

## Speech Act of Condolence in Persian and English: A Cross-Cultural Study

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### Abstract

Different speech acts such as apologies, refusals, compliments, complaints and invitations have been studied and differences between English and Persian have been shown. However, the speech act of condolence has been neglected and there is little written on the way Persian speakers express their condolences. Therefore, the first objective of the present study is to make a cross-cultural comparison in the realization patterns of the condolence speech act between English and Persian. The second aim is to investigate the effect of social distance on condoling strategies in different situations. A discourse completion test consisting of four situations was given to eighty Iranian EFL students of the University of Isfahan. The collected data was coded based on Elwood's semantic formula (2004) with some modifications. The analysis of data revealed that offering of condolence by Iranians who are members of a Moslem community is carried out through strategies which are unique to this religious culture and is considerably different from what was found in the English data. Also, social distance has significant effect on the frequency of the speech act in different situations.

**Key words:** Speech act; Condolence; Cross-cultural; Persian

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### INTRODUCTION

According to Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics speech act is 'an utterance as a functional unit in communication' (p.498). Different speech acts have been studied cross culturally so far. Speech acts such as apologies (Afghari, 2007), refusals (Moradkhani & Feyzi, 2008; Allami & Naeimi, 2011), complaints (Eslami-Rasekh, 2004), invitations (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2006a), requests (Eslami-Rasekh, 1995; Jalilifar, 2009; Salmani-Nodoushan, 2006a; Eslami-Rasekh, Tavakoli & Abdolreza pour, 2010) have been studied in Persian and cross-cultural differences between English and Persian speakers have been shown.

Speech act of condolence which according to Searl's categories falls into the fourth type 'expressive' is used to express the speaker's sorrow at the news of someone's death. As other speech acts, this speech act is also different from culture to culture. In one study Elwood (2004) investigated the cross-cultural differences of expression of condolence between Americans and Japanese. She showed the differences between the way three groups of respondents, American students writing in English, Japanese students writing in English and Japanese students writing in Japanese, expressed their condolences in two situations.

Elwood (2004) classified her responses according to semantic formulas similar to Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) who found five types of semantic formulas for apologies. Accordingly, five patterns were found in the responses to the two condolence situations in her study:

1. Acknowledgement of the death indicates interjections like "oh" or "oh my God".
2. Expression of sympathy like "I'm so sorry"
3. Offer of assistance like "is there anything I can do?"
4. Future-oriented remarks usually took the form of words of encouragement or practical advice, like "try not to get depressed".

5. Expression of concern relates to showing care for the well-being of the speaker and/or his or her family and includes questions like "How are you doing?"

She also referred to some responses which did not fit to any special category. These include: 'expression of empathy', 'sharing similar experience', 'statement of not knowing', 'statement of lacking words', 'positive statements', 'expression of surprise', 'related questions' and 'related comments'.

Although different speech acts have been studied across cultures, it seems that the speech act of condolence has not been studied so much and especially, there is little written on the way Persian speakers express their condolences. Therefore, the aim of the present study is first, to investigate what strategies Persian speakers use in order to offer their condolences in different situations and how these strategies are related to their religious culture. And second, how social distance affects the frequency of these strategies in different situations.

## METHODOLOGY

A discourse completion test (DCT) in two versions, one for male respondents and one for females, was used as the main data collection instrument. The DCT in this study included a short description of the situation and four situations requiring expression of condolence. Like other speech acts, expression of condolence depends on factors such as age, gender, level of education, social distance, and etc. Therefore, these situations consist of a brief description of the addressees such as gender, age and social distance. Respondents in this study were supposed to offer condolences to someone at their age and the same sex. In order to control gender two different DCT was used; the one for females included female addressees and the one for males included male ones (see Appendix).

Social distance was important in this DCT. Different levels of social distance were used to show different degrees of familiarity. For closeness the relationship between close friends was used. Then the relationship between classmates, neighbors and colleagues was used in order to show more distance between interlocutors. Therefore, in this study the dichotomy of -distance/+distance was chosen; by -distance we mean the interlocutors had a close relationship and by +distance they just knew each others. This is in line with Afghari (2007) who used this dichotomy in studying speech act of apology in Persian. In order to make situations as much close as possible to real ones, in situation four only respondents who had a job were asked to answer.

After obtaining the informed consent, the DCT was given to eighty Iranian English students of the University of Isfahan 44 of whom were B.A students and 36 were M.A students. These respondents were between nineteen to thirty. Forty of them were male and forty of them were female. All of the respondents were native speakers of

Persian.

The collected data was coded based on Elwood's semantic formula (2004) with some modifications. The unit of analysis was the utterances produced by the respondents. It is worth mentioning that in order to increase inter-rater reliability the coded data was checked with two other researchers too.

The data was categorized in to eight categories as follow:

1. 'Acknowledgement of the death' which includes interjections such as "oh", "oh no", "oh my God", "oh dear".

2. 'Expression of sympathy' such as "I'm really sorry", "a great sorrow", "what a pity", "it is really a great loss", as well as "accept my condolences" which was the most frequently expressions used, therefore the 'core' of speech act.

3. 'Offer of assistance' which covers utterances like "if there is anything I can do please let me know", "if you need someone to talk to, count on me".

4. 'Future-oriented remarks' like "you should be strong enough to cope with the situation", "I really like to be a witness of your happiness", "you should pacify your mother". Also, there are expressions unique to a Muslim society which are categorized under "future-oriented remarks" too. These responses include praying for the bereaved family to be more patient. Also people wish that this loss would be the last sorrow the bereaved family would suffer in future. Sometimes, they ask God to grant a long life to the bereaved family.

5. 'Expression of concern' are questions about the well being of the bereaved like "are you OK now?" or "where are you now?". Also responses such as "I am coming to you" are put under this category.

6. 'Seeking absolution from God' which include expressions such as "may God bless him" and other religious expressions which are unique to a Muslim society and don't have exact equivalents in English such as asking God to let his soul rest in peace. This is related to Iranians religious belief which makes people to pray for God's forgiveness for the person who is dead.

7. 'Related questions' include questions about the person died and how that happened, like "how old was he?" "what happened?" "when did you last see him?"

It is related to Iranian culture which is based on strong emotional relations and could show caring for others' sorrow is a cultural norm in this eastern society.

8. 'Religious-oriented sympathy' like "we will all die" "he has gone to paradise". Sometimes death is referred to destiny or fate. Responses like "it was his fate" are used to pacify the bereaved family.

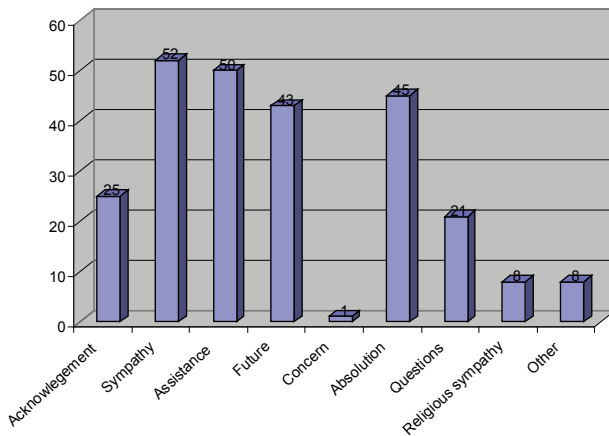
Other categories were include, 'sharing similar experience', 'statement of not knowing', 'statement of lacking words', 'expression of surprise', 'related comments' and 'denial'.

## RESULTS

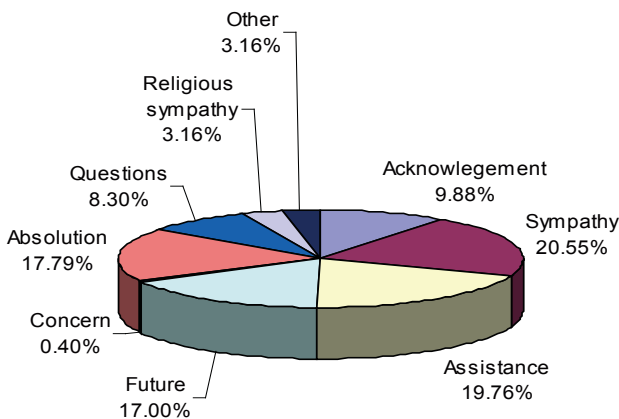
After coding the data, the frequency and percentage of each category of semantic formulas were calculated for every four situations. The results are shown in the following figures.

### Situation 1

Figure 1 and 2 show the frequency and the percentage of semantic formulas used in situation 1.



**Figure 1**  
**Frequency of Semantic Formulas in Situation 1**



**Figure 2**  
**Percentage of Semantic Formulas in Situation 1**

As these figures show expression of sympathy was the most frequently used semantic formula in situation 1. 20.55% of respondents used this semantic formula. The most frequently used response was “accept my condolences” (تسلیت می‌گم) which is the ‘core’ of speech act. The second frequently used semantic formula was offer of assistance which included 19.76% of responses. As long as no great difference was observed between the frequencies of these categories we can say that in an eastern culture like Iran which is based on strong intimacy, expressing sympathy and offering help are commonly used to relieve

the bereaved sorrow.

Next category regarding percentage was “absolution” or asking God’s forgiveness for the person passed away. It is related to a religious culture in a Muslim society like Iran which is based on strong belief in life after death. Therefore, Iranians do pray for the person died and ask God to forgive his sins, let his soul rest in peace. The commonest response was “may God bless him” (خدا بیامرزدش) or (روحش شاد) (خدا رحمتش کند) which does not have exact equivalent in English.

Future-oriented remarks had the percentage of 17.00%. It is a cultural norm to ask God help the bereaved family be patient and overcome the grief of loss of a person. Sentences such as “God give you patience” (خدا صبرتون بده) are very common. Praying for the bereaved family to have a long life was among the responses too, like (بغای عمر شما باشه) (هرچی خاک اون برحومه). Also, people wish that this loss would be the last sorrow the bereaved family would suffer from in future like (غم آخرتون باشه).

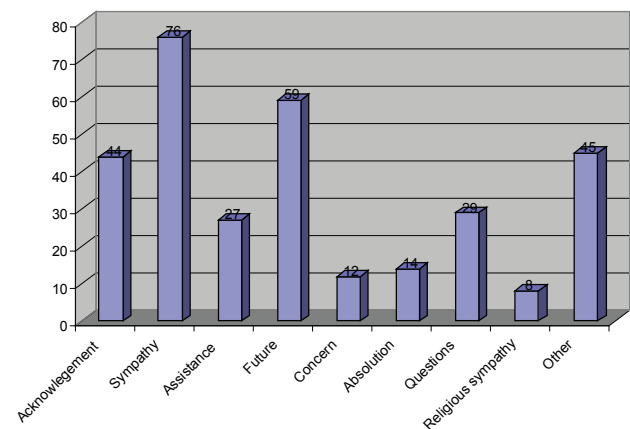
Acknowledgment of the death included interjections like “oh”, “ooh”, “oh my God” (وای، ای بابا، تو رو خدا) and words such as “dear”, “honey”, etc (عزیزم، الهی بی‌میرم) which was the next semantic formula in rank.

Related question about how that person passed away or how old he was comprised 8.30% of the answers. Although this amount is not statistically significant, it might show another cultural difference between western and eastern societies. Asking questions about happening of death is not inappropriate in Iran.

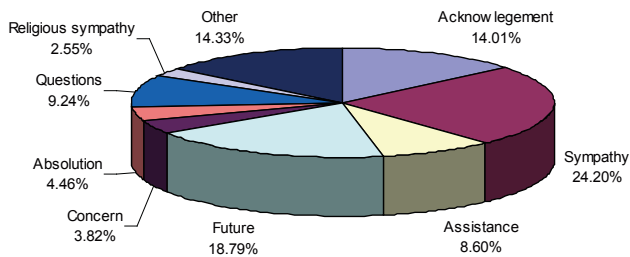
Religious oriented sympathy and other responses had the same percentage. And, just one respondent expressed his concern.

### Situation 2

Figure 3 and 4 show the frequency and the percentage of semantic formulas used in situation 2.



**Figure 3**  
**Frequency of Semantic Formulas in Situation 2**



**Figure 4**  
Percentage of Semantic Formulas in Situation 2

Expression of sympathy was the most frequently used semantic formula in situation 2.

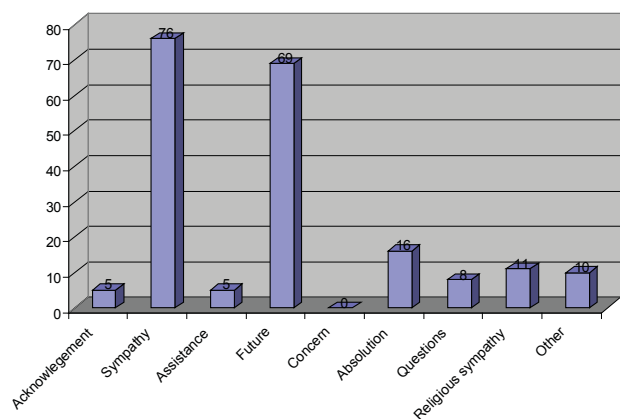
Future-oriented remarks especially religious ones like (غم آخرتون باشه) was the commonest.

Categories of ‘other’ and ‘acknowledgement of the death’ with the percentage of 14.33% and 14.01% were the next categories in rank respectively. Among ‘other’ category expression of surprise such as ‘I really got shocked’ (واقعا شوکه شدم) and ‘expression of denial’ like “I cannot believe it” (باور نمی کنم) or “you are telling lies” (داری دروغ می گی) were very common. Also, some respondents mentioned that they do not say anything or just say “I really don’t know what to say” (واقعا نمی دونم چی باید بگم). Sharing a similar experience or giving nice comments about the person passed away was rare.

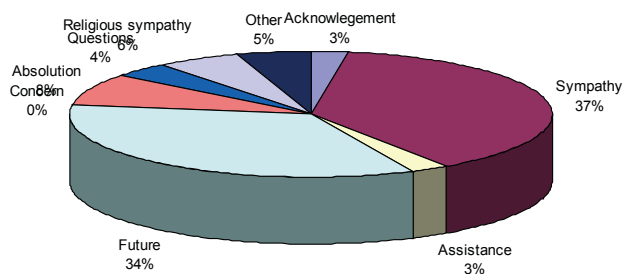
‘Related questions’ and ‘offer of assistance’ had the percentage of 9.24% and 8.6%. Finally, a few respondents expressed their concern, sought absolution from God and expressed religious sympathy.

**Situation 3**

Figure 5 and 6 show the frequency and the percentage of semantic formulas used in situation 3.



**Figure 5**  
Frequency of Semantic Formulas in Situation 3



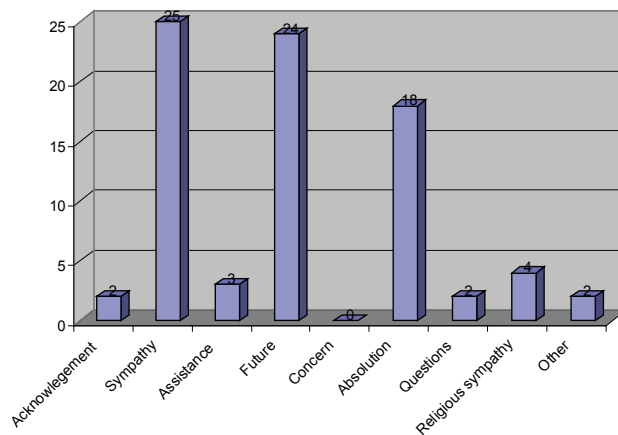
**Figure 6**  
Percentage of Semantic Formulas in Situation 3

‘Expression of sympathy’ was the most frequently used semantic formula in situation 3 which had the percentage of 30%. Following this semantic formula was ‘future-oriented remark’ with the percentage of 29%. The most common response in this situation was something like “I hope this will be the last sorrow you suffer from” (غم آخرتون باشه).

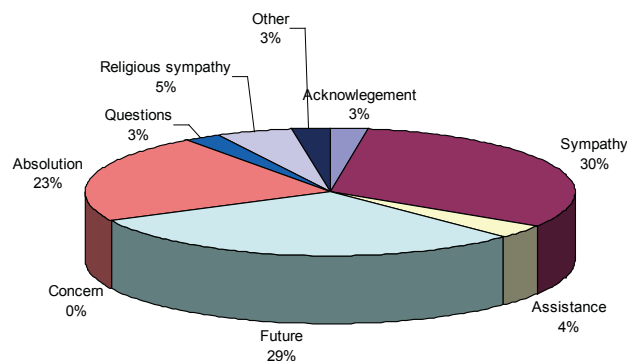
There was not a significant difference between other responses except, no one used ‘expression of concern’ in this situation.

**Situation 4**

Figure 7 and 8 show the frequency and the percentage of semantic formulas used in situation 4.



**Figure 7**  
Frequency of Semantic Formulas in Situation 4



**Figure 8**  
Percentage of Semantic Formulas in Situation 4

In order to make situations closer to real ones, only respondents who had a job were asked to express their condolences in this situation. Therefore, 37 of respondents did so.

The most frequently used responses were that of 'Expression of sympathy' among them "accept my condolences" (تسلیت می‌گم) was the commonest.

34% of the responses comprised 'Religious-oriented wishes' which "may God bless him" (خدا رحمتش کند، خدا بیامرزیش) was the most frequently used expression. No significant difference was observed between the frequency of this semantic formula and the previous one which had the frequency of 37%.

Other responses were rare and no one expressed his concern in this situation.

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## DISCUSSION

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Comparison of the data showed that there are noticeable differences between the responses in these situations which are explained below.

'Acknowledgement of the death' is not frequently used in situation 3 and 4 which involved more social distance between interlocutors. This category consists of interjections like "oh, my God" or terms of address like "honey" or "dear" which are not used in more formal situations.

'Expression of sympathy' was the most frequently used semantic formula in all of four situations. "Accept my condolences" (تسلیت می‌گم) was the commonest response in all of these situations.

'Offer of assistance' was common in situation 1 and 2 which interlocutors had a close relationship with each other and was rare in situation 3 and 4 with more social distance.

'Future-oriented remarks' were the second frequently used semantic formula in all of these situations. Among them religious-oriented ones were the commonest which is a unique characteristic of a religious culture.

'Expression of concern' was very rare. And, no respondent expressed his/her concern in situation 3 and 4 with more social distance.

'Seeking absolution from God' was frequent in situation 1 and 4 but not in situation 2 and 3. This shows that further research should be done to confirm the relationship between social distance and the use of this semantic formula which is unique to religious cultures.

Asking related questions about the person passed away was more common in situations 1 and 2 with close relationship between interlocutors.

There was no significant difference between expressing religious-oriented sympathy and social distance.

Other categories which included rare answers had considerable frequency in situation 1 which involved the least social distance between interlocutors. 'statement of lacking words', 'expression of surprise', 'related

comments' and 'denial' were mostly used in hearing a death of someone known.

In general, comparison of the four situations showed that 'expression of sympathy', 'future-oriented remarks' and 'seeking absolution from God' are the commonest semantic formulas used in situations involved more social distance between interlocutors.

The results of the present study could confirm Elwood (2004) who found that 'future-oriented remarks' were not used by Americans, but both Japanese students writing in English and Japanese students writing in Japanese used it frequently. This shows a difference between western and eastern cultures. As Elwood (2004) mentions, it is cruel to ask a mourner to think about future while Japanese courage the bereaved to be hopeful of future. Also, she found that Americans expressed their concern and offered assistance more than Japanese. As the present study showed, Iranians did not express their concern in situation 3 and 4. Also, 'offer of assistance' was low too.

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## CONCLUSION

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This study tried to investigate the speech act of condolence in Persian and to show the way native speakers of Persian express their condolences in situations with different degrees of social distance.

The findings of present study showed that there are subtle differences in the way condolence is expressed in an eastern society compared to western ones. 'Expression of sympathy' was the most frequently used semantic formula in all of four situations. "Accept my condolences" (تسلیت می‌گم) was the commonest response in all of these situations. Also, Iranians did not express much concern for the bereaved person. However, it should be mentioned that the size of the sample was too small to make safe conclusions. Larger samples and different situations could lead to more valid results.

Comparative studies need to be carried out to investigate different variables which might affect the production of this speech act such as age, sex... which is an important factor to show cross-cultural differences, but is neglected.

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## Appendix A

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Age:	sex:	Degree:
Job:	university major:	

Dear respondent

In each question, you are encountered with a person who has lost someone. Please write what you would say in every situation.

1. You visit one of your female classmates whom you have not seen for a few days on the campus. You ask about the reason of her absence and she says that her grandmother passed away. You say:

2. Your close friend has not attended the class today. You call her after the class and find out that his father has suddenly passed away. You say:

3. Your next-door neighbor has lost his young son. In order to offer condolences to their daughter who is a student your age, you say:

Please read this situation if you have a job.

4. One of your female colleagues who is a student your age has lost his grand father. In order to express condolences you say:

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## Appendix B

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Age:	sex:	Degree:
Job:	university major:	

Dear respondent

In each question, you are encountered with a person who has lost someone. Please write what you would say in every situation.

1. You visit one of your male classmates who have not seen for a few days on the campus. You ask about the reason of his absence and he says that his grandmother passed away. You say:

2. Your close friend has not attended the class today. You call him after the class and find out that his father has suddenly passed away. You say:

3. Your next-door neighbor has lost his young daughter. In order to offer condolences to his son who is a student your age, you say:

Please read this situation if you have a job.

4. One of your male colleagues who is a student your age has lost his grandfather. In order to express condolences you say: