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Discourse Structures of Condolence Speech Act

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Abstract

Condolence is part of Austin's expressive speech act and is related to Searle's behabitives illocutionary act. Although a theoretically sound issue in pragmatics, condolence speech act has not been investigated as much as other speech acts in discourse-related studies. This paper aims at investigating interjections and intensifiers while performing condolence speech act among Persian and English speakers. Movie analysis was utilized to gather information about how native speakers used interjections and intensifiers while performing condolence speech act. Of particular interest was the use of *repetition*, *multiple intensifiers*, *implicit intensifiers*, *expressing explicit concern for the bereaved*, and *using adjectival intensifiers*. The results of the Chi-square revealed that: a) there was a significant difference among intensifiers and interjections in each culture; b) interjections and intensifiers can be organized semantically; and (c) the nature of English and Persian intensifiers is syntactically different. To link theory into practice, pedagogical implications are discussed in the context of EFL.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Speech Act Theory, Interjections, Intensifiers, Condolence.

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1. Background

1.1. Speech Act Theory

Pragmatics is “the study of linguistics phenomenon from the viewpoint of their usage properties and processes” (Verschueren, 1999, p. 1). Delen and Tavit (2010) pointed that Pragmatics has been both controversial and a popular topic in language research since 1960s. Pragmatics puts emphasis on the meaning in conversations among interlocutors. In other words, a learner with full grammatical competence may not be pragmatically competent too. Learners may produce correct grammatical sentences in conversations which are pragmatically inappropriate. Therefore, such breakdowns may hinder the communication among interlocutors which is called ‘pragmatic failure’. One of the important factors of pragmatic failure lies in the fact that learners transfer speech act strategies from their native language (Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Ellis, 1996). The second one relates to input. Although it is necessary for learners to receive a great amount of input from the environment, English textbooks may have problems to present activities which target pragmatic competence (Kasper & Rose, 2001).

Pragmatics is the study of language used in authentic conversations which reflects the relationship among sentences, contexts, and situations. Pragmatics has not a clear-cut definition (Ellis, 2008). As Levinson (1983) mentioned, pragmatics considers linguistic features in relation to users of language. One of the underlying themes in pragmatics is speech act. The theory of speech acts is developed mainly by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1979). The central assumption in the theory of speech act is that the minimal unit of communication is not a sentence or other expressions but rather language act. In another term, human language can be viewed as actions. Individuals perform things by saying different kinds of language acts such as refusals, requests, promises and the like. Austin (1962, p. 67) studied speech acts from the following perspective: “to consider from the ground up how many senses there are in which to say something is to do something, or in saying something we do something and even by saying something we do something.” According to his view, any utterance is composed of the following acts: the locutionary act (the actual words the speaker is saying), the

illocutionary act (the intention of the speaker) and the perlocutionary act (the effect of utterance on the hearer) (Fig. 1).

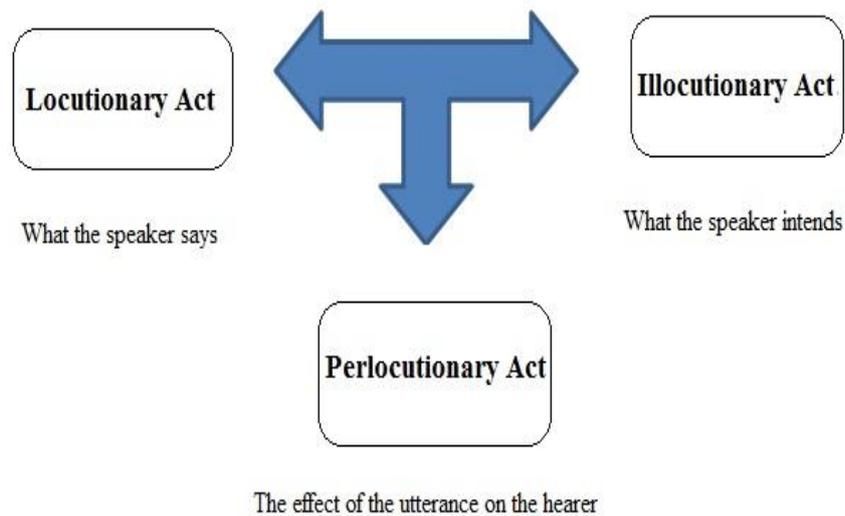


Figure 1.
Austin's Speech Act Identification

Drawing on the works of Austin, Searle (1975) classified speech acts into five general categories (cited in Ellis, 2008, p. 160):

- Representatives: e.g. asserting, concluding
- Directives: e.g. requesting, ordering
- Comissives: e.g. promising, threatening
- Expressives: e.g. thanking, condoling
- Declarations: e.g. excommunicating, declaring war, marrying, firing

As it is mentioned in the classification, condolence is part of expressives. Expressives show the speaker's attitude toward events and also express the *felicity condition* of the speech act. In other words, they count as expressions of a psychological state. This study

made an attempt to investigate intensifiers and interjections while Persian and English interlocutors perform condolence speech act.

2. Condolence Speech Act

The word condolence comes from the Latin *condolere* meaning ‘to suffer together’ (Zunin & Zunin, 2007). It means acknowledging a loss, showing sympathy, or empathizing with someone. Humans are emotional beings and one can see this emotionality in every-day communication. Death of a loved one can bring with itself a state of deep sorrow, grief, shock, and numbness (Parkers, Laungani, & Young, 1997). As a condoler, individuals should express sympathy to a bereaved and help him/her to accept that a beloved has passed away.

Crucially, the ways to express condolence differ from one culture to another. Generally, culture and convention play an influential role in pragmatics. Besides, by understanding the cultural background and the belief system of the bereaved, one can express condolences in an appropriate way. For example, in one culture, the common way to condole may be sending flowers or sympathy cards but in another culture, there may be other ways to console with the bereaved. It simply means that we should be aware of cultural factors and beliefs in condoling. In the same vein, Zunin and Zunin (2007) pointed out that condolence messages convey particular hidden meaning which are different across cultures.

Emotions play an important role in human communications and individuals’ lives are replete with happiness and grief. Communicating meaningful condolence phrases and sentences will reduce the fear one might experience for saying the wrong thing to the bereaved—the sentence should be influential as well. Since emotional communication is always linked to cultural matters, it is important that the condolence message be appreciated by the bereaved family as well as the close friends of the deceased—equal attention should be paid to pragmatics.

The language which is used in highly emotional situations, like when a person is touched by the death of a loved one may be to some extent different from the language we use in daily communication. One of the issues which has made condolence messages complicated

is the nature of relationships among individuals. Therefore, it can be concluded that communicating a meaningful sentiment is something personal regarding the relationships between the individual and the bereaved. Finding the right condolence phrases to say at the right time can be a challenging task. For example, in Iranian culture, saying ‘I’m sorry’ to the bereaved does not communicate anything important. There are some situations that more than *being sorry* is needed. There are situations that individuals want to show their support in a culturally acceptable and linguistically appropriate way. In various situations different sentences may be appreciated. Therefore, it is a necessity to investigate a cross-cultural ways of communicating condolence to the bereaved ones to figure out different strategies natives will use to convey their intended meaning. On the other hand, there may be different responses to condolences in various situations which contribute to the intricacies of condolence speech act.

The main purpose of condolence phrases is to commiserate with those who have experienced the death of a loved one. Sometimes the purpose of consoling is just a conventional one and is related to politeness. For instance, in some countries it may be considered as being rude not to express one’s sympathy to a bereaved—whether the bereaved is an intimate or a stranger. In this situation there are some prefabricated phrases the interlocutors can use to console the bereaved or the grieving family. It is of key importance to know the right expression since the feelings the bereaved is experiencing can range from extreme sadness to outright anger; thus, it is important how one might verbalize sympathy. The following factors should be considered when one wants to word sympathy. These elements influence the way a person chooses condolence or condolence responses:

1. The bereaved relationship to the deceased
2. Speakers’ relationship with the bereaved
3. Speakers’ relationship to the deceased
4. What emotions the bereaved is experiencing

Therefore, in order to have an appropriate message of condolence and in order to figure out the nature of condolence responses, four factors should be considered which is revealed in the figure below:

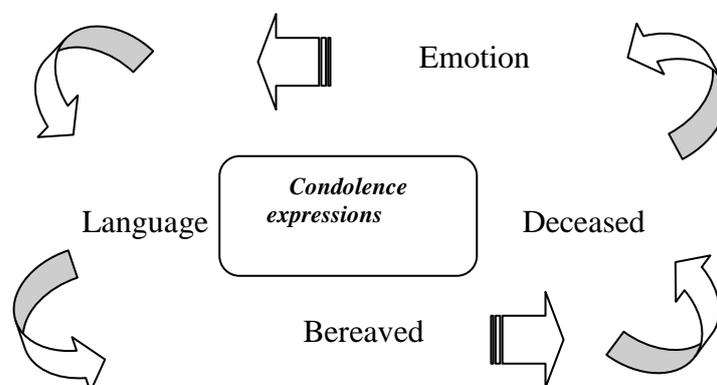


Figure 2.
Factors that Influence Condolence Messages

3. Review of Literature

Current review literature showed that there is little investigation done on interjections and intensifiers in performing condolence speech act. However, some studies have been done on the area of interjections. One of them relates to Wierzbicka's (1992) research in which a number of interjections from English, Polish, Russian, and Yiddish (as well as) rigorous semantic formulae are proposed which can explain both the similarities and the differences in their use. For example, the English interjection *yuk!* is compared with its nearest Polish and Russian counterparts *fu!*, *fe!*, and *tfu!* The author concluded that while the meaning of interjections cannot be adequately captured in terms of emotion words such as *disgust*, it can be captured in terms of more fine-grained components, closer to the level of universal semantic primitives. Meng and Schrabback (1999) conducted a study relating to the acquisition of forms, interactive functions, and discourse type constraints of German interjections, in particular *ha* and *na*. The data consist of two sets of child-adult conversations—picture book interactions in family and psychodiagnostic settings. By comparing the adults and the children's use of interjections, it was revealed that

children had managed to acquire interjectional forms and functions as well as discourse type constraints.

It has to be taken for granted that all interjections have some kind of meaning. In this respect, every interjection is used in particular language and situational context to convey its meaning. Therefore, claiming that a particular interjection may have no semantic features is not correct. Quirk *et al.* (1972) emphasized that “interjections are purely emotive words which have neither referential content nor any particularly significant grammatical function” (pp. 413-414).

Apart from interjections, intensifiers are important parts in communication especially in condolence expressions. Intensifiers are a class of words, generally adverbs, which are used to modify gradable adjectives, adverbs, and verbs. Characteristically, intensifiers serve to enhance the emotional content of an expression. It might be better to say that the use of intensifiers subtly suggests to the reader what emotions should be felt. The basic and common-used intensifier is *very*; a versatile word which modifies many adjectives and adverbs. There are also other intensifiers which often convey the same intention as *very*.

Zellermayer's (1991) compared the use of intensifiers in excerpts from Hebrew and American novels and their translations into English and Hebrew. This study revealed that intensifiers in Hebrew and English texts are considered as markers of the relationship between oral and written elements in that discourse and as indicators of written-text-reader relationships in particular rhetorical communities. Because each group of target texts - Hebrew or English - incorporated in this study has been found to consistently add or delete intensifiers to or from its source texts, one may conclude that such shifts reflect the different biases of the rhetorical communities these writers and translators identify with, in terms of literacy and textual characteristics as well as their varied notions of the *ideal text*.

Language learning does not take place in a vacuum. Hence, the quality of interactions should be analyzed according to mutual constraints which exist among interlocutors. In the same vein, Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued about the ecology of language which takes into account the environmental factors of learning which in turn put emphasis on the language use. The idea flourishes with what

Williams and Burden (1997) schematized as *ecological perspectives* of language.

In their model, Williams and Burden (1997) referred to four factors: Microsystem, Mesosystem, Ecosystem, and Macrosystem. Microsystem is the closest environmental layer affecting the learner which embraces parents, teachers, siblings and peers. Macrosystem, which is placed at the outermost layer, takes into account the entire culture of the society. These ecological perspectives which are represented by Williams and Burden are not dissimilar to the structure of an onion emphasizing that human beings have interactions with cultural and societal layers covering them—as it is schematized in Figure 3, the learner is placed at the center of an onion-like structure. Therefore, individuals may have different styles and strategies when talking together since they are from different social status and there are, of course, power relations which are likely to influence the quality of talk among interlocutors. With regard to the speech act, the conventions of the society are strong predictors of how individuals perform different acts in relation to others.

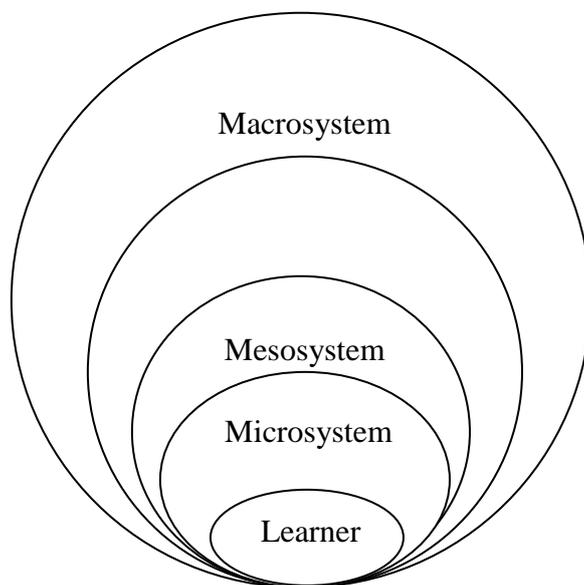


Figure 3.
Various Systems Affecting the Learning Environment

After a close examination of the pile of research (e.g. Blum-Kulka, 1982; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Faerch & Kasper, 1989; House & Kasper, 1987; Kasper, 1989; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987) conducted on particular speech acts cross-culturally, we figured out that the area considering condolence speech act and its response types are underresearched. Most of the people take feelings of grief and sadness as usual circumstances. However, when individuals want to comfort others, they should consider many factors in mind, namely, speakers' feelings, the relation of the bereaved to the deceased, and the relationship between the speaker and the bereaved; these factors may change the easy process of offering condolence to a fearful experience. The feeling of losing a loved one brings with itself a kind of intense psychological pressure. Knowing how to relate to the bereaved is something which requires subtlety and attention. Also, there is not much at hand about the condolence responses. There are situations which require specific linguistic path.

Cross-cultural differences play an important role when dealing with speech acts (Green, 1975; Wierzbicka, 1985). According to ecological perspectives, since individuals have interactions with different people in society, there is a need to know how to use language in different situations appropriately. It is also important to be cognizant of the sentences which are face threatening or face saving. Learners have little difficulty with respect to grammatical or textual competence but when it comes to pragmatic competence, even the most proficient learners will be challenged (Ellis, 2008; Martínez-Flor & Fukuya, 2005). In the same vein, Bardovi-Harlig (1999) posited that even very advanced learners have difficulty with their interlanguage pragmatics. Furthermore, being competent in the grammar of the target language does not mean that a person is pragmatically competent too (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Kasper & Rose, 1999). This lack of knowledge and proficiency in pragmatic aspects of language may result in breakdowns in communications.

In the context of EFL classrooms, learners should be exposed to sufficient amount of input so that they could increase their grasp of pragmatics. However, textbooks are not so rich at providing students with sufficient amount of input in the realm of pragmatics (Kasper &

Rose, 2001). Besides, the problems of teaching pragmatics are increasing and need more research to pave the way for those teachers who encounter difficulties in teaching speech acts (Delen & Tavit, 2010).

The existing literature concerning speech act theory shows that there is a gap in literature about interjections and intensifiers in Persian and English condolence utterances.

4. Significance of the Study

Although several studies have been conducted in the area of different speech acts, investigations into the speech act of condolence have been limited. The present study will serve as a preliminary step in addressing the need to focus on interjections and intensifiers in condolence speech act. Given the fact that condolences are interwoven with emotional states, individuals put interjections and intensifiers in practice. Every day in our language communication individuals use forms which cannot be easily considered as words but assigned to convey messages. These messages are not actually ideas but rather emotions and feelings. These forms which function as pragmatic markers are called *interjections*. Similarly, Wilkins (1992) postulated that interjections have all features attributed to utterances including the fact that they convey complete propositions and have an illocutionary purpose. The fact that interjections exist in language, accounts for their importance which may be less highlighted in linguistics. As a rule of thumb, mastering any language would be incomplete without being able to understand and use interjections and intensifiers appropriately. Interestingly, according to Jovanović (2004), “The term interjection literally comes from Latin **interjicere** with the meaning *to throw or cast between*, from **inter** *between* + **jacere** *to throw*” (p.18).

5. Research Questions

After reviewing the current literature and in accordance with the objectives of this study, four research questions are applicable:

Q1: Are there any significant differences among interjections in Persian condolence messages?

- Q2: Are there any significant differences among interjections in English condolence messages?
- Q3: Are there any significant differences between Persian and English with respect to interjections in condolence speech act?
- Q4: Are there any significant differences between Persian and English with respect to intensifiers in condolence speech act?

6. Methodology

6.1. Corpus

Movie analysis was utilized to gather information about how native speakers use interjections and intensifiers while performing condolence speech act. To this end, 50 movies were analyzed (25 in Persian and 25 in English) to figure out the patterns native speakers of Persian and English utilize while offering their condolences. To make the comparison easier and more similar, both Persian and English condolence speech acts were gathered by analyzing movies. The criterion of selecting the movies was whether they had any condolence dialog.

6.2. Procedure

First, all of the condolence comments were found and transcribed. Those sentences which were related to interjections and intensifiers were selected out, then, each sentence was categorized under specific category based on its underlying meaning. Five categories were used to compare intensifiers among English and Persian speakers. Table 1 is used to compare intensifiers in both cultures:

Table1: A Classification of Intensifiers in Condolence Speech Act

Category	Example in English	Example in Persian
<i>Repetition</i>	I am very very sorry.	خیلی خیلی حیف شد
<i>Multiple Intensifiers</i>	I am so very shocked.	واقعا خیلی ناراحت شدم
<i>Implicit Intensifiers</i>	It broke my heart.	الهی بمیرم!
<i>Explicit Intensifiers</i>	I am so sorry.	خیلی متأسف شدم
<i>Adjectival Intensifiers</i>	I extend my sincere sympathy.	غم جانگداز به شما تسلیت

Table 1 is used as the yardstick to compare the frequency of intensifiers performed during the conversations in which the main theme was offering condolences. Then, each sentence was placed under its own category based on the meaning of the intensifiers used in condolence utterances.

In the same vein, in order to compare interjections in English and Persian, a classification was adopted by Jovanović (2004) to find out the differences in using interjections in condolence sentences. Table 2 provides a classification for comparing interjections in the two cultures. According to Jovanović (2004), Table 2 categorizes interjections on the basis of their meaning (pp. 22-23).

Table2: *A Classification of Interjections in Condolence Speech Act*

Category	Example
<i>Anger</i>	Damn! I cannot believe this bad luck that he is dead.
<i>Annoyance</i>	Ouch! What a pity!
<i>Impatience</i>	Why! She was such a healthy man!
<i>Pain</i>	Ah! I am so sorry.
<i>Pity</i>	Alas! I share my sorrow in this sad day.
<i>Sorrow</i>	Eh! God bless her soul.
<i>Sympathy</i>	Now! I felt profound sadness.
<i>Surprise</i>	Oh, my God. I am sorry to hear that.

After determining the classifications for comparing interjections and intensifiers, the frequency of each category was calculated. Finally, the results were analyzed using a Chi-square test in order to check the significance of the differences when comparing the occurrences of each category across the two cultures. The Chi-

square test was run using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 18.

7. Results and Discussion

7.1. Comparison of Intensifiers in Persian and English

To find out whether there is any significant difference regarding the application of intensifiers in English and Persian, a classification was designed to study the frequency of occurrence in each category. Table 3 shows the results of Chi-square in Persian regarding the distribution of intensifiers:

Table3: Results of the Chi-square Test for the Intensifiers in Persian Condolences

Categories	Observed N	Expected N	df	Sig.	χ^2
<i>Repetition</i>	5	16.6	4	.000	64.892
<i>Multiple Intensifiers</i>	24				
<i>Implicit Intensifiers</i>	42*				
<i>Explicit Intensifiers</i>	9				
<i>Adjectival Intensifiers</i>	3				
Total	83				

As it is revealed in Table 3, there is a significant difference among the intensifiers used in condolence sentences by Persian speakers ($\chi^2=64.892$, $p < .05$). Table 3 shows that *implicit* and *multiple intensifiers* ($N=42, 24$) were used more than the expected ($N=16.6$). Therefore, Persian speakers tend to use intensifiers less explicitly in their condolences. Moreover, the findings revealed that while Persian speakers used *implicit* and *multiple intensifiers* more frequently, they made few uses of *adjectival intensifiers*, *repetition*, and *explicit intensifiers* ($N=3, 5, 9$). Adjectival intensifiers were the least used intensifying tool by Persian speakers.

Table4: Results of the Chi-square Test for the Intensifiers in English Condolences

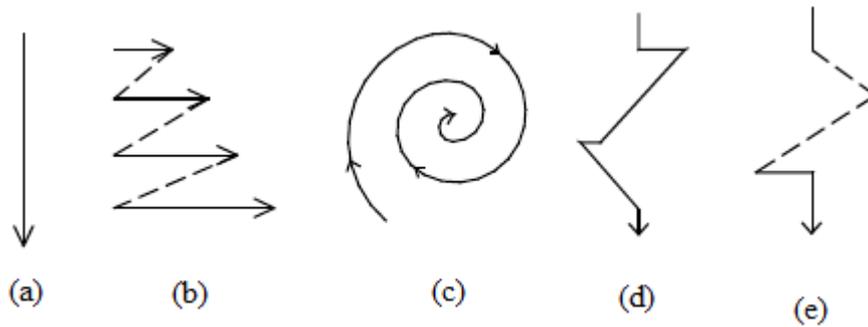
Categories	Observed N	Expected N	df	Sig.	χ^2
<i>Repetition</i>	7	17.2	4	.000	22.256
<i>Multiple Intensifiers</i>	16				
<i>Implicit Intensifiers</i>	18				
<i>Explicit Intensifiers</i>	33*				
<i>Adjectival Intensifiers</i>	12				
Total	86				

Table 4 shows that there is a significant difference among the intensifiers used in condolence sentences by English speakers ($\chi^2=22.256$, $p < .05$). Table 4 also reveals that *explicit* and *implicit* intensifiers ($N=33, 18$) were used more than the expected ($N=17.2$). Moreover, the findings revealed that while English speakers used *explicit* and *implicit* intensifying more frequently, they made few uses of *repetition*, *adjectival intensifiers*, and *multiple intensifiers* ($N=7, 12, 16$). Repetition was the least used intensifying tool by English speakers.

This study supported other cross-cultural rhetoric studies. Kaplan (1972) mentioned four discourse structures that contrast with English hierarchy. He focused on writing and limited his study to paragraphs to understand what he called *cultural thought patterns*. The structures are:

- Parallel constructions, in which the first idea is completed in the second part (Figure b. Semitic such as Hebrew and Arabic)
- Oriental, in which the topic is looked at from different tangents (Figure c. Oriental)
- Freedom to digress (Figure d. Roman)
- The same as the previous one, but it has different lengths (Figure e. Russian)

Kaplan (1972) suggested that English text was characteristically *linear* and *hierarchical* due to the fact that English speakers tend to be direct and straightforward in speech and writing. It can be illustrated by the following diagrams:



(a) English; (b) Semitic (Hebrew and Arabic); (c) Oriental; (d) Roman; (e) Russian.

Figure 4.
Discourse Structures by Kaplan (1972)

He also stated that each diagram relates to a particular language and identified his discourse patterns of each language written structure. As it can be understood by these diagrams, English speakers use direct expressions and patterns while oriental people prefer using indirect patterns.

Table 5: Distribution of Chi-square Formula in English and Persian Application of Intensifiers

Categories	English	Persian	Expected	Sig.	χ^2
	observed	observed			
<i>Repetition</i>	7	5	6	.564	.333
<i>Multiple Intensifiers</i>	16	24	20	.206	1.600
<i>Implicit Intensifiers</i>	18	42	30	.002*	9.600
<i>Explicit Intensifiers</i>	33	9	21	.000*	13.714
<i>Adjectival Intensifiers</i>	12	3	7.5	.02*	5.400
Total	86	83	-	-	-

Finally, Table 5 advocates that there is significant differences regarding three categories of intensifiers in Persian and English speech act of condolence (they are shown with an asterisk). With regard to repetition, there is no significant difference between English and Persian ($\chi^2 = .333$, $p < .05$). This shows that English speakers tend to

use intensifying condolences such as ‘I’m very very sorry’ as equally as Persian speakers. Above all, this category was the least used intensifying strategy used by Persian and English speakers. Persian speakers used more utterances relating to multiple intensifiers than English speakers; however, there is not a significant difference between them ($\chi^2= 1.600$, $p <.05$). In other words, both English and Persian speakers used ‘multiple intensifiers’ with almost similar frequencies. Persian speakers implicitly intensified their condolences more than English speakers. The results of Chi-square showed that there is a significant difference between them ($\chi^2= 9.600$, $p <.05$). The first greatest Chi-square frequency relates to this category. As it is related to explicit intensifying, English speakers outperformed Persian speakers with a significant difference observed between them ($\chi^2= 13.714$, $p <.05$). Regarding adjectival intensifiers, English speakers outperformed Persian speakers with a significant difference ($\chi^2= 5.400$, $p <.05$).

7.2. Comparison of Interjections in Persian and English

After investigating the distribution of intensifiers in English and Persian, it was revealed that out of five categories, only three categories were significantly different. In this part, the same attempt is done on interjections to find out similarities and differences in the application of interjections in English and Persian.

Table6: Results of the Chi-square Test for the Interjections in Persian and English Condolences

Categories	English	Persian	Expected	Sig. p <.05	χ^2
	observed	observed			
<i>Anger</i>	14	3	8.5	.008	7.118
<i>Annoyance</i>	30	18	24	.083	3.000
<i>Impatience</i>	10	5	7.5	.197	1.667
<i>Pain</i>	13	42	27.5	.000	15.291
<i>Pity</i>	28	11	19.5	.000	7.410
<i>Sorrow</i>	9	21	15	.028	4.800
<i>Sympathy</i>	25	39	32	.080	3.062
<i>Surprise</i>	21	11	16	.077	3.125
Total	150	150	-	-	-

As Table 6 manifests, just in four categories out of eight there obtained a significant difference between the way Persian and English speakers use interjections in their condolences. The categories in which a significant difference obtained are *Anger* (sig= .008), *Pain* (sig= .000), *Pity* (sig= .000), and *Sorrow* (sig= .028)

8. Conclusion

This study shed light on some important features regarding Persian and English cultures in that sociocultural norms are going to have great effect on the way speakers perform different speech acts. This study paves the way for further cross-linguistic researches to find out whether there is a universal pattern considering pragmatic competence or each language has its own idiosyncratic way of performing particular speech acts.

The importance of this study is fourfold. First, it is useful for the EFL learners in that they will be familiar with the way native speakers apply interjections and intensifiers in their condolences. Furthermore, the findings of this study may be a fruitful source for EFL learners in order to be acquainted with the way different interjections and intensifiers are used. When learning L2, most students resort to their mother tongue to come up with different speech acts (Delen & Tavit, 2010). This may cause miscommunication among interlocutors. This cross-cultural study would shed light on the way natives use interjections and intensifiers in different ways to reveal their feelings. The findings can help EFL learners to overcome the difficulty of using appropriate interjections and intensifiers in various situations. Moreover, it is possible for learners to understand intensifiers and interjections and their functions.

Second, teachers as the conductors of the class can use the findings in order to instruct learners and also predict where students may have difficulty using and interpreting interjections and intensifiers. This study also helps teachers find out why some learners have problem learning and applying speech acts appropriately.

Third, this study may be of interest for material developers. Learners interact most of their time with their books. Textbooks are also a road map for most teachers and learners. Material developers can use the findings of this study to classify different situations in

which interjections and intensifiers take place. Material developers can also provide beneficial exercises in order to increase learners' pragmatic competence concerning condolence. Learning particular speech acts will increase the quality of interactions among individuals.

Fourth, researchers can use the classification presented in this study to compare condolence speech acts in other cultures. It is also useful for those who want to investigate the discorsal features of language. Moreover, it is possible to reach a universal pattern of dealing with interjections and intensifiers.

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