

She means only her ‘husband’: Politeness strategies amongst Mazandarani-speaking rural women

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Mazandarani is an Iranian language, specifically a northwestern Iranian dialect, spoken mainly in northern Iran along the eastern part of the Caspian coastline, hence a Caspian dialect.¹ Mazandarani is rarely used for official purposes, although some local publications may use it for entertainment, using the current Persian script.² The geographical distribution of Mazandarani is not limited to the Mazandaran Province and the western part of the Golestan Province; even the local people of the northern outskirts and villages of Tehran speak in Mazandarani.

As for the present study, the examples analyzed rely on the field data gathered from Nowkandeh, a city located in the Golestan Province, about 48 kms west of Gorgan, the capital of the province.³

A typical Mazandarani-speaking rural woman uses a number of politeness strategies to show her politeness toward her addressee(s). Mostly a rural practice, she does so for a variety of purposes when talking with her elders (e.g. parents and/or elder sibling(s)), in-law or remote relatives, or even strangers. Her prime motive for such practice seems to be as follows: to pay respect to the addressee by using an avoidance language; the use of such language marks the speaker’s shyness, hence politeness. Specifically, such a mechanism is used not to avoid any face-threatening act toward the addressee or interlocutor, but rather it is used to show the woman’s awareness of the correct etiquette or social protocols. In all such cases, a woman refers only to her husband. It follows that a woman may never make such a phrase as *me shi* ‘my husband’ to refer to her husband; the use of such a phrase is strictly avoided, if not taken as a sign of rudeness or impoliteness. According to Mazandarani rules of polite speech, when talking with a woman, an addresser (whether man or woman) never makes reference to his or her interlocutor’s husband by using such a phrase as *te shi* ‘your husband’; such a manner of referencing sounds quite rude and offensive.

Although each of the ways mentioned here is suitable in specific situations (for particular purposes), a woman may achieve this end by making resort to one of the following (respectful) ways:

- (1) The third person singular pronoun *ve*. (Mazandarani is a gender-free language, hence *ve* means both ‘he’ and ‘she’.) Despite the resulting vagueness inherent in this practice, the context and co-text will make the referent clear.
- (2) The formula “X’s father”, where by X she means her son or daughter.

¹ Shokri (1995:); Oranskij (1375: 331); Kent (1953: 7) says that “The Caspian dialects [...] probably derived from ancient Scythian”. The linguistic relationship of Mazandarani is discussed in Fakhr-Rohani (1997: 6, 10). As far as I know, Dorn and Schafy (1860) published the earliest collection of Mazandarani folk poems, generally ascribed to Amir Pazvaari. Linguistically, Mazandarani has not been sufficiently studied, particularly from the viewpoints that concern discourse analysis or pragmatics.

² Although Mazandarani is not an official language, it is sometimes used in reciting certain emotional and/or ritual poems at wedding or mourning ceremonies where the dialect is spoken.

³ I checked the data with my wife (as well as with her sisters and mother), who served as my informants.

- (3) An appropriate (mostly religious and/or non-academic occupational) honorific title, e.g. *Hajji*.
- (4) The formula “Your X”, where X signifies the addressee’s brother or sister.
- (5) Her husband’s surname.
- (6) A kinship term, preceded by a possessive adjective, e.g. *te per* ‘Your [singular] father’ (when talking with her children).
- (7) Not using anything, until the conjugation of the verb of the statement signifies that the dropped subject signifies the woman’s husband.
- (8) The formula “Our X”, where X may be replaced by the equivalents of such terms as ‘bread-winner’, ‘chief’, ‘relative’, etc.

All these variations show, *inter alia*, that it is generally considered a rather impolite practice for a woman to mention her husband’s given name in the presence of others; the politeness effects generated serve as signs of respect that she pays to her own prestige as well as showing her social maturity and awareness of the proper ways of showing politeness in the presence of her interlocutor(s).

References

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