



## Pragmatic Analysis of Indirect Responses to Compliments in Persian: The Role of Context, Power, and Social Distance

Hossein Aryaeefar

Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, Tehran

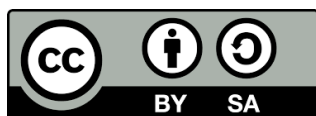
Email: [hossainaryaeefar@gmail.com](mailto:hossainaryaeefar@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

Compliment responses in Persian reflect cultural expectations of modesty and interpersonal relationship management, making their pragmatic meanings difficult to interpret solely through linguistic forms. This study aimed to identify indirect compliment response strategies and examine how situational context, relative power, and social distance influenced their selection and interpretation. A descriptive-analytical research design was employed within a pragmatic framework. Data were collected through purposive sampling using a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) comprising compliment scenarios that varied in power relations, social distance, formality, and interpersonal intimacy. Responses were categorized according to their degree of directness and examined qualitatively through descriptive-interpretive analysis informed by speech act theory and politeness theory. The findings revealed several indirect response strategies, including indirect acceptance, indirect expressions of gratitude, self-deprecation, apparent rejection, reciprocal compliments, face-saving strategies, and humor. Greater power asymmetry and social distance were associated with more formal, respectful, and indirect responses, whereas closer interpersonal relationships facilitated the use of humor and reciprocal compliments. Expressions that appeared to reject praise could function pragmatically as implicit acceptance or gratitude, highlighting the importance of contextual interpretation. These patterns reflected culturally embedded norms of modesty and the need to acknowledge compliments without engaging in overt self-praise. The study concluded that indirect compliment responses functioned as multidimensional pragmatic strategies for managing face, expressing politeness, and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Their interpretation required an integrated consideration of linguistic forms, sociocultural norms, and interpersonal contexts.



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## INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a means of conveying information; it is also an essential tool for establishing, maintaining, and regulating social relationships. In everyday interactions, individuals use language not only to communicate ideas and information but also to express emotions, establish intimacy, demonstrate respect, convey solidarity, and manage interpersonal relationships. From this perspective, many linguistic acts cannot be interpreted solely through their lexical meanings and syntactic structures. Instead, their interpretation requires consideration of the social and situational contexts in which they occur, as well as the relationships among participants (Leech, 1983; Yule, 1996).

A compliment is a common speech act in social interaction that generally expresses a positive evaluation of the addressee's characteristics, abilities, behavior, or appearance. Beyond conveying positive evaluations, compliments can contribute to establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, expressing solidarity, and enhancing the addressee's positive face (Holmes, 1988). However, recipients do not always respond to compliments directly or explicitly. Individuals may accept compliments through expressions of gratitude, appear to reject them, minimize their achievements or qualities, or reciprocate by complimenting the original speaker (Pomerantz, 1978).

From a pragmatic perspective, responding to compliments is a complex interactional phenomenon because recipients must negotiate two potentially competing conversational preferences. On the one hand, recipients are generally expected to acknowledge or accept the positive evaluations expressed by others. On the other hand, explicit and unqualified agreement with compliments may be perceived as self-praise or may create an unfavorable social impression (Pomerantz, 1978). Consequently, responses such as "You are kind," "That is your generous opinion," or "It was nothing" may function as strategies for balancing the acknowledgment of compliments with the maintenance of a favorable social image.

In Persian, indirect responses to compliments are particularly significant because of the cultural and interpersonal norms that may influence their interpretation. Research involving Persian speakers has demonstrated that cultural expectations associated with modesty and the concept of *shekasteh-nafsi* (self-effacement or self-deprecation) can influence how individuals respond to compliments (Sharifian, 2005). Within this cultural framework, individuals may minimize their abilities or achievements, attribute positive evaluations to the kindness of the complimenter, or assign credit for their accomplishments to others. Such strategies may simultaneously convey implicit acceptance of a compliment while avoiding overt self-praise (Sharifian, 2005).

From the perspective of politeness theory, linguistic interactions involve the maintenance and negotiation of the face of both speakers and addressees. Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed that social distance, relative power, and the degree of imposition associated with a communicative act influence the selection of politeness strategies and the degree of linguistic directness or indirectness. Accordingly, responses to compliments may vary depending on the social relationships between participants and the interactional circumstances in which compliments are exchanged.

Situational context plays a central role in interpreting indirect responses to compliments because identical linguistic expressions may perform different pragmatic functions across communicative situations. For example, the expression "No, it was nothing" may convey modesty and implicit acceptance of a compliment in one context, whereas it may constitute genuine rejection or disagreement in another. Therefore, interpreting indirect compliment responses requires careful consideration of the circumstances surrounding the interaction, the participants' communicative intentions, and the interpersonal relationships involved (Leech, 1983; Yule, 1996).

Another important factor influencing compliment responses is the relative power relationship between participants. Hierarchical relationships, such as those between professors and students, managers and employees, or parents and children, differ from relationships

between friends or colleagues of relatively equal status. Differences in relative power may influence the degree of formality, the selection of politeness strategies, and the extent of indirectness in compliment responses (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Consequently, pragmatic analyses that disregard power asymmetries may overlook important dimensions of linguistic behavior and interpersonal communication.

Social distance also plays an important role in shaping the selection and interpretation of compliment responses. In interactions between unfamiliar individuals or participants in formal relationships, respectful and indirect strategies may help maintain appropriate interpersonal boundaries and conform to established politeness conventions. Conversely, interactions involving close relationships may encourage humor, joking, self-deprecation, and reciprocal compliments (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Holmes, 1988). Thus, the pragmatic function of a particular response may vary according to the degree of familiarity and intimacy between participants.

The importance of examining indirect compliment responses in Persian becomes particularly evident when considering previous research on complimenting practices and interpersonal communication. Studies involving Persian speakers have investigated compliments and compliment responses from various perspectives, including politeness, cultural norms, gender, social relationships, and cross-cultural variation (Derakhshan et al., 2020). Nevertheless, examining the combined roles of situational context, relative power, and social distance may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how indirect compliment responses are selected and interpreted in Persian-speaking interactions.

Accordingly, the central research question guiding the present study was: What indirect strategies do Persian speakers employ when responding to compliments, and how do situational context, relative power, and social distance influence the selection and interpretation of these strategies? Adopting a pragmatic approach, this study examined indirect compliment responses in Persian to identify their principal patterns and explain their communicative and social functions. This investigation was intended to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationships among language, culture, politeness, and interpersonal communication within Persian-speaking communities.

The study of compliments and compliment responses constitutes an important area of investigation within pragmatics and sociolinguistics. In everyday communication, compliments function not only as expressions of positive evaluation but also as interpersonal resources for establishing relationships, demonstrating solidarity, enhancing positive face, and facilitating social interaction. Consequently, pragmatic researchers have examined both the linguistic characteristics of compliments and the strategies individuals employ when responding to them, with particular attention to the social and contextual factors influencing these responses.

One of the foundational contributions to the study of compliment responses was provided by Pomerantz (1978), who examined how recipients manage competing interactional preferences when responding to positive evaluations. Compliment recipients generally face the conversational preference for agreement while simultaneously seeking to avoid self-praise. Explicit acceptance may demonstrate agreement with the complimenter but may also be interpreted as an inappropriate endorsement of one's own qualities or achievements. Pomerantz

(1978) demonstrated that compliment responses frequently occupy intermediate positions between complete acceptance and outright rejection, reflecting the interactional complexity of managing agreement and self-presentation.

Pomerantz's framework was particularly relevant to the present study because indirect compliment responses can be understood as strategies for negotiating multiple communicative objectives. For example, by responding with "You are kind," a recipient may acknowledge the complimenter's positive intention without explicitly agreeing with the evaluation. Such responses may therefore balance interpersonal acknowledgment with the avoidance of overt self-praise. This perspective provided a theoretical foundation for examining compliment responses whose literal meanings do not fully correspond to their intended pragmatic functions.

Holmes (1988) subsequently investigated compliments as speech acts associated with positive politeness and interpersonal solidarity. She emphasized that compliments can fulfill positive affective functions by establishing, maintaining, or strengthening social relationships. However, compliments may also create interactional difficulties for recipients when explicit acceptance is perceived as self-praise. Through the examination of compliment exchanges, Holmes explored the linguistic characteristics of compliments and their responses in relation to social variables, demonstrating that interactional contexts and participant characteristics may influence complimenting behavior (Holmes, 1988).

From this perspective, compliments and their responses cannot be adequately understood independently of the social relationships in which they occur. Participants' social status, interpersonal familiarity, and the circumstances surrounding compliment exchanges may influence the selection of direct or indirect response strategies. This perspective was particularly relevant to the present study, which examined how situational context, relative power, and social distance shaped indirect compliment responses in Persian.

Within Persian-language pragmatics, Sharifian (2005) made an important contribution by examining the cultural concept of *shekasteh-nafsi* in Persian speakers' responses to compliments. His research demonstrated how culturally embedded expectations of modesty and self-effacement may encourage individuals to minimize their abilities, skills, or achievements when receiving positive evaluations. Within this cultural framework, recipients may also redirect credit or positive evaluations toward the complimenter, family members, friends, or other individuals.

The relevance of Sharifian's research to the present study lies in its demonstration that indirect compliment responses in Persian are closely connected to cultural conceptualizations and interpersonal expectations. Expressions such as "No, I didn't do anything," "You are very kind," or "You yourself are very kind" may appear, at the literal level, to minimize personal achievements or redirect praise toward the interlocutor. Pragmatically, however, these expressions may convey implicit acceptance, modesty, gratitude, or face maintenance. Sharifian (2005) employed a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) to investigate compliment responses and compared Persian and English data from Iranian and Australian participants. His findings suggested that Persian speakers' response patterns reflected culturally embedded expectations associated with *shekasteh-nafsi*.

Extending this area of investigation, Derakhshan, Eslami, and Chalak (2020) conducted a systematic review of research on compliments among Iranian Persian speakers spanning

approximately four decades. Their review synthesized previous findings on Persian compliments and compliment responses, highlighting the importance of this research area for pragmatics and intercultural communication. The authors examined studies addressing various dimensions of complimenting practices and identified directions for further investigation (Derakhshan et al., 2020).

Previous research has therefore examined Persian compliments and compliment responses from several complementary perspectives. Some studies have investigated the linguistic structures and topics of compliments, whereas others have classified response strategies or explored cultural and cross-cultural differences. However, the interpretation of indirect responses may benefit from the simultaneous consideration of situational and interpersonal variables. The systematic review by Derakhshan et al. (2020) demonstrated the breadth of existing scholarship while highlighting the continuing relevance of investigating the contextual and social dimensions of complimenting practices in Persian.

From a theoretical perspective, Brown and Levinson (1987) provided an influential framework for examining the relationship between linguistic behavior and politeness. Their theory emphasized the concept of face and the strategies individuals employ to maintain or protect their own face and that of others during social interactions. The selection of direct or indirect linguistic strategies may depend on factors such as social distance, relative power, and the degree of imposition associated with a communicative act. This framework offered a useful basis for explaining why compliment recipients might employ indirect or mitigated responses rather than explicitly accepting positive evaluations.

Similarly, Leech (1983) emphasized the importance of politeness principles in the organization and interpretation of linguistic interactions. From this perspective, linguistic choices are influenced not only by lexical meanings and grammatical structures but also by communicative intentions, interpersonal relationships, and social expectations. Consequently, expressions that appear linguistically simple may perform multiple pragmatic functions depending on their contexts of use.

Searle (1969) also provided an important theoretical foundation through speech act theory, which distinguishes the propositional content of utterances from their illocutionary force. Within this framework, the interpretation of compliment responses requires attention not only to their explicit linguistic meanings but also to the communicative actions performed through those utterances. Accordingly, analyzing indirect responses involves examining how speakers use linguistic expressions to perform acts such as accepting, rejecting, minimizing, or reciprocating compliments within particular interactional contexts.

Overall, the reviewed literature demonstrated that compliment responses constitute a multidimensional pragmatic phenomenon shaped by linguistic, interactional, cultural, and social factors. Pomerantz (1978) highlighted the tension between accepting compliments and avoiding self-praise, while Holmes (1988) emphasized the interpersonal and politeness-related functions of compliments and their responses. Sharifian (2005) demonstrated the significance of *shekasteh-nafsi* in Persian complimenting practices, whereas Derakhshan et al. (2020) synthesized research developments concerning compliments and compliment responses among Persian speakers.

Despite these contributions, further investigation of indirect compliment responses through the integrated examination of situational context, relative power, and social distance remained warranted. The present study sought to address this research need by examining how these three dimensions were associated with the selection and interpretation of indirect compliment response strategies among Persian speakers. Its distinctive approach involved treating indirect responses not merely as linguistic forms but as context-dependent pragmatic strategies through which individuals negotiate face, politeness, and interpersonal relationships.

The findings of previous studies further suggested that compliment responses cannot be understood exclusively as individual linguistic choices because they are embedded within broader interactional and cultural frameworks. In Persian, *shekasteh-nafsi* and cultural expectations of modesty may influence the preference for indirect responses. However, the pragmatic functions of these strategies may vary across interpersonal relationships and communicative situations. Accordingly, the present study integrated situational context, relative power, and social distance to provide a more comprehensive account of the selection, interpretation, and interpersonal functions of indirect compliment responses in Persian.

The primary objective of this study was to conduct a pragmatic analysis of indirect compliment responses in Persian and examine how situational context, relative power, and social distance influenced their selection, linguistic realization, and communicative functions.

Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Identify and classify different types of indirect responses to compliments in Persian.
2. Determine the pragmatic functions of indirect responses, including implicit acceptance, indirect gratitude, modesty, self-deprecation, apparent rejection, reciprocal complimenting, face maintenance, and the establishment or enhancement of intimacy.
3. Examine the role of situational context in the selection and interpretation of indirect responses to compliments.
4. Examine the effect of power relations between speakers and addressees on the degree of directness or indirectness and on the type of strategy employed.
5. Examine the effect of social distance on the selection of response strategies and the degree of formality, modesty, and complimenting behavior in responses.
6. Examine the relationship between power and social distance and changes in response strategies across formal, semi-formal, and intimate situations.
7. Explain the role of indirect responses in face management and social relationships between speakers and addressees.
8. Examine the difference between the literal meaning and pragmatic function of indirect responses and demonstrate the role of context in their interpretation.
9. Provide a coherent account of response patterns to compliments in Persian-speaking interactions and their relationship to politeness norms and social interaction.

In Persian, responding to a compliment is not merely a linguistic reaction to a positive utterance; rather, it is a social and pragmatic act shaped by factors such as situational context, power relations, social distance, age, gender, degree of intimacy, and cultural norms. Unlike direct responses such as “Thank you” or “That’s very kind of you,” indirect responses may serve various purposes, including maintaining politeness, expressing modesty, reducing self-praise, establishing intimacy, or even implicitly rejecting a compliment.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a descriptive-analytical design with a pragmatic approach to examine indirect compliment responses in Persian. It aimed to identify indirect response strategies and investigate how situational context, relative power, and social distance influenced their selection and interpretation.

Data were collected through purposive sampling of Persian-language interactions across various social and communicative contexts. The selected interactions represented different levels of intimacy, formality, relative power, and social distance to facilitate comparisons of compliment response strategies.

Following data collection, compliment exchanges were identified and categorized according to the degree of directness or indirectness in the responses. Indirect responses were subsequently classified based on their pragmatic functions, including implicit acceptance, apparent rejection, indirect gratitude, modesty, self-deprecation, reciprocal complimenting, face maintenance, and the establishment or preservation of interpersonal intimacy.

The analysis focused on three primary contextual variables: situational context, relative power, and social distance. Situational context was examined in relation to interactional circumstances, conversational topics, and levels of formality. Relative power was assessed according to participants' social or institutional status, including hierarchical and equal-status relationships. Social distance was evaluated based on the degree of familiarity, intimacy, and interpersonal closeness between participants.

The analysis distinguished between the literal meanings of responses and their context-dependent pragmatic functions. Particular attention was given to expressions whose communicative intentions varied across social situations. For example, the expression "You are very kind" could convey implicit acceptance or gratitude in one context while functioning as part of *ta'arof*, a culturally embedded Persian politeness practice, in another.

The analytical framework incorporated speech act theory, politeness theory, and face-management principles. Indirect compliment responses were examined in relation to their linguistic forms, communicative intentions, and interpersonal functions, with particular emphasis on how speakers negotiated politeness, maintained face, and managed social relationships.

Data were analyzed qualitatively using descriptive-interpretive analysis to identify patterns between indirect compliment response strategies and the three contextual variables. The analysis considered both linguistic features and sociocultural meanings to explain variations in the selection and interpretation of indirect responses across different Persian-speaking interactions.

### **Data Collection Method**

The data for this study were collected through field-based purposive sampling. The research population consisted of Persian speakers, and a situation-based questionnaire, or Discourse Completion Task (DCT), was used to collect the data. This method was selected because it allows the same communicative situations to be presented to participants and makes their responses comparable.

In the first stage, a set of communicative situations was designed in which one participant complimented another. The situations were designed to vary in terms of power and social

distance. For example, situations involving a professor and student, manager and employee, colleagues, friends, and family members were included. The situations also varied in terms of formality and intimacy.

For each situation, participants were asked to imagine themselves in the described circumstances and provide the response they would naturally give to the compliment. For example, a situation such as “Your professor praises your class presentation and says: ‘That was a very good presentation’” was presented, and participants were asked to write what they would say in such circumstances.

Purposive sampling was employed, and an effort was made to include participants from different social and age backgrounds. Before the main data collection, the questionnaire was piloted with a limited number of Persian speakers to assess the clarity of the situations and their naturalness. After ambiguous items were revised, the final version of the instrument was administered to the participants.

After the responses were collected, all data were initially examined and instances containing responses to compliments were extracted. The responses were then classified according to their degree of directness or indirectness. In the next stage, indirect responses were categorized according to their pragmatic functions, including implicit acceptance, gratitude, modesty, self-deprecation, apparent rejection, reciprocal complimenting, and face maintenance.

To analyze the role of social variables, each response was coded according to three primary indicators:

1. **Social power:** an equal or unequal relationship between speaker and addressee;
2. **Social distance:** the degree of familiarity and intimacy between participants;
3. **Situational context:** whether the situation was formal or informal and the circumstances in which the compliment occurred.

When a response could be assigned to more than one category, its primary code was determined according to the context and its dominant function. To increase the reliability of the analysis, the data were classified on the basis of operational definitions for each strategy so that the criteria for identifying indirect responses remained consistent throughout the dataset.

Finally, the classified data were analyzed qualitatively, and where appropriate, the relative frequency of each response type was calculated to determine how changes in power, social distance, and situational context affected the selection of response strategies to compliments.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section analyzes the collected data on Persian-speaking interactions, with a focus on indirect responses to compliments. The aim is to identify different types of indirect responses, explain their pragmatic functions, and examine the role of context, power relations, and social distance in their selection and interpretation. The analysis indicates that responses to compliments in Persian often extend beyond the literal meaning of the expression and that the communicative context and relationship between speakers must also be taken into account.

### **1. Types of Indirect Responses to Compliments**

The analysis showed that indirect responses can be grouped according to their primary function:

| Response Type                | Example                                                    | Pragmatic Function                                                  |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Indirect acceptance</b>   | "You are very kind."                                       | Acceptance of the compliment combined with modesty                  |
| <b>Indirect gratitude</b>    | "That is your generous opinion."                           | Expressing appreciation to the interlocutor                         |
| <b>Self-deprecation</b>      | "I didn't do anything."                                    | Downplaying oneself and avoiding self-praise                        |
| <b>Apparent rejection</b>    | "Oh, no, it's not really like that."                       | Maintaining modesty while implicitly accepting the compliment       |
| <b>Reciprocal compliment</b> | "You are the one who is always kind."                      | Returning the positive evaluation to the interlocutor               |
| <b>Face maintenance</b>      | "It's nothing compared with what you deserve."             | Showing politeness and preserving the positive face of both parties |
| <b>Humor and intimacy</b>    | "Don't keep complimenting me—I might start believing you!" | Creating an intimate and friendly atmosphere                        |

This classification demonstrates that a response may perform more than one function simultaneously. For example, "You are very kind" can function as an expression of gratitude while also attributing the source of the positive evaluation to the interlocutor, thereby helping the speaker avoid self-praise.

## 2. Indirect Acceptance of Compliments

One of the most frequent patterns in the data was accepting a compliment without explicitly stating acceptance. In this type of response, speakers use expressions such as "You are very kind," "You are very thoughtful," or "That is your generous opinion." At the surface level, the speaker does not directly confirm the compliment but does not reject it either.

For example:

**A:** "Your presentation was very good."  
**B:** "You are very kind."

In this interaction, the response "You are very kind" is ostensibly directed toward the positive attitude of the interlocutor, but at the pragmatic level it can be interpreted as a polite acceptance of the compliment and an expression of gratitude. Therefore, the actual meaning of the response cannot be determined solely from its lexical meaning; the conversational context plays an important role in its interpretation.

## 3. Modesty and Self-Deprecation

The second major pattern involves strategies of modesty and self-deprecation. In these cases, the speaker reduces or minimizes the positive value attributed to them by the interlocutor.

For example:

**A:** "You gave a very good speech."  
**B:** "No, I didn't do anything."

At the literal level, the response constitutes a rejection of the compliment. However, within the social context of Persian, such a response may function as an expression of modesty and does not necessarily indicate genuine disagreement with the interlocutor's evaluation. This pattern is related to the concept of *shekasteh-nafsi* discussed by Sharifian (2005) in connection with Persian speakers' responses to compliments.

From this perspective, self-deprecation can function as a strategy for avoiding self-praise and maintaining a modest self-image. Thus, an apparent rejection of a compliment can coexist with implicit acceptance.

#### **4. Reciprocal Complimenting**

Another observed pattern involves responding to a compliment by offering a positive evaluation of the interlocutor.

For example:

**A:** "What a beautiful outfit you're wearing."

**B:** "You always have such good taste."

In this example, instead of directly accepting the compliment, the speaker redirects the positive evaluation toward the interlocutor. This strategy can reduce the focus on the self and transfer it to the addressee while maintaining a positive interactional atmosphere.

Reciprocal complimenting can also strengthen social solidarity. In intimate relationships, this strategy may sometimes be accompanied by joking and humor.

#### **5. The Role of Situational Context**

The analysis indicated that situational context has a considerable influence on the selection of response types. The same expression may acquire different pragmatic meanings in different situations.

For example, the response "You are very kind" in an interaction between two friends may signal intimacy and friendly acceptance, whereas the same expression in an interaction between a student and professor may primarily function to demonstrate respect and maintain formality. Therefore, indirect responses cannot be analyzed independently of the communicative situation. Factors such as location, topic of conversation, degree of formality, prior relationship between participants, and type of compliment can all influence interpretation.

#### **6. The Role of Power Relations**

Another important finding concerns the influence of power relations on the selection of response strategies. In relationships involving unequal power, such as professor–student or manager–employee relationships, responses tend to be more cautious and formal.

For example:

**Professor:** "Your paper is very well written and precise."

**Student:** "Thank you; that is very kind of you."

Here, in addition to expressing gratitude, the student's response demonstrates recognition of the professor's position. The speaker avoids directly accepting the positive evaluation of their own ability and instead attributes part of the positive value to the professor's kindness and evaluation.

In relatively equal-power relationships, such as relationships between colleagues or friends, the range of responses is broader, and humor, self-deprecation, and reciprocal complimenting are more readily used.

#### **7. The Role of Social Distance**

Social distance also plays an important role in the selection and interpretation of responses. In close relationships, individuals generally have greater freedom to use informal, humorous, and even apparently rejecting responses.

For example:

**Friend:** “What an amazingly delicious meal you made!”

**Response:** “Don’t compliment me like that—I’ll have to make it for you again tomorrow!”

Although this response apparently deflects the compliment through humor, at the pragmatic level it can indicate acceptance, intimacy, and maintenance of a positive interactional atmosphere.

By contrast, in relationships characterized by greater social distance, responses such as “You are very kind,” “That is your generous opinion,” or “That is very kind of you” are more appropriate because the degree of intimacy and informality is lower.

### **8. The Interaction of Power, Social Distance, and Context**

The overall analysis indicates that power and social distance do not operate entirely independently; rather, they interact with each other and with situational context in influencing response selection.

For example, a professor–student relationship simultaneously involves social distance and power asymmetry; consequently, the student’s response may be more formal and cautious. By contrast, two close friends typically have equal formal power and low social distance; consequently, responses involving joking, humor, or self-deprecation may be more natural.

Thus, the following general pattern can be derived from the data:

**Greater social distance and power asymmetry → greater formality and caution in responses**

**Lower social distance and greater equality → greater intimacy, humor, and freedom in responses**

This pattern is not absolute, however, and other factors, such as age, gender, type of compliment, communicative situation, and individual characteristics, may also influence response no, it’s not really like that” may apparently constitute a rejection of a compliment, but in an appropriate context it may simply function as a way of demonstrating modesty. Therefore, pragmatic analysis of responses to compliments requires attention to implied selection.

### **9. The Difference Between Surface Meaning and Pragmatic Function**

One of the most important findings of the data analysis is the difference between the surface meaning of a response and its actual interactional function. For example, the expression “I didn’t do anything” literally indicates that the speaker considers their action insignificant. However, in a specific communicative context, it may function as an expression of gratitude, modesty, and implicit acceptance of a compliment.

Similarly, “Oh, no, it’s not really like that” may apparently constitute a rejection of a compliment, but in an appropriate context it may simply function as a way of demonstrating modesty. Therefore, pragmatic analysis of responses to compliments requires attention to implied meaning and the relationship between language and context.

### **10. Summary of Findings**

Based on the analysis, indirect responses to compliments in Persian are characterized by considerable diversity and multiple functions. The major patterns identified include:

1. Indirect acceptance of compliments;
2. Indirect gratitude and appreciation;
3. Modesty and self-deprecation;
4. Apparent rejection accompanied by implicit acceptance;

5. Reciprocal complimenting;
6. Face maintenance for the speaker and addressee;
7. Establishment or enhancement of intimacy;
8. The use of humor and joking in close relationships.

Overall, the findings indicate that context, power, and social distance are three important factors in shaping and interpreting indirect responses to compliments. As formality, social distance, or power asymmetry increases, responses generally tend toward greater formality and caution, whereas in more intimate relationships, the use of humor, self-deprecation, and reciprocal complimenting becomes more possible. These findings indicate that indirect responses in Persian should be viewed as part of a system of face management, politeness, and social relationship regulation rather than merely as linguistic structures for rejecting or accepting a compliment.

The findings of the present study indicate that Persian speakers' responses to compliments cannot be regarded merely as direct linguistic reactions to the interlocutor's utterance; rather, these responses often have multiple pragmatic and social functions. By selecting a direct or indirect response, speakers respond not only to the content of the compliment but also seek to manage the social relationship, maintain their own and the interlocutor's face, demonstrate the degree of intimacy, and conform to cultural norms. From this perspective, responses such as "You are very kind," "That is your generous opinion," "It is nothing compared with what you deserve," or "I didn't do anything" may appear at the surface level to express modesty or even rejection, but in an appropriate communicative context they can be interpreted as implicit acceptance of the compliment, gratitude, and maintenance of the social relationship.

This finding is consistent with Pomerantz's (1978) account of the dual nature of responses to compliments. According to this perspective, individuals face two interactional requirements when receiving a compliment: on the one hand, they are expected to accept the interlocutor's compliment; on the other hand, they are expected to avoid self-praise and presenting an excessively positive image of themselves. Persian indirect responses can be viewed as a means of balancing these two requirements. For example, in the response "You are very kind," the speaker does not explicitly say "Yes, you are right," but neither do they completely reject the interlocutor's compliment. Consequently, the value of the interlocutor's utterance is preserved while the speaker avoids direct self-praise.

One of the most important findings of the study is the prominence of modesty and self-deprecation in Persian speakers' responses. Responses such as "No, it's not really like that," "I didn't do anything," or "You are very kind" may literally be interpreted as a reduction of self-value or a rejection of the compliment; nevertheless, within the cultural and social context of Persian, such responses do not necessarily indicate genuine disagreement with the speaker. This finding is related to Sharifian's (2005) discussion of *shekasteh-nafsi*, or "self-effacement," in Persian culture. According to this perspective, self-deprecation can form part of an interactional cultural pattern and enable "You are very kind" in a conversation between two friends may indicate intimacy and friendly acceptance of a compliment, whereas the same expression in an interaction between a student and professor may primarily indicate respect, maintenance of social distance, and avoidance of a direct response. individuals to maintain a positive relationship with the interlocutor without overtly accepting superiority or competence.

The findings also demonstrate that situational context plays an important role in interpreting indirect responses. A single response may perform different functions in two different situations. For example, the expression “You are very kind” in a conversation between two friends may indicate intimacy and friendly acceptance of a compliment, whereas the same expression in an interaction between a student and professor may primarily indicate respect, maintenance of social distance, and avoidance of a direct response. Therefore, analyzing responses to compliments without considering context may result in an inaccurate interpretation of their actual meaning.

Power relations are also an important factor in the selection and interpretation of responses. In relationships characterized by power asymmetry, such as professor–student or manager–employee relationships, more formal and indirect responses may be used more frequently. In such situations, an individual may use a short and polite response such as “That is your generous opinion” to acknowledge the positive value of the interlocutor’s statement while also recognizing the interlocutor’s social position. This finding can be explained within Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness framework, since attention to the face of the interlocutor and speaker, as well as the degree of social distance and power between them, influences the selection of linguistic strategies.

In contrast, in relationships where power is approximately equal and social distance is lower, responses can be more flexible and varied. The use of humor, joking, self-deprecation, and even apparent rejection of a compliment among friends and family members may form part of strategies for establishing and maintaining intimacy. In such circumstances, the actual meaning of a response depends less on its lexical meaning and more on the relationship between the speakers and their shared knowledge.

Social distance, together with power, also plays a determining role in shaping responses. As social distance between speaker and addressee increases, the likelihood of using more formal, cautious, and indirect responses also increases. Conversely, reduced social distance creates greater opportunities for informal responses. This demonstrates that indirectness in a response does not always indicate rejection of a compliment; it may instead serve as a means of regulating social distance and indicating the degree of formality in the relationship.

The findings can also be compared with Holmes’s (1988) view of the role of compliments in establishing and strengthening social relationships. A compliment is not merely the transmission of a positive evaluation; it can function as a strategy for establishing solidarity and strengthening relationships. Therefore, responses to compliments should also be examined within this interactional framework. Responses such as “You are very kind” or “It is thanks to your kindness” can contribute not only to responding to the compliment but also to maintaining a positive conversational atmosphere.

From a pragmatic perspective, these findings are also consistent with Leech’s (1983) approach. In social interaction, individuals do not focus solely on transmitting propositional meaning; they also seek to balance communicative objectives with social considerations. An indirect response to a compliment represents an example of such balancing because the speaker can maintain a desirable social relationship without either explicitly accepting or completely rejecting the compliment.

The findings can also be interpreted within Searle's (1969) speech act theory. A compliment has a particular communicative purpose as a speech act, but the response to it does not necessarily have to be expressed in the same explicit and direct form. Therefore, understanding the meaning of a response requires consideration of not only its linguistic structure but also the speaker's communicative intention, the relationship between participants, and the situational conditions. For this reason, the response "I didn't do anything" may constitute an apparent rejection at the literal level but function pragmatically as gratitude, modesty, and indirect acceptance of the compliment.

A review of research on compliments among Persian speakers also indicates that attention to cultural and social factors is essential to analyzing this phenomenon. Derakhshan et al. (2020), in their review of research on compliments among Persian speakers in Iran, emphasized the importance of examining different dimensions of this act in future research. The findings of the present study likewise underscore this need and indicate that analyzing indirect responses without considering variables such as power, social distance, and context would provide an incomplete account of Persian speakers' linguistic behavior.

Overall, indirect responses to compliments in Persian can be regarded as part of a complex system of social relationship management. Such responses may simultaneously serve several purposes, including implicit acceptance of the compliment, gratitude, expression of modesty, avoidance of self-praise, face maintenance, respect for social distance, and the establishment or enhancement of intimacy. Therefore, the ultimate meaning of a response cannot be determined solely from its surface form; its analysis requires simultaneous attention to context, power relations, social distance, and cultural norms.

Finally, the findings of the present study demonstrate that indirectness in responding to compliments should not simply be regarded as a sign of ambiguity or non-acceptance. In many communicative situations, indirectness itself constitutes a purposeful communicative strategy. Through indirectness, speakers seek to balance acceptance of the interlocutor's positive evaluation with the maintenance of a modest self-image. Thus, indirect responses can be considered an important means of face management and social relationship regulation in Persian-speaking interactions.

## **CONCLUSION**

The present study aimed to provide a pragmatic analysis of indirect compliment responses in Persian and examine how situational context, relative power, and social distance influenced their selection and interpretation. The findings demonstrated that responding to compliments in Persian involved more than a linguistic reaction to positive evaluations; it constituted a social act through which speakers negotiated face, adhered to politeness norms, maintained interpersonal relationships, and regulated the degree of intimacy with their interlocutors.

The findings indicated that indirect responses, including expressions such as "You are very kind," "That is your generous opinion," "It is nothing compared with what you deserve," and "I didn't do anything," could perform different pragmatic functions depending on the interactional context. These expressions could convey implicit acceptance, gratitude, modesty, or apparent rejection without necessarily indicating genuine disagreement with the compliment. Consequently, their communicative meanings could not be determined solely

from their linguistic forms but required consideration of situational circumstances, participants' communicative intentions, and interpersonal relationships.

Furthermore, situational context and relative power played important roles in shaping the selection of compliment response strategies. In relationships characterized by greater power asymmetry or social distance, participants generally employed more formal, respectful, and indirect expressions. Conversely, in closer interpersonal relationships, indirect responses frequently involved humor, joking, self-deprecation, and reciprocal compliments, which could contribute to strengthening interpersonal solidarity and intimacy.

The findings also highlighted the significance of modesty in Persian interpersonal communication. By minimizing their own achievements or attributing positive evaluations to the kindness and consideration of their interlocutors, speakers could avoid the appearance of overt self-praise. From this perspective, indirect compliment responses functioned as pragmatic strategies for balancing the acknowledgment of positive evaluations with the maintenance of a favorable social image. These patterns were consistent with the cultural practice of *shekasteh-nafsi*, which emphasizes self-effacement and modesty in interpersonal interactions.

Overall, indirect compliment responses in Persian emerged as a multidimensional pragmatic phenomenon shaped by the interaction of linguistic, cultural, and social factors. Situational context, relative power, and social distance influenced both the linguistic realization and pragmatic interpretation of these responses. Accordingly, analyses that overlooked sociocultural and interpersonal factors risked producing incomplete or inaccurate interpretations of speakers' communicative intentions. The findings further highlighted the relevance of Persian pragmatics for understanding culturally embedded politeness practices, including *ta'arof*, face management, and the negotiation of interpersonal relationships in everyday communication.

Future research should incorporate naturally occurring conversational data to examine indirect compliment responses in authentic interactional settings and strengthen the ecological validity of the findings. Comparative studies involving different age groups, social backgrounds, and interpersonal relationships could provide further insights into variations in response strategies across Persian-speaking communities. Cross-linguistic and cross-cultural investigations comparing Persian with other languages could also clarify the extent to which indirect compliment responses reflect culturally specific conventions or broader pragmatic principles. Additionally, future studies could employ mixed-methods approaches to examine the relative contributions of situational context, power asymmetry, and social distance to the selection and interpretation of response strategies. Such investigations would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic dimensions of compliment responses in Persian.

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