Iranian Journal of Applied Linguistics (IJAL)
Vol. 25, No. 1, March 2022, 127-153

"Knock on the wood honey to protect them from evil-eye:" A sociopragmatic analysis of English and Persian compliment response behavior of Iranian female language learners

Mozhgan Younesi
Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran

Hossein Talebzadeh*
Kharazmi University, Tehran and Karaj, Iran

Abstract

Many studies on L1 and/or L2 pragmatic competence are constrained by universalist orientations towards sociopragmatics and overlook the idiosyncratic cultural scripts and schemas of underexplored languages and cultures. Particularly neglected is the complicating role of Iranian cultural schema of (dis-)belief in the evil eye with regards to the speech act of complimenting (and responding to it); actually, the schema is hypothesized to pose intricate interactional challenges for both parties due to the possible interpretations of and (non-)verbal responses to compliments (as predominantly Face-Saving Acts versus potentially Face-Threatening Acts). Moreover, still unknown is the way these could confound EFL learners' cross-cultural communications. To address these gaps, we present the second phase of a more comprehensive study of compliment response (CR) behaviors of Iranian respondents while checking the adequacy of our proposed model (inspired by Herber's taxonomy). To qualitatively and quantitatively examine the CRs of fifteen proficient Iranian female learners of English, we initially collected the data using two sets of Discourse Completion Tasks (DCT) (in Persian and English) consisting of a variety of situations and variables (e.g., social distance and compliment topics). Then, follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted to tap into the participants' (non-)beliefs in the evil eye and its presupposed effects on their compliment exchanges. The findings underscore the adequacy of our modified model and the particularities of Iranian cultural schemas. Specifically, being a widespread belief, evil-eye is shown to play a pivotal role in formulating the responses to compliments through the selective application of CR types such as *Cheshm-Zadan* and *Taarof* in reaction to the compliments given (particularly those on family members or beloved ones) across both languages. The study concludes with a discussion of the findings with reference to the relevant literature and implications for intercultural communication, language education, and sociopragmatic research and practice.

Keywords: compliment speech act; compliment response strategies; evil eye; Herbert`s taxonomy; Sociopragmatics

* *Corresponding author:* Department of Foreign Languages Department, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Kharazmi University, Tehran and Karaj, Iran.
Email address: talebzadeh@khu.ac.ir

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

1. Introduction

Compliments and compliment responses are believed to "not only give insights into the rules of language use in a speech community, but also show the value system of individual speakers as well as the community" (Yuan, 2002, p. 182). An in-depth study of speech acts—including compliments—according to Wolfson (1981, 1989), not only reveals the rules of speaking in a speech community but also offers insights into the value system of an individual and the community (Lin et al., 2012). To respond correctly to compliments, both knowledge of grammatical competence and pragmatic competence are needed. Hence, socio-cultural knowledge must be developed in pedagogy to raise pragmatic competence (Shahidi Poor, 2017). For one thing the native speakers of a language may simply forgive and forget the grammar and pronunciation errors, but the pragmatic errors may cause an offense which will are less likely be easily forgotten or forgiven as the interlocuter may be perceived as rude or uncooperative (Talebzadeh & Rajabi, in preparation; Wolfson, 1989).

Compliments and compliment responses are highly frequent in (Persian) everyday conversations; therefore, analyzing compliment responses can shed light on the specific cultural script of the Iranian speech community given their high frequency and clear connection with cultural norms (Talebzadeh & Rajabi, in preparation). Although there are many studies focusing on the compliment and compliment response speech act even in the context of Iran or Persian language in light of different social factors and cultural schemas (Shahidipoor, 2017; Sharifian, 2005, 2008; Talebzadeh & Rajabi, in preparation; Younesi, 2020; Younesi & Talebzadeh, 2022; Yamini, 1996), still untouched is the possible role of other social schemas or Iranian widespread beliefs (including evil eye) on their compliment responses. *Evil-eye* is the equivalent English translation of "*Cheshm zakhm*" in Persian and "النظر" or "عين الحسود" in Arabic (Talebzadeh & Rajabi, in preparation; Younsei & Talebzadeh, 2022; Zare Zardini, et al., 2015). It is a harm caused by either kindness and admiring look or envious one to humans and things (Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2010). This widespread belief among Iranians associates it to the envy and jealousy of the compliment giver and make the complimentee perceive the compliment as a negative factor; therefore, they may confront the possible danger of evil eye by their compliment responses implicitly or explicitly, linguistically or non-linguistically (Talebzadeh & Rajabi, in preparation; Younesi & Talebzadeh, 2022).

Talebzadeh and Rajabi (in preparation), for instance, analyzed Iranian men`s CRs in light of evil-eye belief. Their focus was only on men`s compliment responses and women`s CRs were untouched in that study. On the other hand, their data were not that recent to

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

propound strong claims regarding the Iranian recent CR behaviors. Therefore, there is a need for a diachronic study which analyzes the Iranian CRs with regard to evil-eye belief. On the other hand, Younesi and Talebzadeh (2022) have recently investigated the effect of evil-eye on Iranian females' compliment responses by considering age, social distance and compliment topic as the first phase of the study. Nevertheless, the possible role of language factor (Englis/Farsi) and its effect on the type of Iranian female compliment responses remained untouched in their studies.

The current study, therefore, is aimed at analyzing the ways evil-eye might influence people`s verbal and non-verbal L1 and L2 behaviors. Specifically, the influence of learning English as a foreign language on CRs given by female Persian speakers is analyzed both in English and Persian situations. Moreover, the integrated effect of social variables and learning English as a foreign language is reported alongside the reflection of the respondents' (dis-)belief in "*evil-eye.*"

2. Literature review

2.1. Pragmatics, Speech Acts, and Language Learners

According to Austin (1962 based on Shahidi Poor 2017), speech acts are the acts being performed in saying something. He has classified three different levels of actions beyond the utterance of the act. These are Locutionary, Illocutionary and Perlocutionary acts:

a) Locutionary act: The act of uttering phonemes, morphemes or sentences and also saying something about the world.
b) Illocutionary act: The speaker`s intention realized in producing an utterance.
c) Perlocutionary act: The intended effect of an utterance on the hearer.

According to Austin`s speech act theory, compliments and compliment responses can be, respectively, considered as illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts (Shahidi poor, 2017). Speech acts include linguistic form and social norms; hence, they play an important role in language studies and contribute significantly to the construction of everyday communication (see Allami and Monatezeri, 2012). Kasper and Rose (2001) define pragmatics as "the study of communicative action in sociocultural context. Communicative action includes not only using speech acts (such as apologizing, complimenting, complaining, and requesting) but also engaging in different types of discourse and participating in speech events of varying length and complexity."

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

There are two positions regarding the similarity or difference of pragmatics among various cultures, similar position and different position (Chen, 2010). Chen (2010, p. 167) argues that a "different position has been held by the majority of scholars studying Eastern languages and has no doubt had the upper hand in the debate, while the similar position has been made explicit only recently by just a few researchers." According to the different positions adopted by a bulk of cross-cultural studies in the literature, there is a pragmatic difference across cultures and languages, so it means that different cultures may use different pragmatic devices and also may have different norms for interaction in terms of conversation structure. Therefore, these various cultures may use different forms to convey similar pragmatic meanings or, conversely, may use similar forms to convey different pragmatic meanings (Sharifian, 2005).

Long and Doughty (2003) state that second/foreign language learners have to achieve a proper level of proficiency in linguistic resources, sociocultural norms, and pragmatics devices in the second/foreign language to survive in a new society and culture (Shahidi poor, 2017). These sociocultural norms and pragmatic devices are a major component of pragmatic competence. For a long time, pragmatic competence was overlooked in pedagogy, but the pronounced inability of many second/foreign language learners to behave appropriately in different situations justified the inclusion of "pragmatic competence" as an integral component of several communicative competence models (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980), hence, its becoming to the forefront in language pedagogy (Shahidi poor, 2017).

2.2. Compliment Response Frameworks

In the realm of compliment and compliment responses, there are various classifications and/or frameworks presenting compliment response types (Boori, 1994; Chiang & Pochtrager, 1993; Herbert, 1990; Holmes, 1993; Pomerantz, 1978; Younesi & Talebzadeh, 2022; Talebzadeh & Rajabi, in preparation). In 1990, Herbert utilized his own presented CR types in 1986 and 1989 to study the existing differences between American males and females in their compliment responses. His category includes 12 different types of interrelated compliment responses (Herbert, 1990, pp. 208-209; see also Figure 1 taken from Herbert, 1990, p. 210):

1- ***Appreciation token***: A verbal or non-verbal acceptance of the compliment.
2- ***Comment Acceptance – single***: Addressee accepts the complimentary force and offers a relevant comment on the appreciated topic.

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

3- ***Praise upgrade***: Addressee accepts the compliment and asserts that the compliment force is insufficient.
4- ***Comment history***: Addressee offers a comment (or series of comments) on the object complimented; These comments differ from (2) in that the latter are impersonal, that is, they shift the force of the compliment from the addressee.
5- ***Reassignmen****t*: Addressee agrees with the compliment assertion, but the complimentary force is transferred to some third person or to the object itself.
6- ***Return***: As with (5) except that the praise is shifted (or returned) to the first speaker.
7- ***Scale down***: Addressee disagrees with the complimentary force, pointing to some flaw in the object or claiming that the praise is overstated.
8- ***Question***: Addressee questions the sincerity or the appropriateness of the compliment.
9- ***Disagreement***: Addressee asserts that the object complimented is not worthy of praise: the first speaker`s assertion is in error.
10- ***Qualification***: Weaker than (9): addressee merely qualifies the original assertion (usually with though, but, well, etc.).
11- ***No acknowledgment***: Addressee gives no indication of having heard the compliment: the addressee either (a) responds with an irrelevant comment (i.e. topic shift) or (b) gives no response.
12- ***Request Interpretation***: The Addressee, consciously or not, interprets the compliments as a request rather than a simple compliment.

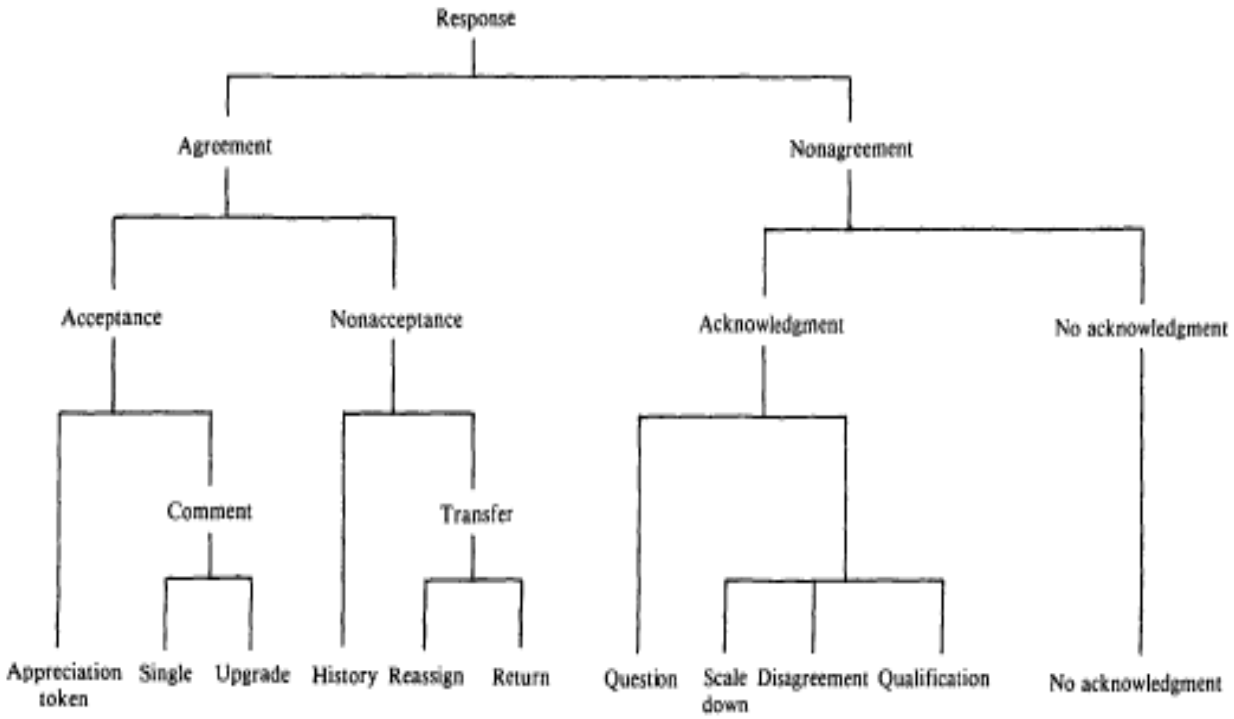
According to Herbert such responses are not compliment responses because it is not perceived as a compliment speech act by the addressee.

Herbert considers some of the compliments as requests and classifies them into the 12th type of this category. This type assumes compliments as a request rather than a simple compliment with the aim of admiration or praise. Therefore, these responses are not considered as compliment responses. But, in Iran, there are some prefabricated CRs which can be classified as the extreme culture-specific politeness strategy of *Ta'roof* which means a non-genuine, ostensible offer (Morady Moghaddam, 2017). In general, Herberts' taxonomy is somehow insufficient in the case of Iranian compliment responses. For instance, Sharifian (2008) had to suggest other categories such as "apology" to eliminate this insufficiency.

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

Figure 1

Interrelations of Herbert`s (1990) Compliment Response Types



More relevant to the current study is Talebzadeh and Rajabi (in preparation) who utilized Herbert`s taxonomy to investigate Iranian men's CR behavior. Their data, too, raised some questions about the adequacy of Herbert`s categories for the context of Iran. In fact, based on their findings, eight new categories (i.e., *Good wish*, *Taarof*, *Boast*, *Cheshm-zadan*, *Witticism*, *Diverge*, *Hallelujah*, and *Combination)* were added to account for their entire modest corpus. Therefore, they introduced a modified framework (adopted in the current study) which consists of 20 categories.

2.3. Iranian Compliment Responses in English and Persian

Motaghi-Tabari and Beuzeville (2012) demonstrate that native Iranians usually disagree with the complimentary force of the utterances while Iranians in Australia or Australians mostly use the agreement CR strategy. So, culture is argued to have a pivotal role in shaping pragmatic norms in such situations that the individual is dominated by the target language culture.

The extent to which Persian speakers reflect the cultural schema of "*Shekasteh-nafsi*" in the context of compliment responses in their L1 and L2 (English) was investigated by Sharifian in 2008. Results showed that Persian speakers instantiate *shekasteh-nafsi* cultural schema both in their L1 and L2 compliment responses but in varying degrees. According to the

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

findings, the context of receiving the compliment would affect the responses and instantiate the *shekasteh-nafsi* schema differently.

Heidari-Shahreza et al. (2011) investigated gender-based differences in compliment responses among elementary Iranian teenage EFL learners. Data were gathered through the application of a written DCT controlled for situations of appearance, character, ability and possession. The results showed that females use evasion and rejection CR strategies more than acceptance ones, and they use implicit and explicit responses similarly (implicit responses are a little more favored by females). In contrast, males desire explicit responses more than implicit ones. This was attributed to the females` assumed modesty and subordination which can make them try to avoid self-praise in the society of Iran.

Allami and Montazeri (2012, 2021) have argued that highly proficient learners mostly transfer the socio-cultural norms of their native language to the English CR situations. This is attributed to their lack of English pragmatic knowledge. These unconscious transfers may lead to confusion and embarrassment in foreign cultures. Low proficient learners, however, tended to use the appreciation token CR strategy by expressing just a simple "Thank you". Allami and Montazeri (2012, 2021) maintain that this given response by low-proficient learners is much more acceptable pragmatically and is better than transferring from L1.

Nelson et al. (1996) is among the very few studies that suggest evil-eye might affect compliment response types. They have compared the Arabic and English compliment responses to understand the existing similarities and differences. To this end, some American and Syrian compliment and compliment response sequences were recorded during the interviews with native speakers. The results indicated that Arabic speakers sometimes use the formulaic expression of yikhzi I-een ('may the evil eye be thwarted') in compliments in order to protect the complimentee from evil harm. This expression is reported to be prevalent in the eastern part of the Arab world.

As noted above, Talebzadeh and Rajabi (in preparation) have analyzed the compliment response patterns among Iranian men with reference to evil-eye and social variables of age and social distance. As a basis for their classification, Herbert's 12-category taxonomy was used and modified in their study. The resulting 20-category taxonomy includes some new categories like *Good Wish, Taarof, Boast, Cheshm-zadan (i.e., evil eye harm), Witticism, Diverge, Hallelujah, and Combination*. The data which were gathered through the use of oral DCT showed that Disagreement, Boast, Combination, Taarof, Cheshm-zadan, Diverge, and Hallelujah were the strategies used distinctively across two age groups of old and young. Furthermore, it was observed that some categories like No Acknowledgement and Boast were

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

the favoured strategies for responding to a close friend's compliment while Good Wish and Appreciation Token were utilized more for an acquaintance.

There is a plethora of studies which investigated the influence of learning a foreign language like English on Iranian`s compliment responses and compared the Persian and English compliment responses. Although the literature is rich in compliment response research, there seems to a need for studies which investigate Iranian female's compliment responses in both English and Persian languages in light of various social variables such as age and social distance as well as their (dis-)belief in "*evil-eye*." Therefore, the current study attempts to fill this gap while trying to follow up on and complement the findings and claims of the study by Talebzadeh and Rajabi (in preparation).

3. Method

3.1. Participants

As this paper reports the second phase of a larger project, with regards to their familiarity with English language, the study participants were categorized into two groups:

1- Iranian females who are familiar with English language: This group consists of participants being upper-intermediate and advanced speakers of English to ensure that they know enough English structures to respond to compliments correctly.
2- Iranian females who are not familiar (enough) with English: In this group, participants do not have any English background or they were basic, pre-intermediate and lower-intermediate speakers of English, so their defective English knowledge may affect the accuracy of data.

Table 1

Overview of participants

English Familiarity (Phase 2)	Upper-intermediate	**10**	**17**
	Advanced	**7**	

Participants were selected by the use of criterion-based sampling. In this sampling, participants are chosen based on a predefined criterion, so the cases that meet the criterion would be selected (Hashemi, 2014). The criterion is English proficiency level in this study, so

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

the female students who were upper-intermediate and higher participated. High proficient participants (17 individuals as shown in Table 1) were EFL learners whose proficiency was estimated by the researchers at the time of interview according to their communication performance, the level of English textbook they were studying (as indicated on the back cover of the textbooks they were studying), and their own self-assessment.

3.2. Data collection

A written DCT was designed to be used in this study. DCTs are advantageous in that they keep variables rather constant and collect large amounts of data in a relatively short period (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001). Sharifian (2008, p. 61) states that "DCTs seem to be more effective when they are used as part of ethnographic studies where the researcher, as an insider, can monitor the validity of the findings and can provide an emic perspective on the cultural dimension of the observed linguistic behavior." This was also the case in the current study. The researchers (particularly the first author), who are both native speakers of Farsi and applied linguists, personally distributed the instruments, responded to any queries of the participants while they completed the forms, and followed up with interviews guided by the written DCT items especially when references to evil eye were made.

3.3. The written DCT situations

For the current study (i.e., the second phase of a more comprehensive one) which compared the CR behavior of Iranian female language learners across the two languages, we did our best to render the items of the Persian written DCT as similar as possible to those of an oral DCT but in print (see the previous subsection; see also Talebzadeh & Rajabi: in preparation). Moreover, the English version of this written DCT was prepared by translating the Persian items into English. It was ensured that the very same variables and appropriate tone of the Persian items were reflected in the English version of the complimenting situations. To ensure English sentences and utterances reflected those stated by a proficient or native user, attempts were made to find the equivalent compliment situations, sentences, and expressions from reliable and valid published DCTs as well as online corpora of spoken English (e.g., Allami & Montazeri, 2012; Sharifian 2008, 2010).

Apart from consulting expert applied linguists and language users to cross-check the appropriateness of the instrument, the English DCT was first piloted to a limited number of

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

parallel language learners and based on their feedback, the items were modified. Furthermore, after a time interval, the English version was informally back-translated to Persian by one of the authors (an applied linguist) to further check the validity of the English DCT. All in all, it might be claimed that the finalized English DCT (as well as the Persian DCT) could well serve the data elicitation purposes of the study.

As noted above, one of the researchers was present while the participants filled out the instruments. The items describe some complimenting scenarios and invite the participants to imagine themselves in the given situations. Therefore, the respondents could state their preferred and most appropriate compliment responses in the specified sections. Taking into account the shortcomings of similar data collection procedures (e.g., Sweeney & Hua, 2015), care was taken to avoid limiting the imagination of participants by adding unnecessary details, so that they can personalize the situation as much as possible (the items of the instrument are reported in section 4).

3.4. Data analysis

In order to classify the given compliment responses correctly, multiple discussions and analysis sessions were held; the preliminary analysis sessions suggested that Talebzadeh and Rajabi's (in preparation) modification of Herbert`s taxonomy (see 2.2. and 2.3. above) might be more appropriate in accounting for the collected data. To ensure coding validity and reliability, classification sample was done by the two researchers before the main coding of the data. Then, lead by the second researcher who had previously conducted extensive coding of similar data while developing the modified taxonomy, both researchers analyzed some portions of the study during the initial analysis sessions. The results confirmed that Herbert`s taxonomy is inadequate for Iranian women compliment responses and its modification proposed by Talebzadeh and Rajabi (in preparation) can be more appropriate.

The classification was done iteratively and in several rounds. After the initial discussion and analysis sessions, the first researcher coded all the collected data. In the meantime, the problematic instances were repeatedly coded and recoded by the first coder alongside the expert coder until a coder agreement was reached. After the first researcher completed the coding, some of the instances (about 20 percent of the whole CRs) were classified randomly by the second coder. More than 75 percent of these randomly selected instances were classified similarly by the two coders, so the rate of consensus was acceptable. After one month, all of the gathered compliment responses were classified again by the first coder to calculate the intra-coder reliability. The rate of this reliability was about 90 percent which seems acceptable

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

as well. A number of chi-square tests were run to statistically check similarities and differences between and among the responses in relation to language, items types, and interlocutor social distance.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results of each DCT compliment item

The topic of each compliment aligns the definitions proposed by Knapp et al. (1984). They define *appearance/possession*-related compliments as the Cs being associated with the addressee`s physical attributes and features and items of ownership. On the other hand, *performance/ability* compliments are those which signal the approval of someone's skills or abilities, for example, academic or work performance (Lin et al. 2012). In addition to these recommended compliment topics, Lin et al. (2012) announced personality trait-related compliments as another type of Cs. In general, the compliment items of the current study were classified based on the following compliment topics:

- Appearance: Item 1 – Item 4
- Ability: Item 2 – Item 5
- Possession: Item 3 – Item 6
- Personality trait: Item 7 – Item 8
- Significant person: Item 9 – Item 10

The results are reported and discussed with reference to the DCT item containing the specified compliment types and the relation (social distance) between the interlocutors.

4.1.1. Compliment by an acquaintance on appearance

You`ve been going to a health club for some time, and one of your **acquaintances** tells you: "What a great athletic body you`ve got!"

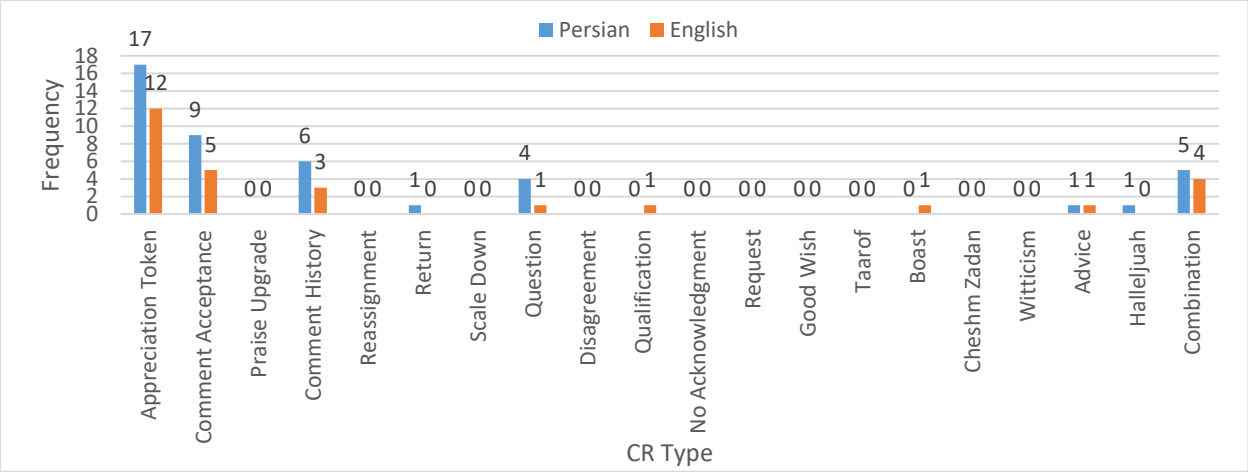
Your answer: ……

As it is obvious in this compliment, the addressee`s physical attributes and features are pointed out. Therefore, the topic of this compliment is *'appearance'*.

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

Figure 2

Acquaintance on appearance



Both in English and Persian, the ***appreciation token*** strategy is the most frequently used one.

4.1.2. Compliment by a close friend on ability

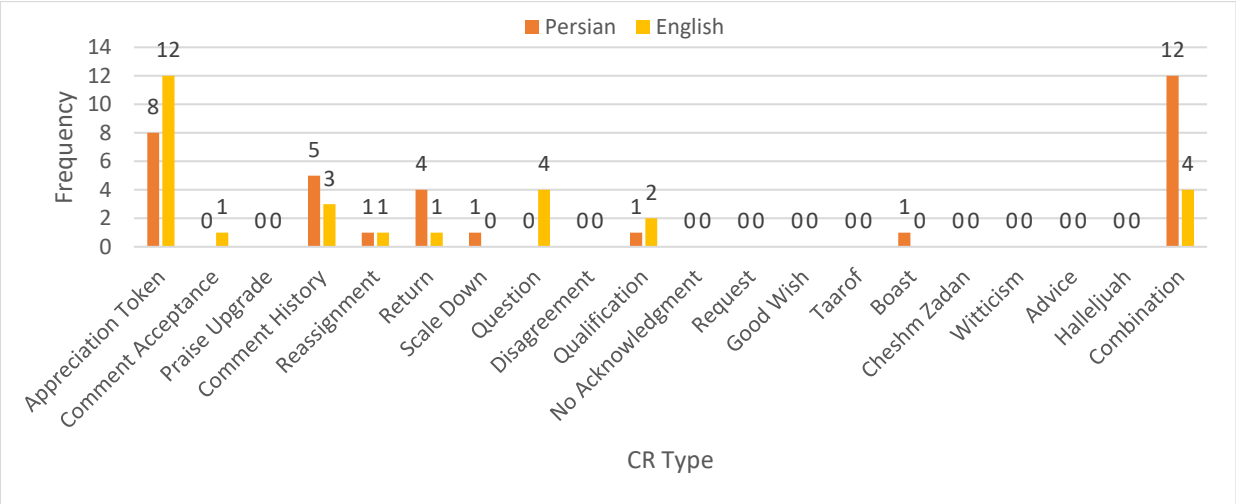
A **<u>close friend</u>** compliments your cooking after a meal by saying: "Your food is so delicious. You`re a fantastic cook."

Your answer: ……

This compliment deals with the cooking skill of the complimentee, so its topic is *'ability'*.

Figure 3

Close friend on ability



[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

Here the English responses were less complicated than Persian ones in the sense of length and number of CR types in a multi-head response. In English, ***Appreciation tokens*** and ***combinations*** are the most popular strategies just like Persian language. Iranians usually utilize the formulaic expression of *Nusheh jan* (hope you enjoyed it, bon appetite) to respond to the compliments on food (Younesi & Talebzadeh, 2022). This expression is classified as a ***combination*** CR strategy (***comment acceptance*** + ***good wish***). The translations of *Lotf daarin* (It`s kind of you) and *Nusheh Jan* were seen in English combination CR strategy which was in line with the Sharifian`s results (2008).

4.1.3. Compliment by an acquaintance on possession

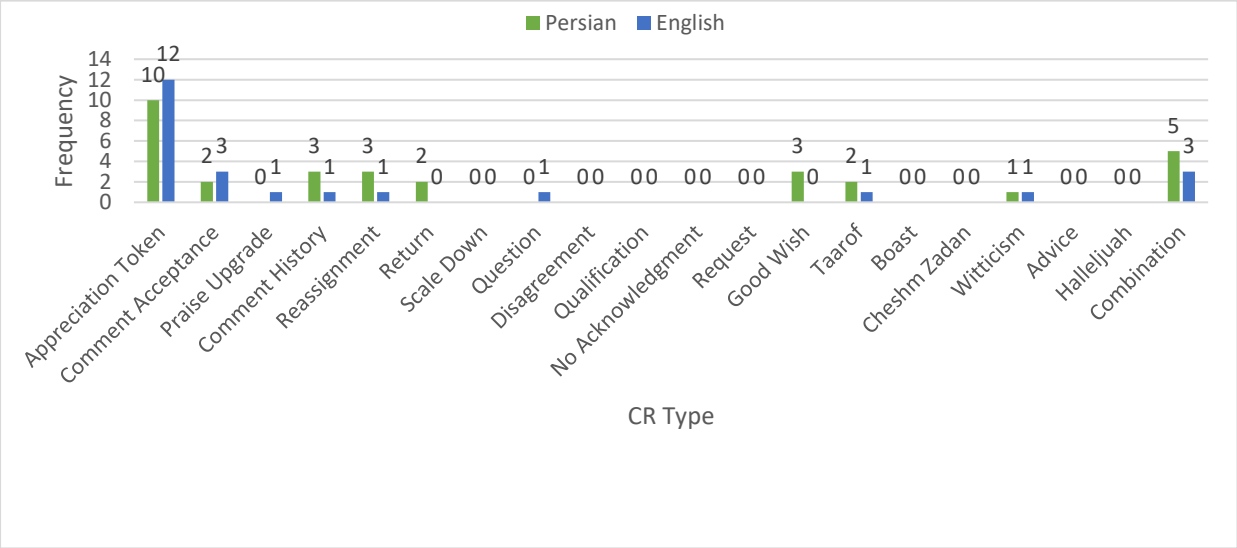
Your **acquaintance** is visiting your new house and says: "What a beautiful house?"

Your answer: ……

This compliment`s topic is *'possession'* because one of the ownership items is pointed out.

Figure 4

Acquaintance on possession



Although ***good wish*** was a prevalent CR strategy in Persian, it is absent in the English responses. Younesi and Talebzadeh (2022) have concluded that Iranian women have a tendency to respond to this compliment by using a *good wish* strategy to show their good will. Therefore, this good wish can be targeted at either complimenter or the complimented object

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

(Younesi & Talebzadeh, 2022). Different translations of *Lotf daarin* (translated as "It's kind of you") were also seen in English responses, so these expressions have formed the total number of ***combination*** CR strategies both in English and Persian language.

"Cheshmaatun ghashang mibineh" expression (translated as 'your eyes see [it] beautifully' in English) is highly frequent in this item`s response in Persian and it would be classified as ***reassignment*** CR type (Younesi & Talebzadeh, 2022). It has been also seen in Persian and English responses of this study. One of the participants responded to this compliment as: "the beauty must be in the eyes of beholders" which is translation of this popular expression.

4.1.4. Compliment by a close friend on appearance

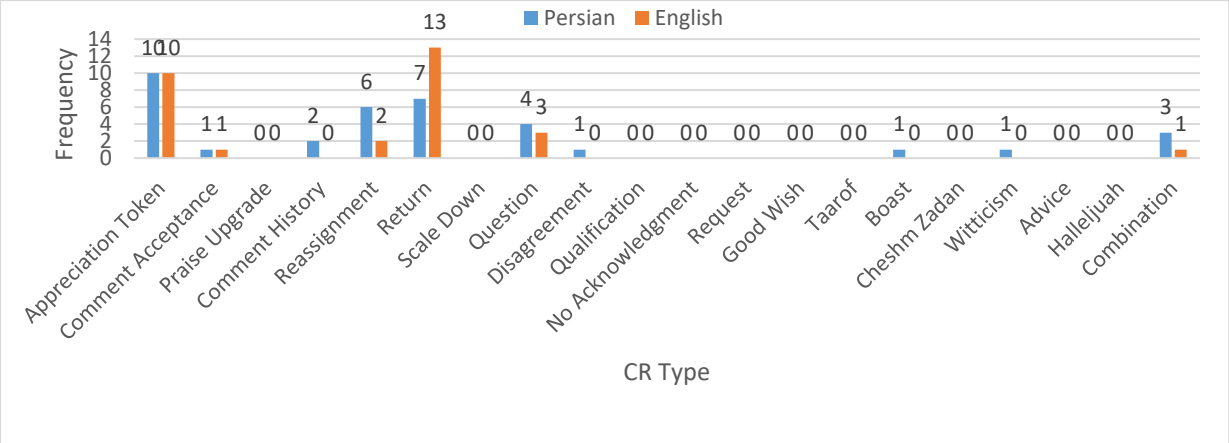
You`ve dressed up for a party. As you arrive at the party, one of your **close friends** says: "Wow! You look really beautiful/gorgeous tonight."

Your answer: ……

This compliment is related to the *'appearance'* of the compliment receiver.

Figure 5

Close friend on appearance



Appreciation token, *Reassignment* and *Return* strategies have been used highly in both languages (the same results have been obtained in the monolingual phase of this study being held by Younesi & Talebzadeh, 2022). Although the participants tried to ***return*** the compliment to the complimenter both in Persian and English, it was more prevalent in the English language. Again, the formulaic expression of "*Cheshmaatun ghashang mibineh"* 'your eyes see

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

beautifully' being classified as ***reassignment*** CR strategy was seen repeatedly in both languages of this study.

4.1.5. Compliment by an acquaintance on the ability

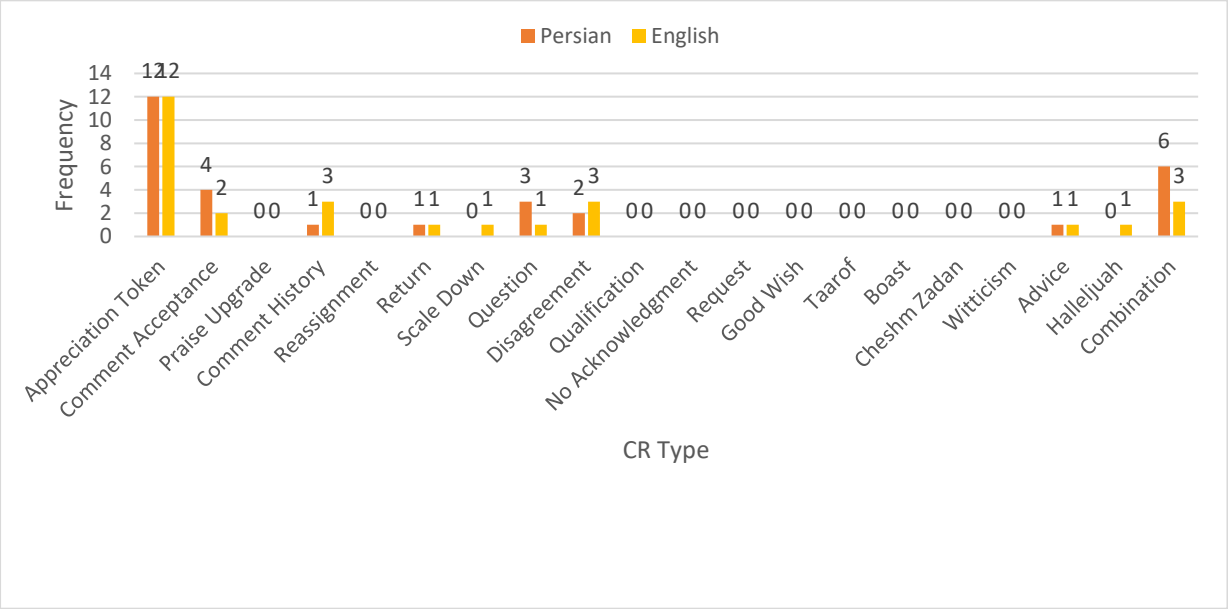
You have an admirable talent/skill such as very good handwriting and an **acquaintance** says to you: "What a beautiful handwriting."

Your answer: ……

According to Knapp et al. (1984), ability compliments are those which signal the approval of someone's skills or abilities (Lin et al. 2012). So, the compliment in item 5 refers to the complimentee`s *'ability'*.

Figure 6

Acquaintance on ability



Disagreement CR type is seen in both languages to respond to this ability compliment. As it is noted by Younesi and Talebzadeh (2022) Iranian females tend to disagree with complimenters in ability compliments given by an acquaintance. It can be resulted from their *shekasteh-nafsi* schema which forces them to (ostensibly) negate or disagree with the given compliments (Sharifian, 2008).

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

4.1.6. Compliment by a close friend on possession

After looking at your new cellphone, your **close friend** tells you, "What a fabulous cellphone!"

Your answer: …...……

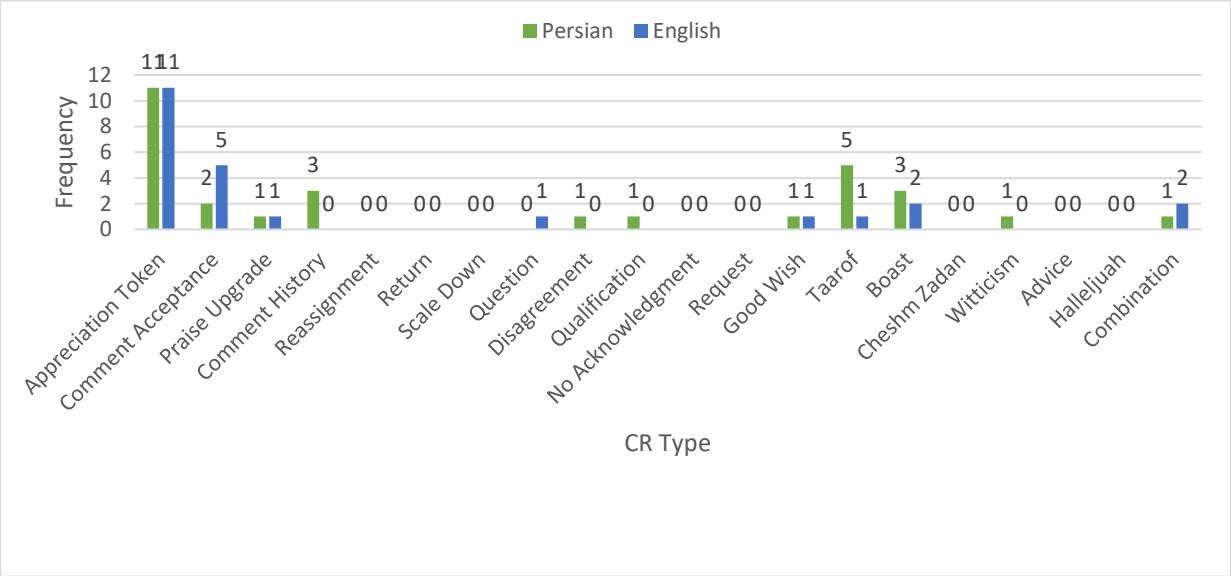
The compliment object is an item of ownership, so its topic is *'possession'*.

We had some responses categorized as combination types of compliment responses. These responses were as follows:

- Not for sale, hands off = ***Request interpretation*** + ***witticism***
- That`s kind of you = ***Appreciation token*** + ***Return***

Figure 7

Close friend on possession



As it is shown in this chart, ***appreciation token*** is used frequently in both languages. Also, ***boast*** CR type seems applicable to respond to such compliments in both languages. ***Taarof*** strategy is more prevalent in the Persian language than in English may be due to its conflict with Western culture. It seems that the participants feel free to speak in their own language and talk about their experiences in Persian, so ***comment history*** is used more in the Persian language. On the other hand, ***comment acceptance*** is more frequent in the English language. Although Taarof strategy is a common response to the possession compliments, it is

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

used more freely on small possessions (e.g.: cell phones) rather than bigger ones (e.g.: houses). This result is in line with the Younesi and Talebzadeh (2022).

4.1.7. Compliment by an acquaintance on personality trait

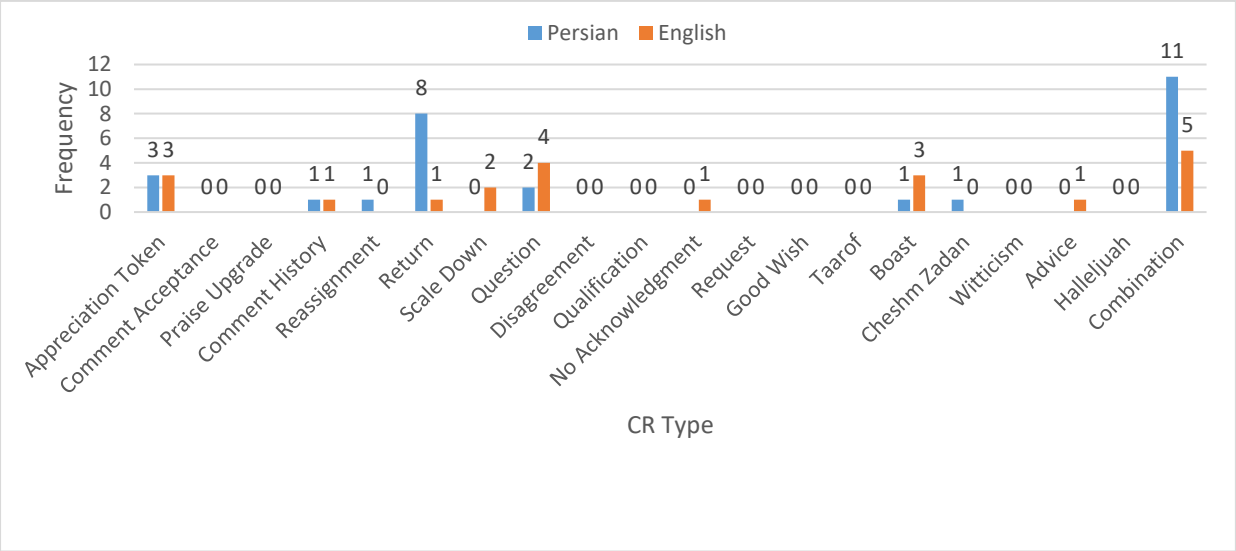
As you are busy talking to one of your **acquaintances**, she tells you: "Everyone talks highly of you all the time."

Your answer: …….

The *'personality trait'* of the addressee is complimented here.

Figure 8

Acquaintance on Personality trait



In English DCT, the responses to this compliment were simpler and shorter than Persian responses; for example, the (young) participants did not use multiple responses to respond to this compliment in English. To respond to this compliment, Iranian women mostly use strategies like *return* and also a combination of *return* and *appreciation token* in the expression of "lotf daarin" in Persian and its translation "that's kind of you" in English responses (similar in pattern and frequency to Younesi and Talebzadeh, 2022).

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

4.1.8. Compliment by a close friend on personality trait

You rarely have any complaints about anything happening in your life and you`re content with whatever you`ve got. Once your **close friend** compliments you saying: "It`s great that you are so happy and satisfied with your life."

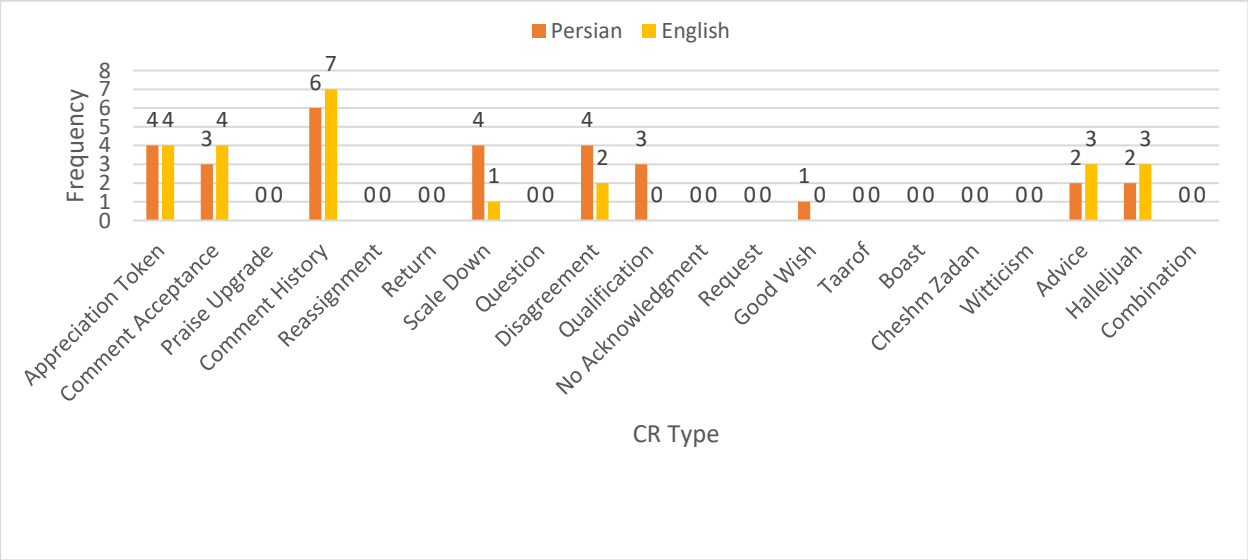
Your answer: …….

The happiness and self-satisfaction of the addressee is referred to in this compliment, so the *'personality trait'* can be regarded as its topic.

As it is noted by Younesi and Talebzadeh (2022) hearing such a compliment is somehow worrisome and makes others feel anxious about the evil-eye threat in Iranian culture. So, the Iranians may use different CR strategies such as ***comment history***, ***scale down***, ***disagreement***, ***qualification*** and ***hallelujah*** to prevent this threat. The Persian and English responses of this study have approved the results obtained in the first phase by the authors. According to the Younesi and Talebzadeh (2022) some of the participants have mentioned in the follow-up interviews that they have used such strategies to show their problems in life and prevent others from yearning their life and consequently avert danger of evil-eye.

Figure 9

Close friend on personality trait



[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

4.1.9. Compliment by an acquaintance on a significant person

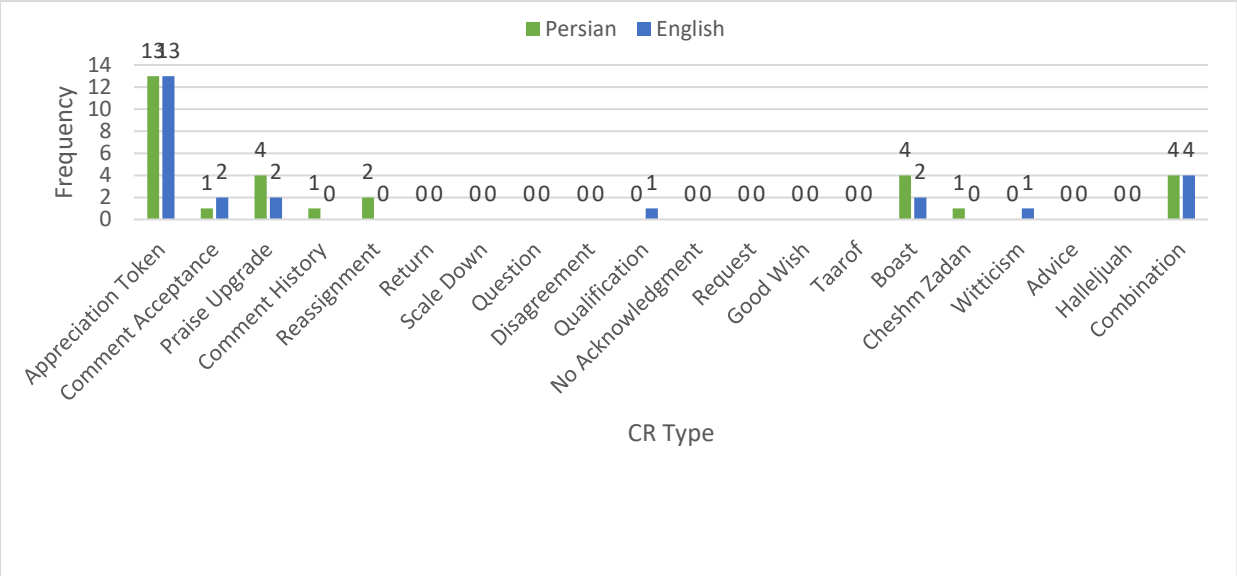
Your **acquaintance** praises your child (or brother/sister or one of their children) by saying: "What a pretty child (or brother/sister or niece/nephew)!"

Your answer: …….

This compliment praises one of the addressee's relatives or significant people. Therefore, the topic can be regarded as a *'significant person'*.

Figure 10

Acquaintance on significant person



Appreciation token has a high degree of use in Persian and English responses to this compliment. The CR type of ***praise upgrade*** is used more than other items' responses in this item. In responding to other compliments, the ***praise upgrade*** was used less. It may be due to the specific culture of Iran which considers the use of ***praise upgrade*** in responding to compliments as a sign of selfishness and egotism. But it is more appreciated in responding to compliments from other people. One of the participants, age 33, explained "I usually scale down and don`t upgrade the compliment while responding to it in order not to make others think that I`m selfish and egotistical."

Sharifian (2008, p.59) has attributed this phenomenon to *shekasteh-nafsi* schema which "spurns any thought of self-endearment. The Persian word *khod*, which is also translated as

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

'self' in English, is often associated with negative connotations and is used in phrases such as *khod-khahi* (lit. 'self-wanting')". Besides, Sharifian (2008) has found that some respondents attributed to themselves the complimented topic on their children. These responses were meant to be taken jokingly. Such cases were also seen in this current study and they were classified as '***boast***' CR type. Totally, in this item, the occurrence of the ***boast*** strategy was also more than in other items' responses.

A respondent, aged 33, used ***cheshm zadan*** CR strategy while responding to a compliment on her family both in Persian and English language. In Persian interview, she said "I would knock on the wood by hearing a compliment on my little nephew". She also wrote the expression 'knock on the wood' in English DCT for the parents` compliment (item 10 of the study). In Persian, it is done nonverbally but in English it is done verbally. So, it can be concluded that knocking on the wood, both verbally and nonverbally, is shared between the responses given both in Persian and English languages. The monolingual phase of the overarching study showed a belief in evil-eye regarding this compliment item, too. Some of the participants have attributed their use of different CR strategies such as *scale down*, *return* and a *simple appreciation token* to the threat of evil-eye for the complimented person. In contrast to Sharifian (2008) who attributed such responses to *shekasteh-nafsi* schema, the findings of these two phases showed that they are in consonance with the evil-eye belief in Iranian culture.

4.1.10. Compliment by a close friend on a significant person

One of the following questions was asked according to the respondents' demographics:

- One of your **close friends** meets your husband for the first time. On seeing him, your friend says: "Congratulations, you guys are true soul mates!"

  Your answer: ……

- One of your **close friends** meets your mother or father for the first time. On seeing them, your friend says: "I didn`t know you have such young parents!"

  Your answer: …….

Some cultures have their preference for, or acceptance of, certain compliment topics. Although complimenting children and spouses is acceptable within American English cultures, these compliments are not appropriate in New Zealand culture (Lin et al, 2012). In Iranian

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

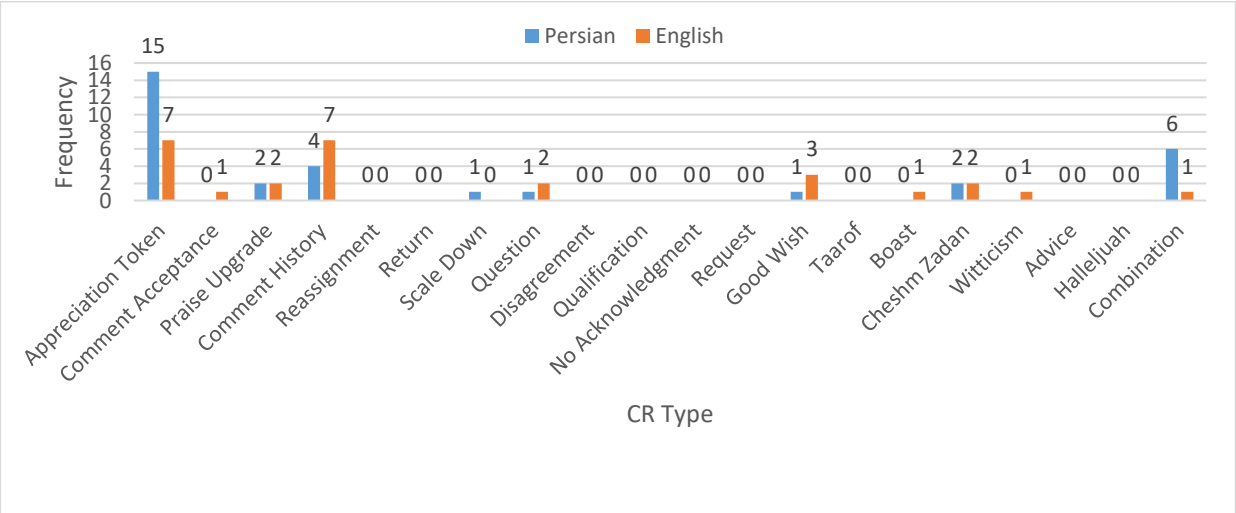
culture, it is acceptable to compliment a woman on her spouse or children by another woman. On the other hand, this compliment topic may be regarded as inappropriate (specially to compliment him on his spouse) if both the complimenter and complimentee are men (Talebzadeh & Rajabi, in preparation).

Both compliment situations in this item refer to a significant person in the respondents` lives, so the topic of this item can be named a *'significant person.'* However, the compliments relating to children and spouses were introduced as possession compliments in American English by Wolfson (1983) and Knapp et al., (1984) (see Lin et al. 2012). In this item, the respondents were complimented according to their marital situation. Therefore, they were complimented by their husband if they were married. On the other hand, they were complimented by their parents if they were single.

Cheshm zadan CR type was also used in responses to the compliments on one's parents both in Persian and English languages. ***Cheshm zadan*** CR strategy was just seen as a verbal remedy for evil-eye threat in this item. Persian expressions such as '*Bezan be takhte*' (knock on the wood), '*Begoo mashallah*' (say mashallah) and also English expression '*knock on the wood*' were seen in the cheshm zakhm compliment response type. One of the participants, aged 34, responded to the compliment on her parents in Persian like this '*bezan be takhte ta cheshm nakhoran azizam*' (knock on the wood honey to protect them from evil-eye). She also responded to the same compliment in English DCT using the 'knock on the wood' expression as the exact translation of the Persian one.

Figure 11

Close friend on significant person



[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

In the follow-up interviews which were held regarding the role of evil-eye on compliment responses, the interviewees asserted that the compliment object has a significant effect on their choice of compliment response type. In items 9 and 10, there was a high tendency to consider the compliment as a negative factor containing evil-eye threat for the loved ones of the complimentee. Most of the interviewees asserted that they are not sensitive to the evil-eye threat while receiving a compliment on themselves, but the evil eye would have a major role in the compliments on family members and significant people for Iranians. So, the Iranian people would try to use verbal and nonverbal remedies to impede any evil-eye harm (see also Talebzadeh and Rajabi: in preparation).

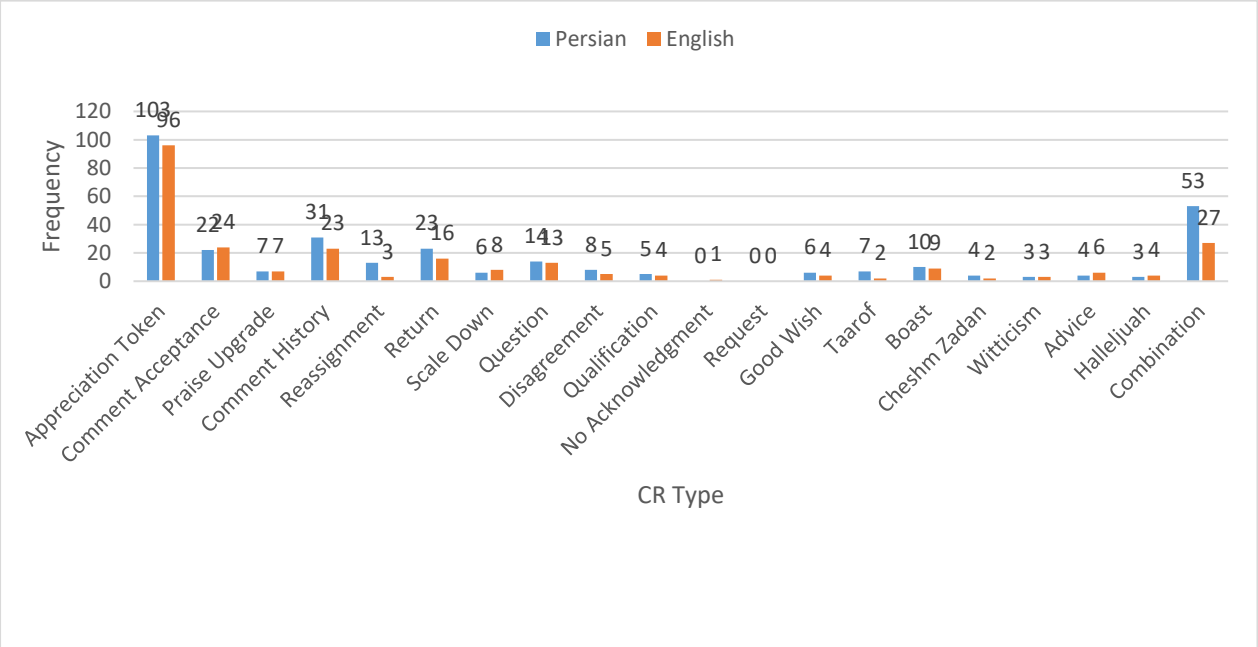
4.2. Compliment response type in relation to language

4.2.1. Persian vs. English responses

The results show that the total number of English responses were fewer than the Persian ones. This also entails that English responses were simpler and smaller in length than Persian CRs. The maximum strategies in a multiple response were 7 in Persian while they were just 3 in English.

Figure 12

Total numbers of compliment response types



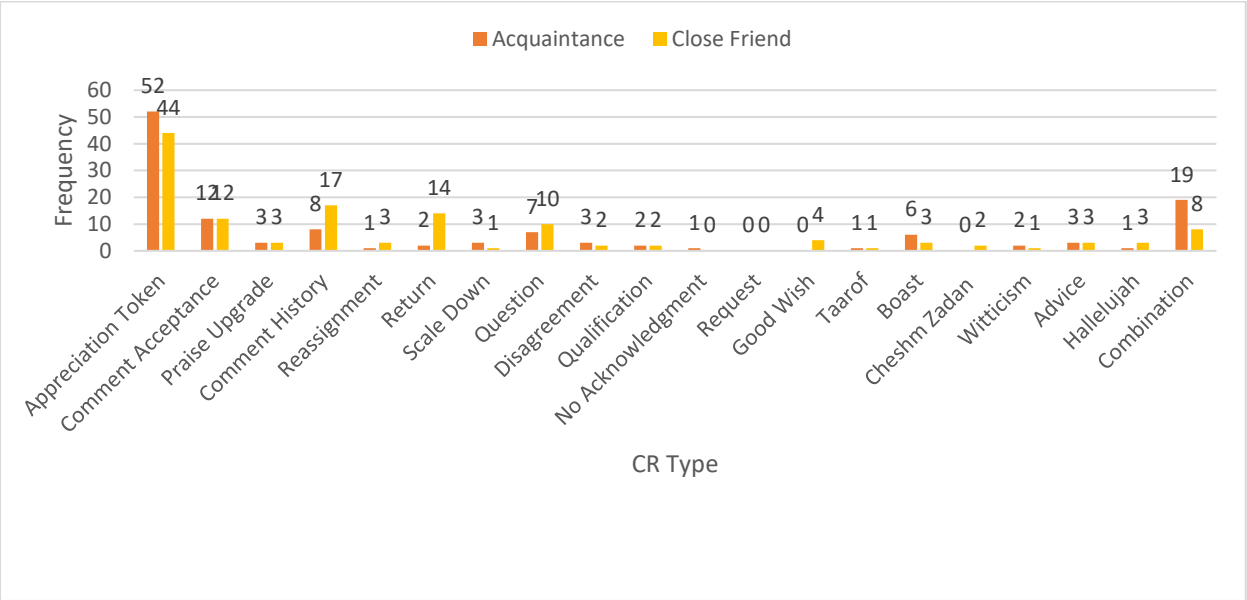
[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

Strategies such as ***combination, reassignment, taarof*** and ***cheshm zadan*** are more often used in the Persian language than in English. There are some exact English translations of Persian responses to the same compliment situations in participants` CRs. This phenomenon showed that participants transferred their Persian culture (e.g.: *taarof and evil-eye belief*) and also the popular expressions (e.g.: lotf daarin) to English responses. The results of chi-square tests indicate that there is not a statistically significant difference between the two language groups in terms of compliment response types.

4.3. Compliment response type in relation to social distance

Figure 13

English responses and social distance



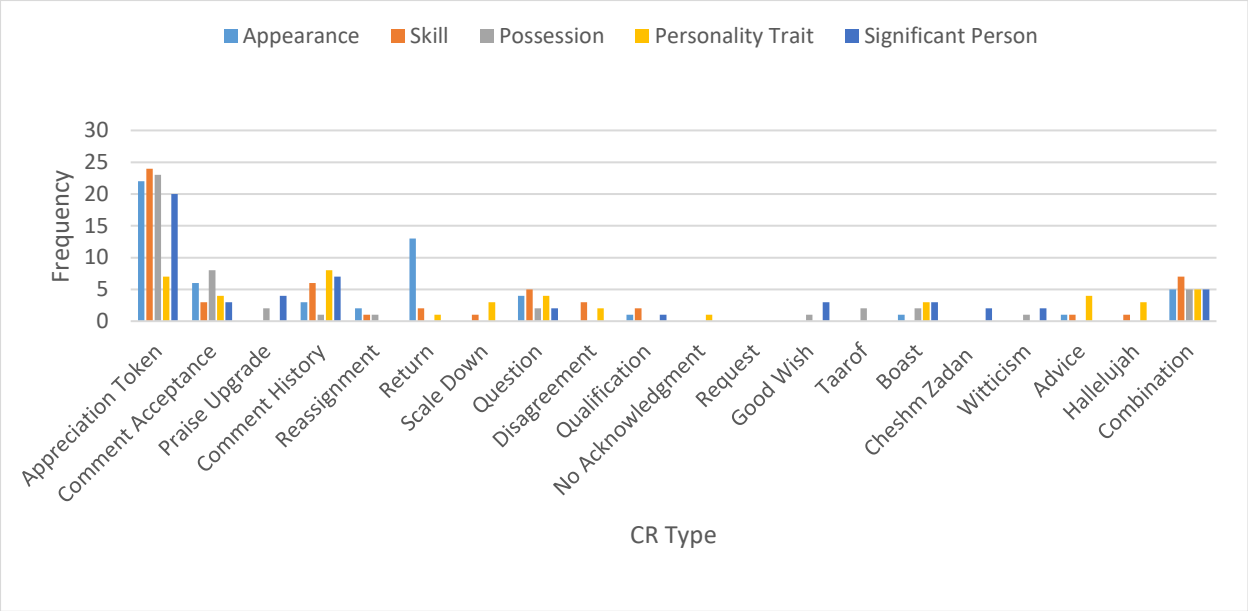
The results of chi-square tests indicate that there is a statistically significant difference between social relations in terms of compliment response types. Participants feel more comfortable using ***cheshm zadan*** CR strategy when responding to a close friend rather than responding to an acquaintance in both Persian and English languages. Regarding the newly coined categories, the monolingual results in the first phase of the study showed that ***cheshm zadan, hallelujah***, ***taarof, advice, boast*** and ***witticism*** strategies are used more freely in responding to a close friend and ***good wish*** in responding to an acquaintance. About Herbert`s (1988) categories, ***question and reassignment*** types are used more to respond to an acquaintance and the ***scale down*** strategy is more favored for a close friend.

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

4.4. Compliment response type in relation to Compliment topic

Figure 14

Compliment Topic (English responses)



The results of chi-square tests indicate that there is a statistically significant difference between compliment topics in terms of compliment response types in the English language. As the chart shows, ***cheshm zadan*** CR strategy is just used in responding to compliments on significant people. This result is in line with Younesi and Talebzadeh (2022) as well as the Talebzadeh and Rajabi (in preparation).

5. Conclusion

This study analyzed the CR behavior of female Iranian English as a foreign language learners both in English and Persian situations. Iranian women`s compliment response behavior and their most and least preferred CR types were identified. Among the most important premises of this study was investigating the reflection of the Persian belief of "*evil-eye*" on the overt and covert compliment response behaviors of Persian speakers. In other words, the objective of this study was not merely investigating a reference or lack thereof to "*evil-eye*", but it aimed at analyzing the ways this phenomenon might influence people`s verbal and non-verbal L1 and L2 behaviors. The results of this bilingual study along with Younesi and Talebzadeh (2022) confirmed the adequacy of Talebzadeh and Rajabi's (in preparation) CR taxonomy consisting of 20 categories for the context of Iran in both English and Persian languages. Their taxonomy

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

which is a modified version of Herbert`s (1990) CR types has some newly coined categories such as Good wish, Taarof, Boast, Cheshm-zadan, Witticism, Advice, Hallelujah and Combination.

Despite some constraints (such as the limited number of predicants) which can invite more caution in their generalization, the findings of the current research and similar ones can be conducive in enhancing the meta-cultural competence of people who need to have intercultural communication and need to impede potential pragmatic failures, and also can be used as part of EIL training courses (Gaylel Nelson et. al, 1996; Sharifian 2005, 2008). It is the case because conducting cross-cultural studies is important to find the reasons behind pragmatic failures (Wolfson 1989). Such findings can enhance our understanding of inter-language pragmatic competence, so they can be used in the realm of teaching and learning of second or foreign languages specially for people who need to learn the Persian language or the Iranians who want to learn another language.

The findings can be also incorporated into second and foreign language teaching by enhancing the pragmatics knowledge and by enabling the teachers to help learners get out of situations wherein they might be "unintentionally" interpreted as rude (Thomas 1983 cited in Allami & Montazeri, 2012). Moreover, the findings can enhance the Persian and English cultural knowledge of EFL teachers to familiarize their students with their local values and morals through integrating L1 cultural themes and contexts into classrooms. In this way, the students will be able to construct or reconstruct their identity and find the unique features of their culture (Nafissi, et al. 2019).

Karimnia and Afghari (2011) have pointed out that there is too little language use information in the existing foreign/second language teaching textbooks in Iran. Also, the contained dialogues, being served as a language use model, do not follow the patterns of naturally occurring talk; therefore, they would be misleading. The results of such studies could be incorporated to reform existing textbooks or develop new ones by including instances or social rules of language use in foreign/second language classrooms (Karimnia & Afghari, 2011).

References

Allami, H., & Montazeri, M. (2012). Iranian EFL learners' compliment responses. *System*, *40*(4), 466-482.

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

Allami, H., & Ramezanian, M. (2021). Role of L1and L2 in the organization of Iranian EFL lived narratives. *Iranian Journal of Applied Linguistics (IJAL), 24*(1), 36-66.

Chen, R. (2010). Pragmatics East and West: similar or different. In A. Trosborg (Ed.), *Pragmatics across Languages and Cultures*, (pp. 167-188). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Mouton.

Chiang, B., & Pochtrager, F. (1993). A pilot study of compliment responses of American-born English speakers and Chinese-born English speakers (ERIC_ NO: ED 356649).

Heidari-Shahreza, M. A., Dastjerdi, H. V., & Marvi, S. (2011). Discoursal variation and gender: The case of compliment responses among male and female Persian speakers. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences, 2*(3), 159-168.

Herbert, R. K. (1990). Sex-based differences in compliment behavior 1. *Language in Society, 19*(2), 201-224.

Holmes, J. (1993). New Zealand women are good to talk to: An analysis of politeness strategies in interaction. *Journal of Pragmatics, 20*(2), 91-116.

Kasper, G., & Rose, K. R. (Eds.). (2001). *Pragmatics in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lin, C. Y., Woodfield, H., & Ren, W. (2012). Compliments in Taiwan and Mainland Chinese: The influence of region and compliment topic. *Journal of Pragmatics, 44*(11), 1486-1502.

Morady Moghaddam, M. (2017). Politeness at the extremes: Iranian women's insincere responses to compliments. *Language and Dialogue, 7*(3), 414-432.

Nafissi, Z., Karimi, F., & Sotoudehnama, E. (2019). EFL students` views on L1 culture through English texts with L1 and L2 cultural content. *Iranian Journal of Applied Linguistics (IJAL), 22*(1), 73-109.

Nelson, G., Al-Batal, M., & Echols, E. (1996). Arabic and English compliment responses: Potential for pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics, 17*(4), 411-432.

Pomerantz, A. (1978). Compliment responses: Notes on the co-operation of multiple constraints. In *Studies in the organization of conversational interaction* (pp. 79-112). Academic Press.

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]

Shahidi poor, V. (2017). A study on the Speech act of compliment response in Persian: The effect of age. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 2, 72-83

Sharifian, F. (2005). The Persian cultural schema of shekasteh-nafsi: A study of compliment responses in Persian and Anglo-Australian speakers. *Pragmatics & Cognition*, *13*(2), 337-361.

Sharifian, F. (2008). Cultural schemas in L1 and L2 compliment responses: A study of Persian-speaking learners of English. *Journal of Politeness Research. Language, Behaviour, Culture*, *4*(1), 55-80.

Sweeney, E. and Hua, Z. (2015). Discourse Completion Tasks. In Z. Hua (Ed.) *Research Methods in Intercultural Communication*. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119166283.ch14

Talebzadeh & Rajabi (in preparation). "Evil eye" in Persian: Age and social distance factors in Iranian compliment response behavior.

Wolfson, N. (1989). *Perspectives: sociolinguistics and TESOL*. Cambridge: Newbury House Publishers.Yamini, H. (1996). A sociolinguistic study of sex-based differences in Persian Compliment patterns (Master's Thesis). Shiraz University.

Yuan, Y. (2002). Compliments and compliment responses in Kunming Chinese. *Pragmatics: Quarterly Publication of the International Pragmatics Association (IPRA)*, *12*(2), 183-226.

Younesi, M. (2020). *A comparative study of Iranian women`s compliment response behavior: The role of age, language and belief in Evil-eye* [Master`s thesis, Kharazmi University].

Younesi, M., & Talebzadeh, H. (2022, November 9-11). *"Say Mashallah:" An investigation of the role of age, social distance, compliment topic, and a (dis)belief in evil eye on Iranian women`s compliment response behavior* [Oral presentation]. The 19th international TELLSI conference, University of Birjand, Birjand, Iran.

[Downloaded from isharat.khu.ac.ir on 2026-10-28]