



Iranian Journal of Society, Culture & Language IJSCL

Journal homepage: www.ijscl.net

Gendered Communication in Iranian University Classrooms: The Relationship between Politeness and Silence in Persian Culture

Saeedeh Shafiee Nahrkhalaji^{1 a}, Mahboubeh Khorasani^{2 b}, Morteza Rashidi Ashjerdi^{3 b}

ARTICLE HISTORY:

Received January 2013
Received in revised form March 2013
Accepted March 2013
Available online March 2013

KEYWORDS:

Classroom interaction
Gendered communication
Silence
Power
Politeness

Abstract

This study examined naturally-occurring university classroom interactions at Iranian universities and provided an analysis of silence patterns as politeness strategies used by male and female students. Since empirical studies of silence in classroom settings are scarce, this paper aimed to explain such phenomena using participant interviews, classroom observation and detailed discourse analysis of classroom interaction. Silence patterns and their interpretations were scrutinized in these observations and were discussed in relation to specific conceptualization of politeness and devices employed to exercise it. The study found that females seem to be the most silent in the cross-sex classrooms, while the distribution of silence is more nearly equal in the same-sex classrooms. Based on the comments from follow-up interviews, reasons for intentional silence as a politeness strategy were categorized into four groups: silence as a face-saving strategy, silence as a 'don't do the FTA' strategy, silence as a power strategy, and silence as an off-record strategy.

© 2013 IJSCL. All rights reserved.

¹ PhD Candidate, Email: s_shafiee@phu.iaun.ac.ir (Corresponding Author)
Tel: +98-331-2291111 Ext. 2655

² Assistant Professor, Email: najafdan@gmail.com

³ Assistant Professor, Email: m_rashidi@phu.iaun.ac.ir

^a English Department, Najafabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

^b Department of Persian Language and Literature, Najafabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

1. Introduction

Silence as a means of communication has different functions and politeness as a sociolinguistic phenomenon is conditioned by the sociocultural norms of a particular society. Both of these constructs are affected by different variables including gender. The complexity of each one has held particular interest for many researchers (e.g., Ladegaard, 2008; Mills, 2003; Sifianou, 1997; Sung, 2012). However, silence has not been sufficiently explored in politeness research. Scollon (1985) in a study on silence and politeness between Anglo-Saxon Americans and Athabaskan Indians finds how gaps in sociocultural norms and values underlying talk and silence as politeness strategies can create negative stereotypes. In a more recent study, Nakane (2006) examined naturally-occurring university seminar interactions in Australia and the role of silence in politeness in intercultural communication. Still, the role gender can play in this relationship has been scarcely explored.

Politeness is contextually gendered in the Iranian society due to its unique social and cultural norms. In this community a range of linguistic behaviors has been developed. We may be able to define the norms operating within this group but there are also different 'takes' on those norms, and gender may play a significant role here in determining what each participant views as appropriate. Silence as a feature of politeness can be affected by the context of interaction and the gender of those who are interacting.

This paper does not focus on positions of power mapped out by one's role in an institution but on the interactional power that someone attains through verbal skills. The focus of this paper is on the role of silence in relation to politeness. In considering silence and politeness in the classroom setting, the issue of male-female relationship needs to be addressed. Silence in gendered communication

may be employed as a face-saving strategy, as a 'Don't do the FTA' strategy, as a power strategy or as an off-record strategy. Males may avoid talking to females to reflect their dominance or to free themselves from the imposition of being required to repeat or explain something for females, while females may avoid talking in order to save interlocutor's negative face, not to break social norms, to build up a good rapport with males or to save their own face.

2. Theoretical Framework

Most language and gender studies presuppose that there is a simple correlation between males and power and females and powerlessness. Therefore, it is essential to conduct studies which specify how to analyze structural inequalities and at the same time individual transgressions and contestations of those inequalities and see language as an arena whereby power may be appropriated, rather than societal roles mapped out for participants before an interaction takes place (Foucault, 1978).

We should not forget that the power-solidarity dynamics is a source of ambiguity; that is, a linguistic strategy employed to dominate a verbal interaction (an exercise of power) may actually be intended to establish rapport (an exercise of solidarity) and vice versa. Hence, the same linguistic strategy can be used to create either or both. The source of domination cannot be located in linguistic strategies such as interruption, silence, volubility and topic raising because the same linguistic strategies have different, even opposite, effects in different contexts. Thus, a strategy that seems to be intended to dominate in one context may be used to establish solidarity in another context (Tannen, 1989).

Persian speakers show their sensitivity to the social distance and relative status of addressees through the intricate system of their language. Regarding social context, utterances

cannot be neutral and linguistic choices imply these vertical relationships. One of the factors that determines the relative status of individuals in the Iranian society is gender. In this social structure there are asymmetries between men and women with respect to power, status, autonomy and role visibility. Iranian women should be more polite and use honorifics more than men to maintain their composure and dignity. They have been criticized more severely for any impolite behavior. Men have silenced women to dominate them. One can even note numerous proverbs that instruct women to be silent and leave things to men. Many proverbs also associate power, dignity and intelligence with males. For example: "The god of a woman is a man." or "Women's wisdom is incomplete." or "Woman's dreams go by contraries."

The changing situation regarding the status of Iranian women in recent decades, however, has made the relationship between gender and linguistic patterns representing (im)politeness in present-day Iran so complex. The social status of females has developed as a result of their academic education and important social responsibility; therefore, the language of females has got closer to the language used by males. Consequently, this complexity makes it difficult to identify the functions of politeness and the functions of impoliteness recognized by Culpeper (2012) as affective impoliteness which is an angry response to frustration and/or provocation; coercive impoliteness which means the use of rudeness to get power; and entertaining impoliteness, in which the participants who are entertained are aware of the impoliteness or the probable impoliteness effects on the target.

Eslami-Rasekh, Tavakoli and Abdolrezapour (2010) argue that the Iranian cultural system can be regarded as a hierarchical one in terms of politeness. In comparison, the American cultural system is based on a deference politeness system as the interlocutors see themselves at the same social level with no

interlocutor exerting power over the other. They found that Iranian subjects were more concerned with the interlocutors' power and when they had to encounter situations which involved power, they considered their interlocutors' power as one key factor which affected their certainty with respect to compliance or rejection. In another study, Parvaresh and Eslami-Rasekh (2009) found that in Persian culture the addressee's gender highly affects the use of politeness strategies. Their data revealed that solidarity is usually overridden by considerations of deference when and where the addressee is of the opposite sex and Iranian women employ conflictives, which have the most impolite intention, mostly when and where the addressee is of the same sex.

Ladegaard (2008), who focuses on the use of mitigated and unmitigated forms of language in Danish pre-school children's play in kindergartens and pre-school classes, argues that children do not display any gender differences in their use of politeness phenomena. His study found that assertive, unmitigated language was a predominant characteristic of the language of these 3–7 year olds, irrespective of their gender. Sung (2012) found a complex relationship between gender and (im)politeness at the level of discourse, examining an extended stretch of interaction involving two instances of potential impoliteness and arguing that gender plays a role in the attribution of (im)politeness by the participants. The participants made metalinguistic judgments in the boardroom interaction in which '(im)politeness' was explicitly invoked and talked about.

The findings of the Cross Cultural Linguistic Research indicate that the essence of politeness is invisible unless there are violations of perceived politeness norms. Politeness is not only a general way of behaving but also an assessment about an individual in a particular situation. Politeness can be a set of linguistic strategies used by individuals in particular

interactions as well as a judgment made about an individual's linguistic habits.

Silence alone is not a self-evident sign of powerlessness, nor volubility a self-evident sign of domination. According to Sattel (1983), men use silence to exercise power over women, while James and Drakich (1993) demonstrate that men talk more than women and thereby dominate interactions. Consequently, silence cannot always be taken to mean power or powerlessness, domination or subjugation. Cultural and subcultural differences can also play a role in this aspect.

As a significant feature of politeness, silence is used in social interactions to avoid imposition, confrontation or embarrassment (Jaworski, 1993, 1997). Brown and Levinson's model (1987) overlooks silence used as a politeness

strategy. However, they consider silence as a 'Don't do the FTA' (face threatening act) strategy, i.e. as an action to redress or mitigate damage to either participant's face.

Brown and Levinson's pragmatic analysis of politeness concentrates on the amount of verbal work performed by individual speakers to counteract the threats to the face of the hearer. They distinguished two types of politeness: negative politeness strategies which avoid offence by showing deference and formality and indicate that attention is being paid to the negative face wants of an interlocutor; and positive politeness strategies that avoid offence by highlighting friendliness and affiliation and indicate that attention is being paid to the positive face wants of an interlocutor (Figure 1).

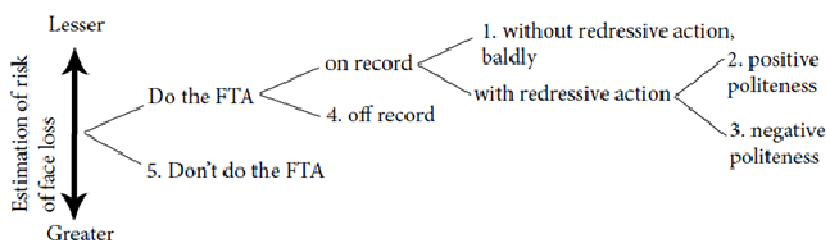


Figure 1
Strategies for Doing FTAs (from Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 96)

Positive and negative politeness strategies are connected to the meaning of solidarity and power; positive politeness is often tied to solidarity because of its focus on closeness, and negative politeness to power due to its focus on freedom, distance and independence. These connections are necessarily a conflation of distance with inequality and closeness with equality (KiesUng, 2003).

In comparison, Sifianou (1997) believes that most of the politeness strategies identified by Brown and Levinson can be illustrated in silence. For example, if silence is used to show deference or the desire to be left alone to pursue one's actions or interests unimpeded

(i.e., a distancing tactic) it works as a negative politeness strategy, while if it is used to highlight friendliness, i.e. as a sign of rapport and solidarity, it functions as a positive politeness strategy. Besides, when silence serves as the vague form of speech act, it can be used as an off-record strategy. Avoiding imposition, conflict, or to secure one's position, silence can be the most polite form; as the least polite form, it places high inferential demands on the addressee. In a more recent study, Ephratt (2008) discusses various functions of silence and introduces eloquent silence as an indirect speech act resembling a rhetorical form. He shortly

focuses on the relationship between polite requests and silence when he argues that minimal number of words can be used to facilitate a non-committal utterance but sound more impolite.

Zimmerman and West (1975) have little doubt that speech patterns and particular syntactic, semantic, phonological and intonational structures function to communicate the cultural and social meanings that cluster around sex roles. They also stress the role of language and its constituent structures in the organization of social interaction and consequently explore the characteristics of interaction between men and women from that perspective.

As the background to verbal communication, silence takes various forms and functions at many different levels of human interaction. Nakane (2005) argues that silence occurs due to interruption, unwillingness to interact (avoidance of communication), sense of dominance, panic, anxiety and embarrassment and switching pauses. In this study, the aspect of intentionality of silence in discussing the use of silence is employed. Kurzon (1997) identifies intentional silence as an intentionally-used strategy; there is no intention in using unintentional silence. Indeed, all silences observed in gendered communication are not strategic and intentional. Unintentional silence cannot be identified as a politeness strategy. Based on the cause of silence, this study aims to discern the intentionality of silence through follow-up interviews with the participants. Nevertheless, due to the ambiguous nature of silence, it is not an easy task. On the other hand, the assessment of silence by other interactant(s) is also important because unintentional silence may be interpreted as intentionally used, threatening face.

2. 1. Politeness in Persian Culture

Brown and Levinson (1987) identify two aspects for face in the context of politeness: positive and negative. A person's desire to be approved of by selected others is positive face, whereas negative face concerns the desire to act according to one's will and to be unimpeded by others. Many researchers (e.g., Hill, Sachiko, Shoko, Akiko & Tsunao, 1986; Ide, 1989; Matsumoto, 1988) have criticized Brown and Levinson's individualistic position in conceptualizing face. In Japanese and Chinese cultures, for example, politeness expressions have a basis in concepts of the family, the reference group, and the society, rather than the individual. According to Matsumoto's observations (1988) to a Japanese, his/her own territory is not of paramount concern, but the position in relation to the others in the group and his/her acceptance by those others matters. Furthermore, what is identified as negative face by Brown and Levinson may not in fact be associated with face metaphors in other cultures. Universality of the concept of 'face' in Brown and Levinson's model also provokes controversy. However, significant cross-cultural differences in the nature and the prevalence of the concept have been observed (e.g., Hill et al., 1986; Matsumoto, 1988).

Sharifian (2007) introduces *âberu* 'face' as the most dominant social schema in Persian cultural cognition. Accordingly, the whole word *âberu*, meaning 'water of face', refers to either the freshness and healthiness or the sweat on one's face. Hence, *âberu* is a metonym, which has subsequently been used as a metaphor associated with a complex schema. Sharifian considers the concept of 'face' as a metonym for one's general well-being, metaphorically associated with a schema that embodies the image of a person, a family, or a group, particularly as viewed by others in the society. Besides, 'face' as the sweat on one's face may be used as a metonym for cases where damage to one's honor and social image has made him/her upset to the point of sweating.

People try to be polite in Persian culture due to the cultural schema of *âberu* and take it as the fundamental reference point in every aspect of their life. The social identity of an Iranian person depends on *âberu* to a large degree. O'Shea (2000) introduces *âberu*, or honour, as a powerful social force. Indeed, *âberu* does not just concern one's behavior and personality, but involves one's family possessions, appearance, etc. Iranians preserve their *âberu* through their behavior, actions, and social skills. Impolite people are frequently called *bi âberu* (without *âberu*) 'faceless' or they show polite behavior because they want to *hefze âberu* (preserve *âberu*) 'save face'.

The following expressions from parents-children conversation, translated from Persian, represent how politeness and *âberu* are related:

Impolite boy! My âberu went with the wind because of your behavior. (I've lost face')

Be polite today and don't pour my âberu . (defame)

Impolite kid, my âberu went. (I've lost face)

To save face, be polite here!

A Persian cultural schema which is closely related to the schema of *âberu* is *târof* which can be defined as 'complement' or 'flattery'. It encourages Persian speakers to avoid imposition on other people and also to refrain from directness in making requests and asking for favors.

The social action of *târof* as a large part of polite behavior has two main functions in Iranian society. First, it is to acknowledge and negotiate social relationships, status, personal character, etc. Secondly, *târof* is a means for exercising a degree of "face work", or *âberu*, before a request is made. *Târof* constitutes a large part of polite behavior. O'Shea (2000, p. 122) believes that "Iranian society revolves around ta'arouf, a formalized politeness that

involves verbal and nonverbal forms and cues".

Iranians often categorize each other as polite or impolite in terms of how much *târof* they exercise. People who show higher degrees of *târof* in their behavior may be categorized as *târofee* and are considered as very polite people.

Persian studies in the area of Persian language and gender yield revealing insights; however, they do not represent actual language use and we encounter lack of empirical studies investigating male dominance on the basis of recorded data. Most of these studies have used data recorded from questionnaires, interviews and classroom interaction. Therefore, studies of gendered communication on the basis of recorded data are necessary in order to obtain a deeper understanding of gender and conversational dominance. In a study, for example, Shams (2009) examines the effect of sex and socioeconomic status of the speaker on type and frequency of politeness strategies and concludes that Persian speakers use more negative strategies but his study does not confirm any significant effect of the two variables of sex and socioeconomic status on the type of politeness strategy.

A great deal of parallels in the expression of politeness between the languages mentioned in Brown and Levinson's model and in Persian has been found; however, studies demonstrate systematic differences in the application and linguistic realization of politeness strategies across and within cultures.

After all, the study reported in this paper explores the role of silence in gendered communication in the Iranian university classroom settings. The questions addressed in this study are:

- 1) Are there any significant differences in terms of intentional and unintentional

silence between male and female students' behavior?

- 2) How do male students perceive female students' silence?
- 3) How do female students perceive male students' silence?
- 4) How are silences and talk negotiated with respect to politeness in male-female interaction?

3. Methodology

3. 1. Participants

The data was collected at two branches of Islamic Azad University in Isfahan, Iran.

Table 1
Participants in the Study

Classroom	Sex	No. of attending students	Major
1	M & F	6	Educational Sciences
2	F	5	Psychology
3	M	5	Governmental Management

3. 2. Procedure

Five observations were conducted on each seminar-style classroom and then the mean of silence (in seconds) for each student in that group was computed, displayed as percentage figures in Table 2. The ratio of silence is calculated as follows. All three classes lasted 90 minutes; however, professors' interaction time is excluded. The remained time is the true time of class which is divided by the number

of students to find how many minutes each student has to interact. This amount is subtracted from the true time of the class. The difference shows the duration of silence equally expected for each student. The minutes of silence of each student then is divided by the difference resulting in the silence ratio. In each class the mean of silence is calculated by adding the ratios divided by the number of the students.

Table 2
Silence Distribution in 3 Classrooms

Class 1			Class 2		Class 3	
Student ID	Sex	Silence %	Student ID (All Female)	Silence %	Student ID (All male)	Silence %
A	M	10.11	A	22.9	A	29.4
B	M	9.6	B	19.39	B	11.8
C	M	5.7	C	17.25	C	19.14
D	F	19.4	D	24.31	D	13.54
E	F	31.1	E	16.15	E	26.12
F	F	24				

Table 3 shows the silence pattern for the students in these classrooms. Evidentially, females in the cross-sex classroom exhibit the most silent moments, while for the same-sex classrooms, the distribution of silence is more nearly equal. It also indicates that silence distribution in the interaction in the same-sex

classrooms does not overlap. Comparing the standard deviation of Class 2 with Class 3, we can conclude that the variability from the mean of silence distribution in male-male interaction is more than that in female-female interaction.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics of Silence in 3 Classrooms

	No.	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation
Class1	6	5.70	31.10	16.56	9.82613
Class2	5	16.15	24.31	20	3.52446
Class3	5	11.80	29.40	20	7.67342

The interviews provide answers to important inquiries. First, what reasons male and female students have for their silence in this setting; comments such as ‘I prefer not to talk much in the class’, ‘I am afraid to talk’, ‘I am rather a good listener’ and so on characterize the self-perception of silence. Second, how each sex

interprets the other one’s silence. Comments from follow-up interviews have been classified and analyzed in the following section. Based on the data, reasons that subjects mentioned for the intentional silence as a politeness strategy were categorized in four groups (Table 4).

Table 4
Self-Perception of Intentional Silence by Female and Male Students

Intentional Silence		
Reason	Male (%)	Female (%)
Silence as a face-saving strategy	12	45
Silence as a ‘ don’t do the FTA’ strategy	22	28
Silence as a power strategy	54	10
Silence as an off-record strategy	12	17

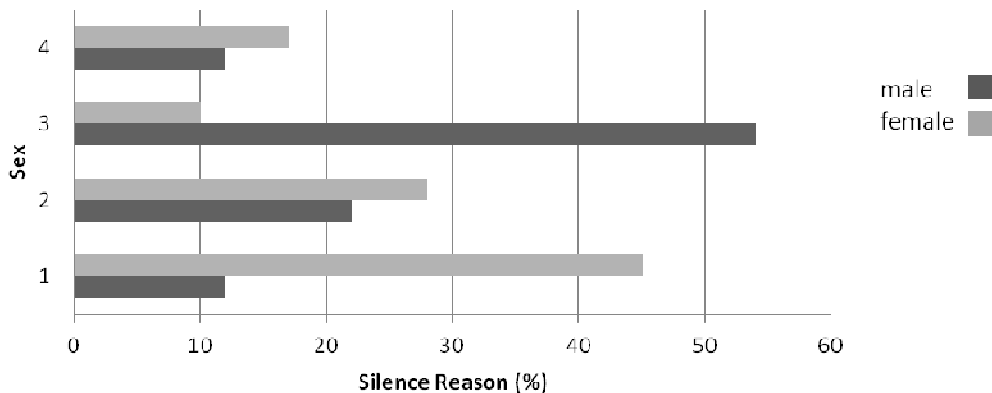


Figure 2
Reasons for Intentional Silence in Male and Female Students

Silence as a face-saving strategy (1), Silence as a ‘ don’t do the FTA’ strategy (2), Silence as a power strategy (3), Silence as an off-record strategy (4)

4. Results

4. 1. Silence as a Face- Saving Strategy

The female students' comments in the interviews suggest that silence is often used as a strategy to avoid loss of face. Comments also indicate that fear of loss is mainly due to lack of self-confidence and to adherence to adequate and satisfactory responses which are based on authentic materials. Female students frame classroom participation more as a risky task. They also find most of the participation of male students careless and irrelevant and incoherent. Females do not express their personal attitude so much. Males believe in learning through negotiation and know silence as unsuccessful education. There were comments by female students about male students speaking more casually without fear of losing face. (Excerpts are translated from Persian to English.)

Interview Excerpt 1: a female student

When I am not sure about something, or I don't have enough information, I prefer to keep silent and leave the floor to others. But male students... they don't think about what they say... they just put their thoughts into words.

Interview Excerpt 2: a female student

.... I don't want to feel embarrassed....

It seems that silence by female students acts as a face saver for the self. Their silence partly is to protect their positive face; they want to be ratified, understood, admired and liked (Brown and Levinson, 1987). As a matter of fact, they consider participation a great threat to their own positive face. Female students use silence more to preserve and save their own face not the interlocutor's.

4. 2. Silence as a 'Don't do the FTA' Strategy

Since acts such as criticism, disagreement or confrontation are highly face threatening for the addressee, some students, mostly females, remain silent to avoid 'dispreferred seconds' (Pomeranz, 1984; Sacks, 1987). A female student illustrates this type of silence as below:

Interview Excerpt 3: a female student

I kept silent because I found the situation challenging. I was not in agreement with the lecturer.

Interestingly, a male student has a different idea:

Interview Excerpt 4: a male student

When I am not in agreement with my classmates or lecturers, I don't hesitate about expressing it.... I say my critical attitude loudly....

On the other hand, male students consider covering up confrontation with silence silly. They think this silence leads to sociopragmatic failure because there is not a mutual understanding of intended illocutionary force and/or attitude between speaker and listener, i.e. the lecturers interpret silence as agreement and do not notice the hidden criticism. Nakane (2006) considers this as the silence of 'non-resistance' or 'non-negotiation' and as politeness strategy of 'Don't do the FTA'.

4. 3. Silence as a Power Strategy

Many interactional situations in classroom settings are heavily influenced by differences of position in hierarchy and status differences. One indicator of dominance in interactions and of powerful talk is silence. As the types of speech act and syntactic phrasing indicate different power strategies, silence is not neutral in some situations; it shows dominance of those who employ it. Not surprisingly, silence patterns also strongly reflect the

influence of status and hierarchy in Persian culture.

The problem of unequal distribution of power in mixed gender conversations, and especially the 'distortion' in communication when men and women enact a 'patterned' female or male speech style has been examined by many researchers (e.g. Yoshii, 1996). In the present study, it was found that males were highly uncooperative and egocentric while females were more cooperative and accommodating. Observing instances of silence, interruptions, and minimal responses, interruptions and silence were found more often in mixed-gender interactions. It can be argued that the subordinate situation of women is maintained in classroom conversations through the use of power devices such as silence.

It often happened that male students interrupted female students, precisely speaking, silenced them. However, male students mostly used silence to exercise power, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Interview Excerpt 5: a male student

I was not interested in her speech.... I thought it was not worth listening

Interview Excerpt 6: a male student

I kept silent to show her I knew more..... she did not have anything new to say.

Respect and power, on the one hand, and intimacy and solidarity, on the other, are indeed crucial components of interactional meaning. Another category which yielded highly significant differences between men and women was the use of minimal responses, i.e. items such as 'hmm', 'aha', 'khob'(well), and '?e' '(yeah) that are not intended to interrupt the current speaker. These minimal responses are rather like comments that serve to display continuing interest and co-participation in topic development and after their insertion the current speaker will

continue her turn. Fishman (1973) believes that these items function as indicators that the listener is carefully attending to the stream of talk. Female students use more minimal responses than male students to provide a positive reinforcement for continual talk while male students in this setting interpret them as signs of deference and powerlessness. They also use them in a negative way by delaying them or by altering their intonation, therefore, conveying disinterest and apathy, especially when talking to women.

4. 4. Silence as an Off-Record Strategy

Female students' interview comments suggest that they tend to remain silent unless nominated for a comment or a response by the lecturer or another classroom participant (75%). They do not like to volunteer to talk in the classroom when there is an open floor for everyone to participate. Male students (87.5 %) take self-selected turns, i.e. volunteered turns. Female students mention lack of self confidence as the main reason. Sometimes even when female students are nominated, they avoid responding.

The silence of female students when being asked for a comment or response can be identified as an 'off-record' politeness strategy. Many male students interpret this silence of female students as an indirect message that they do not know the answer and their silence entitles others to speak and violate the turn-taking rule. Many female students mentioned in the follow-up interview that they did not have confidence despite the fact that they had a lot to say about the topic and that they were not sure to talk, so in the end they did not say anything. In this context, lecturers try to restore the flow of information through providing clues. The next excerpt is a comment of a male student about the silence of a female classmate:

Interview Excerpt 7: a male student

I don't think they keep silent to save their own face...or to show deference... it is just because they don't know the answer ... that is all...but when I don't know the answer, I accept it and I try to get help ...

A female student gives such a comment about her male classmates:

Interview Excerpt 8: a female student

You rarely hear a man saying 'I don't know' ... or 'I have no idea'.... They can easily play with words...

Male students can handle situations in which they do not have the 'correct' answer to the question. Male students openly admit that they do not have a clue. Providing straightforward responses, they are not worried about loss of face. Lecturers interpret the behavior of male students in this context as an attempt to manage to cope with the pressure to present themselves as committed students by showing their engagement and requesting more clues to the answer. It seems that the silence of females in this situation shows that they do not communicate their engagement in the discussion.

5. Discussion

The present study revealed that silence is mostly used as a realization of face-saving strategies by female students in Iranian university seminars. The politeness behavior in the Persian data described in the current study has also been observed by other researchers in different cultures (Mills, 2003; Watts, 2003). Avoidance of voluntary participation can be a way of maintaining positive face of the self, while avoidance of criticism and disagreement can be a classic 'Don't do the FTA' strategy to save the hearer's face. Silence following a question or invitation for a comment directed at an individual can be an off-record strategy. Power relations in the gendered communication in Persian culture also play an important role in

determining silence patterns, interruption and politeness strategies.

The observed behaviors and results obtained from comments in follow-up interviews suggest that female and male students may choose different politeness strategies in coping with face threatening situations such as not knowing the answers when questioned. However, the silent response is not perceived as highly face threatening or impolite by the lecturers; such silent responses can be regarded as 'rude' or 'impolite' in other cultures. The meaning of silence may become a source of miscommunication if it is not interpreted as intended. On the other hand, as Culpeper (2011) argues, "the recontextualisation of impoliteness in socially opposite contexts creates socially opposite effects, namely, affectionate, intimate bonds amongst individuals and the identity of that group".

The study also found that silences as face-saving strategies are much more common among female students and silences as power strategies are much more common among male students. Thus, sociopragmatic failure may be caused by a lack of harmony between silence perceptions among participants. Female students' silence is negatively perceived by male students. The study examined silence and politeness not only from the users' perspectives but also from the receivers' point of view. While female students used silence as a face-saving strategy, it was perceived by male students as a sign of lack of knowledge. Politeness devices may vary in their frequency and significance in different situations of interaction. It was also found that female students in face-to-face interaction couple the minimal pairs with energetic nonverbal comments, such as nodding the head to show interest and encourage the speaker. It was concluded that females provided a kind of positive reinforcement for continued talk and were more active listeners.

Although this corpus of data is too small to allow the formation of any definite conclusions, it does raise questions which could be tested in further research. For example, participants can be selected from fields other than humanities. In a contrastive study, silence patterns and politeness strategies can be explored in EFL learners to explore if they display appropriate social behavior.

References

- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Culpeper, J. (2011). *Impoliteness: Using language to cause offence*. UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Culpeper, J. (2012). (Im)politeness: Three issues. *Journal of pragmatics*, 44(9), 1128-1133.
- Ephratt, M. (2008). The functions of silence. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 40, 1909-1938.
- Eslami-Rasekh, A., Tavakoli, M., & Abdolrezapour, P. (2010). Certainty and conventional indirectness in Persian and American request forms. *The Social Sciences*, 5(4), 332-339.
- Fishman, P. (1973). *Interaction: The work women do*. Unpublished MA thesis, University of California.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality*, Vol. 1: An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley. Harmondsworth, Penguin.
- Hill, B., Sachiko I., Shoko I., Akiko, K., & Tsunao, O. (1986). Universals of linguistic politeness: Quantitative evidence from Japanese and American English. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 10, 347-371.
- Idle, S. (1989). Formal forms and discernment: Two neglected aspects of universals of linguistic politeness. *Multilingua*, 8, 223-248.
- James, D., & Drakich, J. (1993). Understanding gender differences in amount of talk. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Gender and conversational interaction* (pp. 281-312). New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jaworski, A. (1993). *The power of silence: Social and pragmatic perspectives*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Jaworski, A. (Ed.) (1997). *Silence: Interdisciplinary perspectives*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- KiesUng, S. F. (2003). Prestige, cultural models, and other ways of talking about underlying norms and gender. In J. Holmes & M. Meyerhoff (Eds.), *The handbook of language and gender* (pp. 509-527). Blackwell publishing.
- Kurzton, D. (1997). *Discourse of silence*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Ladegaard, H. J. (2004). Politeness in young children's speech: Context, peer group influence and pragmatic competence. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 36, 2003-2022.
- Matsumoto, Y. (1988). Reexamination of the universality of face: Politeness phenomena in Japanese. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 11, 721-736.
- Mills, S. (2003). *Gender and politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nakane, I. (2005). Negotiating speech and silence in the classroom. *Multilingua*, 24, 75-100.
- Nakane, I. (2006). Silence and politeness in intercultural communication in university seminars. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 38, 1811-1835.
- O'Shea, M. (2000). *Cultural shock: Iran*. Portland, OR: Graphic Arts Publishing Company.
- Parvaresh, V., & Eslami Rasekh, A. (2009). Speech act disagreement among young women in Iran. *Comparative Literature and Culture*, 11(4), 2-8.
- Pomeranz, A. (1984). Agreeing and disagreeing with assessments: Some features of preferred/ dispreferred turn-shapes. In J. M. Atkinson & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis* (pp. 79-112). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sacks, H. (1987). On the preferences for agreement and contiguity in sequences in conversation. In G. Button & J. R. E. Lee

- (Eds.), *Talk and social organization* (pp. 54-69). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Sattel, J. W. (1983). Men, inexpressiveness, and power. In B. Thorne, C. Kramarae & N. Henley (Eds.), *Language, gender and society* (pp. 119-24). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Scollon, R. (1985). The machine stops. In: D. Tannen & M. Saville-Troike (Eds.), *Perspectives on Silence* (pp. 21-30). Ablex, Norwood, NJ.
- Shams, M. R. (2009). *Gender, socioeconomic status and politeness strategies*. Unpublished Master thesis, University of Isfahan.
- Sharifian, F. (2007). L1 cultural conceptualizations in L2 learning: The case of Persian-speaking learners of English. In F. Sharifian & G. B. Palmer (Eds.), *Applied Cultural Linguistics* (pp. 33-53). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Sifianou, M. (1997). Silence and politeness. In A. Jaworski (Ed.), *Silence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (pp. 63-84). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Sung, C. C. M., (2012). Exploring the interplay of gender, discourse, and (im)politeness. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 21(3), 285-300.
- Tannen, D. (1989). *Talking voices: Repetition, dialogue and imagery in conversational discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Watts, R. J. (2003). *Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zimmerman, D. H., & West, C. (1975). Sex roles, interruptions and silences in conversation. In B. Thorne & N. Henley (Eds.), *Language and sex: Difference and dominance* (pp. 105-129). Rowley, Mass: Newbury House.