by common people to President AhmadiNejad during his first and second visit to West Azarbaijan. I selected these letters because of the power relation between the writers and recipient. It seemed to me that flattery occurs in contexts in which the writer is inferior to recipient or s/he is in need of the recipient and perhaps has a request. People usually do not use flattery when their addressee and they are in the same power and social status. The letters were randomly selected and the writers were both male and female from various age groups (old-young-middle). But the only thing which was common among all was that they mostly belonged to the lower social class and vulnerable strata and less-educated (their address and style of writing showed this). This study was supposed to answer the following questions:

1. Are there any examples of flattering in Iranian letters? If yes, to what extent?
2. Is there any relation between the gender of writer and flattering?
3. Is there any relation between the age of writer and flattering?

DISCUSSION

Analyzing letters, the researcher noticed five different types of flattery which were evidently used.

Flattery in Address Forms

Variation in the way people address each other has always been considered indicative of social relation, attitude and consideration for the addressee, and thus, the audience. Address formulae may be positively polite, negatively polite and a mixture of both. Address tending towards the addressee's positive face usually takes the form of informal and intimate terms like first names or nicknames.

Negative politeness manifests itself in such formulae as titles and honorifics. Letter-writers have to be extremely sensitive to social and hierarchical factors governing address usage. The social constraints and demands on ―keeping up (polite) appearances‖ are in the background in every verbal interaction. In politeness theory, social status and authority fall under the variables of power and distance (Brown and Levinson 1987: 80). A superior in relative power usually has precedence over his/her inferiors, which is displayed in his/her ability to use positive politeness in address even if the social distance is close. Negative politeness is used by inferiors in return. Equal status, whether regarding distance or power, seems to affect address usage to a certain degree. If both power and distance differences are very small, like among younger family siblings, reciprocal positive politeness is used. If the power difference is small but distance is greater than between nuclear family members, as in the case of close friends, the use of positively polite forms cannot be taken for granted.

When we look at the letters written to President AhmadiNejad, we can see that the addressee's social status as the president and his role as the head of the executive department shows very clearly inthe use of address formulae. The terms used to address are:

ریاست <u>محترم</u> جمهور، رئیس جمهور <u>عزیز</u>، ریاست محترم و <u>عدالت محور</u>، رئیس جمهور <u>بزرگوار</u>، رئیس جمهور <u>محبوب</u> <u>و مردمی</u>، مقام محترم <u>دلسوزو نوع دوست</u>، آن <u>مقام</u>، جناب آقای احمدی نژاد، جناب آقای رئیس جمهور، رئیس جمهور <u>عزیز</u> <u>و گرانقدر</u>، جناب آقای <u>دکتر</u> احمدی نژاد، مقام <u>معظم</u>، <u>بزرگوار</u>، <u>برادر</u> احمدی نژاد، رئیس جمهور <u>محبوب ایران</u>،حضرت عا لی، مقام <u>رفیع و ارفع</u>، <u>چشم امید ملت ایران</u>.

> (the respected president, dear president, the respected and fair president, honored president, the popular president, Iran's loved courteous president, brother AhmadiNejad, valuable president, his highness, the pride of Iranians, high-ranking president, the dignified leader,…)

As it is clear, the writers have totally used negative politeness to address Mr. President. But some writers have also used positive politeness such as:

پدر گرامی، سنگ صبور مهربانم، برادر عزیز.

> (honorable father, kind confidant, dear brother…)

Which seem to arise some feelings in the addressee to satisfy the needs of the writer just as one's brother and father do when one needs help?

Flattery in Greetings

It is clear from the data available that some writers seek help from greetings to please the addressee. Because satisfying the addressee is a way to get the goal, they use greetings as an alternative. About 50% of the writers started their letters with some phrases to welcome Mr. President or to wish him health and success. According to the fact that they mostly used negative politeness which shows these letters are formal, using greetings (the feature of informal letters) may have a relation-making role. The phrases applied are:

- قدم <u>پر خیر و برکت</u> شما را به شهرمان تبریک و تهنیت عرض می نمایم.
- آرزوی موفقیت و سربلندی برای شما دارم.
- از خداوند سلامتی شما را خواستارم.
- ضمن عرض خیر مقدم.
- تشریف فرمایی پر <u>میمنت و برکت</u> جناب عالی و هیات <u>محترم</u> همراه از <u>صمیم قلب</u> خیر مقدم عرض نموده...
- به میمنت <u>قدم مبارک</u> حضرت عالی
- با عرض سلام و خوش آمد گویی
- با عرض سلام و خسته نباشید
- خوش آمد گویی به <u>محضر مبارکتان</u>
- از آمدن شما و <u>منت گذاشتنتان</u> نهایت تشکر را دارم.
- امیدوارم در سایه لطف خداوند سالم و موفق باشید.
- قدم شما را گرامی میدارم.

  - Happy your prolific coming to our hometown.
  - Wish you success and honor.
  - I ask God for your health.
  - Welcoming you to our hometown…

- I welcome your prolific coming to our city from the bottom of my heart.
- your propitious coming
- greeting
- welcoming to your glorified presence
- I extremely thank your coming and we are all under your obligation
- hope you will be successful and healthy with God's blessing
- we honor your coming

Religious Flattery

As everybody knows this country is famous as Islamic Republic of Iran around the world. This title manifests that the government of the country is deeply rooted in Islam and religious issues are considered important for the government. Although religion has a central role in Iranian culture and all the people are religious, those who have strictly ingrained Islam in their life style, thought and appearance are respected by government and have a superior position. This religious context in the country has greatly influenced the discourse of letter writers to Mr. President so that they try to stick to religious terms to satisfy their needs. Phrases like the following clearly represent it.

- امید مان اول به خداست بعد به شما
- خدا سایه شما را از سر ما کم نکند.
- اجرکم عندالـ...
- زن مسلمان ایرانی
- خدایا به این......
- اجر و پاداش شما نزد پروردگارمان محفوظ
- خداوند منّان حتماً آه و نالهُدل ما ضعیفان را شنیده که آن رئیس جمهور محترم به این شهر قدم رنجه فرمود.
- والسلام علیکم و رحمت الـ....
- محض رضای خداوند بزرگ، رحمت خداوند را شامل حالم بفرمایید.
- یک عمر دعا گویتان باشم

- first we are hopeful to God, then you
- hope God never ceases your protection toward us
- may God recompense you
- a Muslim Iranian woman
- oh! Lord,…
- your remuneration will be saved by Allah
- surely God has heard we vulnerable people so that the respected president travelled to our city
- alsalamoalaykom(Arabic idiom)
- for the God's sake, God's Mercy
- I will pray for you all my life

Political Flattery

A language is more than a grammatical or communicative system.It is a symbolic system laden with emotional attachments that canarouse the deepest passions(). One of the topics which usually arouse deep feelings in people is political issues. Every government desires to be supported by its people and tries to support its proponents. One of the strategies the letter writers use is to show off themselves the government supporters which were classified as 'political flattering' by the researcher. Some try to introduce a member of the family as a mortar who took part in the imposed war to defend the country. Sentences like the following clearly represent it.

- شوهرم که پدرش شهید شده.
- سرفرازی و استواری وپایداری نظام مقدس جمهوری اسلامی ایران را از ایزد منان خواستارم.
- سلام به روح بنیان گذار جمهوری اسلامی ایران
- خدایا به این دولت و مسئولین ما عمری طولانی و با عزت بده.
- شو هرم که در عملیات های حق علیه باطل دچار ضربه به کمر شده.
- امید آن دارم که تکیه گاه محکم برای ملت عزیز و شهید پرور ایران باشید.
- امیدوارم همیشه مانند یزرگمردانی همانند رجایی و باهنر باشید.
- بنده 20 ماه در منطقه جنگی......
- خطه شهید پرور آذربایجان

- با سلام و درود به روح پر فتوح حضرت امام
- با 13 ماه سابقه خدمت در جبهه
- شهیدی بنام...را هم تقدیم انقلاب نموده ایم.

- my husband whose father has been killed in Iraq's war
- I pray for the exaltation, firmness and permanence of the holy system of Islamic Republic
- alsalam to the great spirit of the founder of this system
- may God bestows our government and statesmen with long life
- military operations of truth against futility
- Iran's martyrolatry people
- magnanimous men like Rajayi and Bahonar (two martyred president in Iran after revolution)
- alsalam to the great spirit of Imam Khomeini (the founder of Islamic Republic of Iran)
- I have served the country for 13 months at frontline of war
- we have dedicated a martyr to the revolution

Other Forms of Flattery

Brown and Levinson (1987: 77, 178ff.) note that deference can be shown in two different ways: the speaker may either humble him/herself or raise the hearer to show that he/she is not ''in a position to coerce H[earer]'s compliance in any way''. Watts (2003: 80, 176) simply classifies deference as politic behavior which the speaker learns as a child through a process of socialization. It seems that we will have flattery if we combine 'politic behavior' and 'deference'. Because a politic deference is an insincere praise which is the dictionary definition of 'flattery'. In the letters analyzed, there were some clear examples of these phrases.

- یک بنده حقیر vs. جناب عالی
- تقاضای عاجزانه بنده vs. عنایت جنابعالی
- ینده حقیر و بینوا vs. جنابعالی

- Your humble servant(bandeh) vs. your excellency(jenab-ali)
- My humble request vs. your dispensations
- Indigent servant(bandeh) vs. your excellency(jenab-ali)

The term 'bandeh' which can frequently be found in the letters means 'servant' and shows the lower rank of the writer compared with the higher rank of the addressee which is usually expressed by the term 'jenab-ali'.

Gender and Flattery

Most societies differentiate between men and women. Children soon pick up the social stereotypes that underlie this discrimination. They learn that women's language is associated with home and men's with outside world and economic activities. There are differences in neurophysiological processes between males and females but no difference in efficiency. The causes of differences are social rather than biological (Spolsky, 1998). The researcher was interested to know the effect of gender on the number of flattery. So, she selected compared male letters with female letters. As the number of male letters was 12, she randomly omitted 6 female letters to have equal number of letters. The letters were read and number of flattery was recorded.

	Male	*Female*	*Total*
No. of participants	12	12	24
No. of flattery	45	49	94

As it is clear from the table, there is no significant difference between male and female regarding the number of flattery. That is, both male and female use flattery to the same extent.

Age and Flattery

The researcher was also interested to know whether age differences have any influence on the number of flattery used by the writers. Therefore, she tried to classify the letters into three age groups: 15-25, 25-50, and over 50. As the number of letters for groups 1and 3 was only 5, she maximally analyzed 5 letters from every age group. She randomly selected 5 letters for age group 2. Some other letters were automatically omitted because they did not mention the age of the writer.

	15-25	*25-50*	*Over 50*	*Total*
No. of flattery	8	18	14	40

The above table shows a great difference between different age groups especially between groups 1 and 2. It has been clear the older people use more flattery than the young.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have studied the use of flattery as a socio- pragmatic phenomenon in the personal letters. The analysis of this speech act requires looking at people in the process of correspondence as more or less influential participants. The relationship between the writer and addressee has crucial importance. Having a writer with a lower rank (socially, economically, and politically) and an addressee with a higher rank seems to be essential in this speech act because we certainly do not flatter someone whom we do not need. The analysis represented five different types of flattery: flattery in address forms (based on audience design and politeness), political flattery, and religious flattery, flattery in greetings, and humbling yourself or raising the addressee as a special type of flattery. It was evident that Iranian writers frequently used flattery in their letters but I was interested in discovering whether the range of flattery changes according to age and gender variables. This study demonstrated a positive relation between age and flattery while there was no relation between gender and this speech act.

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