Re-Assessing Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Insistence as a Marker of Affiliation and Connectedness

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Abstract

This paper explores the practice of insisting among people in the Palestinian society with respect to invitations. Even though insistence is perceived as a Face Threatening Act (FTA) in some societies (Brown & Levinson, 1987), the study shows that insistence in Palestinian society is desirable and expected behavior which usually aims at highlighting in-group solidarity and revealing affiliation and hospitality. Building mainly on studies in socio-pragmatics and some ethnographic work in communication, this study examines instances of insistence by means of which caring and hospitality are conveyed as markers of affiliation that recreate an interpersonal ideology of connectedness.

Key words: Insistence, Speech act, Pragmatics, Imposition, Face-Threatening Act (FTA)

INTRODUCTION

Establishing and maintaining human relationships in interaction is one of the main functions of language. According to Eshreteh (2014, p.1), "in the interaction, the participants' assumptions and expectations about people, events, places, etc, play a significant role in the performance and interpretation of verbal exchanges".

Interlocutors' choice of linguistic expressions and strategies to convey certain communicative purposes "is governed by social conventions and the individual's assessment of situations" (Nureddeen, 2008, p.279).

This study holds the view that insistence upon extending an invitation is a social activity that has a particular significance in social life. It may happen daily in all communities, or all cultures. Therefore, it is clear that any research that aims at identifying cross-linguistic and cross-cultural influences on the use of various speech act realization strategies in Palestinian Arabic can be extensively beneficial to understand the culture of its speech community (cf. Eshreteh, 2014). Wierzbicka (1991 as cited in Eshreteh 2014, p.1) has pointed out that speech acts reflect fundamental cultural values that may be specific to a speech community. Cultures have been shown to vary drastically in their interactional styles, leading to different preferences for modes of speech act behaviors. As a result, lack of knowledge of speech act realization patterns and strategies across cultures can lead to breakdowns, sometimes misunderstandings, in intercultural and inter-ethnic communication. A similar view was adopted by Nelson et al (2002, p.53) as they stated that one of the reasons for studying communication in Arabic relates to "the misunderstanding of Arabs by many outside the Arab world".

In fact, there has been no single attempt to investigate the features of conventionalized speech acts performed in Palestinian Arabic, more specifically insistence upon extending invitations. Thus, understanding and familiarization with Palestinian culture and the way Palestinians invite are required to improve communication with speakers of Palestinian Arabic who have internalized the conventionalized speech acts conveying the meaning of invitation. There are even many differences between the Palestinian culture and the cultures of other Arab countries (cf. Eshreteh, 2014).

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Throughout my discussion of the notion of *insistence* in this paper, I explore Hofstede's (1980) dichotomy of cultures as either collectivistic or individualistic. In Palestine, the concept *collectivity* is considered as the core of the Palestinian culture, which means that people should always care about other in-group members, regard themselves as members of a collectivity and give priority to the collectivity over individuals. Cooperation and harmony are valued in interpersonal relationships (cf. Triandis, 1995, p.41).

Conversely, individualism is the core of Western culture. In Western society, individual development, benefits and achievements are encouraged and protected and people should satisfy their own needs first. Individualism promotes self-efficiency, individual responsibilities and personal autonomy. According to Hofstede (1980 as cited in Triandis, 1995, p.41), the United States and generally most Western societies are highly dominated by individualism

Nevertheless, collectivism and individualism coexist in all cultures, and it is the matter of predominance that determines which culture a country belongs to. In many researches, Western cultures are empirically proved to be more individualistic than Arab Cultures. Therefore, the concepts of Collectivism and Individualism are not absolutes: they are positions on a scale.

1.1 Definitions of Insistence

Different researchers have different conceptions concerning insistence. In fact, literature review shows that insisting is a widespread speech activity that has been explored from various different perspectives. According to Searle's (1979) classification of speech acts, the type of insisting considered in the present study would belong to the class of directives since it involves getting others to do something. Within this perspective, Vanderveken (1990, p.193) defines insisting as directing in a "persistent way", that is, through a "mode of achievement" that "increases the degree of strength" of the action in question (cf. Eshreteh, 2014).

Hundsnurscher (1981, p.349) describes insisting aptly as a *reactive* action by definition in that it "occurs after the initial action is rejected or not taken up verbally or nonverbally, and it is an indication that the producer of the initiative action is not going to abandon his goal". The initial action may consist in a range of activities with a directive component including suggestions, invitations and offers, as described in the present study. It can happen not only over a continuous stretch of talk, but also as an action taken up again over the course of a day or over a longer period.

A number of empirical sociopragmatic studies tackled insistence when dealing with (responses to) invitations, invitations to stay on at leave-taking, and other convivial directives (Placencia, 2008, p.89). Insistence phenomena as embedded in a sociocultural context also figure in ethnographic studies such as García's (1981) and Fitch's (1990/1991) with reference to leave-taking rituals among Mexican Americans and Colombians, respectively. In Fitch's work, insistence phenomena are examined and considered as an enactment of a particular ideology of interpersonal relations.

1.2 Appropriateness of Insisting

In different cultures, people might develop different degrees of acceptance, not extreme attitudes, towards the notion of *insistence*; they have different assessments and views concerning insistence depending on whether it is absent, mild, or strong. Generally speaking, insistence might be acceptable, or even desirable, in some collective cultures. However, strong insistence could be unacceptable in other individualistic cultures.

a) Some researchers regard insistence as a strengthened directive in some sociocultural contexts since it can be considered as an attempt to limit the freedom of action of one's interlocutor. In fact, in some societies, insistence may be regarded as face-threatening, so mitigating mechanisms such as indirectness or the use of hedges may need to be employed to make insistence more acceptable in such contexts. In fact, the association of directives with face-threat derives, as we know, from Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) politeness model; it is also implicit in Leech's (1983) and Searle's (1975) works on indirect speech acts where indirectness in the realization of directives is equated with politeness (cf. Eshreteh, 2014).

Félix-Brasdefer (2003) found that Americans felt uncomfortable about the strong insistence. He reports that "80 percent of the participants said that they felt uncomfortable, impatient, bad, forced, and even corralled by the insistence" (p.246). Therefore, in some cultures insistence while extending invitations is not desirable since it "implies intrusion on the hearer's territory and limits his freedom of action" (Brown and Levinson, 1978, p.70). What is preferable is that the inviter should try not to impose the invitee. Therefore, the inviter gives the invitee a chance to make decision of whether to come or not. In other words, insistence is an "intrinsically face-threatening" activity (Brown and Levinson, 1978, p.70) even though the act of insistence involves benefits to the hearer and costs the speaker in some ways. Insistence threatens the negative face of the addressee and therefore "comprise a category of inherently impolite acts in which negative politeness is essential" (Leech, 1983, p.106).

b) On the other hand, the above view was refuted by some other scholars doing research on politeness and the management of interpersonal relations in different languages and cultures (cf. Eshreteh, 2014; Wierzbicka, 1985; Blum-Kulka, 1987; Sifianou, 1992; Obeng, 1999, among others). Insistence is viewed as something

acceptable and desirable in some cultures. It is considered polite and represents a socio-cultural expectation; not insisting is viewed as rude or insincere.

Other studies by Fitch (1994, 1998) and Fitch and Sanders (1994), for example, show in their ethnographic study of directives in urban Colombia that insistence does not represent any imposition and it is not necessarily face-threatening, as one would predict from Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) model. Similarly, within sociopragmatics, García (1992, 1999, 2007) finds that strong insistence while extending invitations in Peru (1992), Venezuela (1999) and Argentina (2007) represents hospitality and connectedness. It is acceptable, expected and necessary rather than face-threatening.

2. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

In exploring the notion of *insistence* in Palestinian Arabic, I adopt the second view of insistence; that is, it is socially acceptable and even desirable. Palestinian society has a special pattern of inviting/offering. When two people meet each other or engage in an encounter, the one who invites should insist on inviting and the one who is being invited should bashfully reject the invitation- but in reality intends to accept it later. Put it differently, the invitee is expected to reject an invitation several times, before accepting it with a show of reluctance. Al-Khatib (2006, p.274 and 2001, p.190) has reported that

> "To invite without insistence means that the concerned person is not serious about the invitation, and offers it as a mere remark of courtesy; and to accept the offer without reluctance means that the recipient is gluttonous, and may be described as an ill-behaved person.

With respect to Palestinian Arabic, insistence in the context of invitations (including invitations to stay on at leave-taking) is described overall as socially appropriate and even expected behaviour in the sociocultural contexts examined; furthermore, it is associated with particular politeness orientations (e.g. a preference for involvement and solidarity) (cf. García, 2007; Félix-Brasdefer, 2003, 2006) as indicated in the example below which took place between a man and a young lady:

(a) A: *šu bitḥibbi tišrabi* ? **شو بتحبي تشربي؟**

[What would you like to drink?] → **Invitation**

B: *šukran ma bidi iši.* **شكرا ما بدي اشي. أنا مشغول.**

[Thanks. I don't want anything.] → **Refusal**

A: *šu răyek fi kăsit ŝăy* ? **شو رايك في كاسة شاي؟**

[How about a cup of tea?] →**Reinvitation**

B: *la šukran. bidĭš akalfak.* **لا شكرا. بديش أكلفك.**

[No. Thanks. I don't want to bother.] → **refusal.**

A: *basĭTa. xallĭna naxuð qahwah. Elqahwa jayida ilşubħ.*

بسيطة. خلينا ناخذ قهوة. القهوة جيدة الصبح.

[There is no bothering. Let's have coffee. Coffee is good at the morning.] → **Reinvitation**

B: *maši ilħal.* **ماشي الحال** [It's O.K.] → **Acceptance**

We notice that the speaker here did not even ask the girl whether or not she wanted to drink. It seems as if he was not even ready to let her refuse. The above Example 1 reveals that gender related matters play a very significant role in the Arabic culture(s) and they reflect into the conventionalized speech acts situated at the core of social interaction. However, insistence between opposite sex interlocutors might not be as strong as it could be between interlocutors of the same sex.

The above Example 1 also leads us to differentiate between two types of refusals that exist in some cultures, including Palestinian culture. Chen et al. (1995, p.152) states that refusals are either genuine or ritual.

According to Chen et al. (1995, p.152), ritual refusals are refusals in which the speaker merely pretends to refuse the invitation in question "in the interest of the norms of politeness". In reality, however, the speaker, in a ritual refusal, expects a second invitation, which s/he can then either accept or refuse, as s/he wishes. As a result, an inviter, in the Palestinian culture, largely expects the first refusal to be ritual, and so proceeds to reoffer. Therefore, invitations and offers have to be repeated and declined a number of times before they are accepted. Accepting from the first offer is regarded as bad form, so the speaker and the hearer go through this ritualized behavior where each one has a defined role.

In the Palestinian context, when one friend, for instance, invites another for a cup of tea in a coffee shop, the two friends should show a kind of competition regarding who is going to pay. Both of them should insist on paying. A situation like this does not commonly occur in America or the West.

Taking into account Leech's (2005, p.9) comments on invitations and politeness in Chinese, we can see that politeness makes Palestinians "behave in ways which our visitor from Mars would think irrational": e.g. a sequence of polite utterances such as the following may occur:

invitation →refusal →invitation →refusal →invitation→ accept

It is worth mentioning, as can be noticed in the above example 1, that a sequence of such utterances usually occurs in Palestinian Arabic as well, but not in American English. According to Leech (2005, p.10), such sequences represent "battles for politeness". These battles can be resolved by negotiating with the other person's a politeness agreement. Thus traditionally, after a third invitation, say, an invitee will 'reluctantly' accept the invitation. Or one person will 'reluctantly' agree to go first through the doorway before the other.

In this sense, it is obvious that insistence is an indication of affiliation and connectedness in Palestinian society. Therefore, both the behavior of immediately

accepting the invitation and that of not giving continuous invitations violate the Palestinian norm of interaction and disconfirm with Brown and Levinson's politeness framework which was built on Western criteria; therefore, inadvertences between it and politeness in Eastern collectivistic societies are to be expected. Moreover, one can notice that the inviter is considered "intrinsically polite" based on the concept of genuine desire for invitation, and the invitee's acceptance can be seen as a strong evidence of the inviter's sincerity (Gu, 1990, p.242). In invitations extended in the Palestinian society, damaging negative face turns out to be a ritualized way to show politeness, not necessarily threatening each other's face.

Still, to look more and more determined, some people resort to swearing and making certain religious allusions. In example (b) below, a man in his forties is addressing a co-worker who drove him back home at night.

(b) A: *Wallah ɣeir tišrab finǰǎn qahwa. ma bi-naxxrak.*

واالله غير تشرب فنجان قهوة. ما بنأخرك.

[I swear that you should drink a cup of coffee. I won't keep you long.]

B: *barak allah fīk. ilwaqit mit?xir. bidi arawwiħ.*

بارك الله فيك. الوقت متأخر. بدي أروح.

[God bless you. It's too late. I have to go.]

It should be mentioned here that using such theo-pragmatic expressions in the context of inviting may reflect the impact of Islamic culture on Palestinian people when they perform the act of inviting. Such religious expressions create an impression that the message flows from heart to heart.

The above examples show that insistence in Palestinian Arabic constitutes a face respecting act rather than a face threatening act. That is because the hearer commonly expresses appreciation for invitations no matter how personally they feel about the prospects of spending time with the speaker. Therefore, through insisting on addressing an invitation, the speaker shows respect to the hearer's positive face.

Situation (c) below gives more illustration of the value of insistence as practiced in the Palestinian society. In this situation, B1 and B2 are two men who came from Nablus, a city in the north of Palestine, to visit a friend, A, after his recovery from illness.

(c) A: *bidna niçmal ɣada baçdein ilšǎy wa ilqahweh*

بدنا نعمل غدا بعدين الشاي والقهوة.

[We'll prepare lunch first, and then we will drink tea and coffee.]

B1: *La la. .* لاال [No. No.]

B2: *la akīd. ma rǎħ niTawil.* لا, أكيد. ما راح نطول.

[No, for sure, we won't stay longer]

A: *ma rǎħ yaxuð ?k ar min sǎҫah.* ما راح ياخذ أكثر من ساعة.

[(Preparing the meal) won't take more than an hour.]

B1: *ma bidna nijarbak wala nizҫijak.* ما بدنا نجربك ولا نزعجك.

[Your generosity is well known. We don't want to bother you.]

A: *Um Ali bitjahiz fīh.* أم علي بتجهز فيه.

[Um Ali (i.e. the speakers' wife) is preparing it (the lunch).]

B2: *?iħna xaTaTna nirŭħ makan ǎxar.* احنا خططنا نروح مكان اخر.

[We had planned to visit another place.]

A: *nitɣada baçdein rŭħu wein ma bidkum.*

نتغدا بعدين روحوا وين ما بدكم.

[We'll have lunch together, and then you can go wherever you like.]

The conversation may continue for a few other turns, and the outcome could be that the host's generosity is 'forced' upon the visitors who end up staying for lunch.

As can be seen, at the beginning of this situation the host comes with the invitation for lunch which is forcefully rejected by one of the visitors and which leads to his own (counter-) invitation. The host insists and starts challenging all the arguments the visitors put forward. In other words, the reasons the visitors give for not staying on or accepting the lunch offer are dismissed one by one by the host; that is, all the "psychological" (i.e. we don't want to bother you) and "practical" (i.e. we had planned to go elsewhere) difficulties (Hundsnurscher, 1981, p.354) that stand in the way are dealt with. The visitors once more seem to have no choice but to stay since rejecting the lunch invitation at this stage would convey a negative message – that the hospitality being offered is not appreciated – and could put at risk the good relationship between the host and the guests.

This situation clearly illustrates how primacy can be given not to individuals' wishes but to the opportunity for sociability that has arisen, which is an opportunity to show how much the host cares for his visitors. On the other hand, there is as well the host's social face that is taken care of, an aspect that is characteristic of collectivistic societies. The host acts not only, or not necessarily, according to his own will, but he may be also conforming to established politeness rules and societal customs: in this specific situation, giving in return or in response to the kind gesture of his visitors.

While the visitors had not planned to stay and both felt a little frustrated as they had other plans, as well as rather embarrassed to end up 'imposing' themselves for lunch, they certainly did not feel offended by their host's insistence. However, while taking offense would be very improbable in such situations, a certain degree of frustration is not to be eliminated as possible emotional reaction experienced by the guests, although the respect of social etiquette makes them not manifest it or at least not express it verbally.

Invitations in America are realized through a process of negotiation in an attempt to avoid any threat to the face of both interlocutors as in the example (d) below:

(d) A: *It's really horrible that we never see each other.*

B: *I know. We have to try to arrange something.*

A: *How about dinner? Why don't we go out to dinner together?*

B: *That's a good idea.*

A: *What days are good for you and Joe?*

B: *Weekends are best.*

A: *Oh, weekends are bad for us. Don't you ever go out to dinner during the week?*

B: *Well, we do. But we usually don't make plans till the last minute. Joe gets home*

late a lot and I never know what his schedule is going to be.

A: *O.K. Well, look. Why don't you call me when you want to go out? Any week night is good.*

B: *O.K. I will.*

A: *Really. Don't forget.*

B: *O.K. I won't. I'll call you.* (Wolfson et al., 1983, p.123)

It is clear that both interactants in this situation tried to reach a commitment, but at the end nothing was accomplished except a promise to go out together when both of them find the time to do so. However, regardless of the fact that no insistence or commitment was arrived at through this negotiation, both interactants expressed a great desire to maintain intimacy.

The above discusssion is in conformity with Eshreteh (2014) and shows that Brown & Levinson's (1987) model of politeness is not appropriate or does not apply entirely in Palestinian society. In fact, the model was built on Western criteria and – more important – its authors set up principles, and observed their applicability to Western cultures (cf. Eshreteh, 2014). However, these principles are viable and certainly can be applied, with culturally motivated adjustments, to some other societies. The difference consists in the degree of insistence, in defining the limit that each culture draws between 'acceptable insistence' and 'offensive insistence'. According to Brown and Levinson, insistence would be perceived as an act which threatens a hearer's negative face for it puts some pressure on hearer to accept or reject. However, insistence in Palestinian society indicated sincerity and hospitality. A Palestinian speaker may insist on inviting the hearer twice or even three times in spite of the hearer's showing explicit unwillingness or reluctance to comply and by doing in this way the speaker shows the sincerity toward the hearer. Therefore, inviting and insisting in Palestinian Arabic, "under ordinary circumstances, will not be considered as threatening H's negative face" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.42). Thus, the behaviors which are polite in one culture may be perceived as impolite in another culture by different weight of social rules.

Since insisting is a way of showing affection to people one is close to, then it is unlikely to occur in the presence of strangers. Our observations also confirm that there is somehow a tendency to avoid or reduce strong insistence around food offers among young Palestinians (A point that needs more future research). Some young men confirm that at the present time there are fewer restrictions on personal freedom of action than some years ago. In fact, the study identifies some generational variation in the use of the practice of insistence. It is suggested that this could be interpreted as a possible shift in interpersonal ideology —from connectedness towards empowerment—gradually taking place in the Palestinian society.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion reveals the fact that no insistence or mild insistence only may be appropriate for some cultural groups that place a high value on autonomy (separatedness) or freedom of action, while strong insistence may be appreciated and even expected in other groups where a high value is placed on the strengthening of interpersonal bonds and creating affiliation (connectedness). Contrary to most Western societies where the display of non-imposition and concerns for distancing in speech acts are believed to help avoid face threatening acts and hence to be more polite, a number of cultures, as it is the case in Palestinian society, prefer a show of solidarity and sincerity by directly delivering them. In fact, insistence in Palestinian culture is related to rituals established in collectivistic societies where defending one's social face is vital to the individual for being accepted by the society, which means survival.

Insistence sequences in data from Palestinian Arabic constitute, on the surface, attempts to exert control over the hearer's actions and limit his/her freedom of action; however, they seem to be employed to display interest, sincerity and affection and hence, the assurance that the person really cares**,** thus recreating an ideology of connectedness. That is, this kind of display would constitute one of the ways through which Palestinians enact connectedness (cf. Eshreteh, 2014).

Traditionally, in Palestinian Arabic, invitation has to be repeated and declined a number of times before it is accepted as an indication of politeness. Accepting from the first offer is regarded as an impolite bad form. It has also been argued that Palestinian Arabic has a special patterning of inviting and insisting that can be understood and appreciated only by people sharing the same socio-cultural background.

To conclude, Palestinians do not usually accept invitations from the first offer. Therefore, an invitation as issued in Palestinian society might shock a subject, coming from a Western, individualistic culture, who would regard it as overfriendly and even impolite; perhaps they might consider the speaker as treading on their private territory because s/he (the speaker) is not keeping the social distance usual in Western societies. However,

imposition in Palestinian society seems to be an indication of sincerity and affiliation. In fact, the fundamental cultural difference lies in the fact that Palestinian people strictly stick to collectivism in their speech and acts, while people in the West are characterized by individualism.

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APPENDIX: TRANSLITERATION KEY

The following system of transliteration has been adopted in this study:

Table 1
Consonants

Phonetic symbol	Arabic sound
?	ء
b	ب
t	ت
Ɵ	ث
j	ج
ħ	ح
x	خ
d	د
ð	ذ
r	ر
z	ز
s	س
ŝ	ش
ş	ص
Ď	ض
T	ط
ž	ظ
ς	ع
γ	غ
f	ف
Q	ق
K	ك
L	ل
m	م
n	ن
h	ﻫ
w	و (Semi Vowel)
y	ي (Semi Vowel)

Table 2
Vowels

a	´ (Short Vowel)
ă	ا (Long Vowel)
u	ُ (Short Vowel)
ū	و (Long Vowel)
i	ِ (Short Vowel)
ū	ي (Long Vowel)