

# A Contrastive Analysis of English and Persian Native Speakers' Use of Gambits

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## **Abstract**

Conversations contain spontaneous use of routine formulas which lets speaker sinteract with each other to express opinions. Gambits, as one of these formulas, act as an opening remark and help speakers to maintain the smooth flow of an everyday conversation. The lack of mastery of using gambits in maintaining the conversation leads to breakdowns in speaking. This paper aimed at comparing the use of different categories of gambits by native speakers of English and Persian. To achieve this end, a corpus of 40 hours from Persian Native Speakers (PNSs) and English Native Speakers (ENSs) with an equal number of participants was selected through recordings of conversations from different TV Channels. Following the literature, the frequency of gambit tokens was counted and their functions were classified. Chi-square test revealed significant differences between PNSs and ENSs regarding the occurrences of gambit categories. The findings of this study can have implications for language learners and practitioners in the field. The present research demonstrates to language learners the need for learning gambit expressions as elements to improve the quality of their speaking and also to use the language in meaningful interaction with others.

**Keywords:** Routine Formulas, Gambits, Gambit Tokens, Gambit Categories.

## **1. Introduction**

Conversation Analysis (CA) has focused on the study of verbal interaction. It is suited for the analysis of what happens between participants in a face-to-face conversation, and also the detailed analysis of patterns and strategies speakers use in a conversation to interact with each other.

Everyday conversation is a speech activity that consists of some automatic patterns which are called routines. Routine formulas are, indeed, fixed expressions commonly employed in the conversations in order to help speakers interact smoothly. Gambits as one of these expressions help people to start, continue, and close the

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conversation, and also to express what they are trying to say. Keller (1981) stated that gambits make the conversation sound more natural, more confident, and also make it possible to talk easier. Additionally, Yorio (1980) emphasized the need to investigate 'conventionalized language forms' as gambits into the settings of language teaching. Nevertheless, Routine formulas are used less often by non-native speakers and in discussions.

Researchers focused so much on grammar and correctness of the sentences; however, they forgot to teach important skills like getting a conversation started, keeping it going, and ending it. Moreover, no attempt was made to investigate Persian gambits and compare them with English gambits. Therefore, the present study focused on the use of gambits employed by native speakers of both English and Persian to find differences (if any) regarding the frequency distribution of different categories of gambits and to investigate the significance of this aspect across Persian and English languages.

## 2. Literature Review

Conversation has been of primary interest to language researchers. Since everyday conversation is the most occurring language use, among approaches in speaking, Conversation Analysis (CA) has received special attention. CA has been developed for a particular paradigm in the study of naturally-occurring language use. CA maintains that it is possible to analyze talk-in-interaction by examining its recordings alone. Therefore, in CA the focus is on the analysis of talk produced in interactions, and how participants systematically organize their interactions to solve the problems of understanding.

A great deal of communicative activity consists of routine formulas that are usually fixed-expressions. Wray (2000) defined a formula as:

A sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other meaning elements; which is, or appears to be, prefabricated; that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at

the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar. (p. 465).

Coulmas (1981), on the other hand, defined routine formulae as "highly conventionalized pre-patterned expressions whose occurrence is tied to more or less standardized communication situations" (pp. 2-3). He also noted that using routine formulas is important in the handling of day-to-day interactions. He believed that using routine formulas makes the conversation more natural and provides the speech with a proficient flavor.

There are different perspectives regarding the use of routine formulas. In one view, using formulas allows the speaker to save planning time that can be used where it is needed more (Peters, 1983). Fluency in production and faster processing is another function of formulas that Weinert (1995) has focused on. Yorio (1989) suggested that employing routine formulas makes the language learner appear native like. By using formulas, the speaker can be confident that the speech would be understood by the interlocutors in the intended way (Wildner-Bassett, 1994). In general, routine formulas are chunks that are situationally bound. They are highly frequent and beneficial for the development of L2 learners' performance (Roever, 2011).

In a study conducted by Sorhus (1977), she observed that twenty percent of all words used in daily conversational interaction were fixed-expressions. Sorhus (1977) found out that routine formulas facilitate conversational planning and also maintain a smooth flow of interaction.

Gambits as some of these formulaic expressions play an important role in maintaining the smooth flow of conversation and act as an opening remark (Keller & Warner, 1976). During a conversation, gambits can help people to indicate the ways of how to start, continue, and also end the conversation. Typical examples are *Wait a minute*, *Could you tell me ...*, *I'm calling about...*, *The main thing is...*, and so on.

It is obvious that conversation involves people taking turn while speaking. Based on turn-taking rules—any listener might be selected to speak next—participants may be addressed to contribute in the discussion. In such a case, the speaker needs time to formulate his/her thoughts and react to what the previous speaker has said at the same time. For this reason, people usually employ a set of gambits to react to the previous utterance, and also they utilize gambits to shift the floor and change the topic in a discussion. Hence, gambits can influence the process of turn-taking in the conversation. In sum, gambits are devices that act as (a) discourse organizers to introduce what the speaker is about to say, (b) strategies to maintain the smooth flow of conversation, and finally (c) pause fillers that buy time while the speaker searches for a word or attempts to hold a turn (Keller, 1981).

Different languages have different gambits. In English, for example, some of the common gambits are *You know?*, *Right?*, *Got it?*, *Okay*, *Yeah*. In Persian language gambits such as *Bebin* (meaning *you see*), *Chiz* (meaning *thing*), *Masalan* (meaning *for instance*), and *Yani* (meaning *I mean*) are examples of gambits. (See Appendix for the ten most used gambits in Persian.)

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants and Setting

The data for the present study were mainly naturally-occurring face-to-face conversations between two or more participants. The corpus underlying this study comprised different types of gambits (both English and Persian gambits) with a total of 40 hours which were recorded. The participants were 72 native speakers of both English and Persian (36 ENSs and 36 PNSs). Totally, forty hours were recorded in two months during July and August, 2012. The participants were of both genders (males and females).

**Table 1.** Demographic Backgrounds of Participants

| Language | No. of Participants | Time of recordings (hour) |
|----------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| English  | 36                  | 20                        |
| Persian  | 36                  | 20                        |
| Total    | 72                  | 40                        |

In the present study, two sets of data were collected: (a) gambit categories of English Native Speakers (ENSs), and (b) gambit categories of Persian Native Speakers (PNSs). The ENSs data were taken from a corpus of 20 hours of recording the Talk Shows from the following English TV Channels: Hope Channel, CNN, and Inspiration. The PNSs data were obtained from a corpus of 20 hours of recording natural conversations in live Talk Shows from different Persian TV Channels as follows: IRIB TV1, IRIB TV2, and IRIB TV3.

#### 3.2. Instrument

The conceptual framework employed in the present study is drawn from Edmondson and House (1981). In fact, the analysis of the selected TV Programs was closely based on Edmondson and House's (1981) classification of different types of gambits. According to such classification, gambits can be categorized in the following way: (a) uptakers, (b) clarifiers, (c) appealers, (d) starters, and (e) asides.

In order to collect the gambit tokens used in English, Keller and Warner's (2002) list of English gambits used as a basis in this study. In Persian, however, there was no such a comprehensive list of gambit tokens to identify Persian gambits. So, the researchers identified and also collected Persian gambits based on definitions and some basic characteristics of gambits proposed by Edmondson and House (See Appendix for the most frequently gambit tokens in Persian).

### 3.3. Data Collection Procedure

Once the data were collected, digital video-files for each of the talk shows were listened to, and the gambits were transcribed each time they were heard. Data were transcribed and analyzed according to the conversation analysis. In the present study, it was attempted to conduct research according to the guidelines of *Longman Dictionary of American English* (2005).

Interactions in the video-files were then characterized in terms of the recurrent types of categories used as gambit patterns. There were two sets of gambits: English and Persian gambits. A list was made of the gambits introduced in each language. In other words, the total of English gambits was classified in one group and Persian gambits in another one. After marking all of tokens based on Edmondson and House's (1981) categorization of gambit types, frequency of each gambit was counted. Then, the total number of gambits used by ENSs was calculated and compared with the total number of gambits used by PNSs.

### 3.4. Data Analysis Procedure

It is believed that by critically reflecting on video-recordings, a better understanding of the relationship between language use and the learning opportunities will be developed (Sert, 2013). Analyzing the collected data, on the other hand, involves examining it in ways that reveal the relationships, patterns, etc. that can be found within it. It may mean comparing information to that from other groups to draw some conclusions from the data. In this study, however, the statistical analysis involved two methods of analysis: (a) frequency analysis, (b) Chi-square.

After identifying and categorizing the gambit types, a quantitative analysis was conducted to determine the frequency of different types of gambits. Following this, in order to examine the differences, the Chi-square test was calculated to see whether the differences between the English and Persian speakers' gambit categories are statistically significant or not.

**Table 2.** Edmondson and House's (1981) Classification System for Gambit Types

| Gambit Types | Definition   | English Examples  | Persian Examples  |
|--------------|--|---|---|
| Uptakers     | An uptaker functions as a direct feedback to speakers, showing that their messages have been understood  | Hmm/ Uhum/ I see/ Right/ Great/ Okay  | <i>Bale</i> (Yeah)/<br><i>Doroste</i> (That's right)/ <i>Ahan</i> (Ok)/ <i>Daghighanhamintore</i> (Exactly, that's right) |
| Clarifiers   | Clarifier is used to establish a harmony between the interlocutors and to fill conversational gaps.  | I mean/ You know/ You see/ In fact/ What I'm really getting at is .../ That's the problem/ This is the point. | <i>Masalan</i> (For example)/<br><i>Bebin</i> (You see)/<br><i>Mesle</i> (For instance)/<br><i>Yani</i> (That's mean)     |
| Appealers    | Appealers are tokens to show the speaker's wish that the hearer agree with him   | Okay/ All right/ Remember?/ Don't you agree?<br>Tag-questions: Isn't it?                                      | <i>Dorouste</i> h?  |
| Starters     | A starter indicates somebody is about to say something.  | Well/ Now.  | <i>Khoub</i> (Well)/ <i>Rasiatesh</i> (in fact)   |
| Asides       | Asides indicate that the speaker is not addressing the hearer while speaking. The speaker uses asides to interrupt his or her own message to organize his thought. | Let me see/ Where was I/ Let's say  | <i>Koujaboudam?</i> (Where was I)   |

#### 4. Results and Discussion

Referring to classification of gambit types presented in Table 2, the following extracts from English and Persian TV Channels were selected to analyze and also to describe how participants employed different gambit types in their interactions.

*Extract 1: (English)*A: We all know over time, sleep deprivation can have serious side effects.

B: *Yes.*

In *Extract 1* the *Uptaker, Yes* serves as an acknowledgement of the preceding utterance made by the interlocutor. It illustrates how hearer clearly supported the speaker by showing an interest for and understanding of what s/he says. Persian speakers, similar to English speakers, use a particular class of gambit tokens in order to show the addressee they are listening to her/his speech. However, the difference between PNSs and ENSs lies in the different interpretation. In fact, PNSs employ a set of gambit tokens to confirm their interlocutor's speech in a conversation and to show their agreement with the interlocutor (interviewee). They use expressions like *Bale* (Yeah), *Doroste* (That's right), *Ahan* (Ok), or *Daghighanhamintore* (Exactly, that's right), and so on.

*Extract 2: (Persian)*B: *Khoubbebinidvagheiat in-e ke ta cheandazemaagouzashtkonim,* [Well, you see, the fact is how much we should forgive,]

A: *Bale*

[Yeah]

B: *Vacheghadrshakhsiat-ebozourgvaryd-ashtebashimkebebakhshim ...*

[... and how much we should have a large-hearted personality to forgive ...]

A: *Doroste*

[That's right]

*Extract 2* is the situation in which the speaker A (interviewer) confirmed the speaker B (interviewee) by accepting his/her speeches. The interviewee, on the other hand, continued his/her speech to

express his/her ideas. Indeed, it supports the interviewee's idea and implies that the interviewer agrees what the interviewee says. Results showed that PNSs rarely disagree with the interlocutors' speech in a conversation. They tend to make a comment to show their modesty.

*Extract 3: (English)*"...., to begin with, *I mean*, over the last couple of weeks we discussed very interestingly about how in terms of time, *you know*, you mentioned about, *you know*, whatever is in the future we are not sure about..."

In *Extract 3*, *I mean* was used for showing the modification of idea and intention through expansion of structure to serve a wider explanation. Hence, the speaker used *I mean* as a *Clarifier* to make a harmony in the conversation and also to clarify the meaning of his/her preceding utterance. In this extract, the speaker employed *You know* frequently to maintain the smooth flow of the discussion and warn the hearer that some message is going on. In fact the speaker employed *You know* to show the hearer wants to continue the conversation. In Persian also there are expressions which are used more frequently than others to maintain the flow of conversation:

*Extract 4: (Persian)*"... *bebinid kheslat-e kar-e maa hamin jazabiathast ke masalan panj mah dar ye shahr-e dige zendegi koni*".

[... *you see*, the quality of our job is such attractions that *for example*, you live in another city for five months.]

*Extract 5: (English)*"Many people think this is very interesting. *Don't you think so?*"

In *Extract 5*, the speaker asked *Don't you think so?* to invite the hearer to respond to the utterance which has been said. Indeed, the speaker utilized this gambit to take a turn or to take a response from the hearer to the current turn.

In situations in which the hearer may not provide an immediate response to the current utterance, the speaker attempts to

use expressions like *Let me put it this way* to clarify the point and the previous utterance, as can be seen in Extract 6.

*Extract 6: (English)*A: You know what I'm talking about, *right*?

B: [No response]

A: *Let me put it this way...*

In Persian like English, speakers use *Appealer* tokens to force the hearer to agree with him.

*Extract 7: (Persian)*A: ... *farghesh in-e keshomahonarmandid*.

[... the difference is that you are artist.]

B: *Daghghan, vali be onvan-e insane nemitonipishbinikonicheetefaghibaratmioft e, Dorouste*h?

[Exactly, but you as a human cannot anticipate what will happen. Is it right?]

*Extract 8: (English)*"Now, I want to focus on a few causes for this increased feeling of ...."

In *Extract 8*, the speaker employed *Now* as a *Starter* at the beginning of his statement to have a new start. In Persian, however, the speaker utilized the expression, *Khoub*(Well) as a *Starter* to introduce a new topic. The expression *Rasiatesh*(In fact) was used to explain the thought. In Persian, however, there are other expressions which can be used in this regard: *Rastesh-ro-bekhayn*, *Vagheiat in-e ke*, *Dar haghghat*. These are expressions that all have the same meaning, namely, *In fact*. Indeed, the speaker, in the conversation employed such expressions to attract the attention of his interlocutor and control the conversational planning. Following this, the speaker used the expression *Fekrmikonam* (I think) to represent his ideas and talk about his opinion.

*Extract 9: (Persian)*"*Khoub rasiatesh man fekrmikonam ghablaz inkehonarmand bashim hamamoon insanim*"

[Well, in fact, I think, we are all human before being artist.]

Participants in a conversation may employ *Asides* like *Let say* and *Where was I* to buy time. Actually, in *Extract 10* the speaker

used the gambit *Let's say* to save time in order to think about what to say next.

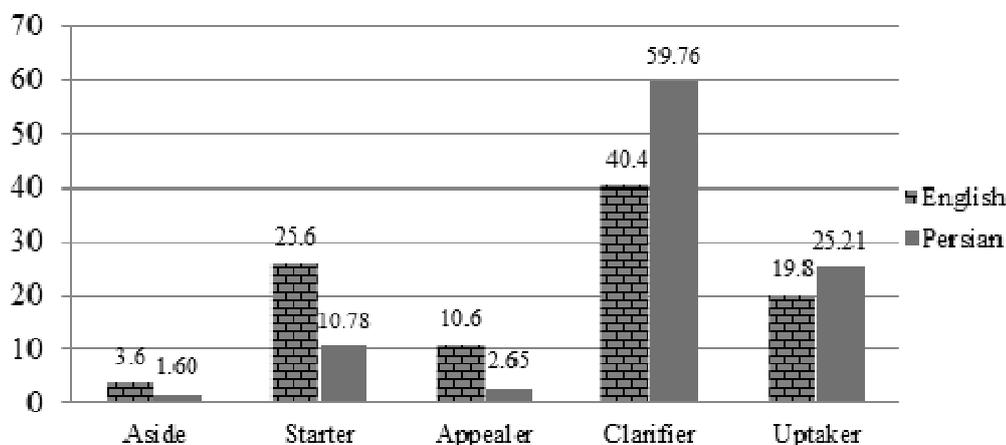
*Extract 10: (English)*"... in the last, *let's say*, 25 years, many psychologists have ignored such opinion."

Regarding the comparison of different types of gambits between native speakers of two languages (English and Persian languages), findings disclosed interesting similarities and differences between the two sets of data. By comparing and analyzing the results, it was revealed that the Persian and English speakers appeared to have very different preferences. A detailed look at the main categories of gambits revealed that PNSs applied these devices within their speaking more than ENSs did. On the other hand, a total number of 2003 occurrences were identified as different types of gambits in PNSs data, while ENSs employed gambits 1907 times in their corpus. The distribution of gambit types is presented in the following table.

**Table 3.** Results of Frequency of the Main Categories of Gambit Types in English and Persian

| Category   | PNSs No. of Gambits | ENSs No. of Gambits |
|------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Uptakers   | 505                 | 377                 |
| Clarifiers | 1197                | 770                 |
| Starters   | 216                 | 489                 |
| Appealers  | 53                  | 202                 |
| Asides     | 32                  | 69                  |
| Total      | 2003                | 1907                |

Furthermore, the results showed that *Clarifiers* comprised a large proportion of gambit tokens used by both groups of speakers. As can be seen in Figure 1, in the PNSs data, 59.76% of all gambit types fell into the category of *Clarifiers*, while in the ENSs data, *Clarifiers* comprised 40.4% of all gambit tokens. In other words, both ENSs and PNSs had a tendency to use *Clarifiers* more than other categories. However, the Persian speakers significantly

**Figure 1.** Percentage of main categories of gambits in PNSs vs. ENSs.

used this category of gambits more. The study regarding the occurrences of *Clarifiers* as the high frequent category of gambits suggested that the two groups have similar cultural preferences. In fact, both ENSs and PNSs had a tendency to make a harmony in the conversation and attract the attention of their interlocutors while speaking.

As illustrated in Figure 1, each type does not carry equal weight. The category that carries the most weight is the *Clarifier*. Therefore, both Persian and English speakers used *Clarifiers* as the most frequently used gambit type.

The other most frequently used gambit types were *Uptakers*, which were after *Clarifiers* the second most frequently used category by PNSs (25.21%), while they were the third most frequently used category by ENSs (19.8%). In other words, *Uptakers* ranked the second as frequently occurring gambit in Persian corpus, while ENSs intended to use *Uptakers* as the third most frequently gambit types. As shown in Figure 1, in the Persian data, the number of *Uptakers* doubled the number of *Starters* as the third most frequently gambit types (25.21% vs. 10.78%). The statistical differences between the two sets of data with regard to the occurrences of *Uptakers* were attributed to the Persian speakers' preferences to show they are more interested

to confirm their interlocutor's utterances. The results showed that PNSs had a tendency to show they are listening and also to confirm the preceding utterances.

The other most frequently used main category of gambit types were *Starters*. *Starters* occupied the third place in terms of frequency of occurrence in PNSs data, while they were as the second most frequently used gambit type in English corpus. The comparison of the total number of *Starters* used by both Persian and English speakers revealed that for ENSs, the occurrences of such tokens doubled the frequency of them in PNSs data (see Figure 1). The results also showed that this category comprised 10.78% of the total gambit types used by Persian speakers, while English speaking participants favored the use of 25.6% of all gambit types in their data.

*Appealers* occupied the fourth in frequency of occurrence in both languages. On closer examination, it was found that ENSs showed a tendency to use *Appealers* far more often than PNSs (English speakers used it almost 5 times more than Persian speakers). Analyzing the data showed that the most significant difference in the distribution between Persian and English speakers was in the category of *Appealer*. In other words, the results showed that *Appealers* occurred highly in English corpus

while they were low in Persian data. In fact, *Appealers* comprised a large proportion of gambit types in English corpus ( $f= 202$ ), while Persian speakers used only a few of such tokens ( $f= 53$ ) in the data.

Finally, as illustrated in Figure 1, *Aside* category displayed the lowest frequency in both sets of data. It comprised a very small proportion of gambit types used by both groups (ENSs used it twice more than PNSs). It revealed that ENSs had a tendency to use *Aside* tokens far more than PNSs. This might be because of cultural differences in rules governing the systems of two languages. Therefore, different cultural thinking patterns of both speakers might be the reason for the differences in the frequency and function of gambits use.

In order to better understand the differences, Chi-square was calculated to see where these differences between the English and Persian speakers' use of gambit categories lie. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics calculated for gambit types between the ENSs and PNSs. As can be seen, there was a significant difference between the frequencies of the two groups.

**Table 4.** Results of Chi-square Calculated for Gambit Categories Between the ENSs and PNSs

|                   |                |
|-------------------|----------------|
| <b>Chi-square</b> | <b>315.406</b> |
| df                | 4              |
| Asymp. Sig.       | .000           |

## 5. Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

Conversation analysis (CA) has received the most attention in analyzing the naturally occurring language use. In CA, the focus is on the structures of language use in talk produced in interactions as forms of human social action (Mazeland, 2006).

Routine formulas as fixed-expressions utilized in the conversations to help speakers interact in a smooth way. Consequently, the study of conversational interaction can be examined in the use of formulaic expressions.

In fact, formulaic utterances are conventionally triggered by certain communication situations and they are seen as part of everyday formulas (Ghonsooly, Khaghaninezhad, & Ahmadi, 2010). Gambits as one of these expressions are treated as common communication devices that initiate assemble, organize the conversation, make harmony with the cultural institutions, and give the two parties time to arrange their thoughts. This paper was conducted in the area of conversation analysis to investigate cross-cultural differences in using gambit categories between native speakers of both English and Persian. Analyzing the data revealed that both English and Persian speakers utilized all kinds of gambits in their speaking (although there were variations as to the distribution and frequency of different types of gambits). The findings of this study showed evidence to support the view that gambits are universal features of speaking in all languages.

The findings of this study support the Edmondson and House's (1981) idea that *Clarifiers* are the most frequently used gambit types. However, there were variations with regard to frequency of occurrence between the two languages. Consequently, findings of this study revealed that there was a close bond between using gambits and culture. Gambits as routine formulas are subject to cultural variation. It means that speakers in different cultures via different languages use gambits differently with different frequency and function.

Since there has been limited research on gambits in Iran, this study was offered to fill hopefully this void. The present study aimed at encouraging the teaching of gambits and demonstrating to language learners the need for learning gambit expressions. There is still a room for conducting the same study in different contexts by taking more variables into consideration. The same study can be

conducted by considering the age, social status (high vs. low) of the interlocutors, occupation, and educational background as the effective variables in language teaching. This study was highly restricted with regard to a comprehensive source of gambit tokens in Persian language. Therefore, it is hoped that the future studies could pave the ways for providing a more comprehensive list of Persian gambits. Moreover, L2 researchers can investigate the effect of explicit instruction on the gambits awareness of the Iranian L2 learners. Teachers and practitioners in the field can focus on the use of gambits during discussions and role play situations at all levels of instructions and proficiency.

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**Appendix**  
**Ten Most Frequently Used Gambits in Persian**

| <b>Gambits</b> | <b>Meaning</b> |
|----------------|----------------|
| Yani           | I mean         |
| Bebin          | You see        |
| Daghighan      | Exactly        |
| Dorouste       | That's right   |
| Ahan           | Aha            |
| Chiz           | Thing          |
| Masalan        | For instance   |
| Mesle          | For example    |
| Fekrmikonam    | I think        |
| Dar vaghe      | In fact        |