Cultural conceptualisations in learning English as an L2: Examples from Persian-speaking learners

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A B S T R A C T

Traditionally, many studies of second language acquisition (SLA) were based on the assumption that learning a new language mainly involves learning a set of grammatical rules, lexical items, and certain new sounds and sound combinations. However, for many second language learners, learning a second language may involve contact and interactions with new systems of conceptualising experience. Many learners bring the conceptual system that they have developed while learning their L1 into the learning of an L2, assuming that every single unit of conceptualisation in their repertoire has an equivalent in the conceptual system associated with the L2. This is never the case. In this paper, I will explicate some cultural conceptualisations that speakers of Persian may bring into the task of learning English as an L2 and discuss some possible implications of this process for intercultural sense making. The chapter begins with a background on the notion of *cultural conceptualisation* and then moves into the discussion of Persian cultural conceptualisations in L2 learning.

Keywords: cultural conceptualisations; ELT in Iran; culture in language learning; cultural linguistics

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Introduction: Cultural conceptualisations

Human languages are systems through which we express the ways in which we conceptualise experiences of different kinds (Palmer, 1996). It is now quite recognized that we do not create a mirror image of an objective reality through our use of language; moreover, we often negotiate with others around us as to how we should think of our various experiences. Consider the sentence, 'This land is me' which reflects the way in which an Aboriginal Australian speaker conceptualises, rather than describes 'the land'. In the 'traditional' Aboriginal worldview, human beings are often conceptualised as being part of the land, rather than possessing it. I refer to such culturally constructed ways of conceptualising experience as *cultural conceptualisations* (Sharifian, 2003, 2011). These conceptualisations emerge from the interaction between members of a cultural group and are constantly negotiated and renegotiated across time and space.

Cultural groups have developed characteristic conceptualisations with regard to almost every aspect of their thought and behaviour. These are usually referred to as beliefs, norms, customs, traditions, and values, some of which do not have any 'objective' correlate in the 'external' world. Technically speaking, cultural conceptualisations are *cultural schemas* (or the complex ones referred to as *cultural models*), *categories*, *metaphors*, etc. that are emergent at the level of cultural cognition (See Sharifian, 2011). At the level of individuals, cultural conceptualisations are *heterogeneously distributed* across the minds of a cultural group. That is, cultural conceptualisations are not equally imprinted in the mind of every individual member of a cultural group but are rather *more or less* shared between the members.

The role of human languages in cultural conceptualisations is two-fold in that they both embody and communicate cultural conceptualisations. The semantic content of lexical items depends on how speakers of a language categorise their experiences. For example, a language may or may not have two words for an animal corresponding to

its categorisation either as food or a living animal (e.g., 'sheep' and 'lamb'). Lexical items may also act as labels for schemas that are largely culturally constructed. A word like: 'politeness' and its translations are likely to be associated with different and even contrasting schemas for people across different languages and cultures.

I would now like to make the observation, partly from my own experience, that learning an L2 may require learning a large number of new cultural conceptualisations (see also Danesi, 1995; Hinkel, 1999; Kramsch, 1993; Krasner, 1999). Watson-Gegeo (2004, p. 341) observes that "second language classrooms exhibit and teach—with varying degrees of explicitness—a set of cultural and epistemological assumptions that often differ from those of the second language learner's native culture(s)". This is of course not to make the claim that all cases of L2 learning would involve the same learning load when it comes to cultural conceptualisations. For a West European, learning English as a foreign language may prove less demanding in this regard compared to the case of an Aboriginal Australian learning English as a second language. It is of course to be noted that where very similar but different cultural conceptualisations are held by the learner and the target culture, the less transparent they may prove to be.

Persian language and culture

The official language of Iran is Persian (also known as Farsi), which is spoken by about half of the population. Persian is an Indo-European language which has been influenced by a number of other languages including Arabic. In terms of culture, Iran is marked by a relatively high degree of diversity due to the presence of ethnic groups such as Turks and Kurds. The country as a whole, however, still revolves around a predominantly Persian culture, which is very much unique and indeed quite different from the cultures of its neighbouring countries (e.g., Arberry, 1963; Assadi, 1980, 1982; Bausani, 1971; Beeman, 1976, 1986,1988, 2001; Eslami Rasekh, 2004; Hillmann, 1981; Hodge, 1957; Keshavarz, 2001; Meskub, Perry, Hillman &

Banuazizi, 1992; Modarressi-Tehrani, 2001; O'Shea, 2000; Wilber, 1967). One of the bearers of the Persian culture is the Persian language itself.

> Sociologists have noted how even the basic notions of everyday encounter such as 'family' and 'friend' signify characteristic conceptualisations in the Persian culture which unfold themselves in the context of what Ahmadi and Ahmadi (1998) have termed "Iranian ways of thinking" (p. 3). The aim of this paper, of course, is to focus on some specific instances where the L1 or the L2 communicative behaviour of Persian speakers reflects characteristically Persian cultural conceptualisations.

The cultural schema of *salâm o ahvâlporsi* 'greetings'

One of the first differences that an Iranian learner of English may notice in the way Iranians and Anglo speakers of English (e.g., Americans or Australians) communicate with each other is in the area of greetings or 'greeting schemas'. Speakers of Persian usually draw on the schema of *salâm o ahvâlporsi*[1] (Beeman, 1986, p.181; Taleghani-Nikazm, 2002, p.1811) which encourages the speaker to follow the greeting device (i.e., *salâm* 'hello') with a series of exchanges that inquire about the health of the hearer's family and possibly close friends, what the hearer is up to, the latest news, etc. O'Shea observes that "[g]reetings take up a lot of time in Iran. Not only does one usually inquire about someone's health, but also about the health of any of that person's friends and relatives with whom one is acquainted" (2000, p. 79). With many Iranians, it usually takes some time before one can proceed to other topics within a communicative event, even in everyday conversations with family and friends. The following is an example of a telephone conversation between two speakers of Persian:

01 Ring

02 Ali: alo?

　　　Hello?

03 Said: alo, salam aleikom [Ali jan

　　　hello, hi　　　[dear Ali

04 Ali: [salam halet chetore?

       [*hi how are you?*

05 Ali: [khoobi,?

       [*are you well,?*

06 Said: [ghorbanat halet chetore, khoob hasti,?=

        [*thanks how are you, are you well,?=*

07 Ali: =bad nistam mersi,

      =*not bad thanks,*

08 Said: che khaba[ra,

       what's ne [*w,*

09 Ali: [Zari chetore,

             [*how is Zari,*

10 Said: Zariam khoobe mer[si,

       Zari is also well th[*anks,*

11 Ali: [Nasrin chetore,?=

      [*how is Nasrin,?*

12 Said: =Nasrinam khoobe, Nasrinam khoobe salamat bashi,

       =*Nasrin is also fine, Nasrin is also fine, be healthy,*

13 Said: [.hhh Fariba chetore,?

       [*.hhh how is Fariba,?*

14 Ali: [khob,

      [*well,*

15   (0.5)

16 Ali: hame khooban [mersi

      everybody is well [*thanks*

17 Said: [Amir chekar mikone

       [*what is Amir ((male first name)) doing,?*

18 Said: Amir khoobe,?

       Is Amir well,?

19 Ali: Am-Amir emruz dige tatile dig[e, pishe Faribast

Am-Amir is well home today we[ll, with Fariba

20 Said: [areh dige

      [yeah well

21 Ali: areh,=

    yeah,=

21 Said: =khob khoobe,?=

    =okay is he well,?=

22 Ali: =hafte digam tatile-areh khoobeh

    =his next week off-yeah he is well

23 Said: ah

    oh

<div align="center">(Source: Taleghani-Nikazm, 2002 , p. 1812)</div>

This typical telephone conversation clearly reflects the Persian schema of *salâm o ahvâlporsi* in that it is marked by several moves that inquire about the health of the family members and their latest issues and news. As Taleghani-Nikazm notes, "Iranian speakers understand and orient to this particular routine because of the socio-cultural knowledge [or schemas] of the activity they share" (2002, p. 1813). The reader will be well aware that greetings in Anglo varieties of English are usually less elaborated and thus Iranian learners of English who draw on their Persian schema may in fact find the Anglo English format of greeting very 'brief' and 'inappropriate'. This is reflected in the following comment by an Iranian learner of English with regard to the way in which Anglo-English speakers greet each other.

(24)   *gharbiâ   kheili salam o ahvalporsishoon khoshkeh*

      Westerners' greeting is very dry[2].

Here the learner has used the adjective 'dry' to indicate that the Western style of greeting is neither sufficiently elaborated nor intimate. Likewise, Westerners may find the Persian style of greeting 'unduly lengthy'.

The cultural schema of *âberu* 'face'

Perhaps the most dominant cultural schema in the Persian cultural cognition is *âberu*. Literally *âb* means 'water' and *ru* means 'face', so the whole word *âberu* literally means 'water of face', which may refer either to facial freshness and healthiness or to the sweat of one's face. In the first sense, the concept of 'face' appears to be a metonymy for one's general wellbeing and it is also associated with a schema that embodies the image of a person, a family, or a group, particularly as it is viewed by others in the society. In the second sense, the sweat of one's face may be again used as a metonymy for cases where damage to one's honour and social image has made him/her upset to the point of sweating.

Although it has been claimed that there is a universal concept of 'face' (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983; Spencer-Oatey, 2000), research has shown significant cross-cultural differences in the nature and the prevalence of the concept (e.g., Hill, Ide, Kawasaki, Ikuta & Ogino, 1986; Ide, 1989; Matsumoto, 1988). Brown and Levinson consider face in the context of politeness and identify two aspects, positive and negative, for the concept. Positive face is a person's desire to be approved of by selected others whereas negative face relates to the desire to act according to one's will despite their disapproval of one's chosen course of action. A number of researchers have rightly criticized Brown and Levinson for adopting a western, individualistic position in conceptualising face (e.g., Hill et al., 1986; Ide, 1989; Matsumoto, 1988). For people in many cultures, what is identified as negative face by Brown and Levinson may not in fact be associated with face. Also Brown and Levinson's definition of face places too much emphasis on 'self' whereas for people across cultures such as Japanese and Chinese the wider group and the society is the matter of prime concern (Matsumoto, 1988). Matsumoto (1988, p. 405) observes that "[w]hat is of paramount concern to a Japanese is not his/her own territory, but the position in relation to the others in the group and his/her acceptance by those others".

The Persian cultural schema of *âberu* appears to be quite complex in that it is subject to several layers of interpretation. *Âberu* is usually multifaceted in that one's face is tied to the face of oneself as well as one's family, which may be conceived as tied to the face of the extended family or any other group to which one belongs. It is to be noted that *âberu* does not just relate to one's behaviour and personality but largely extends to one's possessions, appearance, etc. The following Iranian joke reflects the last two points.

> (25)   Judge: Did you think about your parents' *âberu* when you were robbing the house.
>
> The thief: Yes, but I couldn't find anything that would be good for them.

The meaning of the punch line of the above joke hinges on the fact that the judge meant that the thought of staining the thief parents' *âberu* should have stopped the burglary, but the thief interpreted the judge to be asking whether or not he was thoughtful enough to steal some goods (e.g., nice furniture) that could enhance his parents' *âberu*. The joke reflects both that an individual's *âberu* is closely tied to his/her parents and that possessions are a source of *âberu*.

What is of special significance here is the degree to which an Iranian person's life may revolve around *âberu*. There are many Iranian people for whom their *âberu* is the fundamental reference point in every aspect of their life. O'Shea (2000, p. 101) maintains that for Iranians "*Aberu*, or honour, is a powerful social force. All Iranians measure themselves to a great extent by the honour they accumulate through their actions and social interrelations". The *âberu* schema frequently surfaces in Persian conversations such as in the following expressions:

> (26)   *âberumand* 'presentable', 'honourable'
>
> (27)   *âberu kharidan* (buying *âberu*) 'gaining face'
>
> (28)   *âberu rikhtan* (pouring *âberu*) 'defame'

(29)   *âberum raft* (my *âberu* went) 'I've lost face'

(30)   *âberum bar bâd raft* (my *âberu* went with the wind) 'I've lost face'

(31)   *âberu bedast âvardan* (*âberu* to hand bring) 'gaining face'

(32)   *bi âberu* (without *âberu*) 'faceless'

(33)   *âberu dâdan* (give *âberu*) 'enhance face'

(34)   *hefze âberu* (preserve *âberu*) 'save face'

Apart from expressions in which the word *âberu* is explicitly used, there are many other implicit forms of referring to face in Persian conversations. For example, the core concept of *âberu*, or one's public image, surfaces itself in the care that one should give to *harfe mardom* 'people's talk', where the notion of *mardom* may imply an anonymous social force rather than any actual group of people. People are continuously reminded of the consequences of their thoughts, behaviour, and appearance in terms of what others may say or think about them. This aspect of the schema of *âberu* is discussed in detail by Ahmadi and Ahmadi (1998, p. 212), who maintain that "[t]he prevalence of the metaphor of *mardom* (the people) in Iranian culture indicates to what extent the striving for negating individuality and achieving conformity has been profound in Iranian society".

In terms of learning English as an L2, most Iranian speakers of English are aware that the concept of *âberu* does not readily translate into English. This is reflected in English messages submitted to dozens of Internet sites by Iranian speakers, such as the following:

(35) … The word AABEROO-RIZI [*âberu*-pouring] came to mind when I was reading about the truly stupid people in charge of such things …

(36) … Goldman said. "There's still so much concern about what others think." Goldman refers to the Iranian concern with "keeping face" in the community - or aberu. If aberu is gone, then so is the family's name and honor.

(37) … Pari bursts into tears, saying that the child support is not the main issue, it is because of her aberu (reputation) that she wants him …

(38) … I think the problem is more giving too much value to your social picture. We have even an important word for it in Farsi, Aberoo, that I don't know of a good English equivalent for it.

(39) … However, in any case, denying the existence of the problem never helps solving it. It is much easier to face the issue here without feeling that "aaberoo" is lost …

(40) … I don't see why the aabroo of a whole department must be jeopardized just because a member of the department may be going nuts.

Code switching to the Persian word *âberu* in the middle of these texts is not due to a lack of proficiency in the English language. It is necessitated by the fact that the Persian *schema* cannot not be fully conveyed by 'equivalent' English words such as 'reputation' and 'honor'.

The implication of the schema of *âberu* for learning English is of course much more than just a lack of an equivalent concept. Concerned with protecting their *âberu* in front of their teachers and their fellow learners, many Iranian learners are very cautious about making mistakes in English. Nevertheless, the schema may also act as the source of motivation for some Iranians to learn English, as proficiency in the language may be viewed as enhancing one's *âberu* within the circles of family and society.

The schema of Târof

The schema of *âberu* is closely associated with the Persian cultural schema of *târof* (Assadi, 1980; Asjodi, 2001; Koutlaki, 2002). Aryanpour and Aryanpour (1984, p. 226) define *târof* as 'compliment(s)', 'ceremony', 'courtesy', and 'flattery'. In general terms, the schema of *târof* encourages Persian speakers to avoid imposing on others and to do this by refraining from directly making requests and asking for favours. The general function of *târof* in Iranian society is the negotiation of variables such as

social relationships, status, and personal character. Also *târof* provides a means for exercising a degree of 'face work', or *âberu*, for example, before a request is made. This schema is manifested in the communicative behaviour of many Iranian people partly through repeated refusals of offers and invitations, hesitation in asking for services and favours, hesitation in rejecting requests, etc. Another reflection of *târof* is the use of plentiful hedges. Some may even include the use of honorifics and forms of submissives under *târof* (Wilber, 1967).

O'Shea (2000, p. 122) believes that "Iranian society revolves around *ta'arof*, a formalised politeness that involves verbal and nonverbal forms and cues". She also adds that *târof* "is a ritual display of vulnerability that the other participant knows not to abuse, invoking a sort of *noblesse oblige*" (2000, p. 122). Koutlaki (2002, p. 1741) observes that *târof* "is a very complex concept, carrying different meanings in the minds of native speakers and baffling anyone endeavouring to describe it". Koutlaki also notes that the concept has both negative and positive denotations and maintains that it is a "central concept in Iranian interaction … felt to be indispensable in all communication by native speakers" (2002, p. 1741). Iranians often categorise each other in terms of how much *târof* they exercise. People who show higher degrees of *târof* in their behaviour may be categorised as *târofee*, a term which can carry negative connotations in terms of socialization. Some Iranians have come to despise this cultural trait and consider it as a drawback.

The origin of the *târof* schema is thought to be found in the Zoroastrian religion with its emphasis on good thoughts, good deeds and good words (Asjodi, 2001; Beeman, 1986). 'Good words' here refers to praise and the use of kind words. While a thorough treatment of this cultural schema falls beyond the scope of this paper, it is, however, important to note that Iranian learners of English may find it difficult to abandon it in their use of English which may lead to misunderstandings on the part of those not familiar with it. Consider the following Internet submission by an Iranian person living in the US:

(41) I personally find one misunderstanding of Americans about Eastern cultures awkward: they often don't understand "ta'arof" and take it wrong! (I am talking about its broad meaning, that is, whenever you offer your help or food or invite them or something) that is they assume that you must have some selfish hidden agenda behind being nice to them. They simply are not used to see strangers being nice to them. I haven't given up the habit of ta'arof, but now I say it up front that it is a cultural habit and I don't expect anything in exchange. BTW, 'ta'arof' "is one of those words that has no translation in English, does it?

It is clear that the writer has found it difficult not to draw on the schema of *târof* in communicating with Americans, and this has clearly been misunderstood by those Americans with whom he/she has come to contact. As in the case of *âberu,* an Internet search shows that many Iranians use the word *târof* when writing English, reflecting a feeling that no English word can fully embody the schema of *târof.* Consider the following two examples from the Internet:

(42)   Thanks for the kind words. No taarof, there is no need for monetary compensation. I enjoy doing it. Yes, it is work, but I get a real satisfaction when I see friends finding each other and rekindling old relationships.

(43)   Iranian politeness is as subtle as the intricate latticework on the mosques. The rituals are so complex they have a name of their own: ta'arof. It has no English translation.

The following email exchange also shows another interesting use of the word *târof* in an English letter written by a high school teacher of English.

(44)   Dear [name]:

        Thanks so much for your kindness, you don't need to send the package to Australia. Please send it to my wife in Isfahan. She is still there and will fly to Australia on the 17th. Many thanks.

(45)   Dear [name]:

Please tell me, Is your wife really in Iran for the time being? And will she come back to Aus on the 17th? Aren't you tarofing? If she is really in Iran right now, I'll try to send the package to Isfahan tomorrow (Thursday) then they will reach to Isfahan on Sat. means much sooner than being posted to Aus by me. Please make this clear to me. Thanks

In this exchange, the writer of the second email reveals uncertainty about the truth of the previous communication. Was it an act of *târof* trying to avoid her having to go to the trouble of mailing a package to Australia? Or was the writer's wife really able to take it to Australia herself?

The cultural schema of *Shekasteh-nafsi*

O'Shea (2000, p.83) maintains that flattery is very common among Iranians and instructs non-Iranians to "simply demur modestly, as Iranians would, and turn the comment around to flatter the other party". This observation, in fact, reflects the Persian schema of *shekasteh-nafsi* 'modesty' (e.g., Sharifian, 2005, 2008), which is closely related to *âberu* and *târof*. The word *shekasteh-nafsi* may be literally glossed as 'broken-self' or 'breaking of the self'. The schema associated with *shekasteh-nafsi* encourages speakers of Persian to show modesty through the denial or downplay of any praise or compliment that they receive while trying to reassign the praise either to the initiator of the praise/compliment, family members, God, or simply to luck. In other words, the schema encourages speakers to make use of any compliments or praise that they receive to enhance the *âberu* of their interlocutors, their family, or whoever might have directly or indirectly contributed to a success or achievement. This cultural schema discourages any form of 'self endearing' which would imply the exclusion of others[3]. This schema also encourages the Iranian people to perceive themselves as dependent members of a group and to view their existence, wellbeing, and success as part of and related to those of others in the group. The following exchange between two Persian speakers reflects this schema:

(46) Reza: *vasf-e dâneshe khâregholâdeye shomâ ro kheili shenidim.*

Description-of knowledge extraordinary you very much have heard-we.

'We have heard so much about your extraordinary knowledge!'

Mojtaba: *khâhesh mikonam, mâ shâgerd-e shomâ ham hesâb nemishim.*

Please we student of you even count not-we

'Oh, No! I don't deserve even to be your student.'

It can be seen here that the recipient of the compliment has achieved the objectives of downplaying his talent and reassigning the compliment to the interlocutor in a single sentence. Iranians may also draw on this schema in their use of English and this may lead to misunderstanding by non-Iranians unfamiliar with this schema. Consider the following example:

> (47)
>
> Lecturer: I heard you've won a prestigious award. Congratulations! This is fantastic.
>
> Student: Thanks so much. I haven't done anything. It's the result of your effort and your knowledge. I owe it all to you.
>
> Lecturer: (appearing uncomfortable) Oh, no!!! Don't be ridiculous. It's all your work. (Personal data)

In the above conversation between an Iranian student and an Australian lecturer, the student's reply to the lecturer's congratulations appears to have caused the lecturer a certain degree of discomfort due to feeling his contribution to the student's success has been overestimated. When asked to comment, the lecturer commented that the student 'had stretched the truth too far'. The student, on the other hand, maintained that she did not find anything wrong with her remarks. Other anecdotal evidence suggests that in many cases Persian speakers of English have lost credit because of the degree to which they either downplayed or reassigned their abilities, achievements, or talents.

It is to be stressed that since the inclinations under discussion are cognitive in nature, they may not necessarily be instantiated in fixed formulas and cliché expressions. That is, although the schemas explicated here have certain linguistic manifestations in Persian, it does not mean that they will always appear according to the same wording, no matter what language is being used. For example, although there are certain expressions associated with the schema of *târof* in Persian, it does not follow that the schema is always verbalised through those expressions, or verbatim translations. Take the case of the schema of *shekasteh-nafsi*; although there are certain conventionalised formulaic expressions such as *ghâbel nistim* 'we are not worth it' associated with it in Persian, speakers of Persian may well downplay their talent or capability using other expressions such as 'Oh, no! In fact I have a low IQ' or 'I think I am just an average person in terms of intelligence'.

The general point here is that while cognitive schemas are reflected in linguistic expressions, they are not merely linguistic in nature and they do get realised only in linguistic terms. O'Shea (20001, p. 22) observes, for example, that *târof* in Persian has both physical and verbal manifestations. She notes that "the former consist of activities such as jostling to be the last through the door, seeking a humble seating location, or standing to attention on the arrival or departure of other guests". These activities of course may be associated with the general sense of *târof*, which can encompass all politeness rituals in Persian.

Persian schemas for emotion

The notion of emotion has long been a subject of cross-cultural (e.g., Ekman, 1972; Kitayama & Markus, 1994; Mesquita, Frijda & Scherer, 1997; Russell, Fernandez-Dols, Manstead & Wellenkamp, 1995) and cross-linguistic research (e.g., Palmer & Occhi, 1999). However, there is still no consensus regarding the degree of universality or cultural construction of general human emotions. In this context, Wierzbicka (1995) notes that different cultures may also vary in terms of the attitudes

they foster in their members towards the expression of emotions. She maintains that "different cultures take different attitudes towards emotions, and these attitudes influence the way in which people speak. … different cultural attitudes toward emotions exert a profound influence on the dynamics of everyday discourse" (1995, p. 156).

It should be noted that attitudes towards emotions and emotional expressions are embodied in *emotion schemas* (Sharifian, 2003) that prevail among the members of a cultural group. The Persian emotion schemas, for example, encourage a stronger linguistic expression of emotions when compared to those of many Western schemas, particularly among female speakers. This is reflected in O'Shea's (2000, p. 83) comment that "excessive dramatic statements [of emotion] are quite normal among Iranians … someone may insist that they love you more than their siblings". Persian emotion schemas are best represented in the linguistic category labelled *ghorbun sadaghe* (sacrifice-charity). The following are some examples of such emotional expressions in Persian.

    (48) *Elâhi   ghorbunet   beram*
              May God sacrifice for you I do!
              'May my life be sacrificed for you'

    (49) *Khodâ margam bede*
              God   kill me   do!
              'May God kill me'

While the former may be said by a mother to her child for receiving a good mark at school, the latter may be uttered to a child who has just had a broken leg. It is of course obvious, at least to Iranians, that expressions of *ghorbun sadaghe* should not be taken by their literal sense, but yet they are not free from any emotional content either.

It should be noted that Persian emotion schemas not only include the knowledge of the above-mentioned expressions but also to whom they can be used and for what reason. For example, it is not very common for a husband and wife to show expression of emotion towards each other in public. When it comes to English, some Iranians complain that it does not provide adequate means for them to express their emotions. Consider the following email to the author from an Iranian teacher of English:

(50)

Dear Sir

Something which has recently come to my mind is that English is not a very warm language, we can't express our feelings by it well. In Persian we can express any feeling in any situation perfectly well by a large freedom in choosing different words, I think Indian, Pakistani, Arabic and even Japanese may be like ours. This case is very important in human relationship and humanity as whole. What do you think? (MS)

When asked to elaborate on the observation, the teacher provided the following real anecdote from an Iranian learner of English:

(60)

An Iranian girl and an Arab man fell in love in one of these chat rooms. One of those romantic loves that may look very rare in the world today. Pictures were exchanged and neither of them had nights and days. The man, very fluent in English and the girl, learning new words and expressions each day. After 8 months, once the girl said to a friend, "I have a lot in mind to tell him in Persian but we just exchange the sentence; I love you. What kind of a language is this? I'm running mad, I like to tell him more". (MS)

Such complaints clearly support the observation that Persian emotion schemas may not readily be rendered by the kinds of English expressions that are in current use. The following is also significant: while it is possible to gloss most expressions of *ghorboon sadaghe* into English (e.g., *khodâ margam bede* 'May God kill me'), the majority do not have equivalents among current idiomatic expressions in English. Thus,

learning English for an Iranian person may mean learning new schemas with regard to the expression of emotions. The question still remains as to what will be done when English is used by two non-western speakers of English who may both at least somewhat share emotion schemas.

The cultural categories and schemas of *famil* 'family'

It should be noted here that Persian cultural conceptualisations are not merely associated with words and expressions that may not have equivalents in English but may even be instantiated in those which are assumed to have an exact match in English. Consider the word *fâmil* and its English translation 'family'. Although the two words seem to be cognates, they are not associated with exactly the same categories and schemas. The word *fâmil* in Persian captures what is described as 'extended family' in Anglo cultures, as opposed to the 'nuclear family'. The Persian word *khânevâdeh* also refers to 'family' and may be modified by *darajeye yek* 'first degree', which refers to closer members of the family, such as brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, etc., and *darajeye do* 'second degree', which refers to those not so close.

The Persian schema of family ascribes certain roles, obligations and expectations to the members of the extended family, which may be found to be unusual by some Westerners. Ahmadi and Ahmadi (1998 , p. 223) observe that "the institution of the family in Iran carries out several functions that it no longer fulfils in many Western societies". They maintain that the social structure of Iranian society is built around the notion of 'family' to the extent that an "Iranian is in the first place a member of the family and then a citizen" (1998, p. 222). The Persian schema of *fâmil* is tightly associated with the schema of *âberu* in that a person's *âberu* is highly determined by which family she/he comes from. This often has consequences for people in terms of social and professional mobility and marriage. As an example of the influence of family in the life of a person, Ahmadi and Ahmadi (1998, p. 223) state that "if an Iranian is successful in business or has a high governmental position, he is expected

to help not only his immediate family members but also his kinsmen by granting loans or providing recommendations".

Cultural schemas of social events

Social events constitute a great part of people's life in most cultures and societies. Nonetheless, while visiting friends and family may be common to most cultures, the rituals and sub-events that characterise such events often differ. In other words, different cultures may have different 'event schemas' for social occasions such as visiting family and friends, weddings, etc. An important Iranian event schema is referred to as *mehmâni*. Aryanpur and Aryanpur (1984, p. 927) translate the word into "party, ball, feast, banquet, entertainment, spread, festival, and celebration". However, it is clear that even these English equivalents do not all refer to one and the same event. The English word 'party' has been borrowed into Persian, pronounced as *pârtee,* to refer to getting together of younger people. The word *mehmâni,* however, evokes a category of occasions for Iranians in which the visitors are treated with a relatively higher degree of formality, when compared to most Western schemas. In most houses, the best room, furniture, dining set, etc. are reserved for visitors. O'Shea (2000, p. 131) observes that

> once inside the house, you will be told where to sit in the guest room and will be
> served with titbits, many of which are left out in fancy, covered dishes in
> anticipation of guests. The guest-sitting room will generally have the best of
> everything in the house, and will contain everything for your comfort.

In a typical *mehmâni*, usually tea and fruit are served for the visitors without asking them beforehand. At this stage in a *mehmâni,* the schema of *târof* comes to play, which is best reflected in adjacency pairs where the host/hostess urges the visitors to have some fruit and the visitors decline the offer a few times. If any meal is involved in the visit, then that is usually the time where many people draw immensely on their

schemas of *âberu* and *târof* and prepare a very nice meal to impress the visitors. A thorough description of a *mehmâni* is beyond the scope of this paper but this brief sketch should make it clear to Western readers that *mehmâni* is not exactly the same as 'party'. It should also be clear that some Iranians may mistakenly associate their *mehmâni* with the word 'party' in English and this may lead to certain inaccurate expectations. As an example, an Iranian living in Australia was shocked to receive the following email party-invitation from one of her colleagues.

(62)

[A] wrote:

Hi everyone!

I finally got my act together for a party. The venue is obviously my place at [address] on Friday night [date] from 6:00pm. Could you please bring your own meat, drink (if you drink), and folding chair? I will provide the gas for BBQ.

You are more than welcome to bring your partners …

Hope to see you all on Friday

Bye

[name]

When asked to comment, the Iranian said that she was both surprised and offended by the invitation and therefore she made up an excuse in order to refuse the invitation. This example clearly shows different event categorisation and schemas were at work. Such differences are of course not always one-way and there are many conceptualisations associated with the Anglo varieties of English which may prove to be unfamiliar to its Persian learners, such as the schema of 'cohabitation'.

In general, the majority of the Iranian conceptualisations discussed in this section reflect a group-oriented cultural system where a high degree of significance is attached to social relationships. Historically, this observation may be linked to a lack of support on the part of state-related institutions, which has made people more

dependent on their social relationships and their networks, such as relatives and friends. In such circumstances, people appear to make a heightened effort to maintain their social relationships and their networks in their daily encounters. As it was shown in the preceding sections, language plays an important role in such cultural and social phenomena.

Metaphors

This paper has discussed several Persian cultural conceptualisations and their implications for learning and using English as an L2. It should be noted that 'metaphor' is another kind of conceptualisation that can exert a significant influence on L2 learning. Since a thorough treatment of Persian metaphors would require at least several other papers, I will only briefly discuss this area in the following paragraph.

One of the ways in which people across different cultural groups may conceptualise their experience differently relates to conceptual mappings from one domain onto another (e.g., Kövecses, 2002). For example, in many cultures animals and fruit of different kinds are conceptualised as having certain attributes and these are often mapped across metaphorically to talking about human beings. For instance, in Persian *joghd* 'owl' is conceptualised as an ominous creature. When one refers to a person as *joghd*, it has the connotation that their presence can bring bad luck to others. In Anglo varieties of English, however, owl has traditionally been conceptualised as a wise animal (see further in Talebinezhad & Vahid-dastjerdi, 2005). The issue of metaphorical competence and second language learning requires a much more in-depth treatment, which falls outside the scope of this paper (see Danesi, 1995).

Final remarks

Overall, it should be clear that the task of learning English is much more than learning a set of grammatical rules and lexical items for those speakers of Persian whose general communicative behavior is governed by Persian schemas such as the ones discussed here. As mentioned earlier in this paper, today more interactions in English occur between various non-native speakers than they do between native speakers. In such contexts, drawing on Anglo cultural conceptualisations will only help to facilitate communication when both parties share these as part of competence in a second culture. Diverse cultural conceptualisations expressed in English as the language for international communication should be recognized as assets rather than liabilities since this diversity can (a) provide a springboard for lively conversations in language classrooms, (b) expand learners' conceptual horizons, and (c) enrich the conceptual basis of English as a global language.

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[1] The symbol *â* represents a low back unrounded vowel similar to *a* in the English word 'father'.
[2] The English translations provided in this paper are only rough approximations of the Persian expressions.
[3] See Ahmadi and Ahmadi for a discussion of the philosophical root of this aspect of the Iranian ways of thinking