Ritualized indirectness
Explaining the language practice *taarof* as a reflection of Persian speakers’ cultural values

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**Executive summary**

**PURPOSE**
A rich and elusive source of information about how people relate to each other in terms of their social distance (distant to intimate) and in terms of their relative power (equal or hierarchized) comprises a range of language practices we are here calling *ritualized indirectness*. For the purposes of this report, the term refers to the ritualized conversational exchanges, called *taarof* (also spelled *tarof*), used by speakers of Persian.

This phenomenon is chosen as a topic of interactional pragmatics characteristic of Persian speakers and as an exemplar of the kind of critical information that can be gleaned by second-language observers cognizant of the appropriate level of interpretation. As an expression of Persian politeness, *taarof* can give outsiders a window into the social organization of language users. However, attention to the literal meanings of the expressions alone can render no relevant information for the observer, or worse, can be misleading. The linguistic description given here is meant as an initial step to describe the potential contributions these practices make to an analyst’s understanding of the linguistic exchange as it reflects the interactants’ joint or conflicting plans for ongoing actions.

This phenomenon provides clues about the interactants’ social distance and power relations—properties that have to be assessed relative to the particular individuals in the exchange—as well as clues to their group affiliation. Thus the University of Maryland Center for Advanced Study of Language (CASL) has focused analyses on its use in a general population of language users, providing a certain baseline of “normal” usage in the context of day-to-day communicative exchange. Without this baseline understanding of normal usage in an unexceptional population of speakers, it is not possible to examine the usage of communities or individuals of interest to government language and intelligence analysts.

**FINDINGS**

**Obstacles to analysis: the gaps between the language properties and potential for deep understanding**

*taarof* exchanges bring distinctive linguistic properties that may lead to interpretive obstacles for the observer whose linguistic proficiency and whose sociocultural understanding fall short of that of the native speaker interactants. These include:

- Distinctive pronunciations, words, or constructions that the native speaker recognizes immediately as an instance of the phenomenon, but to the non-native speaker may...
seem simply obscure.
• A conventionalized figurative meaning that will be apparent to a native speaker but may be unknown to a non-native observer of the interaction.
• A heavy social requirement for the practice among some groups, and a presupposition of a substantial shared sociocultural background of the interactants.

The interpretation of ritualized, non-literal speech

Taken together, these distinctive properties imply two strategies for interpretation by the observers of their use. One is to get lost in the weeds of the distinctive linguistic features—to search for the obscure or specialized vocabulary to render a word-by-word literal meaning, struggle then to discern the intended meaning, which may involve conventionalized metaphors unfamiliar to that analyst, and end up with no usable contribution to the understanding of the exchange. A second approach is to recognize that the entire stretch of text consists of speech formulas and conclude that no useful information can be gleaned from it.

CASL’s research implies a conceptual alternative to both of these approaches. These linguistic analyses suggest that understanding the language practices relative to their sociocultural context, and with respect to their implications for the social identities of the interactants, can provide valuable information to language and intelligence analysts.

Figure 1 illustrates the challenge to the non-native observer to adopt, as much as possible, the perspective of the interactants that reflects
• their individual and joint goals in engaging in this linguistic behavior;
• the way that each contribution in an ongoing discourse contributes to the dynamic recontextualization of the exchange; and
• the way that this recontextualization may result in different actions outside of the conversational exchange—as, for instance, the effect that invoking one’s own authority on a topic may result in uptake of that individual’s recommendations in preference to that of another.

This is in contradistinction to a non-native’s perspective, from which the analyst is more likely to fixate on the apparent figurativeness, specialized register, and ritualized exchange. From this external perspective, these contributions to communication may seem both obscure and unoriginal. From the internal perspective of the participants, the exchanges shape the standing of the interactants, and this is the level of meaning that, if appropriately discerned, gives value to the analyst.

Understanding taarof exchanges

Even within the community of contemporary Persian speakers, the significance of taarof is subject to dispute. Roughly speaking, taarof is falling out of favor with younger or more “westernized” Persian speakers; it refers to a time when being literary was more highly valued than being honest, and a time when social hierarchy was inappropriately prominent in conversational exchanges. The perspective of CASL researchers is not to take a stance on whether the use of taarof reflects a non-Western or anti-democratic belief system on the part of its users. Rather, it is to understand that the literary, flowery, or insincere feel of the particular expressions used comes from the outsider’s perspective. Even Persian speakers who explicitly repudiate the use of taarof as reflecting values that they do not hold find it virtually impossible to completely eradicate taarof practices from their interpersonal exchanges. CASL researchers take it as a premise that the floweriness or apparent invocation of hierarchy is a historical, not a contemporary, property of this language. Its use by contemporary speakers of Persian needs to be understood in the more neutral sociopragmatic context of its conventional fulfillment of face requirements.

Adjacency pairs—the pairwise contributions that characterize the dynamic recontextualization of much of conversation—do not have the same character in Persian as in English. This is exemplified in such taarof pairs as offer-refusal, which contrasts with the offer-acceptance that is considered the default pairing for many American English exchanges (Figure 2). A perspective by which American speakers

Figure 1. Clark’s model (1996, p. 14) of the prototypical conversational setting, adapted and supplemented (Brugman, Jackson, & Doughty, 2012).
IMPLICATIONS

CASL’s research begins with determining how “ordinary” language users in ordinary communicative settings engage in taarof exchanges, as well as a substantial review and synthesis of the Persian linguistics literature’s modes of classifying and analyzing taarof exchanges. The result is a first order classification of taarof linguistic properties and the social context of their use. This information will enable language and intelligence analysts to more accurately understand both what the taarof is signaling in terms of the relationship of the interactants, and what is likely to ensue in terms of joint or individual action (i.e., making a request and having that request be honored or not).

PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR THE ANALYST: NEXT STEPS

Our aim here is not simply to demonstrate that “cultural knowledge” is critical for accurate intelligence work. Rather, this study brings some order to one kind of information that is often ignored by language analysts because the intelligence value is deemed not worth the effort. From the work reported on here, and the larger database of taarof exchanges that has been assembled in the course of the study, we propose to provide to analysts:

- A searchable database of expressions used in taarof, annotated to maximize analysts comprehension of their significance
- A workshop on our findings, giving a broad overview of the level of analysis we advocate in this report and a set of heuristics for analysts. The intent is to explain that taarof exchanges should not be dismissed as meaningless or as inherently deceptive, but rather understood to be useful in providing cues as to the distance and hierarchy relations between the interactants, as well as the social framing to aid in the understanding of what is being accomplished in the post-taarof parts of the conversation.
- A quick reference guide for participants in how to apply the lessons from the workshop.

REFERENCES


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