

# The Impacts of Level of Education and Economic Status on the Choice of Address Terms by Young Couples

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## **Abstract**

**This study aimed to investigate the effects of economic status and level of education on the choice of address terms by Iranian couples in Shahrekord, Iran. To this end, 50 couples were selected, based on their educational and economic statuses, and were studied in terms of their choice of address terms. A discourse completion task was used as the data elicitation technique and Chi-square was conducted to analyze the data. The results of this study unveiled the patterns of realizations of terms of address among the couples in different situations. It was found that level of education (though not economic status) was an important factor in the choice of address terms among couples. Unsurprisingly, the more educated the participants, the more formal address terms they used. Indeed, level of education brought about significant differences among the low, mid, and high level of education couples in the address termed they chose to use. It was also divulged that there was no significant difference in using terms of address for couples with low and high economic status.**

**Key terms:** Address Terms, Level of Education, Economic Status, Sociolinguistic Investigation

## **Introduction**

Language is not a set of abstract rules expressed in isolation; rather, it is a social tool for establishing social relations and expressing one's thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and values. Moreover, society's attitude towards sex differences can be manifested in the way language is used to

speak about men and women (Akindele, 2008; Salami, 2004). In this respect, forms of address as a linguistic feature have been in the center of attention by a large number of researchers following the principles developed by Brown and Gilman (1960). Address forms, as Murphy (1988) has elegantly put it, are socially driven phenomena. Sociolinguists have given a

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great importance to address forms since these forms can demonstrate the relationship between language and society. In this respect, Fasold (1984) states that in no area of sociolinguistics like address forms, social functions of language can be more clearly realized. Fasold (1990) holds that people generally address each other using two main kinds of address forms: 1) using their first name (FN) or 2) using their title and last name (TLN). These terms of address could be either a reciprocal exchange of FN or TLN or a non-reciprocal usage of either term in which one person gives FN and receives TLN. The important point is that despite being variable, these patterns of usage are rule-governed and systematic and are governed by some factors like age, sex and social class.

There are some social factors that affect the choice of address terms: the particular occasion, the social status, family relationships, age, gender, occupation, transactional status, race and degree of intimacy (Wardhaugh, 2008). Based on these factors, sometimes the choice of address term is clear: when racial or caste origin is important in society. But in societies which claim to be egalitarian, there exists some doubt about what is the suitable address term. Besides these factors, context in language use is very important. The language which is used by a speaker should be appropriate for the given situation and setting. The current study, thus, was set up to find out the effects of level of education and economic status on the choice of address terms by young Iranian couples.

### **Literature Review**

There is a great deal of research focusing on social factors, as mentioned before, that determine and expound the choice of address terms (Brown & Ford, 1961; Brown & Gilman, 1960; Errvin-Tripp, 1972; Friedrick 1972; Liu, 2009). Keshavarz (2001) investigated the importance of social context, intimacy, and distance on the choice of address terms in Persian. He

concluded that as social distance and degree of formality of context increase, the frequency of familiar terms of address decreases.

Salami (2004) investigated the use of first names and pet names as address forms by Yoruba-speaking women in their interactions with their husbands. His data suggested that while age, education, region of origin, and speech context play important roles in the way that women address their husbands, some other factors like gender role-expectation, and relations of power between Yoruba women and men can affect women's language behavior.

Another study conducted in relation to address terms is that of Yang's (2007), in which she found that married women in Chaoshan, China usually address their husband's families in the same way that children address them. However, some women have abandoned addressing their husband's families like this. Therefore, she concludes that educational background may be responsible for this variation. Hence, she demonstrates a variation between social change and linguistic choice.

Furthermore, Akindele (2008) examined the address forms used by the Basotho people. He analyzed and discussed various types of address forms and the factors determining them. Regarding Persian terms of address, Aliakbari and Toni (2008) identified different types of addressing terms that Persian speakers may use in different contexts. They found that Persians use personal names, general and occupation titles, kinship terms, religious oriented expressions, honorifics, terms of intimacy, personal pronouns, and descriptive phrases to address each other.

Manjulakshi (2004) also notes that terms and modes of address are important in any society for purposes of identification and expression of ideas. To her, the use of these terms depends upon the social rank, age, and the sex of the persons involved in any communicative situation. The relationship that exists or is perceived to exist between

persons addressing and persons addressed to come to control and guide the selection and use of terms and related modes of delivery.

Lyons (1977) in his study showed that the use of social power between speaker and hearer is a main factor in using different address terms. Tang (2005) in his study surveyed some factors that determine which address term is more likely to be used. These factors include age and sex of the addressee, communicative setting, the purpose of the interaction, and regional culture.

Braun (1988) argued that power and solidarity are not always the underlying forces of address derivable from the speaker-addressee relationship. Braun talked about the speakers' characteristics like ideology, regional dialect, social position, and so on. So sometimes the speaker's characteristics determine address behavior. For example, Liu (2006), in his study about Chinese farmers showed the same result as Braun.

Other studies show the different terms of address for naming the other persons like using first name, last name, titles, or combinations of these (Brown & Ford, 1961; Ervin-Tripp, 1972; Manjulakshi, 2004), but there were few studies which focused on different address terms which were used by couples. Pham (2002) argued that between married couples, *minb* (body) is used to address the spouse, by either the husband or wife. If the speaker is the husband, he uses *anh* (elder brother) for self-reference. If the speaker is a wife, she uses *em* (younger sibling) for self-reference. So this study focused on the choice of address terms by Iranian couples under different contexts and settings. More precisely, this study focuses on studying the use of address terms by couples from different social classes and with different levels of education. The couples were divided into two different groups based on their social class: middle class and low class. Each group was further divided into three sub-groups based on their level of education: low, middle, and high. The aim

was to find out whether the level of education and economic status had any effects on the choice of address terms or not. The present study, hence, sought answers to the following questions:

1. Does economic status of young couples have any effects on their choice of address forms?
2. Does level of education of young couples affect their using of different address forms?

## Method

### *Participants*

In this study, the sample consisted of 50 couples who were collected through purposive sampling from different districts of Shahrekord. All couples ranged from 20-35 years of age and had been married only for 1-5 years. They were divided into two main groups based on their economic status (as claimed by them in the first part of the discourse completion task), described as middle class and low class groups. Each of these groups was, in turn, divided again into three groups based on their levels of education (as reported by them on the discourse completion task) and were labeled high, middle and low group.

### *Data Elicitation Instrument*

The data for this study were collected by a discourse completion task (DCT). This DCT consisted of two parts: The first part elicited personal information of participants, e.g. the couples' income, their occupation, and education, while the second part included items which asked the participants to produce proper address forms they usually used in their interactions with each other in the situations described. The items in the DCT (See the Appendix) were designed to ask questions about three different situations: 1) indoor: when couples were alone, i.e. informal setting, 2) when they were with their family members and their relatives, i.e. semi-formal setting, and 3) when they were in an office, a bank, or an insurance company, i.e. formal setting.

**Data Collection Procedure**

In this study, a DCT was designed and given to the couples. DCTs are very effective in gathering a large amount of data quickly and can be used to create an initial classification of semantic formulae and strategies that occur in natural speech (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Before administration, the purposes of the research were explained and the participants were assured that their personal information in the first parts of the DCT will not be disclosed. The data were gathered in the form of frequency of terms of address produced by young couples. Since the data existed in the form of frequencies, Chi-square test was run to analyze data and compare groups with each other. The Chi-square test would show whether the differences between couples' production of address forms were significant or not.

**Results of Data Analysis**

The present study tried to investigate the use of different terms of address by young Iranian couples. Two main factors were surveyed here, i.e. economic status and level of education of the couples. As it was mentioned, a Chi-square was run to

out the relationship between terms of address and economic status. The results are displayed in Tables 1 and 2 below.

The frequencies of different types of address terms by high and low economic status couples are displayed in Table 1 above. As it is clear, for all different types of address terms, the frequencies of high and low economic status couples differed. Whether the difference between the frequencies of address terms by these two groups of couples was statistically significant or not had to be determined by the results of the Chi-square test:

This test indicated no significant association between the economic status and the choice of address terms since the value under *Sig.* (two-sided) in front of Pearson Chi-square was .09, which was substantially greater than the specified level of significance (i.e. 0.05). To put it differently, the results showed that couples with low or high economic status mostly used similar terms of address.

Chi-square test was used afresh to examine the relationship between choice of terms of address and level of education of the participants. Tables 3 and 4 present the results obtained.

**Table 1.** Frequencies of Different Types of Address Terms by High & Low Economic Status Couples

		Address Terms						Total
		T	FN	T & FN	T & LN	NN	ToE	
Economic Status	High	50	44	8	11	7	46	166
	Low	46	49	19	20	8	35	177
	Total	96	93	27	31	15	81	343

Note: Title (T), First Name (FN), Last Name (LN), Nickname (NN), and Terms of Endearment (ToE)

**Table 2.** Chi-Square Results for Comparing Address Terms by High & Low Economic Status Couples

		Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Pearson	Chi-Square	9.43	5	.09
Likelihood	Ratio	9.55	5	.08
Linear-by-Linear	Association	3.02	1	.08
N of Valid Cases		343		

**Table 3.** *Frequencies of Different Types of Address Terms by Couples With Differing Levels of Education*

			Address Terms					Total	
			T	FN	T & FN	T & LN	NN		ToE
Level of Education	Low		47	33	8	6	1	25	120
	Mid		35	15	11	14	3	42	120
	High		22	45	6	9	7	31	120
	Total		104	93	25	29	11	98	360

Note: Title (T), First Name (FN), Last Name (LN), Nickname (NN), and Terms of Endearment (ToE)

**Table 4.** *Chi-Square Results for Comparing Address Terms by Couples With Differing Levels of Education*

		Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Pearson	Chi-Square	38.27	10	.000
Likelihood	Ratio	39.77	10	.000
Linear-by-Linear	Association	5.17	1	.023
N of Valid Cases		360		

Table 3 illustrated the frequencies of different types of address terms used by couples with different levels of education. It could be easily noticed that for all different types of address terms, the frequencies of couples with low, mid, and high level of education varied. Table 4 determines whether the difference between the frequencies of address terms by these three groups of couples was statistically significant or not.

In this table, the Pearson Chi-square test indicated that there was a significant relationship between the level of education and the choice of different address terms by these three different groups ( $p = .000 < .05$ ). Hence, as shown here, couples with different levels of education (low, mid, and high) used different terms of address. The results showed that terms of endearment were mostly used by mid educated couples, and that first name was the one which was commonly used by high educated group. The low educated couples mostly used titles. As such, different address forms used by couples were associated with different levels of education.

## Discussion and Conclusion

As it was seen in Tables 1 and 2, there was a difference (though not significant)

between low and high income people in their use of address terms. All the people in the high income group used titles whereas 46 instances of the use of titles was recorded by the couples in the low-income group. The people in the low-income group uses more FN, T&FN, T&LN, and nickname than their counterparts in the high-income group. When it comes to terms of endearment, 46 of the high-income people and 35 of the low-income people chose this address term. Overall, it is clear that the people in the high-income group were friendlier toward their spouse than the people in the low-income group (though not significantly, as mentioned above). When it comes to level of education, 47 of the couples in the low education group chose titles, whereas only 22 couples in the highly-educated group chose titles. In the high education group, 45 couples chose FN whereas 15 in the mid group and 33 in the low education chose FN. Nickname was mostly used by couples in the high

education group, while couples in the mid group used more terms of endearment compared to people in the low and high groups. In a nutshell, there was a significant difference among the three groups of couples (i.e. low, mid, and high level of education groups) as far as the choice of address terms was concerned.

Manjulakshi (2004) argued in his studies that people with low economic status and low level of education have great difficulty in improving or altering their modes of address, which is on the one hand not in line with the findings in the present study because here it was found that there was no significant difference between couples of different economic status and their using of address forms. Each group of couples with high or low economic status used quite similar address forms, which is in contrast with Manjulakshi's findings. But on the other hand, the findings of present study were in line with Manjulakshi's findings because both studies found that the level of education affected the couples' choice of address terms. The difference between the findings of the two studies might be attributed to the cultural, or other social factors which were different in the two contexts were the studies had been conducted.

Keshavarz (2001) found in his study that language use is sensitive to its social context. He also indicated that as the formality of context and social distance increased, the use of formal address forms such as title also increased. His findings are very similar to the findings of present study. To conclude, as the findings of present study indicate, the choice of linguistic forms is determined by the level of education of couples, but economic status is the factor which cannot affect the choice of address terms.

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## Appendix

### Discourse Completion Task

Age:      Sex:      Education:      Salary:

1) Supposed that you are alone at home with your partner. You cannot see the watch. Call your partner and ask the time:  
.....

2) Supposed that you are alone at home with your partner. You are thirsty. Call him/her and want him/her to bring a glass of water for you:  
.....

3) Supposed that you and your family are at the party. Some of your friends and relatives with their families are there. Call and ask your partner to get your bag:  
.....

4) Supposed that you and your family are at the party. Some of your friends and relatives with their families are there. Name and ask your partner to hang your dress:  
.....

5) Supposed that you and your partner are at a bank. Call and ask your partner to get your coat for you until you talk with boss:  
.....

6) Supposed that you and your partner are at a hotel. You should complete a form to get a room. Name and ask your partner to fill the form instead of you:  
.....  
.....