

Language as Practice and Self-Dialogization: Examination of Language and Self in *Ta'arof*

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Abstract: The relationship between language and self has interested anthropologists for a long time. They have raised, for example, such questions as follows: Is language (i.e., a corpus of vocabulary words) the representation of one's worldview? Or is it language that affects one's worldview? In this study I attempt to examine the relationship between language and self from a different angle; a self dialogized in the process of language interactions. Although comprehension of language structure (such as grammatical rules) among interlocutors is crucial for communication, there are other elements that influence the ways the individuals communicate. My examination of the Iran language practice of *ta'arof*, hopefully contributes to an understanding of such elements. In *ta'arof*, Iranians communicate with one another by conveying what they do not mean to say. Examination of *ta'arof* allowed me to explore a dynamic mechanism in which a self is dialogized through language interaction. I studied this aspect by using research findings that gathered in Iran and the U.S.

Key Words: *ta'arof*, language as practice, language interactions, habitus, language game, speech acts, self-dialogization, perlocutionary

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between language and self has been one of the main research concerns in anthropology. Franz Boas (1911), who is known as a founder of anthropology, for instance, sought to understand other cultures by studying language. Language was believed to be an essential tool in classifying and describing people's worldviews. Similarly, Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) studied the relationship between language and worldview by analyzing the grammatical structure of language and its role in shaping people's perception of the universe. Thus, the issue of whether or not, and to what extent language influences thought have been important topics in anthropology (Duranti 1997: 61). The study

presented in this paper shares the same research interest concerning the relationship between language and self.

Examination of language systems is certainly important in understanding the relationship between language and self. The content of a conversation, for instance, must be understood by interlocutors in order to communicate with each other. In this communication, one's understanding of selfhood is exchanged and shared based on what is mentioned within a language system. Nevertheless, the scope of this kind of examination is highly limited. How does this method explain a social situation where people communicate with one another by saying what they do not mean? It is within this particular social context that my study provides an insight into the relationship between language and self. The social practice of language interactions among Iranians is one good example of this case. An examination of the *ta'arof* practice allowed me to explore the ways in which language interactions uniquely influence self perception, which other systematic analyses of language are unable to explain. Instead of analyzing the ways in which language systems and structures influence worldviews, this study focused on language interactions that affect the ways the self is perceived. In order to examine this aspect, I drew upon both my ethnographic experiences in Iran and the interviews that I conducted among several Iranians who reside in Iran and in the United States. Although the sample size of this research is admittedly small, I attempted to reflect diverse backgrounds of the participants as possible, such as those of gender and age.

In this study, I posited that language interactions play an imperative role in the formation of self. Kenneth J. Gergen (1994) argues that a kind of self that is articulated in a self-narrative significantly strengthens its self-identity through linguistic interactions with others. Thus, both self-perception and one's engagements in language interaction are importantly related to each other. With regards to the relationship between self-construction and daily language practice, Pierre Bourdieu (1977) discussed the ways in which a particular kind of self is created through habitual practices under certain social conditions. For Bourdieu (1977), some aspects of language practices, such as daily speech, are a set of practices that would reinforce the systems of dispositions (*habitus*), which had been cumulatively constructed through habitual activities in the past. Thus, language is considered as a system

of practices that contributes to the formation of the self. It is this aspect of language as action and practice that I shall explore below.

COMPARISON IN LANGUAGE AND SELF

Language and self are imbued in the social context. An examination of aspects of Iranian and Japanese language interactions revealed similar features concerning the relationship between language and self. In both languages, the perception of self in language interaction is defined by the context. For example, the self-reference employed in a conversation in Japanese reflects a relationship between the interlocutors — a relationship that is assumed to be learned. With regards to the relationship between context and self in Japanese, Dorinne Kondo mentions that “[b]oundaries between self and other are fluid and constantly changing, depending on context and on the social positioning people adopt in particular situations” (1990: 31). A fluidity of self-identification with others signifies the individual’s dependency on an ever-changing context. For example, different terminologies of the subjective personal pronoun “I” in the conversation in Japanese imply different degrees of intimacy to the person with whom one converses. The “I” word “*watakushi*” is normally used by both male and female in a highly formal context, such as when one gives a formal speech at a major conference. Another “I” word “*ore*” is usually used by males within informal contexts, as when one speaks with an intimate friend on the phone. Thus, the Japanese use of personal pronouns signifies the conversation context, defining the relationship between self and other. Depending on the context, the Japanese speakers are expected to distinguish appropriate personal pronouns from inappropriate ones in conversations. The example of language practice in Japanese reveals an interactive element concerning the relationship between language and self that is embedded in the social context. *Ta’arof* shares a similar feature in this regard

PRACTICES OF TA’AROF

In his book, *Language, Status, and Power in Iran*, William Beeman defines *ta’arof* as “the active, ritualized realization of differential perceptions of superiority and inferiority in interaction” (1986:56). *Ta’arof*, according to Beeman, is the institutionalized language interaction through which one primarily conveys respect to an interlocutor, in particular to an

interlocutor with whom one is not familiar. Despite Beeman's clear definition of this language practice, my findings revealed that while most of the Iranians I interviewed¹ understood the major roles of *ta'arof*, they acknowledged its complexity as a social practice and understood the practices of *ta'arof* differently.

One would not be sufficiently able to understand the practice of *ta'arof* without considering the social context in which *ta'arof* is practiced, as *ta'arof* relies upon the ability of the individual to comprehend and handle interactions in socially "appropriate" manners within Iranian society. If one fails to recognize the social situations where *ta'arof* is expected to be practiced, or fails to respond to the interlocutor "appropriately" in that situation, argues Beeman (1986), the person is judged as socially inept. In this light, the context of the language interaction must be properly understood by the interlocutors.

My interviews showed that the contexts in which *ta'arof* are employed are clearly understood by the informants. The informants also palpably define selfhood in the interactions. For example, Iranians use *ta'arof* when they exhibit respect towards others. Asked the purpose of *ta'arof*, most Iranian respondents answered that they would use *ta'arof* to exhibit a sense of respect or politeness to the interlocutor. A sense of respect plays an important role in their social relations (Goffman 1967: 91). The interviews also revealed that Iranians mostly practice *ta'arof* when they converse with an unfamiliar person in formal situations such as the New Year's gathering (*Nowruz*). These results seem to indicate that Iranians put themselves in lower positions than the interlocutor in their language interaction in order to convey respect to the interlocutor, especially when they meet someone with whom they are not familiar. As Beeman notes, "the most effective and widely used strategic formula in the use of *ta'arof* is to aim for a lower relative status position and defer to another person" (1986: 59). Therefore, it becomes clear that the context of the conversation crucially shapes self perception, and that Iranians unambiguously understand when and how to practice *ta'arof* under various circumstances.

¹ I interviewed several Iranians, including the two individuals with whom I corresponded through email. I gave them the survey either individually or by group (such as at party). The distribution of the sample group is the following: six males and six females. The distribution by the age group is: four teenagers, five twenty-somethings, two thirty-somethings, and one sixty-year-old.

Bourdieu's (1977) theory of language as a system of dispositions is intriguing in the pursuit of understanding the language interactions of *ta'arof*. The ways people interact with one another are significantly shaped and consolidated through dispositions: "Because the dispositions...engender aspirations and practices..., the most improbable practices are excluded, either totally without examination, as *unthinkable...*" (Bourdieu 1977: 77). In fact, the practice of *ta'arof* is viewed as an institutionalized language practice by Iranians, rather than as mere language interaction, according to the interview results. Asked "Do you expect your children to use *ta'arof*?" in my questionnaire, most Iranians, particularly those who have lived in the U.S. in a short period, answered "yes." I interpret the result to mean that Iranians think of *ta'arof* as a communication means that has been *and* will be learned or taught in the society. In other words, *ta'arof* is considered generational and habitual. Regardless of whether Iranians feel comfortable or ambivalent about *ta'arof*, the term is often expected to be used over generations, disclosing the aspects of what Bourdieu calls *habitus* in the *ta'arof* practice. *Ta'arof* is so instilled in the ordinary lives of Iranians that they grow up hearing, observing, and learning the language interaction.

Ta'arof is viewed as a socio-cultural phenomenon distinctly practiced by Iranians; in as much as socio-cultural elements are considered to be crucial in the language interactions (Gumperz 1968: 51). I explored this perspective by asking "Can it [*ta'arof*] be done in English? If so, is it easier or more difficult?" None of the informants answered "No" to this question. They all agreed that *ta'arof* could be done in English, although the use of *ta'arof* in English is more difficult than it is in Persian. While they provided various reasons for its difficulty, the coherent theme in their answers is the "cultural" attachment to *ta'arof* or its cultural foundation. For instance, a sixty-year old male answered that "In American culture, it [*ta'arof*] is neither expected nor appreciated." An eighteen-year old female replied that "it [*ta'arof*] is not part of the culture [i.e., the American culture]." Another nineteen-year old female wrote that "they [the Americans] don't understand [*ta'arof*]."² Their answers indicate a culturally distinctive feature of *ta'arof*.

Because they grow up practicing *ta'arof*, Iranians are able to learn how to use *ta'arof* "appropriately" within social contexts. This

² I quoted these answers as they were on the questionnaire sheet.

comprehension of appropriateness in the language interaction can account for a “reflexive” self – a self Iranians are capable of creating in varying contexts in the process of acquiring *habitus*. Beeman comments on this self reflexivity by stating that “*ta'arof* constitutes in all social interaction the broad ritualization of behavioral expectations that result from status differentiation in interaction, instances of *ta'arof* are always to a degree reflexive, or indexical, of an interaction situation” (1986: 58). Thus, like the various usages of the Japanese personal pronouns, the practice of *ta'arof* reveals the relationship between self and a conversation context. It is therefore clear that its practice takes place in the social context in which the relative perception of self and others is unambiguously defined or understood by the interlocutors.

Another finding from my interviews elaborated further on this point. Whereas they exercise *ta'arof* with an “unfamiliar” person, most informants did not expect their parents, intimate partners, or family members to use *ta'arof*. This also denoted the Iranian respondents’ clear understanding of to whom *ta'arof* should be practiced with, and that the use of *ta'arof* is indicative of a changing self. As Gergen (1994) argues, what matters in the affirmation of self are the people with whom one engages the conversation. A self that is produced through *ta'arof* is strengthened by others who engage in the conversation: “Identities...are never individual; each is suspended in an array of precariously situated relationships” (Gergen 1994: 209). Recognition of a particular self becomes more thorough, if not complete, with the affirmation of the self by the interlocutor. Whether or not they use *ta'arof*, Iranians perceive *selves* through interlocutors. This feature is plausible when they converse with the people with whom they can easily draw a fine line — such as those with whom they have intimate relationships (i.e., family members) or strangers. They do not feel obliged to use *ta'arof* with the former, whereas they do for the latter. The finding that the practice of *ta'arof* is confined to specific parties, such as distant family members and strangers, demonstrates that Iranians are capable of identifying the self, depending on an interaction situation. The following example of the *ta'arof* practice demonstrates the features discussed above.

EXAMPLES OF TA'AROF

Scenario 1: I join a conversation between my friend and an administrator (Agha-e Reza) after class.

Agha-e Reza: man diruz dar daneshgah-e Isfahan in kif ra kharidam.

(I bought this bag at the University of Isfahan yesterday.)

Friend: in kif kheili ghashange!

(It is very beautiful!)

Me (Just walked in): khaste nabashid, shoma dar bareye chi harf mizadin?

(Please don't be tired [cultural expression when Iranians greet each other]. What were you all talking about?)

Friend: agha-e Reza diruz inja kif kharid.

(Mr. Reza bought a bag yesterday at school.)

Me: bebinam, chetor-e, in kif kheili ghashange! man hamin tor kif ra mikham bekharam baray-e pedram.

(Please let me see it. This bag is very beautiful! I want to buy this bag for my father.)

Agha-e Reza: shoma befamamid.

(Please take my bag.)

Me: jeddi?

(Are you serious?)

Agha-e Reza: shokhi kardam!

(Just kidding, followed by everyone's laughter—as we all understood the context.)

This example showed a typical use of *ta'arof* and highlighted the features introduced earlier; the selves in the conversation are clearly defined and subsequently solidified through a series of interactions. The relationship between Agha-e Reza and myself is noteworthy in comprehending the context in which *ta'arof* is employed in the conversation. He might have not used *ta'arof* in the situation had I been his close friend. Agha-e Reza, an administrative assistant, and I, a student learning the Persian language, barely know each other outside of school and had not developed an intimate relationship. The context in which this conversation occurred was clearly understood by each of us.

One then may ask if Iranians communicate with a stranger without difficulty due to the *ta'arof* practice. My findings disclose that that is not the case. On the one hand, *ta'arof* can be highly useful in initiating a relationship due to the respect the system imbues, in particular, among strangers. On the other hand, there seems to be the issue of "hidden"

intention behind the use of *ta'arof* that sometimes prevents Iranians from establishing close relationships. Indeed, regarding this matter, a sixty-year old Iranian male informant involved in this study responded that he sometimes uses *ta'arof* if he does not “want to get too close or [get] involved” with a particular individual. Another informant similarly points out that “some relationships and communication will not be artificial [without *ta'arof*].” Thus, some Iranians acknowledge this “hidden” strategy of *ta'arof* in their language interactions.

But, how do Iranians define an intimate boundary between self and others? What if a context is not unambiguous enough for one to define an “appropriate” self when necessary? It is in this context that certain features of the seemingly difficulty-free *ta'arof* communication are brought into question in the next section of this paper.

THE USE AND NON-USE OF *TA'AROF*

As a starting point to analyzing the ways in which an intimate boundary is ambiguously constructed, the next two *ta'arof* examples³ illustrate the different reactions in the same situation shown both by a stranger and by a close friend. Often, *ta'arof* is (or is not) practiced in similar social contexts. Consider the following examples.

Scenario 2: While I am in a line waiting for my lunch at the cafeteria, a student behind me starts talking with me. (*ta'arof*)

Me (ordering food): man hambargar makhsus va ab mikham kharesh mikonam.

(I want a special burger and water, please.)

Student (after me): man sandovich va ab portoghal mikham kharesh mikonam.

(I want to get a sandwich and an orange juice, please.)

Me (reading book): ...

Student: esm-e tun chie? (What is your name?)

Me: esm-e man Satoshi-e. Esm-e tun chie? (My name is Satoshi. What is yours?)

Student: esm-e man mansur-e. male koja hastin? (My name is Mansur. Where are you from?)

³ Here, I recall the conversation during my stay in Isfahan, Iran in the summer of 2004.

Me: man japani hastam, vali man daneshuju-m dar amrika. (I am from Japan, but I am a student in the United States.)

Student: jaleb-e! (Interesting!)

The student got his sandwich before mine.

Student: shoma befarmavid. (Please have my sandwich.)

Me: na, na shoma befarmavid (No, thanks. Please have your sandwich)

Student: Na, shoma befarmavid. (No, please have my sandwich.)

Me: na, merci... (No, thanks...)

Scenario 3: the same situation as the scenario 2, but with a different person, i.e., my close friend. (without *ta'arof*)

Me (ordering food): man hambargar makhsus va ab mikham khahesh mikonam.

(I want a special burger and water, please.)

Behzad (my friend): man mikham sandovich va ab portoghal mikham, khahesh mikonam.

(I want to get a sandwich and an orange juice, please.)

Me: Che khabar? shoma emruz chikar kardin? (What's up? What did you do today?)

Behzad: man dar ketabkhone dars khondam baray-e emtahan. (I studied for the exam at the library.)

Behzad had gotten his sandwich before I did.

Behzad: man miram birun va nahar mikhoram. (I am going outside and will eat my lunch.)

Me: Bashe, man miram unja vakhty ke man qaza-e man ra gereftam. (Okay, I will be there when I get my food.)

In scenarios two and three, a different degree of intimacy is evident in the use and non-use of *ta'arof* within the same situation. In scenario two, a student, who happens to stand behind me at a restaurant, clearly uses *ta'arof* in the conversation, whereas my friend does not in the third example. Even though the situation is the same, it is clear that different kinds of the self are being played in these examples. In this sense, in addition to the matter of respect, the practice of *ta'arof* carries the degree

of formality with which Iranians engage language interactions. Thus, many Iranians responded to my question “What would the society be like without *ta'arof*?” by stating that the society will be “direct,” “bold,” “honest,” or “the western society-like.” In other words, their answers point to the aspect of formality that would make language interactions “direct”, “bold”, or “honest” without *ta'arof*. While conceived both positively and negatively by Iranians, this formality is acknowledged as an important aspect of *ta'arof*. For example, a twenty-year old female, who wrote that “time would not be wasted [without *ta'arof*]”, considers *ta'arof* rather in a negatively manner. On the other hand, a twenty-one year-old male viewed it, more or less, positively, asserting that the society would be “better, but more rude [sic] [without *ta'arof*].” Thus, the informant implies that *ta'arof* has social validity, as it provides a modicum of social harmony that may otherwise not exist. The practice of *ta'arof* and its implications are clearly articulated and understood by Iranians.

At the same time, however, this formal aspect of *ta'arof* can be confusing even among Iranians as to where to draw a fine line, especially when the “intimate” boundaries become obscure between the interlocutors. *Ta'arof* can be practiced even among “less intimate friends” as well as strangers; but, it will make their relationships rather formal, as one of the informants replied that “*ta'arof* makes us feel formal toward our friends.” Furthermore, even among friends, the *ta'arof* practice can lead to misunderstanding. A nineteen-year old male shared a *ta'arof* experience. His friend once spoke with another friend of his, and used *ta'arof* with him, saying that he could help review a mathematics examination with him, despite the fact that he himself had to study for his English exam. While the friend of the participant did not really mean to help his other friend review for the mathematics examination (*ta'arof*), the other friend took the use of *ta'arof* literally. The friend did ask for help on the mathematics examination, and the friend of the informant felt compelled to assist him. As a result, according to the informant, his friend failed his English exam because he ended up helping the friend in need and did not have enough time to study for his own exam. Thus, in sharing this story with me, the nineteen-year old informant illustrated the complexity of the *ta'arof* practice, even among Iranians.

Ta'arof, therefore, can generate misunderstanding between individuals. This perspective is contrary to the ability of *ta'arof* to create

harmony in social relations, as discussed earlier. Rather, this example of misunderstanding suggested that *ta'arof* can be a source of confusion in social relationships. What then causes these misunderstandings in the practice of *ta'arof* in terms of the relationship between self and other?

All of the conversations examined above reveal aspects that cannot be captured had one only attempted to interpret the literal, grammatical meanings of the conversation. In the case of the first scenario, for example, while Agha-e Reza offered me his brand new bag upon my reference to it, he did not literally mean to offer it. To this end, his intention, revealed through *ta'arof*, is to produce, and, in a sense, direct the following reactions from the interlocutors in a certain way. Regarding this kind of conversation, J.L. Austin (1962) analyzes the phenomena of "effect" that speech can generate as a result of language interactions. Of the three types of speech acts he discussed, he explained a perlocutionary act as "either the achievement of a perlocutionary object (convince, persuade) or the production of a perlocutionary sequel" (Austin 1962: 118). In contrast to what he terms as a locutionary act in which the act of saying can be interpreted according to grammatical conversations, a perlocutionary act produces certain effects upon the interlocutor as a result of a particular locution. In the case of the example above, the essence of the conversation lies in the manner in which he conveyed his respect to me, rather than on what is actually being said. This point is also confirmed in my analyses of the answers to the question of "What is the purpose of *ta'arof*?" Most Iranians expressed its purpose as being respectful and polite to others. The importance of *ta'arof* demonstrates a sense of respect, sometimes by showing what the person does not really intend to convey in his/her mind. Thus, what is misunderstood in the *ta'arof* practice is not the locutionary aspect of language practice, but that of perlocutionary.

One then may ask if this misunderstanding, as is demonstrated in the *ta'arof* language interactions above, derives from the differences in class, as Bourdieu argues?⁴ Or are such ambiguous interactions a reflection of misperception of a momentary hierarchy in a conversation

⁴ Bourdieu contends that "Since the history of the individual is never anything other than a certain specification of the collective history of his group or class, *each individual system of dispositions* may be seen as a *structural variant* of all the other group or class habitus, expressing the difference between trajectories and positions inside or outside the class" (1977:86).

that is expected to be understood, as Beeman would have contended?⁵ Neither of these explanations sufficiently explain such misunderstanding. However, I consider Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of "language game" a useful starting point in the analysis of ambiguity inherent in *ta'arof* language practices. It explains some instances of confusion of language interaction, such as the examples above, of which each individual is a participant. His main contention is that each individual has different degrees of understanding of what is implied in a conversation. In order to talk about how people use and understand language, Wittgenstein writes about the metaphor of games:

The use of a word in the language is its meaning.

Grammar describes the use of words in the language.

So it has somewhat the same relation to the language description of a game, the rules of a game, have to the game. (Wittgenstein 1974: 60)

Alessandro Duranti (1997) points out that, although Wittgenstein has often been misinterpreted, what he meant by his concept of a language game is that "understanding a word in a sentence is like understanding a move in a game" (237). He continues to explain that "We get an understanding of how a word is used by matching it with other words and other contexts and by projecting its impact on future words and utterances just as we project a move of chess against past and future moves" (237). In other words, a professional chess player would have a different understanding of how to play chess from a novice would; likewise, each individual would have a different understanding of language usages and interactions in their communications. What is implied in the conversation can be interpreted and understood differently depending on the kinds of contexts. Under such

⁵ Beeman emphasizes the hierarchical aspects of *ta'arof* in his discussions: "The 'ethics' that I have identified here—noblesse oblige on the one hand and submission, obedience, respect, and gratitude on the other—...are the linchpins in a system which keeps social interaction rolling smoothly. Material rewards flow from high to low status, material tribute from low to high" (1986: 51).

circumstances, even the same word or the same sentence can acquire different meanings

It is also important to note that Wittgenstein rejects the idea of an "objective" language rule that would dictate the conversations in a certain fixed manner "like a train moving on the railway track" (1953: 218). He considers that the use of language follows and depends on the rules that are established by social practices. Based on the socially established linguistic practice, such as *ta'arof*, one shares and engages a dialogue with others. In this sense, language is woven into a mechanism in which a certain kind of self is dialogued and recognized.

Bourdieu's idea of *habitus* greatly sheds light on the understanding of the *ta'arof* practice in that habitual language practices in the past can allow one to react to different types of conversation in different contexts. However, my findings disclose that many Iranians, including a sixty-year male who could have been assumed to be a master of *ta'arof* by his age, view *ta'arof* as a perplexing socio-linguistic interaction, indicating that *habitus*, by which Iranians are believed to learn how to use *ta'arof*, fails to provide an analytical tool that fully adjusts to its complex social situations. As mentioned earlier, the practice of *ta'arof* initially appears to be difficulty-free in communicating the perception of self and the other. However, I argue, after examinations of various aspects of *ta'arof*, that the self of each individual is constantly negotiated and dialogued in these language interactions. As Gergen stresses, the relationship of the selves in language interaction keeps changing: "'what is meant' and what is communicated between persons are inherently undecidable. That is, meaning stands as a temporary achievement subject to continuous accretion and alteration through supplementary significations" (1994: 267). Furthermore, Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) contends that utterances are a product of an open-ended dialogue with the other, and stresses that the other with whom one dialogues plays an essential role in one's thought and speech: "language...lies on the borderline between oneself and other. The word in language is half someone else's...the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language...but rather it exists in other people's mouths in other people's contexts, serving other people's intention" (Bakhtin 1981: 293-94). Thus, dialogic aspects of language importantly shape the self.

The degree and levels of self-dialogization become evident as the "intimacy" boundary, for example, seen among friends in the examples

above, enters into a state of ambiguity. The self is recognized in a more apparent manner in contexts where less-acquainted family members or strangers, instead of intimate others, converse with each other. Whatever the degree of the relationship between the individuals involved in any interaction, the self is constantly negotiated and dialogued in a subtle sense as the conversation progresses in the *ta'arof* (and non-*ta'arof*) interactions. In the light of self-dialogization, it is also understandable that self-perception becomes thorough by language interactions with others, whether people use *ta'arof* for strangers or they simply do not practice it among intimate parties. As one engages in the conversation, a person begins to delineate different kinds of self. It is in this light that language plays a crucial role in communication as action and practice — action and practice that greatly contribute to the identification of a particular kind of self.

CONCLUSION

Based on ethnographic experiences and interviews with Iranians in Iran and in the U.S., I examined various aspects of a unique language interaction that is widely practiced among Iranians, a practice known as *ta'arof*. It is fundamentally a socio-linguistic practice in which one conveys respect to others in varying manners. What interested me in studying *ta'arof* was the investigation of the relationship between aspects of language as action and practice on the one hand, and the perception of the self on the other hand.

My findings reveal that *ta'arof* is usually employed by Iranians with individuals whom they are less familiar. Iranians often do not feel obliged to practice *ta'arof* with individuals with whom they share a more intimate relationship. Under these circumstances, the context of the conversation is crucial in understanding the relationship between *ta'arof* and the ensuing self-formation that takes place; being reflexive, the kind of self that is engaged in the conversation is consciously constructed and recognized by both interlocutors. Bourdieu's idea of *habitus* greatly contributes to the argument that repetitious socio-linguistic activities would prepare interlocutors for this language interaction. From these findings, it appeared at first that Iranians were capable of demarcating a fine line with their interlocutors as they differentiated the practices of *ta'arof*, depending on the context in which they engaged language interactions.

Nevertheless, this was not the only case. Interestingly, Iranians acknowledge the complex aspects of the *ta'arof* practice in certain situations where the "intimacy" boundaries are not clearly drawn. How do they construct their selves under these circumstances? I presented a story in which one Iranian male failed in *ta'arof* communication with his friend, disclosing a disruption of what is communicated between the two. Against this background, Austin's idea of the perlocutionary act provided a clue to understand what would cause confusion or miscommunication in the practice of *ta'arof*; that is, what is implied can matter more than what is actually said in the conversation. Contemplating the relationship between language practice and self, the same story led me to analyze Wittgenstein's concept of the language game in which, he argues, each individual enters into language interaction with varying degrees of understanding of how to interpret the conversation. This provided insight into the ways in which individuals negotiate the creation of the self through language interactions. I conclude that the self is constantly negotiated based on one's understanding of a context, and that the self is solidified by engagements in language interactions with others. Examinations of various aspects of *ta'arof* practices highlight the ways in which a certain kind of self can be created through language practices.

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