Chapter 5

Ethnopragmatics of *Hāzer Javābi*, a Valued Speech Practice in Persian

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Abstract This study examines the speech practice designated as *hāzer javābi* (literally, ‘ready response’ in Persian (Farsi) using an ethnopragmatic approach; that is, it attempts to capture the ‘insider’ understandings of the practice by making use of semantic explications and cultural scripts. It is one of only a few papers about the Persian language that employ the ethnopragmatic approach. Section 5.1 introduces the practice, offers some classical and contemporary examples, and draws attention to differences in similar-but-different speech practices in English and some other languages. Section 5.2 describes the analytical framework, i.e. ethnopragmatics. Section 5.3 provides historical and cultural contextualization, aiming both to scaffold a more precise understanding of the concept and to explain its cultural prominence. Section 5.4 presents a script for *hāzer javābi*. Section 5.5 discusses broader issues and provides concluding remarks.

Keywords *Hāzer javābi* • Ethnopragmatics • Persian • Farsi • Speech practices

5.1 *Hāzer Javābi*: A First Look

This paper examines *hāzer javābi*, a valued speech practice in Persian (Farsi), primarily with reference to Iran, although the practice exists in other varieties of the language. The term *hāzer javābi* is a meta-pragmatic label for situations in which a person responds to the previous utterance—or sometimes the previous incident—quickly (as perceived by others present) and with the best possible words in the context at hand (as it seems to observers).

Unlike similar labels in English (such as *retort* or *repartee*), *hāzer javābi* is not necessarily, or even usually, a quick comeback to an insult; rather it can happen (and be valued) in response to any form of utterance. Furthermore, the definitions of

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quick and best possible words distinguish *hāzer javābi* from any other kinds of response. This will be explored in more detail in Sect. 5.1.2.

The lexeme *hāzer.javābi* consists of two lexical units: *hāzer*, which can be glossed as ‘present’, and *javāb* ‘response’, with a bound morpheme *-i*, which is a nominaliser affix, added to the latter. Overall, it can be glossed as ‘ready response’. The common related forms are *hāzer.javābi* (noun), *hāzer.javāb* (adjective), *hāzer.javābi-kardan* (verb, only in the form of a ‘light verb construction’ with *kardan* ‘do’ as the light verb).

It is important to note that cognate forms are used in other neighbouring languages in a similar sense. They include Urdu (which uses the exact same phrase: *hāzer.javābi*), Hindi (where there is a small phonological difference: *hājer.javābi*), and Turkish (which displays Turkish morphological features: *hazırcevaplık*).

Hāzer javābi is usually translated by means of a wide range of English equivalents, such as *back talk*, *wisecrack*, *repartee*, *waggery*, and *wordplay*.¹ Other translations could include a wide range of English expressions from responding without thinking, answering quickly, riposting, and improvising, to adroitness and cleverness in reply, witticism, and ready wit. The concept of *hāzer javābi*, which governs the pragmatics of the practice, contains some elements of each of the above English concepts, but it is accurate to claim it is not an equivalent of any single one. In Sect. 5.1.1, I will present some examples from classical literature and two contemporary conversations to make the conceptualization of the practice as clear as possible. Section 5.1.2 discerns the differences with similar concepts and practices in other languages.

5.1.1 Classical and Contemporary Examples

A search for *hāzer javābi* on the Internet allows us to identify different aspects of the meaning of being *hāzer javāb*. Translations of some of these examples are given in (1):

- (1) a. A counselling centre in our town has held a *hāzer javābi* training course.²
- b. You can succeed in the critical moments of life by learning the skill of *hāzer javābi*.³
- c. Apart from the benefits of *hāzer javābi* in daily life, this art is a part of rhetoric.⁴

¹Based on a search on <http://www.vajehyab.com/>.

²Original source URL: http://www.cloob.com/timeline/answer_124707_1421948.

³Original source URL: <http://gizmiz.com/ها-حاضر-جوابي>.

⁴Original source URL: <http://daneshgahezendegi.com/> حاضر-جواب-بودن-؛ یک-فن-سخنرانی-خاص-برای

- d. There is a thin line between being *hāzer javāb* and being impolite.⁵
- e. Some children do *hāzer javābi* to attract more of their parents' attention.⁶

To find the above examples, I used the WebBootCat function on the original interface of Sketch Engine.⁷ Based on the seeds (*hāzer javābi* in different spelling forms) fed into the system, a search was conducted in the Persian content of the Internet. While I did not intend to carry out an extended corpus study, this minimal use of Sketch Engine provided wider and more neutral results compared to the algorithm-driven results offered by Google, Facebook, and other platforms.

Example (a) shows that *hāzer javābi*, as a practice, is so highly valued among speakers that training courses are run for the public. Examples (b) and (c) point to the benefits of *hāzer javābi* in social life, as well as to its aesthetic significance. Examples (d) and (e), on the other hand, show the delicacy required of this practice in social interactions. For example, children being *hāzer javāb* is a generally amusing event for members of the community, and videos of such incidents are popular on social media.

As a 'rule of thumb', a person who can pass such effortless and witty remarks in response to others is considered a more pleasing speaker of the language. This status seems partly due to characters in folk literature who are famed for their quick and funny responses. The tales of such figures, as known by the people, are filled with stories of *hāzer javābi* and in-time responses. Like many classical genres in literature, there is often a didactic aspect. The folk figure Nasreddin (more widely known as Molla Nasreddin in Persian and Nasreddin Hodja in Turkish) is familiar to peoples of the Middle East, South Asia, and Central Asia. Nasreddin is involved in similar stories in different cultures, but the character might refer to more than one personality in the [hi]story (cf. Javadi 2009; Marzolph and Baldauf 1990). The stories related to Nasreddin are "generally humorous, but in the subtle humour there is always a lesson to be learned" (Javadi 2009). In European terms, Nasreddin was a practitioner of Socratic irony. The stories in which he features are recited by people in situations that remind them of the theme of these stories or of Nasreddin's situational humour. It is often difficult for readers to ascertain if Nasreddin is stupid or clever in such situations, but what he does or says makes points about the nature of human life and social interactions.

In one example (Hariyanto 1995: 11–12), among tens of such, Nasreddin takes a few baskets of grapes on his donkey to the local market. He sees a few other farmers, also with baskets of grapes for the market, sleeping by the road. He starts to take grapes from their baskets and puts them into his. One of the farmers wakes up and the following dialogue ensues:

⁵Original source URL: <http://telegram-channels.blog.ir/1396/08/04/کاتال-حاضر-جوابی>.

⁶Original source URL: <http://sahebkhavar.ir/news/26308515/چگونه-با-حاضر-جوابی-کودک-مان-مقابله-کنیم>.

⁷<https://the.sketchengine.co.uk/>.

Man: What are you doing?

Nasreddin: Oh, I'm half mad. Sometimes I do strange things and do not know what I am doing.

Man: Really? Then why don't you sometimes take grapes from your baskets and put them into our baskets?

Nasreddin: You don't understand me, I said I am half mad, not totally mad.

This story provides a good example of the difficulty one may have in deciding if Nasreddin is acting cleverly or stupidly. Regardless, he reacts with *hāzer javābi*; that is, he finds the contextually best possible response in a short time. This talent is the cornerstone of his wit and presents a genealogy of his praised humour. In the above example, his quick reply in that situation, where he is under pressure and in danger, makes the anecdote humorous and memorable.

In more recent times, numerous stories have emerged of the first cross-cultural communications and visits of Iranians to the West, or of Westerners to Iran, containing different understanding and practices of humour.⁸ Gail (2011) discusses various versions of the events surrounding an Iranian envoy's visit to the UK in the nineteenth century. She recounts the encounter of Mirza Hasan (a member of the delegation) with the British host who seemingly lionized him for his wit, a type of wit (called 'bons mots' in the source) that could have occurred in this cross-cultural encounter (Gail 2011: 67):

Mirza Hasan was asked in London if it is true that Iranians worship the sun.

He replied, "Oh yes, Madame, and so would you in England too, if you ever saw him!"

What is described in these stories of *bons mots* and jokes was also observed by other Westerners who studied Persian literature and culture. Kuka (1923: xiv) was among the first scholars to suggest that in Persian, "we may not come across good specimens of sustained irony like that of Swift", but in "Repartees and Epigrams, and in the display of fine Fancy, the Persians can stand comparison with any nation". It was probably difficult for him to contrast the differences between the Persian form of quick responses and repartee, but this paper will do so in Sect. 5.1.2.

Apart from the numerous examples from the written literature, I present two recent examples of conversations to show the characteristics of the practice. Both examples were identified as cases of *hāzer javābi*; at the time, they were posted on the Internet and have been widely viewed. They indicate that a response should have three elements to qualify for *hāzer javābi*. First, it must be quick, but this does not mean it must be produced in less than 200 ms, and the gap between turns in most languages (see Sect. 5.1). Rather, the response must be produced in a smaller time span than a person would normally take to produce the same content. Second, it is phrased in 'good words', in the sense that it is the best response (or at least one

⁸The most notable and influential one was J. J. Morier's *The adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* (1824).

of the best) that could be produced in this context. Third, other people acknowledge and appreciate the previous two points and feel good because of it.

The first example⁹ is taken from a televised interview where a little girl answers questions. The interviewer asks, “What are your favourite dishes?” She quickly names her favourite dishes: “Ooh, I mean like tuna can, I mean like chicken, kebab, I mean like chicken kebab, pickle kebab.” The interviewer interrupts her and asks, “What is a pickle kebab?” The girl’s face shows that she understands she has made a mistake, but quickly (roughly less than 200 ms) replies with “Oh, well, I mean any food that is better if it has pickles with it” (for the Persian transcript, see Appendix 1). This video has been uploaded with the title “hāzer javāb girl” on a popular content website.

The second example is a short conversation extracted from the talk show *Dorehami* (literally, a ‘get-together’), which is hosted by a comedian (Mehran Modiri). The show was aired from March 2016 to April 2018. An audience of around 300 sits in front of the show host, who might interact with them or ask them to walk up onto the set and respond to questions.

In one episode of this television show,¹⁰ Modiri invites two members of the audience on stage in order to ask them some humorous questions. While Modiri’s questions are probably prepared, the participants’ responses are not. The on-the-spot and quick responses of one of the participants present two examples of *hāzer javābi* (printed in bold). The translation below shows an extract of the exchange (for the Persian transcript, see Appendix 2). The host (M in the transcript) asks for the meanings of some idioms in Persian. One of the two participants (P in the transcript) quickly answers the questions while referring to how (poorly) the host is dressed.

M: Somebody is *šambe-yešambe*,¹¹ what does it mean?

P: It means they were wearing different pieces of outfit, one on top of the other, then one item of clothing is showing underneath the other; for example, an outfit that is not matching—like this (he goes towards M and points at and touches his clothes). **This is *šambe*** (Saturday); **this is *yešambe*** (Sunday)

[Audience are laughing loudly]

[P puts his hands on his chest (to show respect)]

[M looks at the audience bewildered and surprised]

[The audience applauds]

M [surprised]: He used me as an example?

⁹<https://www.aparat.com/v/IbB9F/> دختر حاضر جواب.

¹⁰<http://nodud.com/entertainment/joke/1502605141.408156>.

¹¹Literally *Saturday–Sunday*; means ‘dishevelled, not matching’.

[Everybody laughs]

M [pointing at his clothes]: So this is *šambe*? This is *yešambe*?

P: Exactly. Yes.

M: OK. I'll talk to you later. Someone *šiš mizane*¹²: what does this mean?

P: *šiš mizane*? **It means he can't match his clothes.**

M: Hmm.

P: **For example, he wears cotton trousers with a T-shirt** [referring to M's outfit again] Everyone laughing] No offence to you.

Both of these examples qualify as *hāzer javābi*, and both have been labelled as such by Internet users. The example of the girl more fully satisfies the first and the third elements (i.e. quickness and positive perception), while the latter examples from the TV show satisfy the second and third elements (i.e. good words and positive perception). It is necessary to emphasize that in neither case is the speed (quickness) a pre-determined gap between the two parties' exchanges, but a perception of quickness in relation to the linguistic content produced.

5.1.2 *Distinguishing Hāzer Javābi from Similar Concepts in Other Languages*

Prior to looking at *hāzer javābi* in more detail, it is helpful to distinguish *hāzer javābi* from similar-but-different concepts in other languages and cultures. Quick replies are common in many languages, whether they are specifically valued in them or not; however, in most cases, they are. Several languages and cultures appreciate speakers who quickly and effortlessly use a verbal response in a communicative setting. Some examples below show that this quickness does not essentially mean a response *right after someone says something* or even *right after something happens*, but it is often perceived as 'a response *in time*'. A satisfactory definition of the concept 'in time' depends on a perceptual consensus among speakers that hinges on the dynamics of how people interact (see Sect. 5.1).

Hence, some of the most important similar concepts of *hāzer javābi* are enumerated in this section, and their differences clarified. The main challenge here is an inadequacy of definitions offered for such concepts. The definitions are mostly vague, based on etymology, and fall into the trap of semantic circularity.

There seems to be a rhetorical inclination to readiness and quickness in responding that can be traced back, at least in the Western world, to one of the earliest intellectual groups who attempted to articulate the art of speaking: the Sophists. As orators, the Sophists used rhetoric more than any other art and so are

¹²Literally *hitting six*; means 'being nuts'.

deemed to be the “master rhetoricians” (Paul 2014: 44) in history. In order to be the masters of rhetoric, they needed to be interested in “the problem of time in relation to speaking” and in “the temporal dimension of the situation [that speech] addresses” (Poulakos 1983: 38–39). The Sophists, more specifically Gorgias and Protagoras, discussed the power of the opportune moment because “if what is said is timely, its timeliness renders it more sensible, more rightful, and ultimately more persuasive” (ibid.: 40). Speaking, for a rhetor, is a temporal choice, and “unless they [the ideas spoken, R.A.] are voiced at the precise moment they are called upon, they miss their chance to satisfy situationally shared voids within a particular audience” (ibid.: 39).

The Sophists insisted on the importance of the temporal dimension of speaking, that is, the notion of *kairos*. *Kairos* is defined as “the opportune moment” (Poulakos 1983: 36), “the uniquely timely, the spontaneous, the radically particular” (Miller 2002: xiii), and “the right or opportune time to do something, or right measure in doing something” (Kinneavy 1986: 80).¹³ *Kairos*, in short, governs the correct time at which the speech could be most effective.

In addition to this concept, a few other concepts and tropes in Western literature refer to quick comebacks and responses, such as retort, repartee, quip, riposte, bons mots, and so on. It is interesting that different cultures share the fact that the anecdotal examples of such tropes and techniques are told with admiration (cf. Grothe 2005).

Consultation of dictionaries and previous literature establishes that *retort*, *repartee*, *bons mots*, and *riposte* evolved from Latin into English, while *rejoinder* is a French legal term. *Retort* is defined as “turn back, twist back, throwback, say, or utter sharply and aggressively in reply” (Etymonline 2018), and it usually refers to an aggressive, short reply. *Bon mot* denotes “witticism, clever or witty saying”; it originates from French and literally means ‘good word’; *mot* itself is a borrowing of Vulgar Latin *muttum*, from Latin *muttire* ‘to mutter, mumble, murmur’ (ibid.). *Riposte* means “a quick thrust after parrying a lunge”; it is a fencing term from the French *riposte* and originates in the Latin *respondere* (ibid.). *Rejoinder* originates from the Middle French noun use of *rejoindre*, “to answer to a legal charge” (ibid.). As for *repartee*, which comes from the French *repartie* and is mostly defined as ‘quick remark’, it refers to a rapid and witty response in conversation, “especially one that turns an insult back on its originator; [...] The term may also be applied to a person’s talent for making witty replies” (Baldick 2008).

Many times, a repartee fails, or a speaker cannot find the appropriate response in time. The French philosopher Denis Diderot (1713–1784) coined a phrase for the latter situation, *l’esprit de l’escalier*, which literally translates in English as ‘staircase wit’. It is used to refer to the fact that “a witty remark or retort often comes to mind after the opportunity to make it has passed [...] i.e., a witty remark coming to mind on the stairs leading away from a gathering” (Knowles 2005).

¹³For other senses of *kairos*, see Paul (2014), and also Sipiora and Baumlin (2002).

The above-mentioned concepts are helpful in showing that quick replies are not unique to one or two languages. Nonetheless, the definitions are inadequate and similar as they all seem to be quick responses designed to turn an insult back to the speaker. *Bon mot*, a rare concept in use (see below), is the only term that probably has unambiguously positive connotations in English.

The other concept that appears to be used more in conversational English and has been under the scrutiny of some linguists is *quip*. Haugh and Weinglass (2018: 534) explored quips in two varieties of English (American and Australian) and maintained that “quips can be broadly defined as witty, one-liners”. They further defined jocular quips as playful or light-hearted comments on, or responses to, another speaker’s just-prior serious talk, which are designed to initiate a non-serious side sequence (ibid.; after Jefferson 1972). Norrick (1984: 199) also defined a quip as a reaction to “a situation, but not directly to any other utterance”. “Quips are short, sometimes witty, and often ironic comments about the on-going action, or the topic under discussion” (Holmes and Marra 2002: 75), and they often involve exaggeration (ibid.).

These definitions seem unsatisfactory. Defining concepts of this kind is a challenging semantic task because of their high cultural significance and the rare appearances of the term itself in natural discourse. Unlike *hāzer javābi* in Persian, the above terms are seldom used in daily conversations in English. As an example, the British National Corpus (BNC) displays 191 hits if the lemma is *quip* (2 per million); with only one exception, they are all found in printed books and periodicals. The frequency of *bon mot* in BNC is 0.01 per million (19 times in the whole dataset; all from written sources). *Repartee* (0.01 per million) shows only 39 hits, all from books, and there are 788 hits for *retort* (7 per million), all in written materials except for five, four of which were used in a documentary (probably based on a written script) and one educational radio program (again, probably written).¹⁴ Other less common concepts, practices, or meta-pragmatic labels are in use in English, such as *comebacks*, *afterwit*, *sally*, and so on; I will not review them here.

To sum up this section, I have initially examined *hāzer javābi* and have tried to define it in a conventional, dictionary-style way. I have also offered classical examples from literature, as well as two modern conversational examples. In the last section, I have enumerated three distinguishing elements of *hāzer javābi* and compared it with other similar concepts in other languages. Hence, I will argue that, to avoid the semantic challenges that I have mentioned, the ethnopragmatic approach to speech practices provides us with more precise definitions and a clear picture of distributed conceptualizations. I will explain this approach in the following section.

¹⁴All corpus examples from BNC have been accessed using <https://sketchengine.co.uk> from May to June 2018.

5.2 The Ethnopragmatic Approach

As defined by Goddard and colleagues, ethnopragmatics (Goddard 2006; Goddard and Mullan 2019; Goddard and Ye 2015; Levisen and Waters 2017) explores indigenous cultural categories and qualities that are salient in a given language. It does so from a so-called insider or emic perspective.¹⁵ Goddard (2006: 2) enumerated a few questions that one could ask to begin an ethnopragmatic study, such as “what is distinctive about these particular ways of speaking?”, “why—from their own point of view—do the people concerned speak in these particular ways?”, and “what sense does it make to them?”. Goddard maintains that the strength of ethnopragmatics resides in its endeavour to overcome ethnocentrism, in general, and Anglocentrism (Wierzbicka 2014) in particular. In the last few decades, English has been elevated to play the role of impartial language of science, but what has been generally overlooked is that, like every language, English, too, has its own cultural baggage. At a recent international conference on ethno-epistemology, for instance, Goddard (forthcoming) pointed out that “contemporary Anglo culture [...] has a folk epistemology of its own, and it seems indisputable [...] that Anglo English folk notions have left their imprint on theoretical thinking in epistemology”. It follows that projects lacking epistemological sensitivity result in some “inadequacies, exclusions, and marginalization”, and while they present attempts at “producing knowledge of non-European experiences”, they impose their own epistemological categories (Savransky 2017: 12). This is a clear example of ethnological ethnocentrism. With reference to similar attempts, Course (2010: 248) referred to an increasing awareness that “even the foundational assumptions of Western epistemology are neither as transparent nor as self-evident as was previously assumed, but rather pertain to a highly specific naturalist ontology” (cf. Descola 1996; Keane 2007).

Goddard does not create an independent case for ethnopragmatics but, to justify the robustness of ethnopragmatic analysis, prefer to return to its foundational base, i.e. the NSM approach. Commenting on the latter, Goddard (2007: 145) writes:

The methodological attractions of this approach can be itemised as follows: (i) Any system of semantic representation has to be interpreted in terms of some previously known system and since the only such system shared by all language users is natural language itself, it makes sense to keep the system of semantic representation as close as possible to natural language. (ii) Clear and accessible semantic representations enhance the predictiveness and testability of hypotheses. Most other systems of semantic analysis are hampered by the obscurity and artificiality of the terms of description. (iii) To the extent that the system is

¹⁵To the best of my knowledge, the label *ethnopragmatics* was used by Alessandro Duranti as early as the 1990s as an approach to blend ethnography of communication and pragmatics (cf. Duranti 1993, 1994, 2015). Peeters (2016) lists different approaches with an ethno-perspective and the ‘ethno-prefix’ at the beginning of their names (such as ethnolinguistics, ethnolexicology, ethnosyntax). He defines ethnopragmatics as “the study of culturally salient communicative behaviours [that] relies on linguistic as well as non-linguistic evidence, with a view to discovering whether any cultural values, previously known or newly discovered, underpin these behaviours” (Peeters 2016: 151).

intended to represent the cognitive reality of ordinary language users, it would seem problematical to employ symbols whose meanings are completely opaque to language users themselves.

What Goddard explains in (i) is the distinctive strength of NSM in general and ethnopragmatics in particular. Points (ii) and (iii) are contested claims to pinpoint how far an NSM analysis is accessible, understandable and preferable by language users themselves. The answer, it appears, depends on what other methods and approaches it is compared against. In the context of pragmatics, and in comparison with the so-called ‘universalist paradigm’ (Goddard 2006: 1) within it, all three are advantages of the NSM approach, which allows to explicate indigenous categories and qualities by means of reductive paraphrases relying on semantic primes and molecules (see, e.g., Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014; Wierzbicka 2014). The paraphrases are called ‘semantic explications’ and aim to present “an attempt to say in other, simpler words (the metalanguage of semantic primes and molecules) what a speaker is saying when he or she utters the expression being explicated” (Goddard 2013: 250). Explications offer the insiders’ understanding of an expression, while being based on universal concepts shared among all languages. According to Goddard (2013: 250–251), a good explication will satisfy at least three conditions: (1) it should make intuitive sense to the native speakers; (2) it has to be framed entirely in semantic primes (and molecules); and (3) it has to make sense as a whole.

I will present the explication for the Persian speech practice known as *hāzer javābi* in Sect. 5.4. One requirement for an ethnopragmatic study of a speech practice is to put it into its cultural and linguistic context. This entails providing linguistic and non-linguistic evidence. Section 5.3 aims at providing a context for the prominence of *hāzer javābi* in Persian and, by extension, in some neighbouring languages.¹⁶

5.3 Historical and Cultural Context

Hāzer javābi has a long history in Persian classical literature, manifested in a variety of genres. The author of a notable paper on *hāzer javābi* in Persian goes as far as claiming that “we see very often, in the history of Persian literature and poetry, that an in-time word and *hāzer javābi* by a poet has changed the destiny of a nation or ethnicity, it has saved them from enormous bloodshed and plunder, and it has turned darkness into light” (Bagherzadeh 1973: 951; my translation).

Reference is made here to the many examples of *hāzer javābi* before a king (or other persons in authority) by a courageous individual. Mostly told as anecdotes,

¹⁶The online resource <https://nsm-approach.net/> shows that Persian has been previously studied using ethnopragmatic techniques. See, e.g., Sahragard (2000), Karimnia (2012), and Hashemi (2013).

the *hāzer javāb* speaker is the protagonist and the eloquent hero in such narratives. The courage needed to be *hāzer javāb* and to say something *after* the king has spoken commands admiration for ‘standing up to’ authority. However, kings are often softened by the charm of ‘the right answer’ and the intelligence of such wit at ‘the right time’. Bagherzadeh (1973) offers some examples of these incidents, such as Rudaki (858–941 AD) speaking before a Samanid army general, which resulted in the general withdrawing his army, or Hafez (1315–1390) speaking before Tamerlane, an incident that saved the poet’s life.

Ontologies of Persian literature contain other anecdotal evidence of *hāzer javāb* people finding a quick response. Kuka (1923) presented several in a collection on Persian humour. One of the short stories features Khusro Parwiz, king of the Sasanian Empire, who reigned from 590 to 628, sitting in audience with Sheereen (his wife) (Kuka 1923: 225–226):

Khusro Parwiz once ordered 8000 direms to be paid to a fisherman, as a reward for bringing to him a very large fish. When the fisherman rose to depart, one of the direms fell from his hand and rolled on the ground; and he stooped to pick it up. Sheereen, who was with the king, whispered to him, “Look at the meanness of the fellow! How [he] does not let go even a single direm.” Khusro accordingly recalled the fisherman, and said to him, “Were not those 8000 direms sufficient for you, that you stooped low to pick up even a single direm, that had rolled away from your hands?” “The reward of your Majesty has made me rich,” replied the fisherman, “but I was afraid that if the coin remained on the ground, the auspicious name of your Majesty on the coin might get trampled upon.” Khusrow was surprised at this ready wit and ordered that 4000 direms more should be given to the fisherman.

Kuka, who collected these stories in the early twentieth century, probably preferred to use a phrase such as *ready wit* instead of the original *hāzer javābi*, which is justifiable in translation. Regardless of the authenticity of this seventh-century story, this is one of the examples of the long tradition and significance of being ‘ready to respond’ in Persian. The punchline of such stories is the unexpected response that one character (mostly the inferior) finds, often in front of a superior person. Beeman (1981) reported in his fieldwork in central Iran in the 1970s on some folk improvisatory performances he witnessed, where a clown figure performs in front of his boss, a traditional merchant. The performances were based on improvisation of actors, and most of the humour comes from the quick responses of the clown figure to the superior person, the merchant.

Another setting where *hāzer javābi* seems to play an important role in Persian is poetry. *Monāzere*, a genre of verbal battle (cf. Abdullaeva 2014), is a longstanding poetic form in Persian. The prototype of this poetic form is as follows:

He₁ said..... (S)he₂ said.....
He₁ said..... (S)he₂ said.....

This is the simplest form possible, and more complicated versions are seen in serious works of poetry. It is based on sequences of ‘the right response’ with the correct prosody and rhymes between two parties in a debate. Abdullaeva (2014: 254) argues that “evidence from antiquity in almost all languages of the Near and Middle East (Sumerian, Akkadian, Egyptian, Aramaic, Syriac, Middle Persian or Pahlavi, and Arabic) represent the debate between two sides” (cf. Reinink and

Vanstiphout 1991). He points out the ancient origin of this literary genre, which is reflected “for example in the Sanskrit Animal Fables, [and] continued in the Arabo-Persian *Kalīla and Dimna*” (Abdullaeva 2014: 254).

Abdullaeva (2014: 255) describes the role of verbal battles prior to real battles between two armies:

their weaponry was their skill in eloquence, their audience was their soldiers, and the result of their verbal combat could be treated not simply as a rehearsal, inspiring soldiers and their generals to victory, but might itself have half decided the outcome of the battle for both armies.

One additional cultural phenomenon that probably adds to the value of *hāzer javābi* is *mošā’ere*. The word refers to a poetry game known as *bait bāzi* in Hindi and Urdu. *Bait bāzi* is a game that “starts with the first player reciting a stanza of a poem off the top of their head, and the next player must recite another stanza of any poem which starts with the last letter of the verse used by the previous player” (Wikipedia 2018). *Mošā’ere* is Arabic for the same game in Persian. Contestants have played the game in television shows, where the person who cannot find a stanza with the correct first letter within a certain time loses the game. The winners of this game are known as *hāzer javāb* people. The frequency and significance of reciting poetry in various conversational settings in the Persian-speaking community is a possible topic for further study.

To conclude, I have tried in this section to illustrate the historical context in which *hāzer javābi* as a speech practice has developed. It would not be possible to fully understand the practice without knowing the culture. It is now time in the following section to explicate the pragmatics of *hāzer javābi*, as well as the shared understanding of the concept in Persian.

5.4 *Hāzer Javābi*: The Conceptualization

This section presents the script for the conceptualization of the practice of *hāzer javābi* in Persian, following the ethnopragmatic approach in the study of speech practices and categories. This type of explication was called ethnopragmatic script by Goddard (2004: 1215). “Ethnopragmatic scripts are a specialized kind of cultural script—specialized in that they concern culture-specific ‘ways with words’ rather than other aspects of speaking or thinking” (Goddard 2004: 1216).

The script below represents the insiders’ understanding and depicts the shared conceptualization of a *valued* speech practice; in addition, it functions as an explication for the meta-pragmatic label as used by native speakers. Scripts such as this are useful to show the social cognition of culture-specific concepts, practices, and values (cf. Goddard and Wierzbicka 2004). This one, in particular, shows that *hāzer javābi* is conceptualized around three core components: first, a state of readiness (as though a person has prepared) to respond whenever possible; second, a notion of quickness, which is more of a surprising quality; and third, a positive evaluation in relation to the second component; that is, it is surprising and unexpected that a person can find such appropriate words in a short span of time. The proposed explication runs as follows:

[A] Ethnopragmatic script for *hāzer javābi*

- a. often when someone is with other people, it is good if this someone thinks like this:
- b. "when someone here says something at one moment,
it is good if I can say something to this someone a moment after, not like people say
at many times
it is good if I say it with very good words
- c. if I say it well, people here can think about me like this:
- d. 'this someone can think quickly [m], this someone says things well with words'
- e. at the same time, they can feel something good because of it
as people often feel when they want to laugh [m]
- f. I want this"

Each of the six constituents, (a) to (f), represents one aspect of the semantic dynamics of the concept and the pragmatics of the valued practice. Line (a) illustrates the setting in which this speech practice occurs and accounts for the mental state of readiness. The second line reveals the culturally distributed mental state. It hinges on the readiness for coming up with a response unlike other responses. The distinguishing elements of a good response are that it is well articulated, or it contains high-quality tropes or unexpected inferences; in addition, this quality response has to be produced in a relatively short time. Other people would need much more time to come up with such pithy words, such appropriate tropes, or such unexpected inferences.

Lines (c) and (d) try to illustrate the perception of this speech practice, in terms of admiration for the speaker's mental ability or cleverness in conversation. Line (d), moreover, represents the quality of being *hāzer javāb* among speakers of Persian. Line (e) points to the social implication and perlocutionary effect of the speech practice that leads to the last line, (f), the attitude of speakers towards *hāzer javābi* in general (discussed with examples in Sects. 5.1 and 5.3).

Appendix 3 presents the same script as a window to the collective conceptualization of *hāzer javābi* using Persian primes.¹⁷ It is an attempt to show that there is a form of conceptualization distributed heterogeneously (cf. Sharifian 2011) among speakers of Persian that is valued if a person responds well and quickly. The diachronic evidence and contemporary conversations show that there is an inclination to be ready to respond quick and well. Both concepts of 'quick' and 'well' are relative and have been discussed earlier.

5.5 Broader Issues and Concluding Remarks

The final part of this chapter consists of two subsections. The first aims at wedding this study with other linguistic studies on responses in different languages. The second makes some concluding remarks.

¹⁷In addition, Appendix 4 offers the list of Persian exponents of semantic primes.

5.5.1 *Broader Issues*

It seems to be a convention of human knowledge that a response to an utterance needs to be produced in a certain span of time. If speaker B, in a communicative context, fails to produce a response to speaker A's previous utterance in time *t*, both parties, and even other observers, feel unsettled. Experiments on turn taking have shown that the "language production system has latencies of around 600 ms and up for encoding a new word but the gaps between turns average around 200 ms" (Levinson and Torreira 2015: 1–2). Some studies show that "the most frequent turn transitions occur with only a slight gap or overlap, regardless of the language" (Bögels and Torreira 2015: 46). This has at least two implications: first, people start planning their response before the other speaker has finished, and second, the gaps between turns by two parties of a conversation are relatively very small.

Studies in conversation analysis have supported the general intuition that answers are the most common form of response (cf. Lee 2013: 416). Moreover, some studies show that the question–response sequence is "a universal unit of conversational organization and a pervasive type of sequence in all communities" (Stivers et al. 2010: 2616). These findings support my initial claim that there is an expectation to receive a response and this expectation seems to be a part of the perlocutionary aspect of the speech act. Particularly in the case of the question–response sequence, if we take it as a universal unit, the addressee expects to respond and the speaker expects to be responded to. This expectation might be satisfied with the semiotic of a smile in other cases; nonetheless, it is expected and performed on a daily basis in every language.

The focus of this study, more specifically, went beyond the expectation of giving/getting a response in a certain time span. It tried to investigate 'two sides of the same coin' in the case of the speech practice *hāzer javābi* in Persian; one 'side' being a perception and the other a tendency. There is a perception in a conversational setting that a speaker has satisfied the expectation of providing a response in a shorter span of time, as opposed to the expected time *t*. In most cases, however, the turn-taking gaps in these cases are as usual (see the example of the child in Sect. 5.1.2), but the verbal content that has been produced in time *t* is deemed to be of a higher quality than the one that other, 'normal' speakers produce in time *t*, which in turn indicates the mental ability of the speaker.

The other 'side of the coin' is a shared tendency among speakers of Persian to come up with a response to an utterance or an event more quickly. Researchers aware of the state of the art in conversation studies stand a lot to gain from investigating this further, especially given the fact that studies of language production show that pre-articulation processes run three or four times faster than actual articulation (Levinson and Torreira 2015; after Wheeldon and Levelt 1995) and also because of the suggestion that production begins as soon as possible, that is, as soon as the speech act content of the incoming turn is clear (Bögels and Torreira 2015).

This salient tendency in speakers might be studied from a diachronic and also an ontogenetic perspective. The diachronic perspective would confirm the numerous examples of such a tendency in the history of a language, in its literature, and its art

of rhetoric. Grothe (2005: 1) began his survey of repartee in English by noting that the stories of (humorous) comebacks and quick replies are almost always told with a tone of admiration in folk literature, mostly to “pay homage to great wit, especially when that wit is exhibited under pressure”. The ontogenetic perspective, on the other hand, would show how and why someone develops this tendency to master quick comebacks over time.

In practical terms of human talk, it is impossible to have a repartee of confabulations.¹⁸ However, a good speaker, in this case, is perceived as someone who is good at contingencies of human interactions and who has good words to say at the right time, that is, in quicker than the usual time t.

5.5.2 *Concluding Remarks*

This paper applied an ethnopragmatic approach to study a Persian speech practice. A number of examples and contextualizations were leveraged to clearly show the conceptualization of the practice. They demonstrated that a response should have three elements to qualify for *hāzer javābi*; first, it must be quick; that is, it must have been produced in a much smaller time span than the average person would take to produce the same content. Second, it must be formed in good words; that is, it can be seen as the best possible response that could be produced in a given context. Third, others must be in a position to appreciate the previous two points and feel good because of it. The explication in Sect. 5.4 covered all these components and elements in a cross-translatable metalanguage. It tried to depict the tendency to be *hāzer javāb* as well as the ways being *hāzer javāb* is perceived.

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¹⁸The expression *repartee of confabulations* has been used by Lie (2012) while discussing Hegel’s idea “Philosophy is always late”, i.e. every thought is an after-thought.

Appendix 1—Persian Transcript of the Interview with the Little Girl

شما چه غذاهایی دوست داری؟
 اووو، یعنی مثل تن ماهی، یعنی مثل جوجه، کباب، یعنی مثل جوجه کباب، ترشی کباب
 ترشی کباب دیگه چیه؟
 خوب یعنی غذایی که توش بهتره با ترشی بیارن بخورن

Appendix 2—Persian Transcript of the Dorehami Television Show

مدیری- میگو فلانی شنبه یشنبه ست یعنی چی؟
 ش- یعنی لباسش چن تیکه بوده، بعد تیکه هاش زده بیرون از زیر، مثلاً یه لباسی که نافرمانه مثلاً اینجوری (به سمت مدیری می رود و به لباسش اشاره و دست می زند) که این شنبه و این یکشنبه (همه می خندند)
 ش- (دست روی سینه اش می گذارد)
 م- (مدیری با تعجب و غافلگیری به حضار نگاه می کند)
 (حضار دست می زنند)
 م- (با تعجب) منو مثال زد؟
 (خنده)
 م- این شنبه است این یشنبه ست؟
 ش- دقیقاً. بله
 م- خوب حالا بت میگم میگو فلانی شیش میزنه
 ش- شیش میزنه؟ یعنی تو انتخاب لباسهات با همدیگه مثلاً اصن تناسب نداره
 م- اهوم
 ش- مثلاً شلوار پارچه ای رو با تی شرت مثلاً آستین کوتاه (خنده) می پوشه بلانسبت شما

Appendix 3—Ethnopragmatic Script for *Hāzer Javābi* (Persian Version)

حضر جوابی

الف. اغلب وقتی که فردی با دیگران است، خوب است که این فرد چنین فکر کند:
 ب. «وقتی فردی در یک لحظه چیزی می گوید، خوب است اگر من بتوانم لحظه ای بعد چیزی به این فرد بگویم نه مثل چیزهای که مردم در بیشتر مواقع می گویند خوب است اگر من لحظه ای بعد حرف خیلی خوبی بگویم ج. اگر این را بخوبی بگویم، دیگران در مورد من این طور فکر خواهند کرد: د. «این فرد می تواند سریع [م] فکر کند، این فرد خوب حرف می زند» ه. در همان موقع، آنها حس خوبی به این خاطر خواهند داشت مثل موقعی که می خواهند بخندند [م] ی. من این را می خواهم»

Appendix 4—Persian (Farsi) Exponents of Semantic Primes

بدن, آدم(ها)~افراد, چیز(ی), فرد(ی)~کس(ی), تو, من MAN, TO, KAS(I)~FARD(I), ČIZ(I), AFRĀD~ĀDAM(HĀ), BADAN I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY	Substantives
بخش, نوع NO', BAXŠ KIND, PART	Relational substantives
دیگر(ی), همان, این IN, HAMĀN, DIGAR(I) THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE	Determiners
همه, بعضی/مقداری, کم, خیلی/زیاد, دو, یک YEK, DO, XEYLI~ZIYĀD, KAM, BA'ZI~MEQDĀRI, HAME ONE, TWO, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW, SOME, ALL	Quantifiers
بد, خوب XUB, BAD GOOD, BAD	Evaluators
کوچک, بزرگ BOZORG, KUČAK BIG, SMALL	Descriptors
شنیدن, دیدن, حس/احساس کردن, خواستن, دانستن, فکر کردن FEKR-KARDAN, DĀNESTAN, XĀSTAN, NAXĀSTAN, HES/EHSĀS-KARDAN, DIDAN, ŠENIDAN KNOW, THINK, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	Mental predicates
درست, حرف~کلمات, گفتن GOFTAN, KALAMĀT~HARF, DOROST SAY, WORDS, TRUE	Speech
حرکت کردن, اتفاق افتادن, (کاری) کردن/انجام دادن (KĀRI) KARDAN~ANJĀM-DĀDAN, ETTEFAQ-OFTĀDAN, HARKAT-KARDAN DO, HAPPEN, MOVE	Actions, events, movement
(کسی/چیزی) بودن, وجود دارد, (در جایی) بودن (DAR JA'I) BUDAN, VOJUD-DĀRAD, (KASI/ČIZI) BUDAN BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)	Location, existence, specification
مال من (بودن) MĀL-E MAN (BUDAN) (IS) MINE	Possession
مُردن, زندگی کردن ZENDEGI-KARDAN, MORDAN LIVE, DIE	Life and death
لحظه, برای مدتی, مدت کوتاهی, مدت زیادی, بعد, قبل, الان, کی~(چه) وقتی (ČE) VAQTI~KEY, AL'ĀN, QABL, BA'D, MODDAT-E ZIĀDI, MODDAT-E KUTĀHI, BARĀY-E MODDATI, LAHZE WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT	Time

لمس کردن, داخل, سمت, نزدیک, دور, زیر, بالا, اینجا, جایی که	Place
JA'IKÉ, INJĀ, BĀLĀ, ZIR, DUR, NAZDIK, SAMT, DĀXEL, LAMS-KARDAN	
WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCH	
اگر, بخاطر این~چون, توان(ستن), شاید, ن~نه	Logical concepts
NA, ŠĀYAD, TAVĀN(ESTAN), ČON~BE XĀTER(E), AGAR	
NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF	
(بیش)تر, خیلی	Intensifier, augmentor
XEYLI, (BIŠ)TAR	
VERY, MORE	
مثل	Similarity
MESL	
LIKE~AS	

Notes: • Exponents of primes can be polysemous; i.e., they can have other, additional meanings. • Exponents of primes may be words, bound morphemes, or phrasemes. • They can be formally, i.e. morphologically, complex. • They can have combinatorial variants or allolexes (indicated with ~). • Each prime has well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties

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