

# The Address Forms of Spouses in Different Social Strata in Iran and Its Sociolinguistic Implications

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## Abstract

The current study aims to investigate different terms that spouses apply in order to address each other in different social strata in Iran and to discuss what these patterns reflect about the power and solidarity relationships of spouses in the present society of Iran. To this end, using a social class questionnaire, 97 participants were stratified to upper-middle, middle and lower-middle classes and then the patterns used by them were specified. Analysing the data suggests that Iran's religious and patriarchal society play important roles in the way that spouses address each other. Furthermore, it suggests that with the increase of educated and working women, the relationship between spouses is moving towards solidarity; however, power has found new ways of manifestations.

**Keywords:** Social class, Address terms of spouses, Sociolinguistics

## 1. Introduction

Sociolinguistic studies have indicated that linguistic features are reflections of speakers' thoughts, values and attitudes that they intend to convey. Furthermore, society's attitude towards sex differences can be manifested in the way language is used to speak about men and women (Akindele, 2008; Salami, 2004). In this respect forms of address, as a linguistic feature has been the focus of attention by a large number of researchers following the principles developed by Brown and Gilman (1960). That stems from the circumstance that terms of address have been considered as crucial linguistic features which can reflect speakers' attitudes toward and relationship with the addressee. By using language, people define their relationship to each other and identify themselves as part of a social group. Thus, inappropriate use of address terms can hinder effective communication between the speaker and the hearer since they demonstrate the social relationship between a speaker and a listener in terms of status and social distance (Akindele, 2008). In this respect, Fasold (1984) states that in no area of sociolinguistics like address forms social functions of language can be more clearly realized. Regarding this, Fasold (1990, pp.4-5), using Brown and Gilman's power pronoun semantics, states the characteristics of address usage as follows:

1. that in which one member of the dyad has power over the other. In this type of relationship, the interactants are not equal in status;
2. that in which the interactants are power equals;
3. that in which the interactants are power equals but have no solidary relationship (through shared values, for example). Here the interactants are not familiar and have no intimate relationship; and
4. that in which interactants are power equals and have solidary relationship. Here interactants are not only equal in power but they are also intimate.

Fasold (1990) holds that people generally address each other using two main kinds of address forms: 1) using their first name (FN) or 2) using their title and last name (TLN). These terms of address could be either a reciprocal exchange of FN or TLN or a non-reciprocal usage of either term in which one person gives FN and receives TLN. The important point is that despite being variable, these patterns of usage are rule-governed and systematic and are governed by some factors like age, sex and social class. Furthermore, how we say something is not less important as what we say, in other words, the content and form are so integrated that it is impossible to separate them from each other. One way of investigating this relationship is to examine a few aspects of communication one of which can be terms of address.

Considering the significance of terms of address in reflecting the cultural structure of a society, the current study intends to investigate different patterns of address forms of spouses in different social strata in Iran and to discuss what these patterns reflect about the power and solidarity relationship of spouses in the present society of Iran since as Thome-Williams (2004, p.85) states "the use of forms of address in a language indicates the kinds of relationship that one wants to maintain, social distance or solidarity". In this respect, Oyetade (1995) defines address terms as words or expressions used in interactive, dyadic and

face-to-face situations to designate the person being talked to.

## 2. Background

Generally speaking, studies related to terms of address can be divided into two categories: One category has taken its inspiration from Brown and Gilman's (1960) terms of solidarity and power and in this way they have intended to investigate the power and solidarity relationship between interactants and the possible changes that these relationships have undergone throughout the history. On the other hand, another category of studies has employed terms of address as a way to investigate the relationship between social changes and linguistic choices.

Dickey (1996) examined the issue that how the way that speaker A addresses B differ from the way that A refers to B and the factors that affect this difference. To this end, she investigated two types of interaction: family and academic settings interactions. She noticed that family members were addressed and referred to in the same way, except in conversations with a relative of a younger generation. In these cases the term used in reference was the term the younger member of the participants in a conversation would have used in addresses. By contrast, her findings suggested that the important factor in the academic setting was not that of age but of position in the academic hierarchy. Finally she concludes that there is a close relationship between the way that person A addresses person C and the way that A refers to C. The two forms will generally be the same, and when they differ, this difference will depend on the person to whom the speaker is talking at the time he or she addresses the referent.

In another study Dickey (1997) found that Greek terms of address violate two dominant tendencies found in other languages: 1) The tendency toward T/V distinctions; and 2) the principle that "what is new is polite". She concludes that ancient language is capable of contributing more to sociolinguistics than is sometimes realized.

In the same vein, Salami (2004) investigated the use of first names and petnames as address forms by Yoruba-speaking women in their interactions with their husbands. His data suggested that while age, education, region of origin and speech context play important roles in the way that women address their husbands, some other factors like gender role-expectation and relations of power between Yoruba women and men can affect women's language behaviour.

Another study conducted in relation to address terms is concerned with that of Yang's (2007). She found that married women in Chaoshan, China usually address their husband's families in the same way that children address them. However, some women have abandoned addressing their husband's families like this. Therefore, she concludes that education background may be responsible for this variation. Hence, she demonstrates a variation between social change and linguistic choice.

By the same token, Koul (1984) examined major types of modes of address, namely, interjections of address, kinship terms of address and second person pronominal usage from the point of view of their actual use in the Kashmiri society. His findings suggested that the use of modes of address is directly related to the socio-cultural patterns of a given society at a given time.

Furthermore, Akindele (2008) examined the address forms used by the Basotho people. He analyzed and discussed various types of address forms and the factors determining them.

Regarding Persian terms of address, Aliakbari and Toni (2008) identified different types of addressing terms that Persian speakers may use in different contexts. They found that Persians use personal names, general and occupation titles, kinship terms, religious oriented expressions, honorifics, terms of intimacy, personal pronouns and descriptive phrases to address each other.

As can be seen above, the majority of the studies done in the realm of terms of address have focused on address terms in general. Rarely have they focused on terms of address used by spouses. Furthermore, those focusing on addressing spouses have just put the address terms used by wives in to the spotlight not vice versa. Consequently, the current study intends to investigate different patterns of address terms that spouses employ to address each other in various social strata in Iran and to investigate their relationship with Iran's social changes.

### **3. Method**

Ninety seven university students participated in the present study. The reason behind this type of selection stemmed from the fact that University students in Iran come from different cities, so they could be a representative of the most cities in Iran.

In order to collect the relevant data, the respondents were given a questionnaire to fill out. The first part of the questionnaire meant to specify the participants' social class. In this relation, Milroy (1980) views social class as something difficult to pin down. She asserts that people can be ordered by quantifiable characteristics like income, education, occupation, residence or lifestyle. In this regard, a large number of researchers including Broom et al. (1968) and Ray (1971) consider occupation, education and income as determining factors of social class.

Considering these views, the present study incorporated some questions related to participants' income, education, occupation and lifestyle. As for this Alford (1962) believes that of those elements usually employed to pin down social class, occupation alone is the best. Therefore, to stratify the participants according to their social class, the questionnaire designed by Ray (1971) was given to participants to fill out. The rationale behind choosing this questionnaire stemmed from the circumstance that it was very comprehensive and also covered factors like income, education, occupation and life style considered important by Alford (1962).

In this respect, Ray (1971) also believes that two different types of information may be used to determine social class, i.e. subjective and objective type of information. In the subjective approach one simply asks the person what class he thinks he is by giving him a class schema and asking him to identify his position in it. On the other hand, in the objective approach, one obtains information about several properties said to be critical for social class. The current study has employed objective type of information for determining social class. In this way the respondents were stratified into upper-middle, middle and lower-middle classes. The reason for this classification had its root in the fact that rarely could we observe upper or

lower social strata.

The last questions in the questionnaire inquired about the way that the respondents' parents, as well as their grandparents address each other. Furthermore, it was also mentioned that they could hand in their questionnaires anonymously.

Subsequently, the questionnaires were analysed and the respondents were stratified based on their parents' lifestyles, education, occupation and income. Finally, the patterns of address forms for each social class were identified.

#### 4. Data analysis

Analysing the respondents parents' education, occupation, income and lifestyle indicated the following findings:

Table 1. The Number of the Participants in Each Social Class

Lower class	Middle class	Upper middle class
21	51	25
21.6%	52.5%	25.7%

Table 2. Women's Education in Lower Class

No education	Under highschool	Highschool diploma	College Degree
2	6	11	2
9.5%	28.5%	52.38%	9.5%

Table 3. Women's Education in Middle Class

No education	Under highschool	Highschool diploma	College Degree
1	3	39	8
1.9%	5.8%	76.47%	15.6 %

Table 4. Women's Education in Upper Class

No education	Under highschool	Highschool diploma	College Degree
0	0	7	18
0%	0%	28%	72%

Table 5. Men's Education in Lower Class

No education	Under highschool	Highschool diploma	College Degree
2	7	9	3
9.5%	33.3 %	42.8%	14.2%

Table 6. Men's Education in Middle Class

No education	Under highschool	Highschool diploma	College Degree
0	7	31	13
0%	13.7%	60.78%	25.4%

Then different types of address forms used by each of these social classes were pinned down as follows.

#### 4.1 The common terms of address used by men to address their wives in lower class

Generally speaking, men use the women's first name (FN) in order to address them. However in five cases men use the term *Khanom* meaning Madam to address their wives and some others use Title+First name to address their wives (e.g. *Maryam khanom* meaning Mrs. Maryam). Furthermore, rarely does men use not any certain term or zero address terms to address their wives. For instance, one of the respondents' father in this social class addresses his wife using *ba toam* meaning I am talking to you. By the same token, another respondent's father does not use any particular term to address his mother. Additionally, one of the respondents' father uses the term *zan* meaning woman to address his mother. A similar form has been reported by Dickey (1997). She states that in Greece wives address their husbands either by name or with the term "aner" meaning husband. However, husbands rarely address their wives by name and preferred the term "gunai" meaning wife, although they always addressed their mistresses by name.

Rarely does older men in lower class address their wives using contempting terms like *kolfat* meaning housemaid, *Ashpazkhaneh* meaning kitchen and *Manzel* meaning house. Another interesting point observed here is that some men address their wives with their FN at home, but other forms like Children's mother or with the name of their older son or daughter as well as terms like mother when referring their wives outside home or when addressing them there.

#### 4.2 The common terms of address used by women to address their husbands in lower class

In this social class, women usually address their husbands using their FNs. Nevertheless, in some other cases women may use Title+FN. Titles like *Agha* meaning Mr. Some others use the term *Haj* (Mecca pilgrim)+FN. In other cases women call their husbands *ba ba* meaning daddy. Another title used by the women in this class was *Mash* which refers to a person who has travelled to Mashhad (a holy city in Iran where the Shrine of the 8<sup>th</sup> Shite Imam is located). Still some others in this group use some kinship terms to address their husbands. Since in lower social class intermarriage is more common, some women use kinship terms

like *pesar ameh* (Aunts'son) to address their husbands.

#### *4.3 The common terms of address used by men to address their wives in Middle class*

In this class again men usually use their wife's FNs to address them. However, some affectionate terms of address like *Khanoomi* (my lady) and *Golbarg* (Petal) were observed. Another group of men in this class use endearment terms like *azizam* (My dear). Some others used the title Haj+respect title without mentioning the first name.

Diminutive terms also were used by the men in this social class to address their wives. Such terms include first names in a variety of diminutive forms. For instance, the name *Akram* is referred to as *Aki*.

#### *4.4 The common terms of address used by women to address their husbands in Middle class*

Generally speaking, the women in this social class use FN to address their wives. However, some others use Title+FN like Agha Siamak meaning Mr. Siamak and some others use their husbands last names to address them.

#### *4.5 The common terms of address used by men to address their wives in upper class*

In this class usually using FN is quite common as well as some endearment terms like honey, sweetie and some others also just use respect title like *Khanom* meaning Madam.

#### *4.6 The common terms of address used by women to address their husbands in upper class*

The majority of cases had mentioned FN as the most rampant term of address, very rarely endearment terms and some use occupational titles like doctor and engineer.

### **5. Discussion and conclusion**

Generally speaking, the concept of family in Iran's culture is more private than any other culture. On the basis of this culture, females relatives must be protected from outside influences and are taken care of all times. As the data of address terms suggests, this cultural characteristic has been reflected in men's addressing their wives, especially in lower-intermediate strata of society where some men address their wives using terms like wife and not their first names. In this class some women addressed their husbands using terms that their children use to address their fathers. This may demonstrate the social distance that exists between the husbands and wives in the lower intermediate class in Iran. Moreover, using contempting terms and teknonyms by husbands to address their wives may also put attest to this fact that men are considered superior to women in this social class. Since using ones FN implies intimacy; therefore men use teknonyms or other terms to dictate their superiority.

However, according to the present data, even in the lower intermediate class rarely do men use terms other than their wife's first names these days. This may be due to the fact that, today in Iran the number of educated women has increased and may be this has created solidarity between spouses.

The religious beliefs of people have also had its manifestations in the way that they address

their spouses, particularly in lower social class. After the revolution in Iran the use of the religious terms like Haji (a pilgrim of Mecca), Karbalaii (a pilgrim of Karbala) and Mashhadi (a pilgrim of Mashhad) have become very rampant.

The use of kinship terms to address one's spouse may have its roots in the fact that, as Aliakbari and Toni (2008) assert, Iran's culture is very dependent on family relations.

The address terms used by the people in the middle and upper-middle classes indicate the solidarity between spouses in these two classes. Using diminutive, endearment and affectionate terms all show that the relationship between spouses has been formed on the basis of solidarity. This may stem from the circumstance that in the middle and upper-middle class the number of educated and, most importantly, working women exceeds that of lower class women. The factors of education and having a job eclipse the distance between spouses which, in turn, manifests itself in addressing each other.

Despite all the increasing solidarity between spouses, Iran's society can still be described as a patriarchal one. One justification for this claim may be the case that, as the data reveals, some women in upper class address their husbands using their husbands' job titles; however, men will never use women's job titles to address them. This may be due to the fact that as Moghaddam (2001, p.35) states Iran has a patriarchal society. She defines patriarchy as "a kinship ordered social structure with strictly defined sex roles in which women are subordinate to men". Therefore, since these job titles reflect the power of the person, men usually avoid using them.

In conclusion, viewing the data in general suggests that apparently the relationship between spouses in Iran is moving towards solidarity; however, the power relationship has found new forms of manifestations.

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