

## Address Culture of Iranian EFL Students and Lecturers in Oral and Written Communication: A Semio-cultural Conceptualization Perspective

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### Abstract

Compared to non-academic contexts, the use of address forms in academic settings is insufficiently researched. To fill this gap, the present study investigated the address forms commonly used by students and lecturers in Iranian universities in their oral and written communication. The analytical framework used in this study is semio-cultural conceptualization. A qualitative descriptive research design was adopted, which included six open-ended questions. Thirty Iranian EFL lecturers participated in this study, 20 males and 10 females, representing 14 different universities. The average age of the participants was 50. The thematic analysis of the data revealed that in addition to the conventional polite forms, some innovations have emerged in the academic address practice in Iran. While students always addressed their lecturers using respectful forms and honorifics, the lecturers' address choices varied according to sociolinguistic factors such as the students' age, gender, degree of intimacy and distance, and educational status. In the majority of cases, the lecturers employed title plus last name; nevertheless, some of them opted for more intimate forms. However, such forms were never reciprocated by students owing to the perceived power dynamics and elevated respect for teachers, which is deeply entrenched in the culturally-constructed conceptualization of the unique teacher-student relationship in Iran. The findings also suggest that the scope of address studies can be expanded to include semio-cultural conceptualizations, such as emotion schema, and symbolism.

**Keywords:** Address forms, semio-cultural conceptualizations, academic setting, oral and written communication, Iran

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## 1. Introduction

Address forms belong to the domain of relational social deixis, which expresses the social relationship between the speaker and the addressee in a speech event. Social deixis is grammaticalized in the form of honorifics and address forms, which include “second-person personal pronouns (singular and plural, where applicable), nominals (e.g., first names, last names, nicknames), general and professional titles (Mr., Dr., Professor), vocatives (e.g., Babe, Honey, Mama), provocatives (Hey, Hey you), and honorifics (Your Honor/Excellency)” (Keshavarz, 2021, p. 28). In some languages, like Persian, a much wider range of address forms are available to the speaker, including consanguineous and non-consanguineous kin terms, religious titles, and the like (Keshavarz, 1993). Non-linguistic factors that affect the choice of such linguistic terms include age, gender, and the social relationship between the speaker and the addressee, i.e., symmetrical vs. asymmetrical relationship. The superiority and inferiority relationship in an asymmetrical hierarchy is non-physically indexed through the downward use of Tu and upward use of Vous or honorifics (Keshavarz, 2021).

Address forms may also be studied from the semio-cultural conceptualization perspective, an analytical framework based on the premises of Semiotics and Cultural Conceptualization (Keshavarz & Noshadi, 2023). This framework incorporates features of Cultural Conceptualization and Semiotics to account for culturally constructed concepts that are difficult to explicate by either of these two disciplines alone. For instance, in the context of the present study, address forms might represent specific symbolisms (an aspect of Semiotics) in academic settings in a way that the symbols embedded in conceptualizations are unique to Iranian academic culture. The profound semiotic relationship between the *object* (lecturers) and the *signs* (i.e., conceptualizations derived from those address forms) manifested in their interactions are predominantly symbolic. In this regard, “a symbol will be culturally conceptualized among members of a speech community if and only if the *interpretant* related to the symbolic conceptualization is *final*” (Keshavarz & Noshadi, 2023, p. 60). For example, the frequently-used Persian academic title *ostad* ‘Professor’ is a symbol of *respect* for all academics regardless of their rank and status, i.e., instructor, assistant professor, associate professor, or full professor.

Features of Persian address forms are also related to *cultural schema* and *emotion schema*. Cultural schemas accentuate values, assumptions, convictions, belief systems, and behavior expectations pertinent to a multitude of human experiences (Sharifian, 2003). According to Nishida (1999), cultural schemas have to do with one-to-one interaction in a cultural environment. On the other hand, since address forms are culturally constructed and serve as an indispensable part of the shared experience of individuals, they fall within the category of cultural schemas. For instance, as it will be elaborated on in the discussion section of this paper, the cultural schema of *ehteram*, i.e., elevated respect for teachers through address forms, is deeply entrenched in Iranian culture. The development of such schemas enables individual members of a speech community to interact with others appropriately and to share and construct “cultural experiences and knowledge that is determined by cultural norms” (Sharifian, 2011, p.48). Therefore, it can be argued that address forms are culture-specific, reflecting the norms and traditions of a given society.

Similarly, address forms are related to *emotion schemas*, which are also culturally constructed and refer to the collective emotion and behavior of a cultural group (Lutz, 1988; Lutz & White, 1986). For example, members of different cultural groups react differently to the notion of intimacy and bond between university lecturers and their students. Emotion schemas should not be confused with *biological emotions* such as joy, fear, and sadness. In the context of the present study, emotion schema refers to the use of endearment terms in Persian address forms, as it will be elaborated on in the Discussion and Conclusion sections. Accordingly, the main purpose of the present study is to investigate such cultural specificities within the Iranian academic setting.

While the effect of sociolinguistic variables on the choice of address forms is explored, semio-cultural conceptualization serves as the main analytical framework of the present study. This framework analyzes cultural practices through the lens of semiotics and cultural conceptualization. Previous research on address forms has predominantly been confined to the effect of sociolinguistic parameters on the choice of address forms, and to the best of the present author’s knowledge, no study has hitherto considered aspects of semio-cultural conceptualizations, such as

symbolism and emotion schema, in the analysis of address forms. Thus, to fill this research gap, the present study seeks to broaden the scope of address studies and relate address forms to semio-cultural conceptualizations, as explained above. The study was guided by two main research questions, as follows.

1. What sociolinguistic variables affect the choice of address forms by students and lecturers?
2. Which aspects of semio-cultural conceptualizations are related to address forms and how?

## 2. Literature Review

Studies on the effect of sociolinguistic variables such as age, gender, and social status on the use of address forms are abundant (e.g., Farese, 2018; Mehrorta, 1981; Ostor, 1982; Salifu, 2010; Sidnell & Shohet, 2013; Tran, 2010; Yang, 2010). Some studies have also investigated the role of context, intimacy, and distance in the use of address forms (Almasov, 1974; Brown & Ford, 1961; Keshavarz, 2001). The field has also witnessed interest in the use of address forms in other domains, such as *the media* (Bull & Fetzer, 2006; Edu-Buandoh, 1999; Rendle-Short, 2007), *sports* (Wilson, 2010), *political ideologies* (Fang & Heng, 1983; Jaworski & Galasinski, 2000; Keshavarz, 1988), *marine* (Jonz, 1975), *parliamentary speeches* (Ilie, 2005, 2010), and *religion* (Sequeira, 1993).

Some studies have also been conducted on address forms in academic settings (e.g., Afful & Mwinlaaru, 2012; Chejnová, 2013; Dickey, 1997; Harzing, 2010; Formentelli & Hajek, 2016; McIntire, 1972). The results of McIntire's (1972) pioneering study revealed that while graduate students in an American university found it appropriate to call their professors by their FNs (first names), this was considered inappropriate by undergraduate students. Therefore, the age and academic level of the students were determining factors in this study. Dickey (1997) also found that American and British lecturers most frequently addressed their students by their FN. However, students' choice of address forms depended on factors such as the academic rank of the lecturers, students' educational level (graduate vs. undergraduate) as well as the address culture and norms of the university. In a more recent study, Formentelli and Hajek (2016) found that in

Australian universities, the use of FN between lecturers and students is the norm; whereas, in the US and UK, where professional hierarchies are observed, the use of FN is non-reciprocal, i.e., only lecturers use FN to address their students, and the latter are expected to use T+LN (Title+Last Name) or honorifics to address their lecturers. However, these authors claim that there is a gradual tendency towards reciprocal FN usage among lecturers and students.

A few studies have also been conducted in non-English speaking academic settings. For example, the results of Afful and Mwinlaaru's (2012) study revealed that students in a public university in Ghana used titles, kinship terms, and nicknames to address their lecturers. Chejnová's (2013) study focused on Czech students' preferences in addressing their lecturers and how they preferred to be addressed by their lecturers. More specifically, they were asked "whether they prefer V or T forms [the formal French *Vous* 'plural you' vs. the informal or solidary address form *Tu* 'singular you'] in contact with lecturers" (Chejnová, 2013, p. 87). The results of this study showed that "students try to equalize the asymmetry between interactants and prefer positive politeness strategies" (p. 87), which indicates a preference towards the informal and solidary form *Tu*.

In another study, Harzing (2010) put students from 22 countries in a hypothetical situation whereby they were asked to imagine that they were doing an MBA degree program at a university in the USA. The findings of this study revealed that students' address preferences or the way they felt university lecturers in the USA should be addressed depended largely on the culture and norms of their countries of origin. For instance, "students in the Northern European countries (Sweden, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, UK, and Ireland) seem more likely to be on informal terms with their teachers, often calling them by their given name. Sweden, Germany, and the UK even show a completely identical pattern of preferences in this respect" (Harzing, 2010, p. 7). However, as Harzing asserts, "respondents in some countries may have made a more conscious effort to adjust to what they believed to be typical U.S.-based forms of address". For example, in some countries, like Brazil, 'Professor+LN' of the lecturer "is normally not a very common way to address teachers, and hence students [who have used this pattern] might have accommodated to what they assumed to be the norm in the USA" (Harzing 2010, p. 7).

Finally, Formentelli and Hajek (2015) investigated the address practices in Italian academic settings. The results of their study indicated that “the reciprocal use of V form Lei is the main strategy to convey respect and distance.” The results “also show that a frequent practice is the non-reciprocal use of pronouns (Lei-tu) and the combination of lexical forms encoding various degrees of social distance (names, titles, honorifics)” (p.119).

Notwithstanding the above studies, research on the use of address forms in academic settings is still marginal. As Hadi (2017) notes “a thorough review of the existing literature on terms of address reveals that only a few studies have considered address behavior in academic settings” (p. 75). Therefore, the present study is intended to contribute to this line of research by investigating the address culture in Iranian universities.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Design

A qualitative descriptive research design was employed whose purpose was to elicit non-numerical data about the way Iranian lecturers are addressed by their students and how the lecturers respond to them. The participants were also asked to report on recent changes they have observed in the address system in academic settings in Iran. To add to the credibility of the results, Synthesized Member Checking (Birt et al., 2016) was utilized as an intra-coder consistency strategy in order to reach data saturation. That is, when the participants’ responses were inadequate and insufficient, the researcher added comments and follow-up questions to their responses and sent them back to the participants via email for clarification and elaboration. In this co-constructed method of enhancing the validity and trustworthiness of the results, the participants were given the opportunity to engage in the data collection process and provide further information and clarification upon the researcher’s request.

#### 3.2. Sampling Procedure

Multiple sampling (i.e., purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling)

procedures were employed to recruit the participants. Initially, a few Iranian lecturers who were readily accessible to the researcher were approached and requested to participate in the study on a voluntary basis. Then, some of them were asked to share the questionnaire with their colleagues to fill out voluntarily, hence snowball sampling. They completed and returned the questionnaires either directly to the researcher or via the recruiters.

### **3.3. Participants**

Thirty Iranian lecturers (10 females and 20 males) participated in this study. Twenty-seven participants lived and taught in Iran, and three were living abroad at the time of data collection. Participation of these three lecturers in the study was considered legitimate as they were familiar with the address culture in Iranian academic settings having taught in Iran for many years before moving abroad. The average age of the participants was 50. As to their academic degree, 26 held a PhD degree and four of them were PhD students teaching at the university as instructors. In terms of academic rank, four of the participants were full professors, six associate professors, sixteen assistant professors, and four instructors.

### **3.3. Instrumentation**

The data-collection instruments consisted of a demographic questionnaire and six open-ended questions. Participants were asked to report on the way they were addressed by their students both in speaking and writing, and the way they addressed them back. The open-ended questions were first piloted with three Iranian lecturers, and based on their feedback certain modifications were made to the form and content of the questions.

### **3.4. Data Analysis Procedure**

The collected data were analyzed thematically, and content analysis was used to identify the common themes. In other words, inductive bottom-up data-driven

thematic analysis was utilized in this study, hence the grounded theory approach. That is, as the researcher delved into the data collected through an open-ended questionnaire, he discovered certain underlying patterns which led to the development of the common themes, that will be related to sociolinguistics and semio-cultural conceptualizations in the Discussion Section. More specifically, participants' responses to the open-ended questions were checked multiple times, and if some responses were inadequate or ambiguous the respondents were contacted via follow-up emails and were requested to provide clarifications and elaborate on their responses. This synthesized member checking proved to be invaluable as it shed light on some emerging innovations in academic addressing behavior in Iran, as will be discussed in the following sections. Then, all the responses that were related to a given theme were categorized under that theme, e.g., 'gender'. Such categorization was straightforward and did not require inter-coder agreement given that the responses to open-ended questions were to the point in the majority of cases, and the ambiguous ones were clarified through member checking. This obviated inter-rater reliability check. The results of the data analysis will be presented in the Results Section.

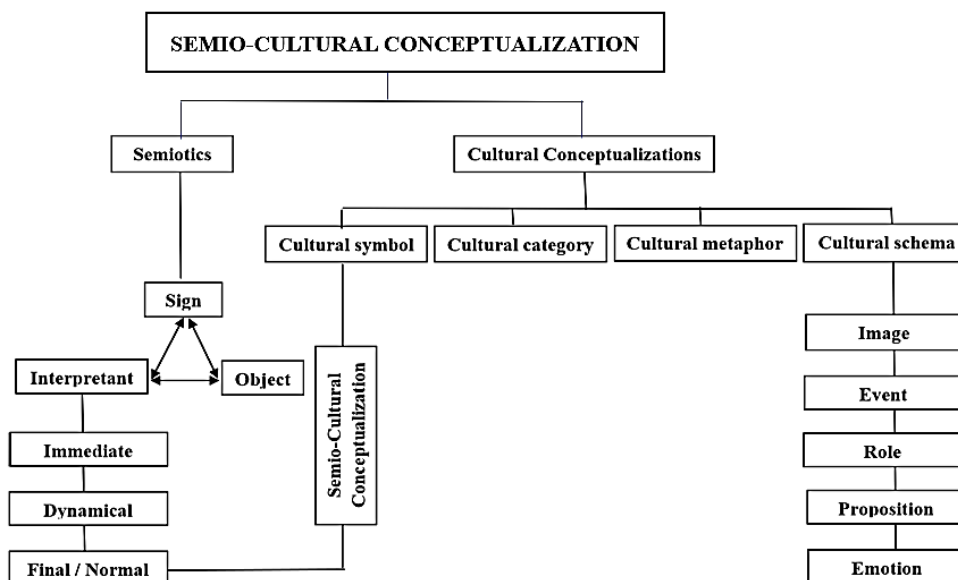
### 3.5. Analytical Framework

In addition to the effect of sociolinguistic factors on the choice of address forms, the present study is based on the analytical framework of Semio-cultural Conceptualization, put forward by Keshavarz and Noshadi (2023). This framework utilizes the principles of cultural conceptualizations and semiotics to develop a more inclusive and dynamic model for the interplay between language and culture. It can be used for studying linguistic and cultural phenomena at the level of cognition, shedding light on culturally constructed concepts that have yet to be fully understood. By incorporating semiotics into cultural conceptualization, the framework offers new insights into the linguistic manifestation of various cultural conceptualizations including the address forms used by Iranian students and lecturers. It is a tool for researchers in various fields to critically analyze cultural practices and to gain a deeper understanding of how these practices reflect and



shape societal norms and values. More specifically, the semio-cultural conceptualization framework incorporates *cultural schemas*, *cultural metaphors*, and *cultural categories* into elements of semiotics, i.e., *signs*, *objects*, and *interpretants* (i.e., immediate, dynamical, and normal/final interpretants), to reach a novel and comprehensive understanding of cultural conceptualizations. To illustrate the link between semiotics and cultural conceptualizations, *cultural symbols* derived from *final interpretants* fall under the elements of cultural conceptualizations from a semiotic perspective to cultural linguistics, as schematically displayed in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
The Semio-Cultural Analytical Framework



(Keshavarz & Noshadi, 2023, p. 57)

#### 4. Results

The themes presented in this section emerged from the inductive analysis of the data without any predetermined hypotheses. Due to the shortage of space, only a sample of responses for each theme is reported. Furthermore, to maintain anonymity, each participant is assigned a code, e.g., P20 for Participant Number 20.

#### 4.1. Open-ended Question 1

Four themes emerged from responses to Question 1 (How do your current students usually address you in academic settings?), as follows.

##### **Theme 1.** Academic rank of the lecturers as a variable

Most participants reported changes in the way they were addressed before and after becoming university lecturers. Drawing on their experiences, they stated that academic rank played a significant role in students' choice of address forms. For instance, P1 reports: "Before getting my PhD, they addressed me Mr+T (Mr+Title), after PhD and becoming a lecturer, *ostad* ['Professor']+LN in F2F communication (and Dear Dr+LN in emails)". P4 also states that "prior to that [when I became a lecturer] they chiefly called me Ms. or Khanom 'Ms.+LN.'" Similarly, P18 writes, "previously I was called Mr. and after being established as a lecturer, most people use the title Dr."

##### **Theme 2.** The educational level of the students

Participants' responses indicate that the address forms used by their students vary according to their educational level. For instance, P18 states that "first-year undergraduates call me Mr+LN. They do not use titles. Sophomores and above along with graduate students say Dr+LN." P8 also reports, "in my General English classes, where most students have a lower level of language proficiency than English major students, they use terms such as "Master", "Mr+LN" (mostly), "Sir", "Teacher" (occasionally), and "Dr./Prof." (rarely)."

##### **Theme 3.** Use of Persian honorifics and endearment terms with academic titles

The data revealed that patterns such as title+honorifics (e.g., *dženab-e ostad* 'excellency/honorable professor', and *dženabe doktor* 'excellency Doctor, *aqaye doktor* 'Mr. Doctor') are used frequently in addressing lecturers. Some participants report that honorifics such as *ostade gerami* 'esteemed/respectable professor', Dr+LN+*bozorgvar* 'great/distinguished Dr.+LN' are also used in written communication. Some other participants state that endearment terms, such as *æziz*

'dear', or *æzizæm* 'my dear', usually accompany the Persian title *ostad*, e.g., *ostade æziz* 'dear professor', *ostade æzizæm* 'my dear professor'.

Another endearment term used by some students is *dʒan*. This word, which literally means 'soul', is accompanied by the academic titles *doktor* and *ostad*, such as *doktor dʒan* 'Dear Doctor', *ostad dʒan* 'Dear Professor' mainly in face-to-face interactions.

#### **Theme 4.** The generic address title *ostad*

The results revealed that the Persian academic title *ostad* 'Professor' is used frequently as a generic term to address all academic staff respectfully regardless of their rank, including instructors who do not hold a PhD degree. This is especially the case in oral communication, as stated by P23: "in oral communication in Farsi, almost all the students use the same form (*ostad*), irrespective of the instructor's rank and status. *Ostad* is used generically as a respectful address form while communicating with a university lecturer". This was echoed in other participants' comments (e.g., P9 says, "in Persian they often call me *ostad* or *ostad+LN*"). Participant No.15 also notes that "even if you have an MA [you are an instructor], you will be called '*ostad*'."

In answer to the researcher's follow-up questions, some participants mentioned that even when English titles like Professor and Master are used by the students, they are actually translating the Persian title *ostad*.

#### **4.2. Question 2. How Do You Address Your Students?**

The following themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of responses to Question 2.

##### **Theme 1.** Gender

A common theme in participants' responses was the gender of the students. There tend to be cultural and religious restrictions in this regard, as reflected in P8's response: "I never address my students using their first names. This is a cultural practice in Persian, transferred to English. I always address them using Mr. X and Ms. Y. To avoid distinguishing between married and unmarried status of female

students I always use the title Ms. X.”

Same/different gender of the students and lecturers also seems to affect the lecturers’ choice of FN as an intimate address form. For instance, P14, a female lecturer, stated that she normally uses Ms., Mr.+LN, but “on some occasions that I want to show intimacy with very good students I may use first names for female students interchangeably with Ms.[+LN].” This is also echoed in a male participant’s response (P19): “I address them with their surnames though time and again I address male students with their first names.”

**Theme 2:** Use of formal and respectful terms by lecturers to address their students

The responses indicated that most lecturers address their students using polite and respectful forms, such as T+LN (Mr/Miss+LN), which is a common practice in Iranian academic settings. For instance, P13 stated, “They address me formally, i.e., Dr.+LN or Professor. I address them formally, too, i.e., Mr. or Mrs.” P22 also observed that “I always use respectful terms such as Mr/Miss+LN, and the polite pronoun *shoma* [you]. I never use FN.” However, some participants reported that they sometimes address their students by their FN, as explained below.

**Theme 3.** Intimacy and length of relationship

Some respondents stated that they used FN to address their students; however, this choice was influenced by the level of intimacy and length of teacher-student relationship, as observed by P12. P6 also noted, “I use first names when we become very intimate and are in touch outside the academic contexts.” Similarly, P9 stated that he often used his students’ first names, “but that is moderated by their age, their gender and how long I have known them; the more I have known them, the easier it is for me to call them by their first name”.

**4.3. Responses to Q3** (Have you noticed any significant differences between address forms used in academic settings before and after you became a university

lecturer?)

The main theme that emerged from the analysis of responses to question three was *innovation in academic address culture*. A few participants observed that the relationship between lecturers and students is getting less formal. For instance, P22 reported, “our professors never addressed us using our first name or never used a second person singular pronoun [to]. I never do this, but I have frequently seen my colleagues do so.” Similarly, P29 wrote, “in Iran it [the address system] has been moving towards more intimate than the time I was a university student. Back then, all instructors and students would call one another by their last name”. P20 also stated, “I expected the university atmosphere to be more formal, and for the first few years I used the students’ family names to address them, but after a while, I started using their first names which they liked so much”. He added, “in case they do not like real first names, I address them by their nicknames. Last semester I had a student whose name was “Molook” [an old Persian]. She asked me to call her “Melody”, which is trendy and modern. In some cases, I also call them by their last names if they are older than me, which is a gesture of politeness in Persian.” In response to the researcher’s follow-up request to elaborate on this issue, the lecturer wrote “here in Iran, as you well know, university lecturers try to keep the distance with their female students, but I always call them by their first names. Once I had a student whose name was "Mandana" but her friends called her "Nana" and she herself asked me to address her by her nickname. Nicknames are becoming more and more frequent nowadays and it seems the atmosphere is getting more relaxed. Another interesting phenomenon today is the use of Western names for Persian names such as Lila for Leila, Irene for Iran (as a girl's given name), Nancy for Nastaran.”

‘Master’, as a new address term, was also mentioned by some participants (Participants 8, 9, 14, 17, and 21). P8 associated the use of this term as well as ‘teacher’ and ‘Sir’ with lower proficiency levels. In response to my follow-up question, he wrote “they use "master" in English. My best guess is that they have referred to a dictionary or Google Translate to find the appropriate address term [for *ostad*].” P21 was of the same opinion and stated that “the freshmen generally say “Master” or “Teacher”, but later they change it to “*ostad*+LN.” P17 also reported,

“I personally interpret Dear Master as *ostad-e æziz*”. She considers the use of Master to address lecturers in English inappropriate.

Another innovation is the emergence of ‘Ma’am’ as an address term in Iranian universities, as reported by three female participants. For instance, P4 stated, “prior to that [prior to becoming a lecturer] they chiefly called me Ms. or *xanom+LN* ‘Lady+LN’, Ma’am, and teacher.”

Yet another innovation is the generic use of the Persian academic title ‘*ostad*’ ‘professor’ to address anyone who teaches at the tertiary level including instructors with a Master’s degree while in the past only professors and lecturers holding a PhD degree were called *ostad*, or alternatively *xanom-e/aqay-e doktor* ‘professor or Mr./Ms. doctor’, as indicated in P19’s comment.

**4.4. Responses to Q.4** (*How do your former students usually address you in their email communications whose purpose is to maintain social relations with you, and not to ask for a favor of any kind?*)

**Theme 1.** More polite forms and elaborate honorifics in Persian salutations compared to English.

Comparison of English and Persian address forms used in students’ emails to address their lecturers showed sharp differences in the form as well the degree of politeness expressed. English salutations were much shorter than the Persian ones. With a few exceptions, the English salutations lacked honorifics. The most prevalent English address form was T+LN (e.g., Mr/Dr+LN); whereas, the Persian salutations were elaborate and contained many honorifics, as illustrated in the following examples.

<i>sælam</i>	<i>ostad</i>	<i>dʒan</i> ,	<i>ærz-e</i>	<i>ædæb...</i>
hello	master	soul,	expression-of	politeness
‘Hello dear professor, expression of courtesy...’				

<i>ba</i>	<i>sælam</i>	<i>ve</i>	<i>ærz-e</i>	<i>ædæb</i>	<i>khedmæte shoma</i> ,	<i>ostade gerami</i>
with	hello	and	expression-of	politeness	near	you, esteemed professor
‘With greetings and expression of courtesy to you, my esteemed professor.’						

**Theme 2.** The use of endearment terms

The only endearment term used in English was ‘dear’, as in ‘Dear Dr.+LN’. However, the Persian endearment terms students used in their emails were varied and more affectionate, as expressed by P17 (“In emails that I receive from my former students in Persian, of course, I have detected loads of passion”). Below some instances of Persian endearment terms are provided.

<i>saelam</i>	<i>ostade</i>	<i>æziz</i>
hello	master	dear
‘Hello dear Professor’		

<i>xanom-e</i>	<i>Dr.....æziz</i>
Mrs.-of	Dr..... dear
‘Dear Mrs. Doctor’	

<i>ostad-e</i>	<i>æziz-æm</i>
master-of	dear-mine
‘My dear Professor’	

**Theme 3.** The educational levels of students

A difference was observed in address forms used by lower and higher-level students. The reason for this seems to be the fact that at pre-university levels in Iran, students always address their teachers by the titles *aqaye+mo’alem* ‘Mr+Teacher’ (or *aqaye+LN*), or *xanome+mo’alem* ‘Miss+Teacher’ (or *xanome+LN*). This is confirmed by P3’s statement that “freshman students who are not yet familiar with these titles may use the Persian address form *aqaye+LN*.” They seem to carry this tradition to the university, but later switch to academic titles like Professor and Dr. A distinction is also made between undergraduate and graduate students, as explained by P7, “My former MA and PhD students usually use ‘Dear Dr+LN’ or ‘Dear Professor’. My former BA students usually use ‘Dear Mr+LN’.”

**4.5. Responses to Q5.** How do you usually address your former students in your

*email responses to them?*

The qualitative analysis of the data revealed that the address choice of lecturers was determined by sociolinguistic variables including *gender*, *age*, and *educational status* of former students. *The frequency of contact* and the *degree of intimacy and distance* were also mentioned by some participants as factors affecting the lecturers' address strategy. This is clearly stated by P3, as follows:

“Depending on the gender, age, time knowing that student, level of intimacy/formality, and their current status, I may use the following terms to address them:

- Using their first name only: Dear Ali or Dear Maryam
- Using their last name: Dear Mr. Alizadeh or Dear Mrs./Miss/Ms. Akbari
- Using their full names: Dear Ali Alizadeh or Dear Maryam Akbari”

Among the aforementioned sociolinguistic parameters, *gender* seems to be the most significant factor influencing lecturers' address strategies. P1 (a young male lecturer), for instance, observed: “My address strategies vary according to their gender and not their age or status.” P7 also reported, “when it comes to addressing female students, I use the term “Ms.” regardless of their age.” P8 (a male lecturer) also stated, “I usually address them using their first name. However, I use the last name when addressing the female students.” This points to restrictions in the Iranian culture with regard to addressing members of the opposite sex.

*Age* “is also a factor; older students are addressed by their last names especially when they have graduated.” (P2). A female participant (No. 4) asserted, “for younger ones [female students], I often use their first name like Dear Maryam. For men and adult students, I often use Dear Ms./ Mr. plus their last name.” P12 also wrote, “The younger they are, the more intimate address forms are used.” This is echoed in P7's report stating that “for younger male students, I might sometimes use their first names. For older students, I certainly use “Mr. plus surname.” These findings reflect the significance of the cultural schema of ‘age’ in addressing students in Iran. However, in addressing former professors, the cultural schema of respect (*ehteram* in Persian) is more significant than age, as responses to Question 6 below reveal. That is, lecturers stated that they show great respect for their former



professors regardless of their age.

*Intimacy vs. distance* was another sociolinguistic variable in the address style of lecturers. Generally speaking, as stated by P7, “in Iran, there is a distance between the professors and students”, in which case the usual address form chosen by lecturers is T+LN, as reported by some participants. However, when there is “more affinity”, as said by P15, the first name is used. Addressing students by their FN seems to be the main indication of intimacy. To reinforce intimacy, sometimes a nickname is used with FN. An interesting nickname mentioned by P20 is ‘Seyed’. He writes, “in certain cases, when they are closer to me, I prefer to use more friendly terms, such as “*Seyed*” for “Seyed Ali”, which is a sign of close relationship with that student.” It must be mentioned that *Sayed* or *Sayyed* is a title to address or refer to a masculine descendant of the Prophet in Shi’ite Islam, but it can also be used as an intimate title amongst ordinary people.

Lecturers have also the choice of using endearment terms with professional titles to show intimacy, as expressed by P25, “I usually address them using: Dearest Doctor+LN, *Doktor*+LN *æzizæm*, *jenanbe* [excellency] doctor+LN *æziz*”. For younger students this participant uses “FN+*džane æzizæm*, FN+*khan-e æziz*, Dearest+FN.” Obviously, the use of FN+endearment terms indicates more intimacy. It is worth mentioning that *khan* is a Persian title traditionally used for the chief of a tribe, but it is used as an address form for male acquaintances, relatives, and friends.

The *formality of context* is another variable that seems to be taken into consideration in the lecturers’ address strategy, as stated by P29: “I usually keep addressing them by their first name in private correspondence. However, in formal academic contexts, I address them with their title like Dr. X or Professor X.”

Another variable affecting lecturers’ address choices is the *academic status of their former students*, as mentioned by P2, “Academic rank also matters; I normally use titles if the person has promoted in academic rank (e.g., graduated with a Ph.D. degree).” P7 also stated, “I generally use the titles Mr. or Ms. with my former students’ surnames.” This is confirmed by P23 by saying that “Of Course, my strategies vary according to their academic positions and status.”

#### 4.6. Responses to Q6. How do you normally address your former professors in your emails to them?

The main theme that emerged from the analysis of responses to Q6 is the *high respect* that all participants showed towards their former professors regardless of their age and status, hence the cultural schema of *ehteram* ‘respect’. This seems to be a time-honored feature of Persian culture. As stated by P20, “In Iran, it is customary and highly ethical to respect former professors. The students never call them by their first names. Students prefer to avoid terms such as “Prof” [short form of ‘professor’], which may be very common out of Iran.” The response of a senior lecturer, who has held important academic and administrative positions in Iran, shows the high degree of respect held towards former professors: “I am always respectful to my former professors and normally I feel that I am still their student. Therefore, I respectfully address them, e.g., Dear Professor/My Most Dearest Professor.” This is shared by other participants, e.g., P28 states, “I normally address my former professors formally and politely in my emails to them.”

Generally speaking, compared to English, Persian salutations are more formal and contain more honorifics, as the following examples illustrate.

a. <i>ostad-e</i>	<i>gerami,</i>	<i>dženabe</i>	<i>aqaye</i>	<i>doctor</i> .....
professor-of	esteemed,	excellency,	Mr.	Dr...
b. <i>ostad-e</i>	<i>gerami,</i>	<i>sarkar</i>	<i>xanom</i>	<i>Dr</i> .....
professor-of	esteemed,	respectable	Mrs.	Dr....

A participant who has done his graduate studies in the US mentioned that he uses FN to address his former American professors, but not Iranian Professors. This indicates the culture-specificity of addressing behavior.

Another interesting observation is reflected in P12’s response: “I still call them by their last names, although I deep-down like to call some of them by their first names.” This shows cultural restrictions for the reasons given above, i.e., the social status of lecturers in Iran and the high respect held towards them. Table 1 summarizes the themes presented above.

**Table 1**  
Summary of the Themes

Open-ended Questions	Themes
<b>Question 1</b>	Academic rank as a variable Educational level of students Use of honorifics and endearment terms with academic titles The generic address title <i>ostad</i> 'Professor'
<b>Question 2</b>	Gender of the students Use of formal and respectful terms by lecturers to address their students Intimacy and length of student-teacher relationship
<b>Question 3</b>	New trends in academic address culture Academic rank change
<b>Question 4</b>	Use of Persian honorifics Use of endearment terms Educational level of students
<b>Question 5</b>	Sociolinguistic variables affecting participants' address choices
<b>Question 6</b>	High respect for former teachers

## 5. Discussion

With regard to research Question 1, the detailed analysis of the data revealed that a number of sociolinguistics parameters (i.e., gender, age, academic rank of the lecturers, educational level of students, degree of intimacy and distance, and formality of context) affect the choice of address forms by both students and lecturers. This is in line with the findings of previous sociolinguistic studies (e.g., Farese, 2018; Hadi, 2017; Keshavarz, 1993, 2001; Salifu, 2010; Sidnell & Shoheit, 2013; Tran, 2010; Yang, 2010).

With reference to the second research question, the data shed light on the relationship between address forms and aspects of semio-cultural conceptualizations as well as the way such relations are established. These are

discussed below.

As the results indicated, lecturers in Iran are addressed respectfully and politely irrespective of their age and academic rank. This is related to the conceptualization of respect for teachers, which is firmly ingrained in Iranian culture. This conceptualization has been referred to as the cultural schema of *ehteram*, which is an essential element of politeness system in Persian (Beeman, 2021; Dabbagh & Hashemi, 2023; Hadi, 2017; Koutlaki, 2002; Sharifian, 2011). As Hadi (2017, p. 237) notes, “*ehteram* is conveyed through the appropriate use of address terms and titles, as well as by other forms of behavior.” This is lucidly reflected in the range of honorifics and respectful address forms lecturers in this study received, particularly in written communication, as illustrated above. Personal experience and observation show that the high respect for teachers and lecturers is not restricted to academic settings, rather it is practiced in the society at large. This is supported by P17’s statement that “even if they [people] do not know me in person, as soon as they learn about my academic status, they become more considerate to observe courtesy when addressing me.” Therefore, it seems that the cultural schema of *ehteram* is part of the collective memory of Iranians.

The use of polite forms in the present study is in line with the results of Formentelli and Hajek’s (2015, p. 126) study on address practice at Italian universities. Their findings indicate that “only V forms (both pronominal and nominal) are considered appropriate when addressing the teaching staff” ... and “respectful titles “professore/professoressa to acknowledge the academic role and signal respect to the interlocutor”.

Another similarity between the findings of the present study and those of Formentelli and Hajek’s (2015) research is in the use of reciprocal polite and formal address forms by lecturers and students in Persian and Italian academic settings. As the results demonstrated, on the whole, the reciprocal use of formal and polite address forms is an integrated part of the academic culture in Iran. In the same vein, Formentelli and Hajek (2015, p. 129) assert, “as expected, reciprocal V pronoun *Lei* constitutes the default strategy to convey respect and social distance between lecturers and students. By contrast, reciprocal use of T form *tu* is never reported, ...most likely because it is deemed too informal and inappropriate in the tertiary educational context.” This is also emphasized by P22 (a female lecturer) of the

present study by saying: “I always use respectful terms such as Mr/Miss+LN, and the polite pronoun *shoma*. I never use FN [to address my students].”

The *Gender* variable significantly influenced the lecturers’ addressing strategy due to cultural and religious restrictions. In this regard, P1 reported that once the head of his department explicitly had warned the staff members against addressing students, especially female students, by their FNs, which is a sign of intimacy. P8 also stated, “I never address my students using their first names.” Nevertheless, some participants did use FN to address their students; however, this intimate address style was never reciprocated by students due to power dynamics. This is reflected in participants (P9)’s report, “I often use their first names, but they never call me by my first name”, as this is against the politeness norms in Iran. Furthermore, in terms of semio-cultural conceptualizations, cultural norms determine how gender as a cultural category is systematically conceptualized in the cultural cognition of teachers and students. This conceptualization ultimately contributes to the choice of appropriate address forms by both lecturers and students.

In contrast, the reciprocal use of FN by lecturers and students seems to be a common practice in Western culture. Formentelli and Hajek (2016), for instance, found “a high degree of informality and familiarity in student-teacher relations in Australia, where reciprocal first names are the default pattern of address at all levels.” (p.631). Furthermore, the results of Harzing’s (2010, p.7) study revealed that “students in the Northern European countries (Sweden, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, UK, Ireland) seem more likely to be on informal terms with their teachers, often calling them by their given name. Sweden, Germany and the UK even show a completely identical pattern of preferences in this respect”. Similarly, Dickey’s (1997) study showed that lecturers most frequently addressed their students by their first names; however, the students’ use of FN depended on factors such as the academic status of the lecturers, students’ educational level as well as the address culture and norms of the university. In contrast, in Iranian academia, it is considered unacceptable for a lecturer to be addressed by their first name, regardless of the student’s status or age. Even lecturers who are familiar with the Western address style find it odd to be addressed in an intimate manner by their

students. For instance, the most senior participant (P30) expressed annoyance about being addressed informally by his American students despite the fact that he has been living and teaching in the US for over 20 years. He wrote, “the non-native speakers [American students] sometimes address me ‘Hi Professor’, the one I do not like at all.” This points to the fact that cultural schemas, which are deeply entrenched in one’s mind, cannot be easily changed, even after years of living in another country and being familiar with their cultural habits.

The results demonstrated that Iranian students use a wide range of terms to address their lecturers, while in languages like Turkish, academic address forms are rather limited. In a recent study, Keshavarz (2022) found that Turkish students use a single term, i.e., *hoca(m)* ‘(my) teacher/Professor’ ubiquitously to address their lecturers. Similarly, in English-speaking academic settings, the address forms are restricted to only a few terms, namely Professor (+LN), Title+LN, FN (cf. Dickey, 1997; Formentelli & Hajek, 2016; McIntire, 1972). This is further evidence of the *cultural specificity* of address forms.

Another finding of the present study is that the students’ address choices in English were largely dependent upon the academic status of the lecturers as well as the educational and proficiency level of the students. This is in line with the results of Dickey’s (1997) study, summarized above.

The findings also revealed that the cultural schema of *age* is a determining factor in the lecturers’ address choices. This schema is shaped by the Iranian cultural values that emphasize respecting older individuals in society. This result is in line with previous research findings highlighting the crucial role of age in the choice of address forms (e.g., Ethelb, 2015; Farese, 2018; Hadi, 2017; Ide, 1989; Keshavarz, 1988, 2021; Mardiha, 2012; Tran, 2010).

An interesting innovation in the address culture in Iranian universities is the emergence of nicknames as an address form, which is a new trend in Iranian academia—a move towards a more relaxed and less formal atmosphere in academic settings in Iran. This, in turn, may reflect social changes in the country. Needless to say, the use of nicknames in academic settings in Iran is non-reciprocal, i.e., only some lecturers take the liberty to call their students using nicknames. This is in stark contrast with the findings of Afful and Mwinlaaru’s (2012) study which revealed that students in a public university in Ghana used nicknames to address their

lecturers, hence cultural specificity. As mentioned before, there is a perceived power dynamics and elevated respect for teachers in Iranian culture, while this does not seem to be the case in Afful and Mwinlaaru's (2012) study context. This shows that participants of these two studies have developed two distinct conceptualizations for the use of address forms.

Finally, a major difference was found between English and Persian endearment terms. The only endearment term used in English was 'dear', which does not necessarily convey endearment. In the words of P17, "I feel that the word 'Dear' in email salutations by native speakers of English does not typically communicate endearment." On the other hand, the Persian endearment terms *æziz(am)* '(my)dear', and *dʒan(am)* '(my)soul/body', which were frequently used in email salutations, seem to pertain to the feelings of email senders towards the recipients. This is related to the culturally constructed *emotion schema*, which is influenced by the collective emotion and behavior of a cultural group. Iranian students seem to have developed this emotion schema to express their feelings toward their teachers. The use of the endearment term *dʒan(am)* after the academic titles *ostad* and *doktor* to address one's lecturer could also be considered a *cultural metaphor* as the addresser compares the addressee to their own precious life.

## 6. Conclusion

The general conclusion that can be drawn from the findings of the present study is that the choice of address forms is largely influenced by the cultural norms of the society, which could in turn result in various conceptualizations in academic settings. For instance, Iranian students use elaborate Persian address forms and honorifics to show respect for their lecturers (e.g., *ba sælam ve ærz-e ædæb khedmæte shoma, ostade gerami* 'with greetings and expression of courtesy to you, my esteemed professor'). From a Semiotic perspective, these address forms suggest a profound symbolic relationship between the *object* (i.e., lecturers) and the *signs* (i.e., conceptualizations derived from these forms). Put differently, such linguistic symbols—address forms—are culturally conceptualized by students within Iranian academic contexts.

Similarly, as mentioned above, Iranian students communicated their *emotion*

*schemas* to their lecturers *only in Persian*, through the use of endearment terms, such as *æziz(æm)* '(my)dear', and *dʒan(am)* '(my)soul/body'. That is, since English lacks linguistic tools that fully convey students' feelings toward their lecturers, they turn to their native language as a compensatory strategy, using endearment terms. These forms are specific to their culture, reflecting patterns that differ from those found in English-speaking cultures.

As illustrated above, students never reciprocated FN owing to the high respect for teachers in Iranian culture. This phenomenon is deeply entrenched in the culturally constructed conceptualization of the teacher-student relationship in Iran. Thus, in Iranian academic settings, the primary factor influencing addressing practices appears to be the longstanding cultural norm of respecting teachers, alongside sociolinguistic variables, such as age and gender. Accordingly, all lecturers are addressed respectfully, regardless of their age or gender. Thus, it can be concluded that address forms are culture-specific conceptualizations developed by a community of speakers through observation and experience.

The above findings may have implications for intercultural communication as well as teaching and translation studies. In particular, non-Iranian lecturers teaching Iranian students may find the results of the present study useful.

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