

Shahrooz Salimian
 5535131
 Joan Muyskenweg 17 E-51, 1096 CJ Amsterdam
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Does the expletive make it impolite?

A comparative pragmatic analysis of Persian *harumzade* and American English *nigger*

Abstract

*This study scrutinized the premise of the discursive approach (Locher & Watts, 2005; Watts, 2003) that claims that no utterance is inherently polite or impolite. This premise leads to the definition of (I'm) politeness as whatever is (in)appropriate relative to the social practices and norms of the conversation and the interlocuters(Locher & Watts, 2005; Watts, 2003). Two of the most offensive expletives in Persian (**harumzade** 'bastard') and American English **nigger** were analyzed according to their meaning and historical and cultural context to see whether we have good reason to claim that they would not be inherently impolite. Because, face is a crucial aspect of impoliteness it was first asked whether the expletives are inherently face-threatening. This was argued to be so provided that the speaker intends to address someone with their conventional meaning as both invariably lead to the inference that the addressee is respectively morally and racially inferior. The following analysis concerned the tenability of the premise. The premise was argued to be counterintuitive if we accept that the expletives are inherently face-threatening, since the discursive approach can mark any utterance as even polite provided that the interlocuters respond with approbation. Thus there is no good reason to think that no utterance is inherently (im)polite. Finally, the two languages were compared to see if impoliteness functions differently in each language and culture. Though the discursive approach and other politeness frameworks are adequate*

*for Western cultures they focus too much on the attitudes of the interlocuters. In Persian society, grave insults such as **harumzade** threaten and involve the entire family and not just the addressee. The attitudes of the family and the community are in many ways more important to the uptake than that of the addressee.*

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1. Introduction

The study of politeness in sociolinguistics took off through the work of Brown and Levinson (1987) on the concept of 'face'. The term face refers to the public self-image that any person in a community has and wishes to manipulate to further his or her goals. Every individual is constantly in need of balancing their autonomy (negative face) and recognition (positive face) through their verbal and non-verbal interactions with others. Some acts are *intrinsically* face-threatening (FTA) meaning that they are aimed at reducing the addressee's negative or positive face in almost all contexts (e.g. commands for the former and ridicule for the latter). If an individual's face is threatened it can be redressed by trying to improve either the positive or negative face of the recipient (depending on whether recognition or autonomy is judged to be required). These redressive utterances are categorized under either *positive* (e.g. *I agree with you actually*) or *negative* politeness (e.g. *I'm sorry, shall I leave you be?*). A *positive politeness* strategy seeks to minimize the threat to the addressee's face by appealing to notions of solidarity and friendship, whereas a *negative politeness* strategy seeks to give the addressee to avoid imposing on the addressee's personal space which is often done by using indirect speech, apologies and preferring questions over propositions (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Because face is dependent on the responses of others and because everybody wishes to maintain their own face, it is supposed that it is only rational for all interlocutors to actively cooperate to maintain each other's face. Therefore, Brown and Levinson (1987) follow Grice's Cooperative Principle which can be paraphrased as: Interlocutors will converse as is required to further the goals of the conversation through mutual acceptance of certain standards of interaction such as honesty, clarity and brevity.

Though the concept of politeness has been influential, it has garnered a myriad of criticism. Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of face has been considered to be too culturally specific and individualistic. Gu (1990) analyzed how face works in Chinese

discourse and found that what might be considered as an FTA according to Brown & Levinson's analysis is actually considered to be face *enhancing* in Chinese society. For more community-centered cultures it is not considered a threat to an individual's autonomy if the individual is asked for help in opposition to Western cultures (1990). Studies such as Matsumoto (1989) for Japanese and Koutlaki (2002) for Persian have come to a similar conclusion that reduction of autonomy is experienced wholly differently in these cultures and that face cannot be easily reduced to the individual since a family member may affect the face of all other family members through inappropriate behavior.

More recent research (Locher & Watts, 2005; Watts, 2003) has moved away from the above conception of face and politeness and focuses on the 'discursive' aspect that is inherent in politeness instead. Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory is based on an abstract conception of what they consider face and politeness to be. However, this conception was not built on observing the behavior and evaluations of actual interlocutors, which Locher and Watts (2005) and Watts (2003) consider to be the starting point of any politeness framework. Therefore, the discursive approach (Locher & Watts, 2005; Watts, 2003) proposes to make a distinction between first order and second order politeness. The former refers to the way that politeness is experienced and defined by a linguistic and cultural community, whereas the latter is a theoretical concept that linguists create to be able to account for and predict how politeness manifests in society. Brown and Levinson's theory is, of course, staunchly a second order approach to politeness since it claims to apply to all languages and cultures. Because first order politeness (politeness₁) is determined by the social context in which individuals live and because the evaluation of what is considered polite and impolite is historically contingent there is no stable definition for politeness₁ and face; rather they are always negotiated, hence 'discursive'. Second order politeness (politeness₂) is therefore, also contingent since it seeks to describe politeness₁. Locher and Watts (2011) claim that no single

sentence is inherently polite or impolite rather it is completely contingent upon the assessments of the interlocutors and the social norms of the speech environment. The norms of the conversation depend on the context (consider a door-to-door salesman confronting a customer in front of their house compared to the customer entering a shop, arguably the former is intrinsically more intrusive and thus inevitably more prone to be a threat to the customer's negative face). Politeness is therefore, not inherent to an abstract sentence but to specific utterances (Culpeper, 1996, 2012; Watts, 2011). Additionally, linguists should refrain from creating an overarching theory of politeness₂, because that would require us to take a normative stance on what is regarded to be (im)polite and what effects face. If the linguist goes beyond the evaluations of the interlocutors to create a predictive theory it is inevitable that they will have to base it on their own intuitions since the object of study is social interaction (normative by definition) (Watts, 2003). Locher and Watts (2005) claim that Brown and Levinson introduced their own politeness₁ intuitions into their theory without realizing it. For example, Brown and Levinson's theory already assumes that politeness is fundamentally about reducing friction (reducing face damage) between interlocutors as each of them tries to further their own interests. Brown and Levinson also assume that the hearer's response is not of great value as the utterance itself carries the meaning. The discursive view follows the evaluations of the interlocutors themselves and every interlocutor can negotiate the appropriateness of the utterances in a conversation within the social practices, cultures and linguistic communities that they are a part of.

Locher and Watts (2005) categorize utterances according to a four-tier system. Because their approach is based on politeness₁, utterances are considered *politic* if they are considered *unmarked* (appropriate) to the social expectations of the parties in a conversation. Marking is manipulated through the addition or omission of any linguistic feature (word, phrase etc.) that is either beyond or above the expectations of the interlocutors according to their social

practice. These *politic* utterances do not elicit any evaluative response from either of the interlocutors after being uttered. Some parties would consider a simple *Thanks* to be a normal way of expressing gratitude and expect such responses based on their social practices. If the speaker uttered *Thank you very much* instead and the recipients respond with a sign of approbation the sentence is considered *polite* because it is *positively marked*. If they would have taken it even further by perhaps saying *I cannot begin to thank you for all you have done*, it might have been *over-polite* and *negatively marked*, because it might be interpreted as disingenuous or pragmatically inappropriate (imagine uttering this to a waiter after receiving your drink). Finally, an utterance can also be *negatively marked* and *impolite* by omitting expected linguistic features in a certain context. To continue the waiter situation, consider not thanking when the waiter serves the food and says *Enjoy your meal*. Thus, (im)politeness may be defined as whatever is above or below the expectations of the social practice that the interlocutors engage in.

The discursive view has been criticized for being implausible (Culpeper, 2012; Orecchioni, 2013; Bousfield, 2008) since it is hard to imagine that at least some words (swear words) or certain speech acts (i.e. threats) are not inherently face-threatening. Bousfield (2008) adopts a second order view and defines impoliteness as an intentional FTA by the speaker to the addressee. According to Bousfield impoliteness can be predicted similar to Brown and Levinson (1987). A more nuanced position comes from Terkourafi (2005, 2008) and Culpeper (1996, 2012). Culpeper (2012) argues for a dualist position that considers (im)politeness to be dependent on both a semantic and pragmatic scale, which was originally proposed by Leech (2007). The semantic scale looks at the lexico-grammatical and syntactic features of a given language and discusses the inherent (im)politeness that these features express *outside* of any context (Leech, 2007). For example, on a semantic scale of expressing gratitude, the longer phrase *Thank you very much*, is more polite than *Thanks* as the former

intensifies the degree of gratitude through an adverbial phrase. The pragmatic scale looks at politeness relative to the social norms and specific circumstances of the utterances in question (Leech, 2007). Therefore, on the pragmatic scale the former expression could be considered to be too polite if it is uttered to a family member who would have deemed *Thanks* to be sufficient. Culpeper (2012) argues that the (im)politeness of an expression can only be determined by studying the interaction between both scales. Some expressions are so commonly used to express either positive or negative attitudes in a language that we can consider them to be semantically encoded within the expression (Culpeper, 2011; Terkourafi, 2005). Evidence for semantic encoding comes from surveys that asked British English speakers about what words they considered to be the most offensive, with *cunt* and *motherfucker* being perceived by most of the participants as being the most offensive words in the language for most contexts (Millwood-Hargrave, 2000). Terkourafi's view (2005, 2008) resembles that of Culpeper (2012) in that she considers certain linguistic expressions to become *conventionalized* meaning that a linguistic expression will eventually acquire a fixed meaning if this meaning is reciprocated often enough within a language. Conventionalisation is dependent on the statistical frequency of a certain use of an expression and is always a matter of degree (Terkourafi, 2005).

Additionally, some researchers have increasingly moved towards studying impoliteness as its own area of research (Culpeper, 1996, 2012), motivated by the large variety and ubiquity of instances which we could call *impolite* or *rude*. Culpeper (2012) defines impoliteness as a negative attitude that is informed by certain social expectations and beliefs. An utterance is considered impolite when these expectations or beliefs are perceived to be contradicted by the utterance according to the interlocutor(s) (either the speaker or hearer or both evaluate it negatively). Through analyzing large corpora Culpeper (2012) claims that impoliteness in English mostly occurs through *conventionalized impoliteness formulae*. These

are standardized phrases that conventionally express some form of denigration. For example, one type of formula is called a personalized negative vocative which always starts with *you* followed by an expletive (bastard, dickhead, shit etc.). Both Brown and Levinson (1987) and the discursive view (Locher & Watts, 2005; Watts, 2003) merely consider impoliteness to be the absence or explicit violation of respecting face and the conversational norms respectively (Culpeper, 2012), whereas Culpeper (1996, 2012) argues that impoliteness can also be systematic and even encouraged depending on the context of the conversation.

This study seeks to research politeness and impoliteness phenomena further. The present study will analyze impoliteness in Persian and American English. The dominant position in the current literature is that of the discursive approach and this study seeks to scrutinize an important premise of the discursive approach: Impoliteness depends on social norms and practices and is not encoded into linguistic constructions, that is to say it is not inherent in linguistic expressions (Locher & Watts, 2005). The best candidate for linguistic constructions that are context independent would most likely be expletives, because these seem to be designed to threaten face in some manner specifically and because they tend to elicit the strongest emotional responses (Culpeper, 2012; Millwood-Hargrave, 2000). Expletives are thus the most suitable to analyze in a small scale study. An expletive is whatever a language conventionally considers to be a swear word or offensive language. Because the implausibility of the discursive approach involves the intuition that some words have to be face-threatening (Orrechioni, 2013), the study will start by analyzing whether expletives are inherently face-threatening. This will be followed by an analysis of the definition of (im)politeness that Locher and Watts (2005) to see if the expletives can be incorporated into this definition. Finally, a cross-cultural comparison will be made between Persian and American English to see whether impoliteness functions differently for each language. This is of particular importance, because of the consistent influence that cross-

cultural have made on politeness studies (Leech, 2007).

Research Question 1: Are expletives in Persian and American English inherently face-threatening if uttered or are they context dependent?

Research Question 2: Is the discursive approach justified in saying that no utterance is inherently polite or impolite.

Research Question 3: Are there manifest differences between how expletives work in Persian and American English to manipulate face and impoliteness?

2. Method

Because the full array of expletives in both Persian and American English is too extensive to discuss in a small-scale study the decision was made to focus on a small number of expletives in both languages. The selection procedure was motivated by taking the cultural context for each language into account and purposefully choosing what I considered to be among the most sensitive words in both languages. The analysis for the Persian section relied mostly on (my) native speaker intuitions of the culture and language, since no prior studies on Persian expletives seem to have been performed. In the case of Persian, the term *harumzade* ('bastard'¹) was chosen and for American English, the word *nigger*. The analysis for both words proceed through a semantic and cultural analysis. That is to say, the goal was to ascertain what the meaning (especially connotation) of these expletives is and how they are used in practice. In addition, related words (synonyms, euphemisms, dysphemisms) to both *harumzade* and *nigger* were analyzed to see what the significance is of using *harumzade* and *nigger* over their counterparts. The data for the expletives was acquired from YouTube. Natural data was considered to be preferable to self-constructed utterances, following the

¹ As in born out of wedlock.

methodology of the discursive approach (Locher & Watts, 2005; Watts, 2003).

The data was considered natural as long as the utterances were spontaneous and not staged (no fiction or reality shows), with the exception of some uses of *nigger* since it is used ubiquitously and creatively in African American media (in particular rap songs and stand-up comedy). YouTube comments were also used for *nigger* to avoid any ambiguity between the forms *nigger* and *nigga*, which would be indistinguishable in non-rhotic accents such as African American Vernacular English. Finally, data was also gathered from Vanguard News Network, a right-wing forum dedicated to discussing socio-political issues. All the data in the study were instances where the speaker intended to offend (FTA) and where the addressee clearly had the appropriate uptake by responding negatively, with some exceptions of *nigga* being used as a term of endearment. In the latter case, the utterances had to evoke no negative response to ensure that the addressee actually had the right uptake.

3. Analysis

3.1. The case of *harumzade*

The following section will discuss the meaning and uses of the expletive *harumzade* and the related word *namashru*. The first example (1) was uttered in the middle of an Iranian divorce court hearing by a woman seeking to divorce her husband. The husband was present and brought his brother with him as an arbiter. The woman eventually started arguing with the brother and husband and addressed (1) to them.

(1)	<i>be</i>	<i>che</i>	<i>rapt-i</i>	<i>madar-et</i>	<i>man-</i>	<i>tohin</i>	<i>kard</i> ²
					<i>o</i>		
	to	what	matter-	Mother-	I-	insult	do:PST3SG

² Present tense = PRS, past Tense = PST, infinitive = INDF, possessive = POSS, accusative= ACC, imperfective = IPFV, subjunctive = SBJV, singular= SG, The numbers 1, 2 and 3 refer to the grammatical person.

INDF 2SGPOSS ACC

Harum- yani chi
zade

Sin-born meaning what
of

'For what reason did your mother insult me? Why did she call me a bastard?'

(Longinotto, 2013, 18:17)

The wife accuses the men's mother of having addressed her with the word *harumzade*. This word is a compound of *harum*, derived from Arabic *haram* 'sin' and *zade* 'born of'³.

Harumzade can be considered to be an FTA both to the recipient, in this case the wife, but also to the parents of the recipient. The implication is that one of the parents of the recipient committed adultery and conceived the recipient out of wedlock. It is not clear whether the mother actually meant to accuse (one of) the wife's parents of extra-marital sex or whether she only meant to insult. It is possible to use *harumzade* solely as an insult without actually making the accusation that the parents committed adultery. This can be seen in (2). This was uttered by a talk show host (Sakuee, 2012) as a response to a caller who threatened him over the phone. We may assume that the caller is a complete stranger to the host. These usages would then be similar to *son of a bitch*, which is (usually) not actually used to accuse the mother of the addressee of adultery, rather it is used to insult the addressee herself.

(2) *to mi-xa-i xedmat-e-man Be-res-i Harum-zade*
you IPFV-want:PRS-2SG service-EZ⁴-I SBJV-arrive:PRS-2SG Sin-born of

'You want to come and get me, *harumzade*?' (Sakuee, 2012, 0:59)

³ Because the connotations of *harumzade* are lost when translated into Modern English bastard, I have decided to refrain from translating it from this point onward.

⁴ EZ stands for ezafe 'addition' a connector specific to Persian grammar. The ezafe can connect any noun to any other noun, pronoun or adjective.

Extramarital sex is a punishable offence in Iran and the offender can even be charged with the death penalty⁵ (Vahdati, 2007). Moreover, births out of wedlock are considered illegitimate and the child has no paternal hereditary rights, because an inheritance requires a child to be born within the confines of Islamic matrimony (Ardakani & Rashidi, 2016). Therefore, *harumzade* is as much an insult to the recipient as it is to the parents, if not more so. Thus, if we follow a definition of impoliteness based on just the negative evaluation of the addressee (Locher & Watts, 2005), we miss the fact that the face of the addressee's parents has still been severely threatened regardless of the uptake of the addressee. In the case of the women in (1), even if she and her parents had been very stoic and did not take personal offence by the implications of the word *harumzade*, their face would be tarnished in the eyes of the community all the same. Calling somebody a *harumzade*, is a threat to their *heysiat* (honor). To understand this phenomenon, an elaboration of the workings of face in Persian culture is required and will be performed in section 3.1.2.

The context described above is part of a long-standing tradition and practice within Iranian society. It would be strange to say that the meaning of this word is unstable in the sense that Locher and Watts (2005) mean. With unstable they mean that the (im)politeness of utterances can be negotiated and changed by changing the norms of the social practices. Though it is logically possible to change the connotation and negative evaluation of *harumzade*, it would require a large shift in the dominant social practices of Iranian society, in particular their attitude to sexuality. Therefore, we may assume that the meaning and its evaluation are stable, though still subject to long-term change (as any language and culture can change). Moreover, *harumzade* carries a distinct connotation that changes the uptake of an utterance that contains it. This will be demonstrated by looking at a synonym.

Harumzade has a more neutral counterpart, namely *namashru* composed of *na*

⁵ A translation of Article 82 of the Iranian penal code: The punishment for adultery in the following cases is killing and there is no difference between young and not-young and marriage-bound and not marriage-bound.

(negative adjectival prefix) and *namashru*, a loan from Arabic, meaning ‘the way’, ‘legislation’, or ‘religious law’. This word refers to any conduct that is outside of Sharia law, and is often used to refer to children born out of wedlock. Unlike *harumzade*, *namashru* carries a more descriptive connotation and does not imply hostility towards the recipient. If we replace *harumzade* with *namashru* in constructions similar to (1) and (2), the phrase becomes infelicitous as can be seen in (3) and (4).

(3) **#*Namashru hast-i***

Namashru be:PRS-2SG

‘You are unlawful’

(4) ***Harumzade hast-i***

Harumzade be:PRS-2SG

‘You are a *harumzade*’

Of course, it carries the same implication as *harumzade* and therefore, it is still potentially face-threatening. That is to say, when either *harumzade* or *namashru* is used, the speaker is appealing to a *moral order* that is foundational to the understanding of the two words.

However, the choice for explicitly using *harumzade* instead of *namashru* implies an intention by the speaker to emphasize his or her hostility or disapproval towards the recipient.

Harumzade may be categorized as a dysphemism of *namashru*. That is to say, in this case, the language facilitates an additional term that refers to a specific act and consequence that is *namashru* (extra-marital sex and childbirth out of wedlock) but intensifies the taboo that surrounds anything that is *namashru*. If we frame this into Leech's scales (2007), we can say that semantically speaking *harumzade* is more impolite than *namashru* and that the reverse is not possible.

To conclude, since the meaning of *harumzade* is stable and since the explicit use of *harumzade* over *namashru* implies hostility towards the addressee, it is justified to make the

following statement: Any utterance containing *harumzade* addressed towards a person with the meaning of *harumzade* intended by the speaker is face-threatening to the addressee. Now that we have established that *harumzade* is inherently face-threatening we need to analyze whether it is also inherently impolite.

3.1.1. Utilizing discursive terminology with *harumzade*

At this stage, the preceding analysis has not actually utilized the terminology of Watts and Locher (2005). This will be the purpose of this section. The discursive approach, like other politeness frameworks, has been built on and has mostly researched politeness and not impoliteness (Culpeper, 2012). This creates a notable issue with the categories that Locher and Watts (2005) utilize. According to the discursive approach, *harumzade* could in fact be *politic* or even *polite* as example (5) demonstrates. Example (5) is of an Iranian Shiite cleric relating his views on Uthman Ibn Affan (3rd Calif of the Rashidun Caliphate and a prominent Sunni leader) during a sermon.

(5)	<i>In</i>	<i>Osman-e</i>	<i>Harum-</i>	<i>un</i>	<i>dige</i>	<i>ham</i>	<i>Harum-</i>
			<i>zade</i>				<i>zade</i>
	this	Uthman-EZ	Sin- born	he	more	as	Sin-
			of			well	born of
	<i>bud</i>	<i>ham</i>	<i>valadat</i>	<i>zena</i>	<i>bud</i>		
	Be:PST3S	as well	nativity	infidelity	Be:PST		
					3S		

‘This *harumzade* Uthman, who was both a *harumzade* and a fornicator’ (Danesmand, 2012, 0:58)

Political hostility between Shiite Iranian clerics and Sunni⁶ clerics is common and politically sanctioned in Iran. After the cleric refers to Uthman in the manner of (5), the crowd approves of his statement by saying *amin* ‘amen’. Thus, this utterance would have to be considered *politic* and perhaps even *polite* considering that the audience thought his utterance was positively marked. It seems strange to say that an utterance can be *polite* and intentionally degrading at the same time. The social practice (sanctioned animosity towards Sunnis from Shiites) in this case vindicates his behavior but the (dead) target (and likely many Sunni Muslims) were intended to be insulted by (5). At the micro level, this could make sense as each individual has their own evaluations about what is appropriate to say and what is not. However, if we step back then we must say that this is an FTA, as indeed I have argued any use of *harumzade* (with the meaning intended) has to be an FTA. We are then left with a very counter intuitive conclusion; using an expletive and intentionally threatening a person’s (or a group’s) face is not necessarily impolite, in fact it can be *politic* and even *polite*. Ironically, the discursive approach is supposed to be a first-order approach that follows the evaluations of the interlocutors without introducing a theoretical conception of politeness into the analysis (Watts, 2003). Yet, the terms used in this section (*politic*, *polite*, *impolite*) seem to be second-order concepts after all⁷. For if I had followed a first-order approach I would not have used the terms of the discursive approach but used native Persian words for politeness instead, which obviously function differently from the terms of the discursive approach. Moreover, instances such as (5) make the scope of a social practice unclear. The cleric is a public figure and could anticipate that Sunni Muslims would see the video of his sermon. There are also Sunni Iranians⁸ and not every Shiite Iranian would approve of the cleric’s message. It seems arbitrary to say that they are not part of the social practice even if they were not present at the

⁶ The two main sects of Islam. Their relationship is comparable to how the Protestant and Catholic church perceived each other as enemies in the past.

⁷ See Discussion for a more extensive analysis of this argument.

⁸ The CIA estimates that between 5-10% of the national population is a Sunni Muslim in Iran. (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>)

sermon. Since the scope of a social practice is so unclear and since the above interpretation leads to a counter intuitive conclusion, there is no reason to assume that *harumzade* is not inherently impolite.

3.1.2. The relation between *harumzade* and face in Persian society

The workings of face in Persian society cannot be exhaustively dealt with here but the key difference between face in Persian and American culture can be effectively shown by using the native Persian terms for face. Face cannot be straightforwardly translated into Persian but the two equivalents would be *shaxsiat* ‘character’ and *aberu* ‘water of the face’. The former refers to an individual’s social standing towards society. A person who is *ba-shaxsiat* ‘with-character’ can be described as somebody who follows social norms and whose behavior and conduct is met with approbation by her peers and community members (Izadi, 2015, 2016; Koutlaki, 2002). The term *aberu* refers to what a person thinks that other people think of their *shaxsiat* (Izadi, 2016). Therefore, a person’s *aberu* can be damaged if they are humiliated or offended in any public situation by another actor. Of key importance is that *aberu* is often inseparable from larger groups, in particular that of the family, hence *aberuye xanevade* ‘water of the family’s face’. Returning to the above examples of *harumzade*, the addressees’ *aberuye xanevade* is damaged through its use by implicating the parents of the addressees. Therefore, the focus of an impoliteness analysis for Persian cannot only be on the evaluations of the addressee by him or herself, but more importantly must consider the implications an insult has on the evaluations of any party that was a witness or was informed of the insult later. It does not matter then how the addressee relates to the insult as much as it matters how the public relates to the insult. In terms of how expletives work differently in American English and Persian, this would have to be the main manifest difference between the two cultures. In American (and Anglo-Saxon) society, it is the individual who can gain or lose

face *as* an individual⁹, whereas in Iranian society members of a unit (for our purposes the family) gain or lose a collective face or *aberuye xanevade*. In this sense, we can postulate that there are two ways that impoliteness can occur in Persian society, whereas in American society there is only one. The first way includes minor forms of impoliteness that only affect *shaxsiat* and the second being major offences that effect the *aberu* of the addressee and his or her family. Modern American society would only have the former way as face threats are reduced to the individual.

3.2. The case of *nigger*

The history and usage of *nigger* cannot be exhaustively dealt with here. For the present purposes, it is not necessary to know the precise meaning of the word, rather it only needs to be examined whether its use and meaning carry an inherent negative evaluation. It is sufficient to define *nigger* as a racial slur that claims the racial inferiority of the addressee's 'race' which has historically been used against African-American people and occasionally against other ethnicities that were not considered to be 'white'¹⁰ (Rahman, 2012; Smith, 1992). The terms that can be used to refer to African Americans¹¹ have changed considerably overtime. In the nineteenth century, the preferred 'neutral' term was *colored people*, which at times was used to refer to Asians and Native Americans as well (Smith, 1992). Late in the nineteenth century, the term *negro* was suggested by several early black rights activists as the preferable word for various reasons (Smith, 1992). At the same time, the word *negro*, had always been associated with *nigger* and *nigga* and was not unanimously accepted as a neutral or positive term (Rahman, 2012; Smith, 1992). Though *negro* was still the preferred term of official institutions and Civil Rights activists in the 1960s, the shift towards *black* as the new respectful label was already taking place and was cemented by the 1970's (Smith, 1992). In

⁹ Of course this not always the case even for American society since someone can represent a company or other official institution and carry their reputation in an interaction. However, these are exceptions that cannot be dealt with here.

¹⁰ It is inaccurate to say not of European descent, since the word has been used to refer to Irish people.

¹¹ I have chosen to use African American as I take this to be a mostly neutral and descriptive term.

turn, by the 1990s *African-American* became the dominant label used by the media, activists and higher institutions (Smith, 1992). The consistent general shift in labeling African-Americans is perhaps one of the best examples of a discursive struggle in American English. What is clear from this brief historical overview is that *nigger* was never (at least from the Abolition of 1860 and onwards) considered to be an appropriate label to refer to African-Americans neutrally (Rahman, 2012). If the offensiveness of the term was neutral or context sensitive, activists and American institutions would not go to such great lengths in creating a new term that was egalitarian and unmarked. Attempts have even been made to symbolically ban the use of the word in the United States.¹² The following utterance is from a report detailing a controversy with a white English teacher addressing an African American with *nigga*¹³ (Dodiet, 2006). The teacher claimed that the student addressed him with *nigga* first and that he simply responded in kind as a way to establish intimacy. The teacher received an unpaid ten day suspension following the controversy.

(6) *Well I was just stunned a second, well then, get away from the door nigga.* (Dodiet, 2006, 1:12)

The word is also ubiquitously used in rap, comedy and day to day interactions¹⁴. The following are some examples from stand-up comedians¹⁵ (7), rappers (8) Youtube comments (9).

(7). *That's any nigga that hustle, that's our national anthem right there.* (Williams, 2008,

¹² In 2007, the New York City Council was considering this motion in an effort to re-educate the public on the troubled history of the word. See https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-02-27-nword_x.htm

¹³ These controversies have happened before. See Appendix B for more instances of whites using *nigga*. <http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/tv/ct-bill-maher-ice-cube-20170610-story.html>

¹⁵ The comedian is Katt Williams, the rap group YG, who are both African American and produced (7) and (8) respectively. The race of the commenter of (9) cannot be established for certain.

0:45)

(8). *First thing's first I love all my niggas. This rap shit cracked and I involve my niggas*

(YGVevo, 2013, 0:32)

(9). *Lmfao my jamaican niggas* (mcool43v3r, 2014)

If we consider the teacher's usage, it does not seem to be the case that he had a different intention with his use of *nigga* as compared to the four examples. All the examples seem to use *nigga* to address a person (or several) in a similar fashion to *bro*, *dude* or *man*. All these words and *nigga* used in the above examples (including (6)) are used to highlight a sense of camaraderie. The intention behind the utterances, at the very least, does not seem to be face-threatening. Yet instances such as that of (6) generate considerable controversy whereas, those of (7-9) do not seem to be as contested. It is clear that the race of the speaker (in particular if he/she is white) of an utterance with *nigga* is of crucial importance to the perceived appropriateness of the utterance. It is important to add that I am not claiming that African-Americans may use *nigga* without controversy themselves, rather that the perlocutionary effect of the utterance seems significantly impacted by the ethnic background of the producer. On the illocutionary level, however, all the examples imply the same thing, being a term of solidarity. Therefore, whether *nigga* is perceived as face-threatening and impolite is highly context sensitive, meaning that the discursive approach is right to say that the norms of the interaction would determine the impoliteness of utterances (6-9). However, does this also apply to the original form *nigger*? To examine whether *nigger* is inherently face-threatening, we need look at instances where the illocutionary force is used to denigrate the addressee's race.

The following examples show *nigger* being explicitly used as a racial slur.

(10) *I got more respect for that black man, than I got for you **white niggers** out there.*¹⁶

(Fusion, 2016, 0:54)

(11) *This video sucks. The term "**Sand Nigger**" is not offensive in any way. It's just another term for Arabs :D*¹⁷ (Calmari, 2015)

(12) *On the other hand, say you could locate the filthiest, most vile **sand nigger** in Gaza.*¹⁸

(littlefieldjohn, 2010)

It is interesting to note that (6-19) all use the shorter derivation *nigga*, whereas (10-12) all use the original form *nigger*.¹⁹ Rahmani (2012) has argued that *nigger* should be seen as the quintessential racial slur and is wholly different, though related to, *nigga*. Most notable about (10-12) is that *nigger* can be used to threaten other ethnicities by adding an adjective. In the case of (10), the Ku Klux Klan member is face-threatening several White American recipients, whereas *sand nigger* in (11-12) is directed towards Arabic (sometimes just Middle-Eastern) people. The following uses demonstrate that *nigger* can be used as a general expletive meant to denote the inferiority of recipients from any ethnic background. At the same time, the qualifying adjective used for non-African American peoples demonstrates the underlying assumption that the original non-qualified counterpart is still meant to face-threaten African-Americans specifically. The fact that *nigger* can be used as a general expletive referring to racial inferiority is evidence that the word has (acquired) the denotation of denigrating a recipient based on their ethnic and/or historical background. Therefore, the term is intimately tied to denigration and (especially if the denotation is intended) will likely lead to face-threatening and a negative evaluation by the recipient. We can conclude that at

¹⁶ Uttered by a Ku Klux Klan member. Historically, *white nigger* has been used to refer to Irish immigrants and even any white person who performed menial labor.

¹⁷ From a comment on a Youtube video explaining what *sand nigger* means.

¹⁸ From a post on the forum of Vanguard News Network, a website with the subtitle: No Jews. Just Right. The first page of the thread contained 20 posts by 15 different members, using *nigger* and *sand nigger* for a total of 30 times, sometimes interchangeably.

least the form *nigger* is inherently face-threatening.

3.2.1. Are utterances with *nigger* inherently impolite?

Similar to section 3.1.1 that discussed the impoliteness of *harumzade*, we would have to say that the original form *nigger* is not necessarily *impolite* but can be either *politic* or *polite* according to Locher and Watts (2005) since the speakers of (10-12) not only use it frequently among each other, but do not reproach one another for its usage and intention. In fact, it seems to be the social norm *to use nigger* to refer to African-Americans and Middle-Easterners as a way of threatening their face in the social practices of the people of (10-12). Indeed, historians have argued that *nigger* was used as a tool to systematically oppress and further the interests of white slave-owners and segregationists (Kennedy, 2008). What the members of the social practices of (10-12) have in common is that they want to make it explicit that in some sense they deem African-Americans and Middle-Easterners racially inferior to themselves. Thus, the same counter intuitive issue arises for American English as well in that expletives that are inherently face-threatening can be *polite* according to the discursive approach. Moreover, it does not seem to match with the general tendencies of American society towards the word *nigger* as great efforts have been made to (re)create labels that refer to African-Americans respectfully. It seems justified to reject the definition of (im)politeness that Locher and Watts (2005) have made based on the present argument. Once we reject the definition of (im)politeness as wholly dependent on the social practices of the interlocutors, there is no reason to assume that no utterance is inherently polite or impolite. Indeed, if we follow other definitions of impoliteness in the literature then the opposite claim is supported. According to Bousfield's (2008) definition of impoliteness, uttering *nigger* to an addressee intentionally would always be impolite provided that my argument about *nigger* being inherently face-threatening is accepted. According to Terkourafi's definition, we may

say that uttering *nigger* is impolite in the majority of instances in American society since its use as an expletive has become conventionalized to the degree that the hearer would not need to make an inference about the intention of the speaker if *nigger* would be uttered.

4. Discussion

Politeness research has notably had difficulty with establishing clear methodological strategies to tackle its subject of research. Whereas the canonical theory of Brown and Levinson (1987) considered it satisfactory to invent their own sentences and discuss them with an abstract conception of rational agents in order to establish a universal theory of politeness, the discursive view rejects these premises and only looks at individual instances, denying the possibility of a predictive theory (Locher & Watts, 2005; Watts, 2003). The dualist approaches of Culpeper (1996, 2012) and Terkourafi (2005, 2008) in turn emphasize the importance of basing a framework on empirical data and extrapolating formulae that are context dependent but conventionally constituted to express face-threats or face-enhancements.

My approach was dualist in the sense that I think we need to look at both the semantics and the context of the words that are associated with politeness, following Culpeper (2012), Terkourafi (2005, 2008). and Leech (2007). However, when it comes to expletives and in particular the expletives that have been discussed presently, it appears that the context matters far less than it would for less serious expletives or non-expletives. Terkourafi's (2005, 2008) frame based approach would describe *harumzade* and *nigger* as having been conventionalized to such a degree that they semantically encode face-threat. Of course, this proposition can only be validated with statistics on the uses of *harumzade* and *nigger* and the frequency in which they are used to abuse.

An additional difficulty in politeness research is how to define (im)politeness. The only commonality that (almost) all definitions of impoliteness share is that in some way

(im)politeness has to concern the manipulation of face (Bousfield, 2008; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Culpeper, 2012; Leech, 2007; Locher & Watts, 2005; Terkourafi, 2005, 2008). Yet the definitions differ radically. For example, if we had utilized Bousfield's (2008) definition of impoliteness we would have to say that *harumzade* and *nigger* are inherently impolite since they have been argued to be inherently face-threatening. This definition has effectively equated face-threat and impoliteness with one another hearkening back to Brown & Levinson's theory (1987). This study shares the intuition that face-threat and impoliteness are, at least, closely connected and that it makes no sense to claim that inherently face-threatening expletives can be *polite*, like the definitions of Locher and Watts (2005) suggest after having been applied to the above examples. This definition of (im)politeness gives so much weight to the evaluations of the individual interlocutors that the analysts lose sight that politeness is a cultural and linguistic phenomenon that can be institutionalized at a large scale. When the focus is on the micro-level of individual conversations the ability to adequately explain what politeness is and how it works is lost (Culpeper, 2012; Terkourafi, 2005). A more radical critique comes from Haugh (2007) who considers the discursive approach to be a second order approach in disguise. Haugh (2007) discusses native speaker views of various linguistic communities and argues that what is considered polite behavior is not necessarily considered to be marked or beyond the social expectations of a community and thus not a first order lay conception of politeness. Politeness may simply be expected and taken for granted. This seems to resemble Koutlaki's (2002) and Izadi's (2015, 2016) analysis of honorifics and ritual request taking sequences (continuously expressing humility by prioritizing the needs of the addressee though not necessarily meaning it) in Persian. Honorifics and rituals are commonplace in Persian social interaction and they are simply the norm, though their absence may be perceived as *negatively* marked. Similarly, American English native speakers consider friendliness and consideration to be distinctive of politeness (Haugh, 2007), yet this does not

mean that they would consider ‘friendly’ or ‘considerate’ behavior to be above the expectations of the interaction.

This issue of focusing on the micro-level seems even more problematic for Persian. As argued above, the discursive approach (and perhaps politeness theorists in general) focus too much on the role of the speaker and addressee in the determination of face-loss and (im)politeness. Though this is satisfactory for Western cultures and languages, it misses the fact that in a community-centered culture such as that of Iran the evaluations of the parents and community (neighbors, village members etc.) are arguably more relevant to face manipulation and (im)politeness than those of the interlocutors. This makes micro-level frameworks such as the discursive approach particularly ill-equipped to analyze Persian discourse when loss of *aberu* is involved, because such an analysis necessarily requires the analyst to look at larger social practices that possess great influence on the behavior and experiences of the interlocutors. However, it is important to reiterate that this study purposefully chose particularly sensitive expletives in order to see if we can justify the claim that no utterance can be inherently impolite. Therefore, the discursive approach may still work very well for analyzing politeness and also minor expletives in both American English and Persian.

5. Conclusion

The present study has argued that *harumzade* and *nigger* are inherently face-threatening. By taking the cultural and historical context of both expletives into account and discussing how they are used through several examples it is clear that competent native speakers that wish to illocute the meaning of these expletives are seeking to insult or degrade the addressee. This is corroborated by the fact that we can rank *harumzade* as more impolite than *namashru* on a semantic scale and that *nigger* can be used as a blanket term to denigrate the addressee’s racial or ethnic identity as no other word in American English can.

At the very least, there is little reason to think that no utterance is inherently impolite as the discursive approach claims, though this does not mean that the opposite has been demonstrated. The main limitation of this study and that of Brown and Levinson (1987) and Locher and Watts (2005) is that they are all mostly based on native speaker intuitions. To validate the findings of this study, follow up studies are required that gather statistics on the uses of *harumzade* and *nigger* including native speaker views on the significance of these words and their perceived impoliteness. Moreover, a discussion of native Persian words for politeness and even lay American English would have shed more light on whether the discursive approach is a first order approach. This limitation could be particularly problematic for the Persian section as the effect and connotation of *harumzade* and *namashru* on a native speaker should be described through the native politeness lexicon as well since '(im)politeness' cannot be assumed to correspond to a native understanding of what is and is not face-threatening. Other considerations that relate to the study such as gender, power, and morality could not be discussed either in this small study. Finally, the notion of culture and linguistic community were simplified to facilitate the study meaning that my arguments might not apply to Iranian society and American society as a whole, though the conscious decision to choose some of the most controversial words in both languages has mitigated this issue.

Finally, future studies should take the workings of face in non-Western cultures and languages into greater consideration as the focus on speaker and addressee evaluation is appropriate for societies such as the United States but much less so for societies where face can operate and is shared by larger entities than the individual.

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