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POLITENESS CONCEPTUALIZATION IN IRANIAN SOCIAL INTERACTIONS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

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Abstract

This study investigated the concept of politeness as perceived by Iranians in their social interactions from the perspective of politeness theory, especially politeness 1 that views politeness as judgments of other people's behaviour. Data were collected using open-ended questionnaires and a focus group discussion. While 190 Iranians responded to the questionnaire, 6 teachers of English participated in the group discussion. Data were coded and analysed using thematic analysis. The results reveal that a taxonomy of five verbal strategies and eight non-verbal strategies, along with their sub-strategies, are used by Iranians in their social interactions. This taxonomy contributes to the discipline of politeness from the sociocultural perspectives. The study partially supports the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1987) as in this study new politeness strategies were discovered, while embracing multiple perspectives for the conceptualization and practice of politeness.

Key words

Politeness conceptualization; politeness strategy; verbal politeness; non-verbal politeness; Iranian society

1. Introduction

The construction of effective communication can be achieved through the employment of appropriate politeness strategies, the purposes of which include taking care of others' feelings, establishing levels of mutual comfort, reducing interaction friction and conflict, and maintaining a safe context for smooth communication (Hill et al. 1986, Ide 1993, Lakoff 1973, Mahmud 2019). Politeness is a cultural phenomenon rooted in the values and beliefs of a particular community. It is defined as a "frame of coded communicative norms embodying social conventionality", with variations in its realisation across cultures (Baider et al. 2020: 259). Although what politeness refers to continues to be an issue of considerable debates in research on pragmatics (Haugh 2004), politeness is known to be a device that can display an awareness of a person's face (Yule 2020). Further, it is presumed that politeness is a universal social concept by which people in societies with different cultures take individual self-images to the face wants (Gagné 2010). The degree of social

closeness and distance can determine the type of politeness in social interactions in which politeness is used to equalise the interactants' status.

Since the last four decades, the universal idea of linguistic politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) has sparked both approval and critical viewpoints. Despite some partial support for the originality and comprehensiveness of Brown and Levinson's theory of linguistic politeness, a range of critics have addressed issues such as cross-culture differences in face work, enormously variable utterances, exclusively speaker- and sentence-based analysis (Bargiela-Chiappini 2003, Pizziconi 2003). It has been noted that this theory is culturally bounded, not applicable in every language context (Lee 2021). Further, it has been argued that this theory is cross-culturally questionable (Gu 1990, Ide 1993, Kasper 1990, Matsumoto 2003). Further, Nwoye (1992) has cast doubt and raised questions on the conceptualisation of face, explaining that this theory is more applicable in the Western linguistic context. By the same token, Matsumoto (2003) claimed that the theory of Brown and Levinson (1987) may not be applicable in the Japanese culture, arguing that Japanese honorifics function primarily as a positive strategy by reducing social distance. Scholars have given tremendous attention to the application of some taxonomies of the politeness model, particularly the one presented by Brown and Levinson (1987). However, little is known about how politeness, as a practical device rather than a theoretical construct, is instrumentalised in social interactions in many social contexts, including the Iranian social interactions. While in the Argentinian and Brazilian societies, participants in a conversation can have a very close distance, in Korea the respectable distance between interlocutors in conversations is very important. Politeness markers such as "*afak*" (God give you good health, with ellipsis of the word 'God') is very often used by Moroccans in making requests (Alaoui 2011). To fill this gap, the present study intends to investigate how politeness is conceptualised in the Iranian social interactions.

2. Review of literature

Given that social interactions are usually reciprocal, interactants are able not only to stay polite but also to detect the (im)politeness of the other interactants. To date, some politeness frameworks have been adopted in social research: classical, postmodern, and framed-based. The classical view of politeness was well-founded in the premises of *Cooperative Principle* of Grice (1975) (Brown and Levinson 1987, Lakoff 1973, Leech 1983). This approach took a positivist stance in that politeness is not the outcome of interlocutors' perspectives. In contrast, traditional theorists have presented a prescriptive conceptualisation of politeness in social interactions, arguing that all cultures have unanimously agreed on the nature of politeness. Accordingly, politeness was principally realised as the etiquettes/maxims/principles practised universally across different cultures. In the traditional view of politeness, speakers' behaviour and intention determine the degree of how politeness is exercised in social interactions.

The model of face proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) appears to be the most influential one. Reconsidering Goffman's original notion of face-work,

Brown and Levinson (1987) conceptualised two interrelated facets of face: positive and negative. They referred to positive face as “the positive consistent self-image or ‘personality’ ... claimed by interactants,” or “the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others” (p. 61). Positive face is a type of desire of closeness, symmetry, and proximity. Negative face, however, is defined as “the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, right to non-distraction – i.e., to freedom of action and freedom from imposition,” or “the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61–62). Negative desire is oriented towards asymmetry, independence, and aloofness. They hypothesise that human interactions are potentially subject to face-threatening. Thus, the key role of politeness is more transparent in the interactional occasions. This is because it serves as mitigating medium in face-threatening acts (henceforth, FTAs) which can determine the linguistic forms, resulting from the interaction among three variables: (1) power that the hearer has over the speaker, (2) social distance between speaker and hearer, and (3) ranking of imposition of the speech act (Brown and Levinson 1987).

FTAs mostly occur when one person intimidates the social or personal face of another person through events such as criticising, imposing, embarrassing, and disagreeing. In such occasions, politeness should soften or minimise the degree of threat to face. Performing a speech act, the addresser employs a particular context-relevant tactic of politeness to lower the threat of face losing, thus preserving the interactant’s face. For example, a person can directly show his or her contentious stand towards an idea (*I disagree with you*) or he/she can alternatively use a relenting speech (*I am not sure about that*). The employment of politeness means, in fact, that speech act performer is aware of the addressee’s feelings (Brown and Gilman 1989).

Rejecting the traditional view of (im)politeness, the post-modern view of politeness emerged (Mills 2003, Watts 2003). By its arrival, homogeneous and universal look at the politeness was questioned and then replaced with heterogeneous understanding of politeness, either across different cultures or within a culture. Accordingly, the addressees’ role in specifying politeness regained its importance and politeness turned out to be a negotiable notion whose existence can be linked to the jointly contribution between the speaker and addressees. Regarding postmodern view, a prior predictive and prescriptive mask of politeness was discarded and supplemented with an interactive one. Yet, this view does not intend to provide a universal conceptualisation of politeness (Locher and Watts 2005). This new conceptualisation of politeness became well-known for its distinct features. The first feature amounts to the differentiation between first-order and second-order politeness (refer to Watts et al. 1992). The first-order politeness regards the lay perception of politeness in their sociocultural groups. It is a common-sense notion realised in conventional expressions such as ‘*thanks*’ and ‘*please*’. It is the addressee’s evaluation that determines what is polite and impolite. On the other hand, the second-order politeness relates to the scientific construct in social research. In this view, there is no place for ordinary understanding of politeness; whereas, the main attempt is to provide a theoretical evaluation of politeness function in social interactions.

The second premise of politeness which features postmodern politeness is that the politeness realisation is hearer-oriented and situationally constructed (Tayebi 2021, Terkourafi 2005). That is, politeness is identified in the language recipient's evaluation rather than language producer's intention. This contributes to the absence of dynamicity of politeness in the traditional view. The third feature is that the analysts' responsibility is not to apply the theoretical framework of politeness but to reveal the participants' grasp of (im)politeness (Locher 2006, Sharifian and Tayebi 2017, Watts 2003, Yousofi et al. 2016). Undermining the credibility of the two previous views towards politeness, particularly under the premise of theory-driven approach, Terkourafi (2005) formulated an alternative approach. This new view is assessed based on its underpinning notions. In contrast to the preceding views, the framed-based view employs corpus analysis and empirical observation for the investigation of politeness strategies. In fact, being neutral to the deductive fashion of norms, the framed-based model makes a high attempt to establish a behaviour as politeness norm "in a bottom-up fashion by painstaking analysis of recorded spontaneous data" (Terkourafi 2005: 235). It explores norms (frames) in a deep inductive analysis of co-occurrence between discursive expressions and the context of interactions. The framed-based view is also characterised by its major focus on the second-order politeness. Because the second-order politeness features all face-constituting behaviours, this approach intends to bring all interactional behaviours under scrutiny via face-constituting lens.

The past few decades have witnessed an increase in studies investigating the underlying theoretical constructs of politeness from different socio-interpersonal and ideological aspects (Abdolrezapour and Eslami-Rasekh 2012, Feeney and Bonnefon 2013, Martínez-Flor 2007, Pitts et al. 2014, Spencer-Oatey 2011). This shift appears clear in analysing the role of politeness in computer mediated communication (Knupsky and Nagy-Bell 2011, Park 2008), in examining politeness strategies and markers in advertisements (Blitvich 2009, Brown and Crawford 2009, Pishghadam and Navari 2012), or examining the impact of variables such as social distance, power, and imposition on the politeness production (Goldsmith 2007, Holtgraves 2002). Two theoretical propositions for the analysis of social interactions have been proposed: (a) anthropological or sociological and (b) discursive or linguistic. From the anthropological perspective, sociocultural norms and conventions, which are conducive to the proper behaviour, guide the study of politeness. From a linguistic aspect, politeness is proposed as mediating a strategy to eliminate or mitigate any feasible conflict between interactants.

As we showed in our review of literature where we presented the theoretical perspectives, various theories and models have been proposed to conceptualise politeness. As it can be observed, it is difficult to get a uniform definition of politeness. Several theorists have differentiated between politeness 1 and politeness 2 (refer to Mills 2017). While politeness 2 is the scientific abstracted view of politeness, politeness 1 is the lived experience. To show how the common-sense and the scientific notions of politeness differ, Watts et al. (2005) proposed two terms: first-order politeness and second-order politeness. While the former encompasses how members of a particular socio-cultural group perceive and discuss the various ways of politeness, the latter is the theoretical con-

struct of politeness from the perspective of social behaviour and language usage (Kdar and Haugh 2013). This study contributes to the second order of politeness as it targets how politeness manifests itself in communicative interactions among members of the Iranian society. In other words, our research has been informed by politeness 1.

In the Iranian context, few studies have examined politeness using the ethnographic approach. Two studies in the Iranian context have employed the ethnographic approach: Hosseini et al. (2018) and Izadi (2022). To examine the actual uses of *āberu* (face in the Iranian culture), Hosseini et al. (2018) collected ethnographic data which included idiomatic expressions and collocations used in authentic daily communications, TV serials, websites, and weblogs. They reported that *āberu* in the Iranian culture has connection to the social status of an individual. They found that this concept includes a wide range of meanings which can be understood to be larger than *adab* (politeness). In the Iranian culture, *adab* refers to the appropriateness of a formal behaviour to a specific context of communication. Accordingly, they argued that the loss of *āberu* can result in the feeling of shame. They concluded that *āberu* should be understood from both relational and interactional. In another recent study, Izadi (2022) used the ethnographic approach and analysed the possible misunderstanding of communication in an academic context which involved communication between 10 Malaysian university lecturers and 15 Iranian students. Specifically, the researchers identified the categories of politeness based on the discursive approach to (im)politeness (Locher and Watts 2005). The results showed that (im)politeness is a subjective evaluation of a hearer or the receiver of a behaviour or action (Izadi 2022).

3. The present study

Taking into account the gaps in previous studies, as we explained above, this study seeks to examine how politeness is conceptualised in the Iranian social interactions. To this end, the present study drew on an anthropological approach of politeness. According to this view, a productive role is given to politeness in regulating social interchange among individuals.

4. Method

4.1 Research design

The study is an exploratory study that draws on the postmodern view of politeness through using both open-ended questionnaires and focus group discussion. The study also utilises the ethnomethodological aspect because the study seeks to examine the ways that members of a particular society use to exhibit politeness (David and Sutton 2004). The ethnomethodological aspect involved understanding how Iranians create social structures through showing politeness in their social interactions. This methodology is linked to politeness 1 where the focus

is on examining the politeness strategies used by Iranians in their social daily interactions. Such an exploratory investigation with the ethnographic tool puts an emphatic stress on the societal contexts in Iran because the context is the key principle of genuine interpretations of social interactions. Researchers who employ ethnomethodology argue that society members' perceptions and perspectives are unfathomable unless the investigation is done through unfolding the discourse in the context. In our research, we supported and explained the analysis of the questionnaires with focus group discussion (Arundale 2006, 2010).

4.2 Participants

The total number of participants who received the questionnaires was 200 volunteers: 41 students at an English school, Ilam, Iran, 75 students with different majors studying at Ilam University, and 84 lay people with different education levels and occupations. They were selected randomly. The participants comprised 115 females and 85 males. The age of the participants ranged from 10 to 50 years. The focus group consisted of 6 people (4 males and 2 females) selected from the participants of the study. They were Ph.D. candidates studying TEFL at Ilam University with age range from 25 to 30.

4.3 Data collection and analysis

A questionnaire was designed to collect both background information (age, educational level, and occupation) and qualitative data on participants' perceptions of politeness in the Iranian social interactions (Appendix A). The questionnaire was piloted with 20 students who were asked to answer the questions and give constructive feedback concerning the clarity of the questionnaire. After piloting the questionnaire, data were collected from 200 participants who were asked to respond to the questionnaire through reflecting on how politeness is conceptualised in the Iranian social interactions. Each participant was supposed to write at least seven forms of politeness materialisation. Of 200 administered questionnaires, 190 fully answered questionnaires were collected. With reference to the theories explained in Section 2, the questionnaire we used is based on politeness 1. We used questionnaires for data collection because their objectivity and reliability are higher than they are in the qualitative methods of data collection. Additionally, the personal involvement with respondents in questionnaires is kept to a minimum. Further, piloting the questionnaire helped us to increase the objectivity of the questionnaire.

The data collected through the open-ended questions were analysed to sketch a taxonomy of different forms of politeness. Each researcher coded all responses in order to categorise and identify how politeness is conceptualised in the Iranian social interactions. The analysis also targeted the categorisation of politeness strategies and sub-strategies. After the analysis of the questionnaire data, the focus group discussion involving 6 people was carried out. The focus group discussion was developed to discuss the underlying beliefs and attitudes held by the participants. The focus of the discussion was on how and why participants intend

to show politeness in a particular way or more frequent ways. Moderated by one of the researchers, the focus group discussion lasted for one hour. The reason behind using the focus group discussion was that it can provide researchers with quick and supporting information (Kroll et al. 2007). It is preferred over other methods as it produces complex information in minimum amount of time and cost. Data collected through the focus group discussion were analysed thematically to support and explain the findings of the analysis of the questionnaire.

Our intention to collect data from the 6 participants was to closely understand from experts, who are sensitive to the topic, how and why Iranians show politeness in some specific ways in their social interactions. For the avoidance of possible bias of the focus group discussion, two strategies were employed. First, the three researchers revised the focus group discussion questions before they started data collection. They did this in order to eliminate any leading questions. Second, the researchers made sure that the questions presented in the focus group discussion were neutrally formed in order to motivate the 6 participants to provide long answers based on their experience.

Four strategies were employed in order to enhance the validity and reliability of the results. First, the triangulation of data was done through the use of data obtained from the questionnaire and the focus group discussion. We used both sets of data to achieve the objective of the study. Second, cross-checking of the results of the analysis was done by the three researchers. For cases of differences and discrepancies in the interpretations of the results, the first researcher compiled all these issues and called for a meeting among the researchers to solve these issues. Three, the convergence of the findings obtained from the survey and focus group discussion increases the validity of the results. Fourth, the researchers met to compare the initial analysis done by each researcher and to reach an agreement on the categorisation of all politeness strategies and sub-strategies. The meeting also helped the researchers in assigning labels to the politeness strategies and sub-strategies. The researchers discussed all labels and reached a final list of the strategies and sub-strategies of politeness.

5. Results and discussion

The analysis of the data has shown that there are two types of politeness strategies in the social interactions in the Iranian society: verbal and non-verbal. This confirms that “in face-to-face communication, addressees can confirm the intended goal of the speaker verbally or non-verbally” (Válková and Kořínková 2020: 68). Each of these two major categories has some sub-strategies. Tables 1 and 2 reflect that the number of nonverbal politeness categories (eight strategies) exceeds those of verbal politeness strategies (five strategies). As shown in Table 1, *communication strategies* and *verbal avoidance* strategies have 15 sub-strategies each. Among the non-verbal strategies, the highest number of sub-strategies were in *behaviour* and *physical expressions*, 21 and 14 sub-strategies, respectively (Table 2). We identified 42 verbal politeness sub-strategies and 73 non-verbal politeness sub-strategies. The following two sub-sections report all these sub-strategies.

Table 1. Verbal politeness strategies in the Iranian social interactions

Verbal politeness strategies	Total number of sub-strategies	%
Address terms	5	12%
Greeting	3	7%
Communication strategies	15	36%
Verbal avoidance	15	36%
Religious politeness	4	10%
Total	42	100%

Table 2. Non-verbal politeness strategies in the Iranian social interactions

Non-verbal politeness strategies	Total number of sub-strategies	%
Behaviour	21	29%
Physical expressions	14	19%
Hygiene and clothing	5	7%
Meetings and parties	4	5%
Non-verbal avoidance	5	7%
Having respect	9	12%
Responsibility	9	12%
Eating habits	6	8%
Total	73	100%

5.1 Verbal strategies of politeness

As reflected in Table 1, there are five verbal politeness strategies: *address terms*, *greeting*, *communication strategies*, *verbal avoidance*, and *religious politeness*. Each one of these verbal politeness strategies has some sub-strategies.

As shown in Table 3, the first verbal politeness strategy is ‘*address terms*’ which includes five sub-strategies (12%). A great amount of the discussion in the focus group stresses that the addressees should be addressed with polite terms according to their age (parents, elder children, relatives, or younger (kids), a higher degree of education (such as teachers and professors), or their closeness and intimacy. These *address terms* include using ‘*shoma*’ (*you* in plural form in English or *vous* in French). The use of such pronouns is highly associated with the power and solidarity, which are two fundamental dimensions in analysing social interactions (Brown and Gilman, 1960). The consistent occurrence of these pronouns depicts the political perspective and social status of the speaker. The interchangeable use and variant applications can be attributed to the transient attitudes and moods. The former dimension of pronoun use is evident in the examples given by Brown and Gilman (1960) regarding the role of power in using T and V forms (from the Latin *tu* (*tu* in Persian) and *vos* (*shoma* in Persian)). The main feature of power semantic is the nonreciprocal trajectory of using pronouns. In fact, the superior uses T-forms and the inferior responds with V-forms. Another aspect of

T-V form use is in the condition of equal status and power. The use of each form is reciprocally used between persons of the same status; however, the intimacy and formality are the indications observed to distinguish their use. This dimension is called solidarity by Brown and Gilman (1960).

The original singular pronoun in Persian is T (*tu*). Using *shoma* in the singular form is used as a form of address to an individual with high power in profession, age, gender, and wealth. If the recipient is older than the speaker, V (*shoma*) form is used. Certainly, as Brown and Gilman (1960) noted, the semantic conflict in using T-V forms occur in different communication conditions. The findings of this study indicated changes in the norms of social interactions in the Iranian society. These changes were mirrored in the use of *tu* and *shoma* in the daily communications.

The analysis of the data has also uncovered some other types of *addressee terms*. The academic degree (e.g., Ph.D.), title of the occupation (e.g., professor, teacher, or engineer), or kind-hearted terms such as *maman joon* (dear mom), *baba joon* (dear daddy), *dadashi* (dear brother), *abji* (dear sister), and *azize baba/maman* (dear mom and daddy) were the other address terms used in the Iranian daily communications. These findings are consistent with Aliakbari and Toni (2008) who pointed out that Persian language includes a rich source of address terms whose usage requires a great skill on the side of language users in various interactional contexts.

The focus group discussion also revealed that in the Iranian culture, parents, and teachers have a highly prestigious role in the society; hence, to maintain their high ranks and not to violate their prestige. This shows that through the use of the *address terms*, Iranians give a special attention to interlocutors. Eslami-Rasekh et al. (2010) hold that the Iranian system of politeness follows a hierarchical pattern. They argue that power affects the form of politeness in the Iranian social interactions. Moreover, the analysis of the focus group discussion reveals that to Iranians, polite children should be given a great deal of attention. For that reason, Iranian parents try to raise children who are polite in their interactions with their friends and other kids in their society.

As shown in Tables 1 and 3, *greeting* is another strategy of verbal politeness in the Iranian social interactions. This strategy had the lowest rate among other sub-strategies (7%). In the focus group, some participants explained that this low percentage could have some logical roots in the small amount of time spent on greeting. Even in its lowest percentage compared to other strategies, according to the analysis of the focus group discussion, Iranians are well-known for spending a great amount of time on greeting. The participants revealed that greeting is a short-term undertaking which would not last for more than 1 or 2 minutes. That is why communication parties do not have much time to perform their politeness strategies. It is generally agreed by the participants in the focus group discussion that those who embark on greeting and saying hello (*salaam*) sooner than the other party could be regarded as more polite in the Iranian culture. For that reason, being the starter in greeting and in saying *salaam* is considered a way of showing politeness. The emergence of similar intent in the focus group emphasises that being the first in greeting has some religious roots. Islamic instructions (the dominant religion in Iran) persuade their followers to be first in saying

salaam and consider that as a polite way of greeting. Further, another feature of greeting that can be regarded as politeness form is the excessive hyperbolic use of compliments such as *Qorboonet beram* (I sacrifice my life for you), *khake patam* (I am dust under your feet), *fedat besham* (I will die for you). This reveals how Iranians tend to use flattery-like expressions in their daily greetings. These unreal greetings belong to politeness forms since their primary purpose is to lower the FTAs in the interactions.

Table 3. Verbal politeness sub-strategies

	Strategies	Sub-strategies
1.	Address terms (5)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Using ‘<i>shoma</i>’ (you in plural form in English) 2. Addressing teachers according to their educational degree 3. Addressing kids with kind-hearted terms such as <i>azize baba/maman</i> (dear of mom and daddy) 4. Not using “<i>tu</i>” (you in the singular form in English) for strangers 5. Using nice address terms for parents such as <i>maman joon</i> (dear mom), <i>baba joon</i> (dear daddy).
2.	Greeting (3)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Being first in saying <i>salaam</i> (hello) 2. Being the starter of greeting 3. Using excessive compliments such as <i>Qorboonet beram</i> (I sacrifice my life for you).
3.	Communication strategies (15)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. No interruption in interlocutor’s talking 2. Use of polite expressions in talking such as <i>lotfan</i> (please) 3. <i>Tā’ārof</i> 4. Indirect speech in requests and criticisms 5. Low voice tone 6. Giving the other party a chance of talking 7. Using a common language or dialect for people with different languages or dialects 8. Manner of talking (formal/informal, plural verb for the singular subject, tense) 9. Getting permission (e.g., from the teacher to enter/exit the classroom or to start talking) 10. Talking clearly 11. Beautifying talking with figures of speech (e.g., simile, metaphor, and hyperbole)
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. Confirming interlocutors’ opinions even when we have an opposite idea 13. Being relevant in talking 14. Knowing when to start talking 15. Having respect for other (even opposite) opinions

	Strategies	Sub-strategies
4.	Verbal avoidance (15)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Avoid insulting 2. Avoid mocking 3. Avoid using vulgar terms 4. Avoid using informal language in the formal environment 5. Avoid starting a chat while eating 6. Avoid complaining/disputing particularly with the opposite gender or an elder person) 7. Avoid making sound pollution 8. Avoid prejudging (particularly about people's face) 9. Avoid joking in the first contact particularly with the opposite gender 10. Avoid verbosity and aggression 11. Avoid lying and backbiting 12. Avoid criticizing 13. Avoid gossiping 14. Avoid fussiness 15. Avoid unreasonable and absurd behaviour
5.	Religious politeness (4)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Swearing on Allah 2. Starting a task with the name of Allah 3. Using religious expressions such as <i>In Shaa Allah</i> (God willing), <i>Alhamdulillah</i> (Praise to God) 4. Ending a task by thanking Allah

Communication strategies encompass the largest amount of verbal politeness strategies with 15 sub-strategies (36%). Some of these sub-strategies include no interruption in interlocutor's talking and the use of polite expressions and words in talking such as *loftan* (please), *moteshakkeram* (thanks), and *Tā'ārof* (Table 3). All these sub-strategies are indirect speech which are used in requests and criticism, with low voice tone. In the Iranian maxims of interaction, as expressed by the participants in the focus group, it is very impolite to interrupt a person (particularly an elder person or a woman) who has the turn of talking. It is regarded as polite performance when one party waits until the other party is done with his/her talking. In our analysis, we decided to put 'no interruption in interlocutor's talk' under the communication strategies because 'interruption' here refers to involvement of interlocutors in a particular conversation. Further, the other way that politeness is heavily reflected in the Iranian norms of communication is the way that they beautify their talking with polite words and collocations. As one of the respondents has noted that the use of *khosh beyan bodan* (sweet talking) signifies the degree of civilization.

As a sub-strategy of *communication strategies*, *Tā'ārof* known as ritual courtesy is one of the politeness forms that is used excessively in the Iranian culture. *Tā'ārof* can be shown through offering services and goods repetitively, hesitating

in asking for favours and services, in turning requests down, and in making complaints, and giving excessive compliments (Shishavan and Sharifian 2016). This finding supports the findings of Izadi (2015, 2016). It is usually defined as flattery or 'Iranian politeness' whose prominent aspect is to demonstrate the speakers' politeness (Faika 2016). Participants in the focus group pointed out that Iranian people call each other as polite or impolite with respect to the amount of *Tā'ārof* exercised in the social interactions. The person who uses *Tā'ārof* abundantly is identified as a very polite person. The other facet of *Tā'ārof* is to relent the directness in requests because in the Iranian culture directness in social behaviour is not so much praiseworthy as indirectness. Advocating directness in their social contact, tourists in their first visit to Iran are overwhelmed by Iranians' practices of *Tā'ārof*.

Criticism and direct requests, as a form of *communication strategies*, are susceptible to threaten the interlocutors' faces. To save the faces, Iranians make much effort to employ indirect requests and sugar coat their criticism. To do so, according to the data obtained from the focus group discussion, they prefer to use some short verses of traditional Iranian poets, such as *Hafez Shirazi* and *Saadi*, and proverbs. As a form of politeness in communication strategies, the low voice tone is used to put on a positive face in the interactions. In Iran, high voice tone in speech acts such as requests and criticism and in interaction with women and elder people is the sign of impoliteness, as argued by the focus group. As an example, one of the participants has regarded laughing gently in a low voice tone in public environment as politeness materialisation.

Verbal avoidances, as one of the verbal politeness strategies, have 15 sub-strategies (36%). Some of these sub-strategies include avoidance of mocking and insulting, using informal language in formal environment, starting a chat while eating, and complaining/disputing particularly with an opposite gender or an elder person. In general, the analysis of the group discussion shows that for Iranians, exercising restraints and self-control in certain situations are of great value in showing politeness in the social interactions. Iranian parents repeatedly want their children to avoid any conversations which might lead to dispute and conflict (Salmani-Nodoushan 2007). For example, one of participants in the focus group discussion has shown that women should be very attentive to their communication style (using formal style) with the sales persons, strangers, and opposite gender.

The last sub-strategy of verbal politeness is *religious politeness* which constitutes 10% of the total number of verbal politeness. It is believed that this type of politeness stems from religious teachings of hospitality and generosity (Shishavan 2016) as well as attitude to religion (Al-Issa 2003). In Islamic teachings, for example, if a person greets you with *as-salāmu 'alaykum* (peace be upon you), you are considered a polite person if you provide a longer greeting such as *wa alaykum as-salāmu wa-rahmatu llāhi wa-barakātuhu* (Peace be upon you as well as God's mercy and blessings). A great number of respondents took the stand that religious activities could mark verbal politeness. Some of the religious politeness sub-strategies are swearing on Allah, starting a task with name of Allah, using religious expressions such as *In Shaa Allah* (God Willing), *Alhamdulillah* (praise

to God), and ending a task by thanking Allah. According to the analysis of the focus group discussion, Iran is a country with abundant Islamic principles and instructions which can considerably influence the social interactions. Due to this fact, they try to gear their social communications to Islamic teachings. One of the participants in the focus group discussion pointed out that “politeness is easily identifiable in discourse of those who use His name such Allah (*Khoda*) in his/her speech to please God”.

5.2. Non-verbal strategies of politeness

The non-verbal politeness strategies were classified into eight strategies; each strategy has some sub-strategies (Tables 2 and 4). Through the analysis of the questionnaires, we identified 73 sub-strategies, which exceeds the number of verbal politeness sub-strategies. This was supported by the analysis of the focus group discussion, where participants have shown that Iranians are more willing to show politeness in a non-verbal manner. In other words, in the Iranian social interactions, there is a tendency to exhibit politeness through the use of non-verbal (sub)strategies.

As displayed in Table 2, a high proportion of politeness realisations could be grouped under *behaviour* (29%) which has 21 sub-strategies (Table 4). Participants in the focus group discussion revealed that Iranians are very much careful in terms of behavioural performance in their daily social interactions. This can be a valid justification for the high number of behaviour sub-strategies. Some of the sub-strategies which were classified under *behaviour* include wearing smile, paying attention to the talking party, being patient until the speaker ends talking, silence, visiting old people, and controlling anger. As an example, silence as a form of non-verbal politeness is closely associated with the context of the interaction and role of gender in the Iranian culture. In the focus group discussion, it is more visible when Quran is recited, a prestigious person is talking in a meeting or ceremony, or there is a violent argument. Silence is utilised as a politeness strategy to avoid FTA. Regarding this, Takanaga (2004) showed that in the Japanese culture, being silent is a strategy to avoid performing FTA. Thus, remaining silent seems to be a privilege and a polite act in front of grandfathers/mothers or an elderly person who has the turn of talking in Iran.

Under *physical expressions*, 14 sub-strategies of politeness realisations were identified. Some of these sub-strategies are stretching the hands to let other parties be first to enter or exit a room or a gate, lowering the head down when an elder or reputable person is talking, holding the hand gently on the chest or bending the body at time of greeting, and the way of sitting and standing up before a respectable or old person. The comments of participants in the focus group discussion suggested that showing politeness with hands at time of leaving or entering a room is ubiquitous in the Iranian social interactions. This sub-strategy of non-verbal politeness is popular where a lot of people, probably from different social classes intend to enter or exit a room. In such social interactions, it takes them long to enter or exit because of this sort of politeness exhibition. Iranians try to display their politeness through hand manoeuvres at exit or entrance.

Table 4. Non-verbal politeness sub-strategies

	Strategies	Sub-strategies
1.	Behaviour (21)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Wearing a smile 2. Paying attention to the talking party 3. Being patient till the speaker ends the talking 4. Silence 5. Visiting old people 6. Controlling anger 7. Having impeccable manner 8. Knowing how to behave in different situations 9. Making apologize in case of making mistakes or being guilty 10. Being fair 11. Being patient in face of insult or blame 12. Being attentive to the topic selection of discussion 13. Avoid laughing loudly particularly in front of the opposite gender 14. Being thankful and considerate 15. Giving gifts particularly in return for a service 16. Forgiving others' mistakes and faults 17. Being humble 18. Being calm 19. Being modest 20. Being altruistic (e.g., helping poor people) 21. Humility
2.	Physical expressions (14)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stretching the hands to let other parties be first to enter or exit a room or gate 2. Lowering the head down when an elder or reputable person is talking 3. Holding the hand gently on the chest or bending the body at the time of greeting 4. The way of sitting and standing up before a respectable or old person 5. The way and privacy of looking (e.g., Having a direct look at the talking person) 6. Using gestures in talking and presenting things with both hands 7. Walking with dignity 8. Standing upright in talking 9. Having a respectful and uncritical look 10. Avoid doing awkward and childish movements in talking 11. Proximity (holding distance in interaction with the opposite gender)
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. Kissing (hands and faces (for women), heads (adults kiss the head of the younger) faces (for men) 13. Pressing the hands at the time of shaking hands 14. Lowering head at the time of saying goodbye

	Strategies	Sub-strategies
3.	Hygiene and clothing (3)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Being clean and tidy 2. Wearing fashionable trendy clothes 3. Having personal and public hygiene 4) wearing hijab 5) Wearing luxurious and conspicuous clothes
4.	Meetings and parties (4)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Being a hospital host and hostess 2. Being thankful to host and hostess 3. Being gregarious 4. Greeting friendly with guests and shaking their hands warmly
5.	Nonverbal Avoidance (5)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Avoiding <i>tejassos</i> (interfering others' affairs) 2. Avoid making friendship with wicked persons and any interaction with them 3. Avoid self-importance, arrogance and pride, and irritability 4. Avoid hypocrisy, duplicity, cruelty, suspicion 5. Avoid committing a crime
6.	Having respect (9)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Having respect for peoples' rights (e.g., religion, age, experience, opinions, colleagues at work) 2. Having respect for parents/children/teachers 3. Having respect for national religious customs and ceremonies 4. Having respect for neighbours (e.g., following the morals and rules in an apartment) 5. Having respect for social laws (e.g., traffic laws, rules of standing in line, and customs of selling and purchasing) 6. Having respect for tourists and religious minorities 7. Having respect for scientists and the erudite 8. Having respect for nature (e.g., avoid throwing garbage on the environment and cutting down trees) 9. developing a character in children from an early age
7.	Responsibility (9)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Punctuality 2. Fulfilling promises 3. Obeying and listening to parents' orders and advice 4. Being open-minded to criticism 5. Being responsible for what we do and what we say 6. Helping each other in difficulties (e.g., Lending money) 7. Participating in the ceremonies and celebrations 8. Trusteeship 9. Developing an understanding between parents and children

	Strategies	Sub-strategies
8.	Eating habits (6)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Remaining silent while eating 2. Not having a direct look at someone eating 3. Eating slowly and gently and not making any sound by mouth in eating 4. Avoid flossing teeth in front of others 5. Considering the convenience of guests at meal time (e.g., Guest is the first and the last one at the beginning and end of the meal) 6. Having a small slice of food

Based on the analysis of the focus group discussion concerning the physical expressions, participants pointed out that one way of showing impoliteness is the presence of physical expressions. It is worthy to note that physical expressions as a way of showing politeness can vary in their number and interpretation from one nation to another. This reveals that politeness is contextually and socially phenomena-based. It is argued that using physical gestures to show non-verbal politeness prevails in the Iranian daily interactions. This is supported by the focus group discussion as one of the participants noted that “the way we stand in front of the other party of communication is very important”. Further, he asserted that the form of standing should not be abusive and insulting.

As for *hygiene and clothing*, there are only three sub-strategies (Table 4). Although some of the participants value wearing *hijab* and having personal and public hygiene as politeness forms, a great number of them characterised being clean and tidy and wearing fashionable trendy clothes as two important indexes of showing non-verbal politeness. In the focus group discussion, some participants noted that being tidy and wearing nice clothes are paramount features of polite people. For instance, one of the participants in the focus group discussion mentioned that “it would be accounted an impolite act wearing casual clothes in front of *grandees*. Indeed, we find polite people having these two features.”

Meetings and parties are places where a great variety of non-verbal politeness strategies are displayed. The analysis of the questionnaire has shown that most of the respondents identified (1) being a generous host/hostess and (2) being thankful to host and hostess as some of the sub-strategies. Being a generous host/hostess involves giving more than what is expected. An example is the way a person treats and offers food to those who visited him/her. One of the participants noted that “hospitality features could be serving guests excessively and accompanying guests as they are to leave the meeting or parties and waiting at the door to see them off”. For Iranians, as the participants in the focus group acknowledged, how a host and hostess behave in the meetings with their guests is an important aspect of non-verbal sub-strategies. For that reason, they showed that Iranians employ different forms of politeness to be considered *mehmannavaz* (hospitable). In a collectivist society including Iran, a great attention is given to the behaviour of hosts/hostesses and guests in parties and meetings. These gatherings provide

the appropriate platforms to exhibit politeness strategies. Due to this fact, unlike individualistic society, the way of acting, either by hosts/hostesses or guests, is closely monitored to ratify the acceptability of their behaviours.

Similar to *verbal avoidance*, *non-verbal avoidance* was identified in this research as one of non-verbal politeness strategies. *Non-verbal avoidance* strategies include five sub-strategies. As shown in Table 4, some of these sub-strategies include avoiding *tejjassos* (interfering in others' affairs), making friendship with wicked people, and feeling of being self-important, arrogant, proud, or irritable. A great number of respondents revealed that a polite person avoids all these negative ways of behaving. On the other hand, some respondents believed that being humble, having nice friends, and using friendly talking could be traits of a polite person. Considering words of the participants in the focus group discussion, naughtiness and being pompous have been tremendously abhorred in the light of Iranian traditions and Islamic teachings. The majority of the participants in this study regarded these two traits as impolite forms and their avoidances as polite.

The other non-verbal strategy of politeness is the issue of *having respect*. Our analysis of the questionnaires indicated that Iranians are very concerned with *respect* as politeness materialisation which encapsulates having respect for peoples' rights, parents/children/teachers/neighbours, national customs, and social laws. Most participants regarded respect as a way of showing politeness non-verbally. One of the participants in the focus group discussion noted that "regarding having respect for peoples' right, politeness can be completely visualised in offering your seat to a disable or a very old person on the bus". Another participant said that "having respect for parents and teachers who have long and painstaking task of rearing children and students is a politeness form". Another group whose respect has been emphasised in the Iranian culture is neighbours. Considering the discussion in the focus group, most of the participants declared that in eastern societies such as Iran, neighbours gain a great amount of respect. Such a notion is prevailing in traditional collectivist societies like Iran where it is the responsibility of neighbours to be aware of each other' problems. One participant expressed that Iranians cannot call themselves Muslims if they are not aware of their neighbours' problems and are not helpful. Participants also believed that politeness could be realised through respect for the social laws and national customs. The example of social law could be respecting the traffic rules. One of the participants mentioned that "a person who breaks the driving rules and regulations, for example speeding in a low-speed line, could not be regarded as a polite person". Considering the focus group discussion, it seems that non-verbal politeness strategies are intricately interwoven with social activities. In the Iranian context, social actions can be accompanied with non-verbal strategies of politeness.

Responsibility was another non-verbal politeness strategy which encompasses different politeness forms. According to the respondents, being punctual, fulfilling promises, and obeying and listening to parents' orders and advice are ways of showing non-verbal politeness. Participants in the focus group discussion noted that as raising polite children is highly advocated in the Iranian culture, polite children are distinguished from impolite ones based on how much they obey

their parents and listen to their advice. As punctuality and promise fulfilment are desirable personality traits, it is implied that a polite person is more likely to be on time and keep his/her promises.

Regarding *eating habits*, which is one of the non-verbal politeness strategies, Iranian people show different forms of politeness. They attempt to remain silent while eating, not to have a direct look at someone having his meal, eating slowly and gently, not to make any sound by mouth in eating, and flossing teeth in front of others. These are just some sub-strategies of non-verbal politeness of *eating habits*. Participants in the focus group discussion are of the view that compared to other cultures where people spend less time on eating and try to eat outdoors than indoors, Iranian people spare particular time for eating indoors among family members. According to their belief that time spent on eating is not accounted in their age, eating has become so salient part of their culture that they spend plenty of time preparing their regular meals. Furthermore, they consider this as a great traditional custom at meal time, and the violation of one of them is considered as an impolite act. In the Iranian social interactions, eating meal usually happens on a rectangular tablecloth on the floor more often than at dining tables. When all members of a family are sitting around the table cloth, it is impolite to stretch out legs in front of tablecloth.

6. Conclusion

This study was one of the attempts to examine how politeness is conceptualised in the Iranian social interactions. Data were gathered using a questionnaire with open-ended questions and a focus-group discussion. The analysis of the data revealed that politeness in the Iranian societal interactions could be classified into two major categories: five verbal strategies and eight non-verbal strategies. This supports the view of Feyaerts et al. (2022) who have highlighted the equal importance of both verbal and non-verbal resources in interactive communication. Further, the findings of this study showed that Iranians are more likely to deploy politeness in non-verbal manners. One possible reason for this result could be that the number of daily activities, such as clothing style and eating habits, exceeds that of verbal uses that people are involved in. Generally speaking, this study found a great number of politeness strategies that are commonly used verbally and non-verbally by Iranians. It could be said that the Iranian culture is one of the eastern cultures in which an immensely rich source of politeness forms is displayed in their daily social interactions.

The findings of this study have theoretical applications. Although in some cultures, politeness is perceived as an invisible concept and its comprehension is barely tangible except in case of the violation of politeness norms such as using taboos, in the Iranian culture interlocutors try their best to make politeness practices visible, either verbally or non-verbally. One possibility for such high effort to be polite, as indicated by the comments of the participants in the focus group, is attributed to Iranian traditional life style as well as Islamic instructions which both insist on being polite in social interactions. For Iranians, formal situations

(e.g., in meetings) and the certain social activities (e.g., meal time) are considered more suitable to practise their politeness. The comments of the participants in the focus group discussion suggest that what encourages Iranian people to be polite is the issue of protecting *âberu* (reputation). *Âberu* is referred to as a powerful cultural force (O’Shea 2000). Iranians put a lot of effort into protecting *âberu* by means of being polite in their social interactions. Impoliteness could threaten their *âberu*, and eventually their faces in social interactions.

We showed in our study how different members of the Iranian society understood and practised politeness. Furthermore, the findings of this study support Kdar and Haugh (2013) who argued that “any approach to politeness necessarily draws from multiple loci of understudying” (p. 81). Additionally, the significant contributions of our study are associated with the discovery of new strategies perceived and practiced by the sociocultural group of Iranian people in their daily communications. Put simply, the findings can be supportive of the conceptualisation of politeness by both Brown and Levinson (1987) and Watts et al. (2005). In other words, we argue that politeness is a construct that can vary from one society to another taking into account that various sociocultural factors may affect the practice of politeness.

Although it is argued that cultures are distinctive and idiographic and do not lend themselves to making generalisations (Morand 2003), many verbal and non-verbal politeness strategies in the Iranian culture are identical to those proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). According to the analysis of the data in this study, phrasing requests and apologies (negative politeness forms) and using kind-hearted address terms and wearing smile (positive politeness forms) are politeness strategies that can be closely traced to those outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987). Further, it might be misunderstood that the issue of politeness is centralised on linguistic manifestations. However, Brown and Levinson (1987) acknowledged that non-verbal forms such as kinetic and prosodic ones determine the parameters in face work.

Similar to other empirical studies, this study has some limitations. First, one of the limitations is related to the research design of the study. As the study examined how Iranian show politeness in their culture and the verbal and non-verbal strategies which they use to do so, it was difficult for our study to uncover the politeness strategies Iranian people are not aware of. Thus, future studies may collect corpus of utterances and analyse them to improve our taxonomy. In this way, politeness strategies used implicitly by Iranian people can be identified. Second, another limitation has connection to the sample of the study. As the sample in this study included 190 participants from one city in Iran, generalizations of the findings to other populations in Iran should be done with cautions. Third, other researchers may consider populations from a number of universities in order to compare the findings with the results of our study. One of the major contributions of our study is the taxonomy of politeness strategies we generated based on the analysis of data we collected. Although our study provided interesting findings, constructing the same research in a new context or culture can be one of our suggestions for future research. Fourth, future research may use our taxonomy of verbal and non-verbal strategies to examine how politeness is

conceptualised in another culture. Fifth, an area that deserves researchers' attention is to compare how the conceptualisation of politeness may differ across cultures. Sixth, further investigations can focus on either verbal politeness strategies or non-verbal ones and examine how they are comprehended in the social interactions in the Iranian social context. The seventh limitation is related to variations of politeness strategies across demographic variables such as age and gender. Although our research collected demographic information of the participants, we did not intend to examine how the politeness strategies can vary across the demographic variables. This was out of the scope of our research as we targeted the verbal and non-verbal strategies of politeness in the social interactions. Hence, future researchers may consider these variables in their investigations.

Declaration of competing interest

Authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

Appendix A

Dear Respondent,

We would like to thank you in advance for your sincere help in answering this questionnaire. This questionnaire consists of two sections. While the aim of Section One is to collect data on your age, educational level, and occupation, Section Two aimed at collecting responses concerning your perceptions of politeness in Iranian interactions.

Section One:

Please answer the following questions:

1. What is your age?
2. What is your highest educational level?
3. What is your occupation?

Section Two:

Please answer the following question. You are advised to give elaboration as much as you can.

Question:

How is politeness conceptualised in the Iranian interactions?
In other words, we would like you to list ways of how Iranians exhibit politeness when they are communicating with others. Please give examples for each form of politeness.

No.	Ways of showing politeness	Examples

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