

## A Sociopragmatic Analysis of the Speech Act of Criticism by Persian Native Speakers

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the speech act of criticism among Iranian native speakers of Persian. Making and taking criticism can be difficult since no one would like to be told that he or she is wrong. In fact, criticism is a very important speech act in people's daily life. More and more people view criticism as a panel from where they can improve their performance or how to do things better. It is commonly used by people in almost all cultures. However, this speech act is very situation-dependent in that speakers should know how to perform the speech act considering such aspects as the hearer, the relationship with the hearer, the topic, the purpose of the speech, and the appropriate linguistic forms for the speech act. Empirical studies on speech acts show that the same speech act is very likely to be realized quite differently across different cultures. Accordingly, the primary objectives of this study are to examine Iranians' perception and production of the speech act of criticism. Data are based on the distribution of a Discourse Evaluation Test (DET) and a structured interview. It consisted of four situations given to 100 Iranian native speakers of Persian at Payame Noor University, Iran. The corpus was then analyzed and categorized based on Nguyen's (2005) coding scheme, in which criticisms are coded according to their realization strategies and external modifiers. The overall findings showed that the use of direct strategies outnumbered that of indirect strategies and mitigating devices. However, one distinctive feature of the present data was that politeness is achieved through the use of mitigating devices.*

**Keywords:** Pragmalinguistics, sociopragmatics, speech act, criticisms, Persians.

## **1. Introduction**

The study of speech acts has been a central concern of pragmatics, especially in cross-cultural pragmatics (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989, p.2). The present study examines the meaning of utterances that carry the speech act of criticism in different situations. Pragmatics, thus, “is the study of acting by means of language, of doing things with words” (e.g., persuading, refusing, apologising) (Kasper, 1989, p.39). Through the pragmatics of language use, one could better understand how language is used and how it is interpreted in a given context. Accordingly, to be pragmatically competent, a speaker needs to have the ability to “understand and produce socio-pragmatic meanings with pragmalinguistic conventions” (Kasper & Röver, 2005, p.318). In other words, the speaker needs to have “the ability to act and interact by means of language” (Kasper & Röver, 2005, p.317).

The present study focuses on Iranians’ perception and production of speech act of criticism. The pragmalinguistic conventions of the speech act of criticism cover three important dimensions: choice of strategy and directness level, choice of internal modification through the addition of mitigating or aggravating modality markers, and choice of external modification by means of supportive moves, introductory or subsequent to the head act. At a sociopragmatic level, the way in which speakers choose to formulate a criticism and, more specifically, the amount and type of modification chosen, has been found to be affected by a number of social and situational/contextual variables. The most widely discussed and tested variables are social variables like the social distance, social power and imposition of the requested act, having been proposed by Brown and Levinson’s (1987, 1978) influential model of politeness. The present study focuses on the choice of strategy and directness level and the mitigating function of the dimensions of external modification. Accordingly, the study provides a valuable insight into the Iranian culture. It is believed that this culture has its own unique set of conventions, rules and patterns of communication when performing the speech act of criticism. These reflect the structure of the Iranian society as well as its values

### ***1.1. Literature review / Theoretical background***

#### ***1.1.1. The speech act of criticism***

The notion of speech acts originates from Austin's (1962) claim that an utterance encodes a specific "act" or function that the speaker wants to achieve by producing the utterance. Min (2008) indicated that based on Austin’s analysis of speech act, the performative verb “criticize” denotes the speech act of criticism. However, the utterances were later classified according to a particular categorization as developed by Searle (1979). According to the classification system brought forward by Searle, there are five types of general functions performed by speech acts: declarations, representatives, expressives, directives and commissives. As far as criticism is concerned, it contains the types of declarations, representatives and expressives, excluding directives and commissives”. The speech act research over the last two decades has encompassed an increasingly broad range of types of speech acts. From an initial focus on directives (e.g. Ervin-Tripp, 1976; Brown and Levinson, 1978; Bellinger and Gleason, 1982), researchers proceeded to examine positively affective speech acts, such as compliments and apologies (e.g. Olshtain and Cohen, 1983; Holmes,

1986; Herbert, 1989), as well as more negatively affective acts, such as disagreements (Blum-Kulka et. al, 1989; Georgakopolou, 2001; Scott, 2002).

For this study, the speech act of criticism is selected as a unit of analysis. Min (2008) indicated that criticism is an important and indispensable speech act in our daily communication, which is just as important as the compliment, apology, and request. The study is motivated by the fact that there is a need to explore more about the cultural values and norms in non-western cultures such as the Iranian one. The study contributes to the field of cross cultural pragmatics in that it discerns the importance of pragmatics in strategies of Iranians as they perceive and produce the speech act of criticism.

### *1.1.2. Defining a criticism*

Tracy, Van Dusen and Robinson (1987, p. 56) define criticism as the act of “finding fault” which involves giving “a negative evaluation of a person or an act for which he or she is deemed responsible”. Nguyen (2005) defined criticizing as “an illocutionary act whose illocutionary point is to give negative evaluation of the hearer’s (H) actions, choice, words, and products for which he or she may be held responsible” (p.7). This act is performed in the hope of influencing H’s future actions for H’s betterment as viewed by the speaker (S) or to communicate S’s dissatisfaction with or dislike regarding what H has done but without the implicature that what H has done brings undesirable consequences to S (Wierzbicka, 1987). Criticism is similarly defined as “an expression of dissatisfaction or negative comment” (Hyland, 2000, p. 44).

### *1.1.3. Direct/Indirect Criticisms*

As cited earlier, the choice of strategy and directness level is an important dimension of pragmalinguistic conventions of the speech act production. It should be noted that speakers can vary how direct their speech acts are and in so doing communicate less than the literal meaning of what they say and yet still perform the act. The speech act theory makes a distinction between direct and indirect speech acts. Searle (1975, 1979) states that any speech act can be performed indirectly. As Searle states (1975), “The simplest cases of meaning are those in which the speaker utters a sentence and means exactly and *literally* (my italics) what he says.” In these cases, there is a direct correlation between the utterance type and its function and giving a direct speech act. Therefore, the utterance ‘I criticize’ would be a direct speech act because the type and function are related. In that sense, a direct criticism is the direct expression of negative evaluation without reservation. It means that the interlocutor directly points out the hearer’s mistakes and demands correction directly instead of beating around the bush, including insulting, threatening, and so on.

In indirect speech acts, the form differs from the function. An indirect speech act, says Searle, is the one that is performed “by means of another” (1979, p.60). Usually, in these cases, the indirect speech act carries meaning in the utterance, but the intended force in the speech act has a secondary meaning as well. As Searle (1975) stated, when a speaker utters a sentence, he does not only mean what he says, but he also means something more. Indirect criticism, in other words, means that the illocutionary force of criticism is uttered by means of

the performance of other speech acts, so the interlocutor's real intention can be partially concealed. This is always thought of as an effective and acceptable means with positive results.

It should be noted that a number of studies discussed the notion of direct and indirect speech acts in relation to politeness and directness and analyzed why speakers choose direct versus indirect speech acts. For example, investigations on the directness in speech act realisations have been closely tied to politeness, and studies on politeness often delve into appropriateness of speech act forms (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). For example, Brown and Levinson (1987), as cited in Marti (2006), claimed that there is an intrinsic ranking of politeness strategies in terms of indirectness. Referring to Goffman's (1967) notion of face, as the public self-image, reputation, or self-esteem of a person, they argued that since it is in the mutual interest of interlocutors to save, maintain, or support each other's face, the so-called Face Threatening Acts are either avoided (if possible), or different strategies are employed to counteract or soften them. In the Iranian culture, face constitutes two main components, i.e. *šaxsiat* and *ehteram*. The first one deals with the character, honor, personality and self-respect. In this sense, "a person's *šaxsiat* is mainly dependent on the way s/he behaves and his/her educational background and is often perceived as related to the socialisation and upbringing she has received" (Koutlaki, 2002, p.1742). On the other hand,

"Ehteram (near equivalents 'honor', 'respect', 'esteem', 'dignity') establishes the positions and statuses of the interactants with respect to one another and is shown through the adherence to the established norms of behavior according to the addressee's position, age, status and interlocutors' relationship. Ehteram is shown among others through the use of appropriate address terms, conformity to the rules of ritual politeness (*ta'arof*) and other conventions" (Koutlaki, 2002, p.1742).

Accordingly, politeness strategies are based on the interpretation of *šaxsiat* and *ehteram* and they are employed according to the degree of face threat that a person might encounter or estimate for an act. The assessment of the amount of face threat, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), depends predominantly on the relative power of the speaker, the social distance between interlocutors, and rank (the degree of imposition). According to them, by adding these values, we could calculate the weight of a face threatening act. The assessment of these social and situational/contextual variables covers the social perceptions that underlie the use of a speech act, i.e. sociopragmatics. Min (2008, p.74) states that,

"Criticism is an intrinsically face-threatening act in Brown and Levinson's terms. It belongs to the group of speech acts that threatens the hearer's positive face. In order to make the criticism more acceptable to the hearer, the speaker tends to reduce the imposition of criticism, which means the increase of degree of politeness".

This is accomplished through the use of strategies or semantic formulas as well as mitigation devices. The choice of actual wordings as conventions of forms that they produced in realizing this speech act fall under the pragmalinguistic aspect. Likewise, decisions made about whether to modify criticisms and criticism responses are also related to sociopragmatics, as they more or less reflect the speaker's social perceptions of politeness. However, the choice of external and internal modifiers is more concerned with pragmalinguistics since it involves choosing linguistic structures and assigning politeness values to such structures.

#### **1.1.4. Criticism Mitigation**

Criticisms usually consist of semantic formulas varying in content, order and frequency, depending on the eliciting speech act and they are sensitive to social variables like gender and the social status of both the speaker and addressee. Therefore, criticisms can involve a great deal of mitigation, i.e. strategies employed in order to smooth interactional management by reducing risks for participants at various levels, e.g. conflict, face. In the literature on pragmatics, mitigation strategies can take the form of external or internal modification. External modification does not affect the utterance used for realizing a speech act (head act), but rather the context in which the act occurs. It is affected though supportive moves (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), i.e. various devices that may precede or follow the head act (e.g. reasons or justifications for the act), thus modifying indirectly its illocutionary force.

It should be noted that while the softening of negative effects and the smoothing of social interaction during the negotiation of a face threatening act is considered to be the primary function of mitigation (Fraser, 1990; Caffi, 1999), the precise nature and politeness functions of both external and internal modifiers are context-specific, i.e. these devices are not inherently polite, but they may derive their politeness value when employed in certain situations (Bella, 2011).

### **2. The Present Study**

The present study investigates two aspects of the speech act of criticism in Persian, i.e. pragmalinguistics, as the linguistic end of pragmatics, “the particular resources that a given language provides for conveying particular intentions” (Leech, 1983, p. 11), such as lexical devices and the syntactic structures, and sociopragmatics, as the sociological interface of pragmatics, which studies the ways in which pragmatic performance is subjected to specific social conditions, such as power, social status, etc. The main focus in this study is on Iranian native speakers of Persian’s performance of the speech act of criticism, i.e. how do they linguistically realize it in terms of strategies used and mitigation devices, and comprehend it.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Subjects**

The researchers used a random sampling method to select 100 respondents. The subjects were first given a background questionnaire. This instrument was addressed to all participants and the purpose was to record data about their personal information like gender, age, etc. The participants of this study were 100 females. The participants were residents of Esfahan, Iran with the age range of 18 to 45. They all speak Persian as their native mother tongue.

#### **3.2. Instruments**

Following previous researchers such as Hudson *et al.* (1995), Fouser’s (1997) and Safont Jorda (2003), a Discourse Evaluation Test (DET) was used as the main method of data collection for measuring the pragmatic awareness (see Table 2). Participates were asked to write situations where they received criticism. The questionnaire was developed based on the experiences by the researchers and then piloted to ensure the reliability of the instrument.

The prompts suggested equal or unequal power in the relationships of the speakers; situations involved the subject and a friend, the subject and a boss, the subject and a teacher, the subject and a classmate. In each situation, the subject is familiar with the interlocutor. Each prompt simulated a situation that occurred in different setting such as a workplace, a university or at home.

**Table 1:** Description of the four situations

Situations	Description
<i>Situation 1:</i> [-P, -D]	The subject - a boss, Criticism of job performance
<i>Situation 2:</i> [=P, =D]	The subject - a friend, Criticism of food
<i>Situation 3:</i> [-P, -D]	The subject - a professor, Criticism of homework
<i>Situation 4:</i> [=P, =D]	The subject - a classmate Criticism of a paper

Furthermore, to help the researchers achieve a better understanding of the subjects' performance in the present study and to provide a clear interpretation of the collected data, structured interviews were used as well.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

Following Nguyen's (2005) coding scheme of speech act of criticism, the responses coded according to their realization strategies and external modifiers (see Appendix A).

## 4. Results

The results are discussed in the four following sections: an analysis of strategies across the situations, an analysis of the strategies for each situation, an analysis of external modifiers and an analysis of the structured interview.

### 4.1. Criticisms across all Situations

The participants were asked to evaluate the appropriateness of the criticisms based on the Iranian culture. The appropriateness of language use can be recognized by acknowledging the social identity of the listener in terms of the relative social status and the degree of

acquaintance between participants. Also, the appropriateness can be given within specific situations and contents (Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei, 1998; Laver, 1981). Accordingly, scenarios were assessed according to their cultural appropriateness. The respondents were asked if they found the criticism appropriate, and if not, they write down what they would say if they were the boss.

In Situations#1, a boss expressed his criticism to his employee. The social relationship between the participants is that of high social status and low social distance. The respondents were asked to produce their own criticism in case they found the expressions of criticism inappropriate.

It should be noted that this situation involves an unequal relationship in terms of status. This means that a direct criticism is permitted and even supported by the entitlement and expectations given to the speaker, i.e. a professor and boss. However, it was evaluated as inappropriate by Iranians because they believed that there is still a need to soften the words used when pointing out a negative act related to the hearer. 56% of the respondents reported the criticism expression in appropriate. The strategy type used in the scenario was that of a “negative evaluation”. Respondents reported that this strategy was inappropriate since it threatened the interlocutor’s face and the boss should have started with some introduction to the interlocutors’ failure at work before expressing his negative evaluation. The other 44% who reported this was a boss’s right to express his opinion about his staff productivity at work. In terms of the boss’s right to make criticism in this situation, 46% of the respondents reported that the boss had a right to do so.

In Situation #2, the respondents receive a criticism about food by a friend. The social relationship between the participants was that of equal power and low social distance. It has been indicated that “when the speech act involves a low-degree of imposition and is produced for a person in equal relationship, the degree of required indirectness is smaller” (Taguchi, 2006, p.515). In response to the question of appropriateness of the types of criticism expressions used in the situations, 52% of the respondents reported the use of negative evaluation strategy was quite appropriate in such situations. They explained that a friend had a good intention to improve his or her friends’ action and thus his criticism was tolerated. 48% of the respondents thought reported this criticism as inappropriate. They reported that they usually opted out criticizing their friends in such situations since by doing so they might damage all favors the hosts had undertaken to receive their guests. They suggested a more indirect criticism in similar situations. 41% of the respondents also believed that the friend had the right to make criticism.

In Situation #3, the respondents received a criticism about homework essay by a professor. The social relationship between the participants was that of high social status and low social distance. The findings showed that 66% of the respondents reported the use of negative evaluation inappropriate in this situation. 37%, however, agreed that the professor had a right to make criticism about the student. The respondents believed that in such situations, encouragements or at least less direct criticism from the professor were more appreciated by the students.

In Situation #4, the respondents received a criticism about their paper by a classmate. The social relationship between the participants was that of equal power and low social distance. The respondents found the criticism 78% appropriate and reported their friend had 43% the right to express their criticism in that situation. The justification of negative

evaluation in this situation was that the friend had the intention to improve and help his or her friend's assignment, and they themselves asked him to provide comments on their paper.

#### 4.2. Direct/Indirect Strategies

In terms of strategies and the directness level, the findings showed that the respondents used a variety of direct and indirect strategies when expressing criticism. The respondents used direct strategies in the form of *negative evaluation* (32.60%), *identification of problem* (12.10%), *consequence*(9.90%) and *disapproval* (5.95%).The overall indirect strategies used by the respondents ranged from the most to the least frequent strategies including *request for change*(11.20%), *suggestion for change*(14.10%),*demand for change* (3.30%), *asking/presupposing* (2.40%),*other hints* (6. 15%), *indicating standard, preaching, advice for change, and expressing uncertainty*(0.25%).What follows is an analysis of the data for each individual situation:

##### 4.2.1. Situation #1

As presented in Table 2, *consequence* (35.15%) was the most frequently used strategy among direct criticism strategies. Other direct criticism strategies from the highest to the lowest strategies include *disapproval* (12.5%), *identification of the problem* (7.80%), and *negative evaluation* (3.15%). Results showed that request for change (16.40%) has been the most frequently used strategies among indirect criticism strategies. Other strategies from the highest to the lowest were suggestion for change (13.30%), demand for change (4.70%), asking/presupposing (3.90%) and other hints (3.10%). Overall, consequences were the most frequently used strategies in situation #1.

**Table 2:** A summary of the strategies used in situation #1

Type	Frequency	Percentage
1. Direct criticism		
a. Negative evaluation	4	3.15%
b. Disapproval	16	12.5%
c. Expression of disagreement	0	0%
d. Identification of problem	10	7.80%
e. Statement of difficulties	0	0%
f. Consequences	45	35.15%
2. Indirect criticisms		
a. Correction	0	0%
b. Indicating standard	0	0%
c. Preaching	0	0%
d. Demand for change	6	4.70%
e. Request for change	21	16.40%
f. Advice about change	0	0%
g. Suggestion for change	17	13.30%
h. Expression of uncertainty	0	0%
i. Asking/presupposing	5	3.90%



j. Other hints	4	3.10%
Total	128	100%

#### 4.2.2. Situation #2

The findings shows that negative evaluations were the most frequently used strategy in direct criticism strategies. Other strategies from the highest to the lowest were *identification of problem* (3.15%) and *disapproval* (1.10%). The findings showed that the use of *other hints* (26.30%) was the most frequent used indirect criticism strategies by the respondents. Other elicited indirect strategies were *suggestion for change* (8.45%), *request for change* (4.20%), *asking/presupposing* (3.10%) and *preaching* (1.10%). In general, *negative evaluation* has been the most frequent criticism strategy in Situation #2. See Table 3 below:

**Table 3:** Frequency of the strategies in situation 2

Type	Frequency	Percentage
1. Direct criticism		
a. Negative evaluation	50	52.60%
b. Disapproval	1	1.10%
c. Expression of disagreement	0	0%
d. Identification of problem	3	3.15%
e. Statement of difficulties	0	0%
f. Consequences	0	0%
2. Indirect criticisms:		
a. Correction	0	0%
b. Indicating standard	0	0%
c. Preaching	1	1.10%
d. Demand for change	0	0%
e. Request for change	4	4.20%
f. Advice about change	0	0%
g. Suggestion for change	8	8.45%
h. Expression of uncertainty	0	0%
i. Asking/presupposing	3	3.10%
j. Other hints	25	26.30%
Total	95	100%

#### 4.2.3. Situation # 3

The findings showed that identification of problem was the most frequently used direct strategy. Other elicited direct strategies from highest to lowest were negative evaluation (20.65%) and disapproval (7.45%). See Table 4 below:

**Table 4:** Frequency of the strategies in situation 3

Type	Frequency	Percentage
1. Direct criticism		
a. Negative evaluation	25	20.65%
b. Disapproval	9	7.45%
c. Expression of disagreement	0	0%
d. Identification of problem	28	23.20%
e. Statement of difficulties	0	0%
f. Consequences	0	0%
2. Indirect criticisms		
a. Correction	0	0%
b. Indicating standard	1	0.80%
c. Preaching	0	0%
d. Demand for change	6	4.95%
e. Request for change	18	14.90%
f. Advice about change	1	0.80%
g. Suggestion for change	30	24.80%
h. Expression of uncertainty	0	0%
i. Asking/presupposing	2	1.65%
j. Other hints	1	0.80%
Total	121	100%

Results also showed that suggestion for change was the most frequent indirect strategy in situation #3. Other elicited indirect strategies were request for change (14.90%), demand for change (4.95%), and advice about change (0.80%). Overall, *suggestion for change* was the most frequently used criticism strategy in situation # 3. In this situation, people's desire for others to evaluate them positively is evident in the use of the strategy. Since the speaker giving the criticism was acknowledging their negative abilities in writing a homework essay, the speaker did have the social rights and obligations to give a feedback to a student. The use of indirect strategies such as suggestion for change supported the hearer by giving him face and be acknowledged (implicitly) for his positive qualities..

#### 4.2.4. Situation #4

Results showed that *negative evaluation* was the most frequent direct strategy in this situation. Other direct strategies from the highest to the lowest were *identification of problem* (13.45%), and *disapproval* (0.95%). The findings showed that suggestion for change was the most frequently used indirect criticism strategy. Negative evaluation and identification of problem were the most frequently used direct strategies in this situation. The justification for the use of such an explicit format of criticism is due to the influence of high familiarity between the interlocutors. However, subjects also preferred to maintain the face through the use of other

semantic components that mitigated the force of this direct criticism. For example, subjects tried to compensate for their criticism by reaffirming the good points of their friend's essay. Other indirect strategies were other hints (3.85%), demand for change (2.90%), expressions of uncertainty and asking/presupposing (0.95%). See Table 5 below:

**Table 5:** Frequency strategies in situation 4

Type	Frequency	Percentage
1. Direct criticism		
a. Negative evaluation	69	66.35%
b. Disapproval	1	0.95%
c. Expression of disagreement	0	0%
d. Identification of problem	14	13.45%
e. Statement of difficulties	0	0%
f. Consequences	0	0%
2. Indirect criticisms:		
a. Correction	0	0%
b. Indicating standard	0	0%
c. Preaching	0	0%
d. Demand for change	3	2.90%
e. Request for change	2	1.95%
f. Advice about change	0	0%
g. Suggestion for change	9	8.65%
h. Expression of uncertainty	1	.95%
i. Asking/presupposing	1	.95%
j. Other hints	4	3.85%
Total	104	100%

### 4.3. Criticism Mitigation

The responses were also analyzed based on the use of mitigating devices across the situations. The findings showed that the most frequently used mitigating devices from the highest to lowest across the situations are sweeteners (53.35%), thanking (15%), grounders (10.40%), alerters (9.15%), opt-out (7.10%), steers (2.10%), apology (2.10%) and disarmers (0.80%). It should be noted that one of the most obvious features of the data of this study was the use of *compliment, thanking, grounders* and *alarters* when mitigating a criticism comment. Subjects tended to mitigate their criticisms externally using 'sweeteners'. Bella (2011, p. 1734) stated that, "A speaker in such a condition seems to invest in pragmatic routines whose formulaic nature can guarantee a politeness effect." The subjects' choice of how to modify their criticisms appeared to be influenced by the sociopragmatic judgments of the situational factors. What follows is an analysis of the data for each individual situation.

### 4.3.1. Situation #1

The findings showed that *sweeteners* (34.90%) were the most frequently used strategy in situation #1. Sweeteners used to express positive remarks toward the interlocutor either before or after expressing criticism. The purpose was to alleviate the offensive act (Nguyen, 2005). Table 6 shows that grounders are most frequent mitigators used by the respondents. In a grounder, the speaker gives reasons, explanations, or justifications for his or her criticism, either before or after the main criticism. The reason for using a grounder might probably be viewed in a way that the speaker has been trying his best to achieve a smooth interaction with an expectation that this reason would have an impact on the address to be more co-operative and understanding to his situation. This is in line with Faerch and Kasper (1989) who pointed out that grounders are effective mitigating strategies because they can open up "... an emphatic attitude on the part of the interlocutor in giving his or her insight into the actor's underlying motive(s)". A summary of the mitigating devices used in situation 1 is reported in Table 6.

**Table 6:** Frequency of mitigating devices for situation 1

External modifiers	Frequency	Percentage
a. Steers	1	2.30%
b. Sweeteners	15	34.90%
c. Disarmers	1	2.30%
d. Grounders	13	30.25%
e. Alerter	8	18.60%
f. Thanking	3	7 %
g. Apology	2	4.65%
Total	43	100%

The respondents used sweeteners and grounders as to compensate the offensive act of criticism. Other strategies from the highest to the lowest frequency are alerters (18.60%), thanking (7%), apology (4.65%), steers (2.30%) and disarmers (2.30%). Some elicitations of the responses in Situation 1 are as follows:

- Please pay more attention to tasks assigned to you, because you may lose your position and make mine risky (consequence).  
لطفا بیشتر در مورد کارهایی که به شما محول شده دقت فرمایید، چون هم ممکن است موقعیت خود را از دست بدهید و هم موقعیت مرا به خطر بیندازید.
- I'm happy with you. Just fix these problems and take a bit of creativity and innovation (request for change)  
ما از شما راضی هستیم. فقط این اشکالات را رفع کن و کنی خلاقیت و نوآوری داشته باش.

The example above displays the realization of the direct criticism in the form of a request asking the respondent to pay more attention to his or her duties followed by the consequences that he may face in case he does not. By doing so, the speaker states clearly the reason. The use of direct criticism is justifiable by the impact of the social power. There is no doubt that the boss's obligations and rights of his or her job and gives him more space to

initiate a direct realization. However, the direct criticism is mitigated by the use of a request “Please pay more attention to the responsibilities assigned to you” as recorded in the data. Or the criticism is accompanied with an explanation that helps soften the situation and the negative impact of the criticism. This helps the boss to save the face of his employee and gain a successful interaction. The use of mitigates thus is appreciated.

#### 4.3.2. Situation #2

The findings showed that *sweeteners* (44.25%) were the most frequently used mitigating devices in this situation. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), compliments are inherently face threatening acts; however, they can also be regarded as face-enhancing speech acts, in that they are usually intended to have a positive effect on interpersonal relations. Personal compliments typically enhance people's face by conveying support for, or approval of, some of their positive attributes. Thus the use of such act helps in managing the face threat as it serves to create a more balanced comment and slightly softening the negativity of the overall criticism.

The respondents attempted to compensate for the act of criticism by appreciating the food (27.45%). Other mitigating devices from the highest to lowest were *grounders* (5.30%), *apology* (1.75%) and *disarmers* (0.90%). A summary of mitigating devices used in this situation are tabulated below (see Table 7).

**Table 7:** Frequency of mitigating devices in situation 2

Modifiers	Frequency	Percentage
a. Steers	0	0%
b. Sweeteners	50	44.25%
c. Disarmers	1	0.90%
d. Grounders	6	5.30%
e. Alerter	7	6.20%
f. Thanking	31	27.45%
g. Apology	2	1.75%
h. opt out	16	14.15%
Total	113	100%

Some samples elicitations in situation 2 are as follows:

- Your food has always tasted great (*sweeteners*). Thank you (*thanking*). But I guess you've a bit tired (*grounder*) because your food has been a bit salty (*negative evaluation*). Did you realize it [that it was salty] (*asking/presupposing*)?

همیشه غذات خوشمزه می شده. دستت درد نکنه. ولی فکرکنم امروز خیلی خسته شدی چون کمی غذات شور شده بود. خودت متوجه شدی؟

- I don't use that much salt in my food. That's why I notice your food is salty (*identification of problem*).

من عادت به استفاده زیاد نمک در غذام ندارم، به همین دلیل غذای شما به نظرم شور رسید

- Thank you (*thanking*). You did a great job (*sweetener*). But I make my food with little salt (*other hints*). I guess our taste is different.

ممنون. خیلی زحمت کشیده بودی. اما من غذا را کم نمک تر می خورم. ذائقه هامون با هم متفاوت.

### 4.3.3. Situation #3

The findings, in Table 8, show that sweeteners were the most frequently used strategy in Situation 3. Other mitigating devices from the highest to lowest were *grounders* (9.10%), *alterers* (5.45%), *steers* (3.65%), *thanking* (1.90%) and *apology* (1.80%). The use of sweeteners supports the speaker by acknowledging the positive abilities of the student effort in writing.

**Table 8:** Frequency of mitigating devices in situation 3

Modifiers	Frequency	Percentage
a. Steers	2	3.65%
b. Sweeteners	43	78.20%
c. Disarmers	0	0%
d. Grounders	5	9.10%
e. Alerter	3	5.45%
f. Thanking	1	1.80%
g. Apology	1	1.80%
Total	55	100%

Some elicitations are as follows:

- You'd better try to do something with few problems (suggestion for change)

بهتر است سعی کنی کاری انجام دهی که کمتر اشکال داشته باشد

- It's obvious you spent lots of time on this paper, but your article does not have reached the goal I had in my mind (disapproval)

از مقاله شما مشخص است که خیلی وقت گذاشتید، اما هدفی که من برای این مقاله داشتم در مقاله شما محقق نشده است.

- Thanks for spending time on the article (thanking). There are some trivial problems in it (identification of problem). You must correct them and return it to me (demand for change).

از اینکه روی مقاله وقت گذاشتی ممنون. ولی چند جای اون اشکالاتی پیش پا افتاده بود. باید درسشون کنی و به من تحویل بدی.

### 4.3.4. Situation #4

The findings showed that *sweeteners* (68.95%) were the most frequently used mitigating devices in this situation (see Table 9).

**Table 9:** Frequency of mitigating devices in situation 4

Modifiers	Frequency	Percentage
a. Steers	2	6.90%
b. Sweeteners	20	68.95%

c. Disarmers	0	0%
d. Grounders	1	3.45%
e. Alerter	4	13.80%
f. Thanking	1	3.45%
g. Apology	0	0%
h. opt out	1	3.45%
Total	29	100%

Other mitigating devices from the highest to lowest frequency were alerters (13.80%), steers (6.90%), grounders (3.45%), and thanking (3.45%). A respondent reported that she would refuse to express criticism in such situations. Some elicited samples are as follows:

- I think it's not bad but you need to you'd better try more (suggestion for change).

به نظر بد نیست. ولی بهتر است بیشتر تلاش کنی

- That's very good. It is obvious you spent lots of time (sweetener). But I think that will improve your work if you write this part that way (suggestion for change)

خیلی خوبه، معلومه خیلی زحمت کشیدی اما به نظر من اگر اینجا را اینطوری می نوشتی بهتر بود.

## 5. Structured Interview

An analysis of the structured interview showed that all respondents believed criticism is necessary and could lead into future success and progress. In response to the question if they favored criticism, the respondents welcomed any criticism which is "constructive" and which expressed with appropriate discourse.

To the majority of respondents, criticizing people requires some conditions such as whether the hearer could take a criticism, and if s/he appreciated being criticized at all. Criticism should be expressed at the right time, to the right person, in the right context. The person who criticizes should be fair and should avoid being extremist or biased against something. Criticizing a friend should be acted elegantly in order not to offend or threaten their face. Receiving criticism from the speakers who got a social role or are in higher status is more justified. However, the way the criticism is expressed, especially the speakers' intonation, intention, manner of saying and politeness are very important.

The respondents also reported that though criticism is very common in Iranian culture, it is not that much appreciated. The respondents suggested the use of mitigating devices such as grounders and compliments as acts to compensate for the possible act of offensiveness.

## 6. Discussion

As mentioned before, the choice of a strategy and the directness level are closely linked to the notion of politeness. For example, linguists such as Leech (1983) or Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) believed that, there is a strong relationship between politeness and indirectness. For example, Leech (1983) claimed that "the more indirect an illocution is, the more diminished and tentative its force tends to be" (Leech; 1983, p.108). In other words, the

illocution *I want you to answer the phone*, verbalized by a speaker is perceived to be less polite than *Would you mind answering the phone?* Because it is more direct. In that sense, a direct criticism with a negative evaluation would probably not be welcomed because it would be perceived as an impolite act for it threatens both *šaxsiat* and *ehteram* of Iranian Face. As Brown and Levinson (1987) pointed out, face needs to be continually attended to in the process of communication and face-threatening speech acts; therefore, it is needed to be softened so that politeness is achieved.

Results of this study indicated that the choice of a criticism strategy and the directness level are highly influenced by the relative power of the speaker, social distance between interlocutors, and rank (degree of imposition). The findings suggested that Persian respondents favored direct criticism strategies more than indirect criticism strategies in the situation of high social status and high social distance relative to the interlocutor. Accordingly, situations which involved interaction between friends with equal statuses, direct criticisms were accepted since friends can criticize friends easier when they are asked to do so. The findings of this study showed that direct criticism strategies were the most frequent ones in such situations. In other words, interlocutors felt more comfortable to express a direct negative evaluation to an interlocutor of equal status and low social distance. This is in line with Salmani Nodushan (2008) who found that Persian native speakers use more direct strategies when the social distance is low.

Moreover, results of the interview also supported this argument since the respondents believed that a friend has the right to criticize, but their criticism is more appreciated when they are asked to do so (situation #4) for which their criticism is considered what is referred to as “constructive” criticism. Despite the fact that the food situation involved an interaction between two friends some respondents yet reported that they would opt out providing any negative comments on the food since they believed the friend took the burden of preparing food and that they had been guests and it was not worth threatening their face and damage the friend’s favor. Their friend might feel embarrassed so this might be the reason behind opting out.

The analysis demonstrated that there was a relatively low preference for indirect strategies, when criticism were directed towards juniors, instead there were many direct criticisms employed by the participants who hold higher power status than the addressees such as the boss and the professor situations. The respondents reported that a professor has the right to criticize the students because he has the status to do so. Thus, not only is the directness level supported by higher power, but it is also the social expectations or entitlements that a person in such a position effectively claims for himself in his interactions with others. In other words, people within the Iranian society regard themselves as having a range of rights and obligations in relation to other people and they typically base these on different factors such as agreements and requirement, roles and positions, behavioral conventions, style and protocols. The essence of rights (and obligations) is that people expect that others should do or not do certain things in certain contexts. The basis of these expectations could be semi-legal, associated with a particular role, or simply just a social convention that has developed on the basis of what normally happens (Spencer-Oatey 2008, p.15). However, a professor’s criticism should be in a way not to disregard students’ efforts in preparing materials. Similarly, they reported that a boss has the right to criticize an employee using direct criticism strategies since his or her intention is to improve the function of the company. This perception is in line with the findings of the production questionnaire where



the respondents used identifications of problem, disapproval and consequence are more frequent than other direct strategies.

The findings also showed that the respondents were bounded by their culture and tried to save the face of their interlocutors by using words that increase the degree of politeness through the use of mitigation. The overall findings showed that the use of direct strategies outnumbered that of indirect strategies and mitigating devices. However, the use of mitigating devices was more frequent than indirect strategies. This is in line with Farnia, Sohrabi, and Abdul Sattar's (2014) study of Persian native speakers of speech act of suggestion in which Persians used more directive strategies than conventionalized form and indirect strategies to offer suggestions. Moreover, in their study, the use of mitigating devices outnumbers that of direct and indirect strategies.

## **7. Conclusion**

The present paper was an examination of the speech act of criticism among Iranian native speakers of Persian. The speech act of criticism needs to be handled appropriately if harmonious relations are to be created and/or face to be maintained. There is no doubt that losing face is a painful experience and for this reason every participant in a Face Threatening Act (FTA) situation tries his/her best to maintain each other's face. Within the context of Iranian society, face is connected with people's sense of value, dignity and identity. This study showed that there are indeed different trends in choosing criticism strategies and the directness level in relation to social variables of power and distance. Alongside these variables, politeness strategies are affected by the fact that within Iranian society people regard themselves as having a range of rights and obligations in relation to other people; therefore, a criticism posed by a boss or a professor is part of the expectations and obligations of that role or position. This is also a part of the social norms in this society, i.e. "a standard of behavior shared by a social group, commonly understood by its members as authoritative or obligatory for them" (Anderson, 2000, p.17). The overall findings showed that the use of direct strategies outnumbered that of indirect strategies and mitigating devices. However, one distinctive feature of the present data was that politeness is achieved through the use of mitigating devices. In other words, the purpose of the use of mitigating devices is to maintain their face, i.e. *šaxsiat* and *ehteramin* social interactions when a criticism is made.

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## Appendix A: Coding Scheme

Nguyen's (2005) coding scheme of the speech act of criticism

Type	Characteristics	Example
<b>1. Direct criticism</b>	Explicitly pointing out the problem with H's choice/ actions/ work/ products, etc.	
<b>a. Negative evaluation</b>	Usually expressed via evaluative adjectives with negative meaning or evaluative adjective with positive meaning plus negation.	<i>"I think ah it's not a good way to support to one's idea (L), "Umm that's not really a good sentence" (NE).</i>
<b>b. Disapproval</b>	Describing S's attitude towards H's choice, etc.	<i>"I don't like the way you write that ah "I'm convinced about the idea" or "in my opinion"</i>
<b>c. Expression of disagreement</b>	Usually realized by means of negation word "No" or performatives "I don't agree" or "I disagree" (with or without modal) or via arguments against H.	<i>"I don't quite agree with you with some points (.) about the conclusion" (L), "I don't really agree with you &lt;as strongly as&gt; you put it here" (NE).</i>
<b>d. Identification of problem</b>	Stating errors or problems found with H's choice, etc.	<i>"And there are some incorrect words, for example "nowadays" (L), "You had a few spelling mistakes" (NE).</i>
<b>e. Statement of difficulties</b>	Usually expressed by means of such structures as "I find it difficult to understand...", "It's difficult to understand..."	<i>"I can't understand" (L), "I find it difficult to understand your idea" (L).</i>
<b>f. Consequences</b>	Warning about negative consequences or negative effects of H's choice, etc for H himself or herself or for the public.	<i>"Someone who don't – doesn't agree with you (.) would straight away read that and</i>

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<b>2. Indirect criticisms:</b>	Implying the problems with H's choice/ actions/ work/ products, etc.	<i>turn off."</i>
<b>a. Correction</b>	Including all utterances which have the purpose of fixing errors by asserting specific alternatives to H's choice, etc.	<i>"safer" not "safe", comparison" (L), "And you put "their" I think t-h-e-r-e" (NE).</i>
<b>b. Indicating standard</b>	Usually stated as a collective obligation rather than an obligation for H personally or as a rule which S thinks is commonly agreed upon and applied to all.	<i>"Theoretically, a conclusion needs to be some sort of a summary" (L).</i>
<b>c. Preaching</b>	Usually stated as guidelines to H, with an implicature that H is incapable of making correct choices otherwise.	<i>"The following statement is meant to help you. You see, anyone can have an opinion, but the issue is whether they can back it up". "You must pay attention to grammar", "You have to talk about your opinion in your summary". "I still want you to consider some points", "What I would have liked to have seen is like a definite theme from the start like you're just TA:LKING about it" "I mean conclusion should have some sort of improvement".</i>
<b>d. Demand for change</b>	Usually expressed via such structures as "you have to", "you must", "it is obligatory that" or "you are required" or "you need", "it is necessary".	
<b>e. Request for change</b>	Usually expressed via such structures as "will you ...?", "can you ...?", "would you ...?" or imperatives (with or without politeness markers), or want statement.	
<b>f. Advice about change</b>	Usually expressed via the performative "I advise you ...", or structures with "should" with or without modality	
<b>g. Suggestion for change</b>	Usually expressed via the performative "I suggest that ..." or such structures as "you can", "you could", "it would be better if" or "why don't you" etc.	<i>"I think if you make a full stop in here the ah (.) this sentence is clear is clear", "It could</i>

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<b>h. Expression of uncertainty</b>	Utterances expressing S's uncertainty to raise H's awareness of the inappropriateness of H's choice, etc.	<i>have been better to put a comma (.) so ah ((laugh))", "Are there several paragraphs ah not sure about the paragraphs".</i>
<b>i. Asking/ presupposing</b>	Rhetorical questions to raise H's awareness of the inappropriateness of H's choice, etc.	<i>"Did you read your writing again after you finish it?".</i>
<b>j. Other hints</b>	Including other kinds of hints that did not belong to (h) and (i). May include sarcasm.	<i>"I prefer a writing style which are not too personal".</i>
<b>3.External Modifiers</b>		
<b>1. Steer</b>	Utterances that S used to lead H onto the issue he or she was going to raise	<i>"I read your essay and here are some my own ideas of this", "Ah I have some comments about your writing" (</i>
<b>2. Sweeteners</b>	Compliments or positive remarks paid to H either before or after a criticism to compensate for the offensive act.	<i>"There are quite good relevant ideas that you presented (.) ah but ..".</i>
<b>3. Disarmers</b>	Utterances that S used to show his or her awareness of the potential offence that his or her speech might cause H.	<i>"You had a few spelling mistakes (.) but I think that's because you're writing too quickly, (.) nothing too major.".</i>
<b>4. Grounders</b>	The reasons given by S to justify his or her intent	<i>"I think "is" is better than "are" there because traffic (.2) ah single?" .</i>

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