

Heterogeneous distribution of cultural conceptualisations and (im)politeness evaluations

Abstract

The argumentative and variable nature of impoliteness evaluations and perceptions has long been discussed by scholars working in the field. The variability found in the perception of (im)politeness norms is arguably one of the most important and fundamental components of (im)politeness research. By using a three-stage analysis and drawing on several authentic examples from Persian, the present study uses the notion of heterogeneous distribution of cultural conceptualisations to account for instances where differences arise in the conceptualisation of (im)politeness in Persian interactions. It will be argued that evaluations of (im)polite behaviour vary according to people's level of internalisation of the cultural conceptualisations. Furthermore, this study will also address some of the most significant social and cultural factors that cause variability in people's evaluations of what is impolite and why it is so.

Keywords: Politeness, impoliteness, cultural conceptualisations, cognition, Persian

1. Introduction

It is commonly believed that people have general expectations about how they should be treated in a particular situation and that they are also capable of forming hypotheses about what the (im)politeness norms are in their speech community (Mills 2003). This, however, does not mean that there is always a consensus regarding what is considered polite or impolite among people. This dissension is known as variability in evaluations and perceptions of impoliteness, which has been in the forefront of (im)politeness research since the rise of discursive approaches to (im)politeness (Locher 2006; Locher and Watts 2005;

Watts 2003). As Eelen (2001) proposes, the variability in the perception of (im)politeness norms should be treated as a fundamental component of any theory of (im)politeness.

However, although it is now widely accepted that politeness and impoliteness arise through evaluations by participants in situated discourse and that such evaluations are not homogeneously shared (see Fukushima and Haugh 2014: 165; Kádár and Haugh 2013; Haugh 2013), there has not been much research on factors that cause such variability in participants' evaluations of impoliteness and politeness in a speech community. Investigating the grounds that influence participants' evaluation of (im)politeness does not mean that there are pre-existing and idiosyncratic sets of norms that participants carry around and apply when evaluating linguistic behaviour or conduct, a point that is forcefully made in Eelen's (2001) criticism of first-wave approaches to politeness. While investigating the role of culture in perceptions of impolite language seems to be a potentially rewarding endeavour, such an enquiry runs the risk of falling prey to "simplistic essentialist views of culture" (Kádár and Haugh 2013: 231). As Mills and Kádár (2011: 21) maintain, "if we use models of politeness which ignore the heterogeneous nature of politeness and impoliteness, those generalisations about culture will be of limited value." Therefore, the relationship between (im)politeness and culture should be approached with caution.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the notion of 'cultural conceptualisation' (Sharifian, 2011, 2017a) as one of the factors which heavily influences people's evaluations of (im)politeness in a heterogeneous fashion. Although "research on impoliteness needs some way of capturing the fact that different groups of people – different 'cultures' – have different norms and different values" (Culpeper 2011:12), this task needs to be approached from a perspective that does not view speakers as being imprisoned in the house of their cultures (Mills 2009). By drawing on authentic examples of different types of Persian

rituals, the present study discusses the variation in individuals' access to and their understanding and evaluation of cultural conceptualisations.

The outline of the paper is as follows: in section 2, the notion of variability and heterogeneous distribution of cultural conceptualisations is discussed by drawing on the relevant literature. In section 3, the methodology and the type of data used in this study are explained. In section 4, the heterogeneous representation of cultural conceptualisations is discussed by drawing on several examples that address the issue under investigation from the participants' own perspective and evaluation. This is followed by a conclusion in section 5.

2. Variability in evaluations of (im)politeness

In light of the data emerging from the discursive approach to politeness (Locher 2006; Locher and Watts 2005; Watts 2003), many researchers in (im)politeness studies (He 2012; Kádár and Bargiela-Chiappini 2010; Kádár and Mills 2011; Mills 2003, 2009; Mills and Kádár 2011) have claimed that cultural norms are not homogeneously or uniformly shared across members of a speech community and that, within one single community, there is variability in understandings of politeness and impoliteness. When we deal with the interpretation and understanding of (im)politeness, we are inevitably dealing with the notion of 'evaluation'. As Kádár and Haugh (2013: 61) argue, there are four key dimensions that are important in accounting for the inherent variability of (im)politeness evaluations. The first dimension pertains to persons and relationships and refers to the fact that, from an interpersonal perspective, persons and relationships are conceptualised differently across different social groups. The second dimension is what Kádár and Haugh (2013: 62) call 'categorisations', i.e., "the common-sense knowledge that ordinary people – that means all people in their capacity as ordinary people – have about what people are like, how they

behave, etc.” (Schegloff 2007: 469). The third dimension is valency and refers to “various scales ranging from good to bad, appropriate to inappropriate, like to dislike and so on” (Kádár and Haugh 2013: 62-3). The final factor in evaluation is the existence of a normative frame of reference, which refers to “the perception that others from the same social group would evaluate a person or relationship in the same way” (Kádár and Haugh 2013: 63). All these four dimensions are influential in moment-to-moment evaluations of impoliteness and can help in explaining the variability that is inherent in the understanding and perception of (im)politeness.

As the bulk of research discussed above shows, there is variability in how members of a speech community make sense of different (im)politeness norms, traditions, values and expectations and how they evaluate them regardless of the type of norms they espouse and the social groups they belong to. In this connection, Spencer-Oatey (2005: 341) maintains that variability in evaluations of norms and culture can be observed a) between members of a given social group, b) across situational contexts and c) in the cultural manifestations that are common to a given social group. This means that despite the regularities that are present across different social groups and sub-cultures, members of the same social group do not always manifest regularities in each and every aspect of their shared norms and conceptualisations. It should be highlighted that variation in evaluations and perceptions of impoliteness can occur both at the level of social and cultural norms and at the level of individual values/norms (cf. Culpeper 2008; Kádár and Haugh 2013).

One of the most important ways to account for the variability of impoliteness evaluations can be found in what Sperber and Wilson call individual’s ‘cognitive environment’. In fact, the cognitive aspect of evaluations of (im)politeness cannot be separated from how individuals understand and evaluate impoliteness. As human beings, although we live in the same physical world and are involved in the process of deriving information from this

common source, our mental representation of this process lacks homogeneity, not only due to differences in our physical environment, but also our “cognitive abilities” (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 38). Our cognitive abilities are part of the cognitive environment and includes our “inferential abilities”, “perceptual abilities”, knowledges, memories, etc.

Sperber and Wilson (1986: 39) define an individual’s cognitive environment as “the set of all the facts that he can perceive or infer.” They (1986: 39) argue that the cognitive environment “consists of not only all the facts that he is aware of, but also all the facts that he is capable of becoming aware of, in his physical environment.” This means that even if two persons might come from exactly similar social groups or communities, their cognitive environments are likely to be different and hence their evaluations of impoliteness will differ.

As Tayebi (2016) argues, evaluations of impoliteness are made on the basis of expectations that are influenced by individuals’ cognitive abilities and the accumulation of their past experiences. Locher and Watts (2008: 78), following Escandell-Vidal (1998), use the notion of ‘frame’ and argue that “the theoretical basis of ‘frames’ are cognitive conceptualisations of forms of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour that individuals have constructed through their own histories of social practice”. This approach is supported by Terkourafi’s (2001: 182) frame-based approach to (im)politeness according to which “speakers’ knowledge of language includes a knowledge of repertoires of frames which are constrained by their socio-cultural affiliation”. These ‘frames’ are, as argued by Terkourafi (2001: 182), “constantly subject to change in light of the interaction between previous experience and potentially changing social conditions of existence”.

The variability inherent in the understanding of (im)politeness becomes even more complicated when we are dealing with culture. Despite the fact that there have been many studies that claimed to have moved away from the conceptualisations of culture “as people

embodying a unified belief or value system” (Sarangi 1994: 415), there have been fewer studies devoted to systematically explaining the relationship between culture and the actual behaviour of the people who consider themselves to be members of that cultural group. One way to account for the variability in the understanding of cultural norms and expectations is by drawing on the notion of ‘heterogeneous distribution of cultural conceptualisations’, an approach which is predominately based on the notion of ‘cultural cognition’ (Sharifian 2011, 2017a).

Cultural cognition is a form of “enactive cognition” (see Stewart et al. 2011) that “is the result of social and linguistic interaction between individuals across time and space” (Frank 2015: 494) and is “not represented simply as some sort of abstract disembodied ‘between the ears’ entity” (Frank 2015: 494). Indeed, cultural cognition is a property of a cultural group (Sharifian 2011, 2017a) and forms the basis of an individual’s actions in two ways: a) individuals’ behaviour, including ‘linguistic performance’, largely derives from cultural cognition, b) individuals “largely operate on the basis of the assumption that other interactants’ behaviour draws on the same cultural cognition” (Sharifian 2011: 22). The interaction, however, takes place within the boundaries of an individual’s cognitive environment and abilities, and the elements of cultural cognition are not homogeneously shared amongst members of the speech community. Furthermore, cultural cognition is dynamic, meaning that its elements tend to be negotiated and re-negotiated across generations, for example through exposure to and contact with other social groups and communities (Sharifian 2011, 2017a). In fact, cultural cognition should not be viewed “as fixed representations inside the mind of individuals but as emergent properties resulting from the interactions between members of a cultural group” (Sharifian 2011: 21). As Frank (2008: 243) states:

At the macrostructural (global) level, “language” may be viewed as an emergent phenomenon, the cumulative effect of the heterogeneous and distributed behavior of socioculturally situated language agents. Or, more concretely, the global or macrostructural level can be viewed as an emergent phenomenon resulting from the utterances produced by these agents; the utterances in turn being based on the individual agent’s “idiolect”. Hence, by shifting our perspective, we can focus either on the microstructural, individual, or local level, the behavior of the language agents, or on the macrostructural, collective, or global level, keeping in mind that global properties flow from the aggregate behaviour of individuals, although the actions of the latter are not the sole source in bringing about changes in the system.

It is also worth noting that, in addition to cultural conceptualisations, the objects that are being evaluated, i.e. the norms and expectations and even the notion of ‘politeness’ itself all are constantly changing over time, because the cognitive domain against which the impoliteness evaluation is made is subject to change (Locher and Watts 2008: 78). In fact, as Watts (2008) notes, evaluations of (im)politeness are subject to change in the same way that language is. In what follows, several examples are provided to discuss the notion of heterogeneous distribution with respect to (im)politeness.

3. Methodology and data

The examples used in this study to discuss the variability in impoliteness evaluations are collected from several popular Persian lifestyle weblogs that included discussions on various topics such as relationships, relationship dramas/break-ups, university experiences, student life, lifestyle and other similar topics from messages posted between 2013 and 2016. All the examples which are reported in this study are natural speech events which can be claimed to be characteristic of everyday interactions in modern Persian (cf. Parvaresh and Tayebi 2014; Tayebi and Parvaresh 2014).

The way the forums operate is very basic and well established. The users post a topic and explain a situation or a bad/good experience and often ask for other users' opinions and suggestions. Sometimes the resulting discussion could be as long as 100 pages. The excerpts for this study were chosen based on topics likely to elicit the cultural conceptualisations to be investigated, as is the case with incidents involving relationship conflicts and relationships with the in-laws. For the purpose of confidentiality, all the names are pseudonyms and potentially private information is either omitted or modified (cf. Sharifian and Tayebi, 2017a,b).

Following Sharifian and Tayebi (2017a, b), in this study, I have also adapted the three-stage methodology that comprises a) metadiscourse analysis, b) discourse analysis, and c) conceptual analysis. The focus of the metadiscourse analysis is purely on identifying words or expressions that are frequently used by participants when describing an impolite act. These words or expressions are linguistic markers that allow the researcher to analyse what the participants consider impolite within the context of their interactions. The discourse analysis stage involves analysing the scenarios that led to an evaluation of impoliteness, and finally the third stage, which examines the link between the perception/evaluation of impoliteness and the underlying cultural conceptualisation. This three-stage analysis may be diagrammatically presented as follows:

Insert Figure 1

The three-stage analysis in Figure 1 is presented as a cycle because, as the analysis will show, the meta-discourse and discourse levels, as well as the underlying cultural conceptualisations are all interrelated. Using this three-stage analysis I was able to a) identify the markers used

for an evaluation of (im)politeness, b) identify the scenarios in which this evaluation took place, and c) examine the nature of the relationships between the evaluation of impoliteness and the underlying cultural conceptualisations, a relationship which may not always be noticed by the interactants during the course of an interaction. By drawing on these three layers, I was able to assign the interpretations of the cultural conceptualisations to different categories in order to discuss their distribution.

4. Analysis of examples from Persian

As Sharifian and Tayebi (2017a, b), Tayebi (2016) and Sharifian (2017a, b) have discussed, there are different cultural conceptualisations that are associated with different languages. Furthermore, apart from language, cultural conceptualisations can also be instantiated in other aspects of people's lives, such as cultural art, literature, cultural events, ritual, non-verbal behaviour and emotion (Sharifian 2017a: 7). In this section, different types of Persian rituals and participants' interpretation and understanding of them are discussed, with a focus on the heterogeneous distribution of underlying cultural conceptualisations.

Rituals have always been an important factor in human communication as they help "humans to form social or relational networks, by providing a powerful way in which people's social dependence can be expressed" (Kádár and Haugh 2013: 148). As Kádár (2017: 4) notes, a ritual is a social action which "embodies a social group's practice". Kádár (2017: 4) believes that "in ritual interactions, there is a strong underlying interpersonal implication behind the words uttered" even if the rituals "do not follow clear 'scripts'". Furthermore, through the operationalisation of rituals, considerations for one's and others' face are often expressed (Spencer-Oatey 2005), relationships are reinforced, social and community values are highlighted, and "interpersonal relationships" are maintained (Kádár 2013).

There are certainly various rituals in Persian and explaining each is beyond the scope of the present study. In this paper, following Tayebi (2016) and drawing on online data collected

from different contributions to lifestyle discussion forums, I will discuss rituals under what in Persian is known as *rasm va rosum* (roughly translated as ‘traditions and customs’). The notion of *rasm va rosum* can be found in the traditions and values that are associated with certain events or practices. For example, there are important Persian cultural assumptions underlying events such as engagements, weddings, New Year’s celebrations, and funerals. These assumptions can lead to formulations of “certain expectations, the infringement of which may be interpreted by some as offensive” (Tayebi 2016: 12). The rituals associated with these events often provide a “joint experience which is recurrent” and “symbolically codifies the roles” of participants and their relationship (Kádár and Haugh 2014: 148).

However, as the following examples will show, although individuals are conscious of the norms and conceptualisations and are aware of the “influence that a particular ‘collective’ cognition has on their thought patterns and behaviour” (Sharifian 2011: 22), in reality they may share some but not all components of the cultural conceptualisations which are associated with the ritual(s) in question. Consider the following example from a forum on different Persian traditions and customs in which a woman complains about her in-laws and how they have disrespected her by failing to comply with the traditions and rituals she firmly associates with politeness and respect.

- (1) *shoharam va xânevâdash dar durân-e aghd xeili be man bi-ehterâmi kardan, vâse xarid-e aghd hich kâri nakardan! migân mâ rasm nadârim. hattâ ye ta’arof ham nazadan! xeili xejâlat keshidam jelo fâmilhâmoon. tahghir shodam! Nazar-e shomâhâ chiy-e? be nazaretoon chi kâr konam?*

[“My husband and my in-laws disrespected me so much during our engagement. They did not buy any gifts for me! They say they don’t have this tradition! They

didn't even ostensibly offer (*ta'arof*) to do so. I was so **embarrassed** and felt **humiliated!** What is your opinion? What do you think I should do?"]

In this example, the metadiscourse markers 'humiliated' and 'embarrassed' are used to describe the negative feeling that the narrator has experienced because of the way her in-laws have treated her. Furthermore, one finds an explicit reference to the cultural conceptualisation of *ta'arof* in Persian. *Ta'arof* is a cultural schema that plays a major role in everyday Persian social interactions as emphasized by a vast body of literature (Asdjodi 2001; Assadi 1980; Beeman 1986; Hillman 1981; Hodge 1957; Koutlaki 2002; Sharifian 2011). There are many different definitions of *ta'arof*; for instance, Koutlaki (2002: 1741) argues that "*ta'arof* is a very complex concept, carrying different meanings in the minds of native speakers and baffling anyone endeavouring to describe it". Similarly, Tyler et al. (1978: 6) argue that *ta'arof* is a "necessary part of social intercourse and business dealings in Iran; without it communication seems blunt, brusque, and uncivil to Iranians". As Sharifian and Tayebi (2017a) note, *ta'arof* is a concept that is so deeply interwoven with notions of respect and politeness that people would go to any lengths to display it in order to be considered polite. The notion of *ta'arof* is most often associated with different acts such as constantly offering goods, services, food and gifts to other interlocutors in certain interactions in an ostensible rather than a genuine manner.

As the example shows, at the discourse level the speaker associates the act or tradition of receiving gifts during her engagement with how much her husband and in-laws respect and care about her. As it was mentioned above, not adhering to cultural conceptualisations of *ta'arof* and the associated traditions and rituals can lead to a certain perception and evaluation of impoliteness and even, as in this case, humiliation and embarrassment. This is due to the fact that people often operate on the *assumption* of shared cultural conceptualisations, but in reality they are likely to access cultural conceptualisations to

varying degrees. Such assumptions of shared cultural conceptualisations can potentially lead to the impression that an interlocutor has consciously and intentionally made the choice not to comply with the speaker's expected rituals and traditions by, in this case, not buying any gifts for her during her engagement. This example and the follow-up discussion clearly point to the variability and heterogeneous nature of cultural conceptualisations and associated rituals, as other members of this forum offered various interpretations of this story. By way of illustration, consider the following comment from another member of the forum, who clearly associates the in-laws' behaviour with what she calls 'different understandings of traditions':

(2) *be nazar-e man nabâyad enghadr be xodet begiri. xândevâdehâ rasm va rosumhây-e xodeshoon ro dêrand va be sheklhây-e moxtalef ejrâsh mikonan. maslan xânevâdey-e shohar-e man aslan rasm-e kâdo nadâshtand. vâghean ham hich kas to fâmileshoon in kêr ro nakard-e bud. vali be jâsh vâse jahâz, rasm dâshtand vasâyel-e âshpazxoone ro kâmel bexaran, bâ inke mâ in rasm ro nadashtim.*

[“I think you should not take this personally. Different families have different traditions and customs and they do the rituals according to their own understandings. For example, my in-laws were not into the tradition of giving me gifts. Actually, nobody in their family ever did that. But instead they had the tradition of buying all the kitchen appliances as part of the dowry, a tradition that we did not have in our family”.]

In example (2), the participant clearly points to the heterogeneity of cultural conceptualisations by referring to the fact that people's understandings of traditions and rituals are not and should not necessarily be the same. This interpretation can be taken as evidence suggesting that there are different levels of understanding of cultural conceptualisations, which can potentially explain why the “same behaviour may be

understood as impolite by some but less impolite or not impolite at all by others” (Culpeper 2011: 15). In the forum under investigation, there were many similar examples in which the act of not buying gifts was interpreted as unintentional and representative of the in-laws’ different internalisation and conceptualisation of such rituals and not necessarily indicative of the level of respect they had for their daughter-in-law. This lends support to the idea that the distribution of cultural conceptualisations among speakers in a speech community is heterogeneous and that variability in these conceptualisations is at the very heart of the speech community. In fact, this is how misunderstandings between people occur and how they can be accounted for. The heterogeneous distribution of cultural conceptualisations across a speech community provides a basis for speakers to evaluate other interlocutors’ communicative behaviour. Consider another comment from the same forum in which the participant’s evaluation of (1) above and similar situations is determined based on the intention of the person who does not conform to the commonly known and practiced rituals. Differently put, people seem to be more forgiving if they realise that someone unintentionally has failed to perform the rituals they adhere to:

- (3) *xânevâdeh shohar-e man ham in rasm ro nadâshtand, aval man xeili **asabi** shodam va fekr mikardam dorough migan. pedaram vali hamishe migoftan arzesh-e doxtar-e mano digarân ta’een nemikonand, vâse hamin be har bahâne vâse man kâdo mixaridan va jelo shoharam be man midâdand. kam kam shoharam ham fahmid ke mâ in rasm ro dârim va unâ ham shoro kardan be kâdo xaridan, va mâ fahmidim ke unâ vâghean az in rasmhâ chizi balad nabudan! shomâ ham aval az niyateshoon motma’en besho.*

[“My in-laws did not have this tradition either. At first, I **got really mad** and I thought they are lying ... However, my father always used to say that his daughter’s worth is not determined by other people’s acts, therefore, on all occasions, when my

husband was around, he would give me gifts. Eventually, he realised that we do have such a tradition in our family and he started buying me gifts. Then I realised these poor people **genuinely did not know anything about these traditions**. I think you need to first make sure what their intention is”.]

The example above addresses the notion of intentionality vis-à-vis impoliteness evaluations. As Culpeper (2011: 50) argues, “hurtful verbal [and non-verbal] behaviours and messages are considered more hurtful, malicious, immoral, etc., if they are considered intentional”. In this example, the act in question initially created a sense of anger (which is a metadiscourse marker indicating that an impolite evaluation has occurred) in the speaker, because she assumed that the in-laws are intentionally refraining from following the rituals to, presumably, save a massive amount of money. However, as soon as they realise the importance of the tradition in question, their conceptualisations are updated. As Sharifian (2017a: 4) argues, members of a speech community, “as agents of cultural cognition, are complex systems in their own right, controlled by nervous systems, endocrine systems, etc.”. Therefore, they do have the capacity to act upon the interactional and relational history to construct and reconstruct their conceptualisations in such a way that can have a significant effect on their future behaviour (Sharifian 2017a: 4). In the same forum, there were also a considerable number of participants who argued that the in-laws’ act in (1) above is intentional, condescending and disrespectful. The following example provides a case in point:

(4) *hagh dâri nârâhat bâshi! inâ hamashoon vaghti be naf’eshoon bâshe rasm dârand, be zarareshoon bâshe aslan tâ hâlâ be omreshoon nashnidan rasm ro. inâ hamash cherto pert-e. bâvar nakon.*

[“You have every right to be hurt! The in-laws are all like that, when they can benefit from a tradition, they say they have it and when it costs them a lot, they claim they

have never and ever heard about this tradition in their life. These are all nonsense. Don't believe them".]

Examples in which the in-laws' act is evaluated as offensive and intentional were among the most frequent responses to the post in (1) above. All the participants with similar opinions believed that the in-laws *do* know about the traditions in question, but they act as though they have never heard about them. Such interpretations can refer to the fact that there are different levels of access to cultural conceptualisations including rituals and traditions and that people can choose to act or not to act according to conceptualisations that are generally accepted and practiced by members of the speech community. To further illustrate this point, consider the following two examples which are replies to (4) above:

(5) *daghighan! dorough migan! vâse manam hamin bud, be man goftan mâ rasm nadarim ke vâse arus xarid konim yâ kâdo bedim, vali vaghti barâdar shoharam yek sâl ba'd zan gereft, vâse un hame rasmahâ ro balad budan va sang-e tamum gozshtan!*

[“Exactly! These are all lies! I had a similar experience; when we got engaged, they told me they don't have the tradition of buying gifts or take the bride shopping. But after a year, my husband's brother got married and for that bride they knew all the traditions and did the best they could!”]

Examples such as (5) include infringement of what is known as ‘equity expectations’ (Spencer-Oatey 2005; Tayebi 2016) in which the participant bases her negative evaluation of the in-laws' behaviour on the inequity by which the two brides in question are treated. Equity expectations are based on the premise that people believe “they are entitled to a personal consideration from others to be treated fairly” (Spencer-Oatey 2005: 100). In this particular example, as the discourse analysis show, equity is influenced by the participants'

interpersonal expectations in which ‘fairness’ is evaluated against the history and nature of the relationship she holds with her in-laws. In other words, people “are more likely to take offence when someone with whom they are acquainted or have a history does not treat them fairly” (Tayebi 2016: 7-8, cf. Culpeper, 2011; Spencer-Oatey 2008) and that they expect a certain level of respect from *certain* people with whom they have a defined relationship (Culpeper 2011; Spencer-Oatey 2008; Tayebi 2016, 2018). Here is another example:

(6) *be man goftan ke rasm nadârim barây-e aghd talâ bexarim, vali vâse arusi rasm darim. ba’d zamân-e arusi ke shod, goftan pool nadârim va inke man xânoomi konam va kotâh biyâm va shoharam ro zire feshâr nazâram. vali ba’d arusi doxtareshoon xânevâdeh dâmâd va dâmâd ro tahdid kardan ke yâ servis bereliyân-e si meliyoni mixarin yâ arsui ro kansel mikonan. bâvaretoon mishe?!*

[“They told me that they do not have the tradition of buying gold for ‘engagement’, but they do have the tradition to do so for our ‘wedding’. But then before our wedding, they told me that they don’t have enough money and that I should be the bigger person and just forget about it and don’t put my husband under pressure! But then it was their own daughter’s wedding, they threatened the groom and his family to buy their daughter a 30 million *Toman*¹ diamond set or they would call off the wedding! Can you believe that?!”]

As the participants’ description of the in-laws’ behaviour in the two examples above show, they believe the in-laws are choosing not to uphold the cultural practice of buying gifts despite the fact that they do know about this tradition and have practiced it for other brides within their close circle of families. This kind of manipulation of socio-cultural practices takes place according to the in-laws’ goals and preferences, which allows them to “make

¹ The Iranian *Toman* is the official currency of Iran, the *Rial*.

those individual choices, and [...] convey interactional ‘meanings’ through those choices” (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009: 39). As the narrator’s understanding of the in-laws’ behaviour shows, there could be different interactional goals for the in-laws, depending on one’s type and history of relationships, that one can achieve by opting in and out of acting according to socio-cultural norms. Such examples suggest that evaluations of cultural/social norms are influenced by interactional goals “rather than being a matter of blindly following norms or the perceived intentions of speakers” (Kádár and Haugh 2013: 210).

On a different note, there were also a group of participants who did not necessarily evaluate the incident in (1) above as offensive, but presented a completely different interpretation.

The following excerpt illustrates the point:

(7) *man aslan dar shokam! chetor ye doxtar-e emruzi bâyard ehsâs-e sharmsâri bokone ke behesh kâdo nadâdand?! mage alan dahe panjâh-e? man ke zamân-e ezdevâjam tamâm-e in rasm va rosuomhây-e ghadimi ro rixtam dur. na xodam kardam na az unâ xâstam! unâ ham hich entenzâri nadâshtan.... shomâ ham say kon afkâret ro taghir bedi!*

[“I am literally in shock! How is it possible for a modern girl to feel humiliated for not receiving gifts?! Do you live in the 70s? When I was getting married, I got rid of all these old and archaic traditions. I did not do any of them and I didn’t ask for anything either! They did not have any expectations either... I think you should try to change your mindset!”]

Example (7) is another case in which variability in evaluations of impoliteness and rituals is evident. The speaker in this example is trying to disassociate herself from what she calls “old and archaic point of view”, probably to express a more modern identity (see Blitvich 2010; Blitvich et al. 2013 for a discussion on identity vis-à-vis (im)politeness). An identity

which allows her to advise the participant in (1) to try to put these traditions behind her and change her outlook on life. This example can be discussed in terms of what Garfinkel (1967) refers to as norms that are both standardized and standardizing in that, by practising or ignoring these norms, people can demonstrate that they are members of a particular group (see also Kádár and Haugh 2013), which in this case is the group of modern Iranian women who do not abide by what the narrator in (7) considers old and archaic traditions and beliefs. Similar to this example, but somewhat less condescending, there were many other comments in this forum in which the participants tried to valorise a more modern identity, either by criticizing such rituals and traditions, which ‘unfortunately’ or ‘sadly’ have caused or can cause a lot of anxiety and unnecessary conflicts between them and their spouses or by praising the ‘Western’ cultures. The following is an example:

(8) *man vâghean az in sonathâ xaste shodam. mano doost pesaram mixâym ezdevâj konim vali har do xânevâdehâmoon bâ in rasm rosum hây-e masxare divânamoon kardan. man ke hamash bâ xânevâdam da'vâ dâram, chon unâ sunatiyan va man nemixâm unjuri bâsham. hamash migan **zesht-e** in rasmhâ nabâshe. kâsh mishod mâ ham mesl-e xâreji-hâ bedoone in mahdodiyathâ zendegi konim va enghadr talâsh nakonim ke dar in **had-e hâl beham zan** beham ehterâm bezârim va mo'adab bâshim.*

[“I am so sick and tired of all these traditions and rituals. My boyfriend and I want to get married, but both of our families are driving us crazy with these stupid and old traditions. I am always fighting with my family, because they are too traditional and I am not. They keep saying it would **be rude** if we don’t follow the rituals. I really wish we could be like westerners and we would one day live without these boundaries and learn to live without being **sickly respectful and too/over polite**”.]

Example (8) points to one of the reasons why there are misunderstandings and variability in evaluations of impoliteness. The participant in (8) describes her family as a very traditional one that considers such traditions and rituals as highly important, as indicated by the metadiscourse marker ‘*zeshte*’ or would be rude. As the participant reveals, her family is putting her under so much pressure for not wanting to get married according to traditions which she describes as “stupid” and “old”. As it was mentioned before, there are a lot of reasons why people would intentionally opt out of performing a ritual or act according to what is considered as ‘polite’ in the society. In fact, recognising the struggle and anxiety that comes with behaving according to some of these rituals could be enough reason for some not to want to practice them anymore. The participant in this example also refers to the metadiscourse marker “sickly respectful” or “over-polite” practice of these cultural conceptualisations, which is in line with examples of over-politeness that Locher and Watts (2008) view as marked and negatively evaluated. Furthermore, there was a significant number of comments that showed the participants’ urge and willingness to change their belief system and to adopt a more modern lifestyle that does not uncritically follow older traditions and rituals. The following example illustrates the point:

(9) *mâ tasmim gereftim be sabk-e xodemoon berim jelo. yek ruz dotâi bâham raftim yek halghey-e xeili sâde xaridim. na arusi gereftim na jahâz. xodemoon dotâi zendegimoon ro joor kardim. albate xânevâdehâmoon ham komak kardan vali mâ vâse dele xodemoon va eshghemoon zendegei sâxtim. midonam ke xeili az javoonhâ in âzâdi ro nadâran vali mâ tasmim gereftim ke in rasmhâ ro eslâh konim... omidvâram shomâ ham betunin.*

[“We decided to have our own style. One day, my husband and I went and bought a pair of simple rings. We did not have a wedding and I did not buy any dowry. We did

everything on our own and prepared a simple home for the two of us. I should say our families did help and supported us, but we followed our own hearts and wishes and made a life out of love for us. I know that many young couples don't have the freedom to live like this, but we made a conscious decision to make a change to all these traditions... I really hope you guys can do that, too".]

Examples like (9) above refer to the changes that each society goes through and demonstrates that conceptualisations are dynamic in that they are constantly being negotiated and renegotiated across generations in a speech community (Sharifian 2011, 2017a, b). As a matter of fact, "an important aspect of our conceptual life is the human capacity to reconceptualise existing cultural conceptualisations" (Sharifian, 2017a: 9). In the example, the process of reconceptualisation is even discussed at the metadiscourse level by the participants themselves. As Sharifian (2017a: 10) notes, "reconceptualisation may take various forms, including the blending of elements of conceptual systems drawn from different speech communities and cultural traditions". In addition, evaluations of rituals and conceptualisations are inevitably influenced by increasing globalisation and mobility which allows people from all parts of the world to be in contact. Example (9) above is a case of reconceptualisation, which is the adaptation or amalgamation of a conceptualisation that may have its roots in other countries and cultures or sub-cultures.

5. Concluding remarks

This paper has argued that variability is an inevitable aspect of (im)politeness evaluations and is reflected in the reality of our lives and our day-to-day interactions. Although it is assumed that there is a consensus on how one should or should not behave in different situations, in reality, social and cultural norms and expectations are interpreted differently by different people. As Sharifian (2011, 2015, 2017a,b) argues, the distribution of cultural conceptualisations among speakers in a speech community is heterogeneous and variability

in these conceptualisations is an important feature of communication in most speech communities. This is, in fact, how cultural misunderstandings between people within one speech community can be accounted for.

Although studies on (im)politeness have identified a wide range of factors that influence speakers' perception of (im)polite language, including the social context, attitudes, emotions, intentions, power and considerations of face (see, for example, Bousfield 2008; Bousfield and Locher 2008; Culpeper 1996, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2012; Culpeper et al. 2003, 2010; Haugh 2008, 2009, 2010, 2013; Kienpointner 1997), there is still a large gap in the literature as to what can actually cause variability in people's evaluations of impoliteness. Identifying these grounds for an evaluation of (im)politeness is an important step, because they are overlooked as the "familiar scenes of everyday affairs" that are "taken for granted" (Garfinkel, 1967: 35). The present study was a small step in this direction, trying to shed light on some of the most significant social and cultural factors that cause variability in people's evaluations of what is impolite and why it is so.

This study has revealed how the 'heterogeneous distribution of cultural conceptualisations' accounts for instances in which differences in evaluations of (im)politeness in interactions can arise and how discrepant understandings of cultural rituals, for instance, can lead to different linguistic/behavioural expectations whose infringement or breach in turn can lead to perceived impoliteness and offence. The study also fills an important knowledge gap by investigating some of the underlying factors that influence interpretations and evaluations of norms and rituals that are rooted in certain Persian cultural conceptualisations. As the examples reveal, people's choice, intention, identity and their interactional goals are among factors that can greatly influence their interpretation of cultural conceptualisations and their evaluation of (im)politeness.

The findings in this study can potentially contribute to research on intercultural communication. As this study shows, people's intricately diverse understandings and evaluations of cultural conceptualisations can sometimes create misunderstanding in intracultural communication.

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