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**Impoliteness and Power: An Interlanguage Pragmatic Approach  
to the Use of Impolite Patterns in Terms of Power**

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**Abstract**

Although studies on pragmatics in general and politeness in particular abound in the literature, impoliteness has been largely ignored. In the present study, participants filled out either the Persian or English version of a discourse completion test (DCT). The researchers analyzed collected answers to discover the relationship between impoliteness and power. Furthermore, the researchers compared responses to the Persian version with responses to the English version to see if they diverge regarding the relationship between impoliteness and power. According to the number of impoliteness strategies used, the results show that though there is a positive relationship between impoliteness and power in Persian, there is no relationship in English responses. In comparing the mentioned relationship in two languages, there is a significant difference between them. This led to the conclusion that the learners did not realize the relationship between impoliteness and power in English, whereas in answering the Persian DCT their answers showed the recognition of that relationship.

**Keywords:** impoliteness, power, interlanguage pragmatics.

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## Introduction

There are a lot of studies focusing on interlanguage pragmatics (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996 & 1999; Blum-Kulka, 1982; Cohen, 2008; Kasper, Rose & Kasper, 2001 and Walters, 2007 among others) and politeness theory (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003; Meier, 1997; and Myers, 1989 among others). These subjects were also investigated by Iranians (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Heidari, 2010; Khakzad-Esfahlan, 2010 and Monfaredi, 2010). But when it comes to a recently introduced concept such as impoliteness or power, a concept which although rather old and frequently used, has recently joined linguistics, finding directly relevant studies seems rather difficult. Lowe (2009) in a review of the book "*Impoliteness and Language*" noted that,

until quite recently, only a small number of studies (Lachenicht, 1980; Austin, 1990; Culpeper, 1996; Kienpointner, 1997) directly and specifically addressed the area of impoliteness. Thankfully this has changed in the past few years, and there has been an explosion in the interest taken in impoliteness phenomena, almost to the extent of rivaling politeness [4] and a special edition of *The Journal of Politeness Research* 4 (2) (2008) was dedicated entirely to the discussion of impoliteness. (p. 1865)

The above mentioned studies have rarely referred to the relationship between impoliteness and power. Only Bousfield and Locher (2008) in a book titled *Impoliteness in Language: Studies on its Interplay with Power in Theory and Practice*, have discussed this relationship quite comprehensively. In the articles in this book, the studies are mostly based on discourse analysis (DA) and they analyze interactions in specific contexts such as political interaction, legally licensed interaction, and workplace interaction. Moreover, in these studies the results are mostly based on the researcher's interpretation of one person's performance. This study tends to work on this rarely addressed subject with reference to educational policies. With a cursory look on the commonly used materials for teaching languages (especially English), it is quite clear that implicit in their content are different politeness strategies or techniques. Impolite language is,

however, seldom found in there. In an article in favor of teaching impoliteness Mugford (2008) noted that

English language teaching tends to deal with the pleasanter side of second language interaction such as making friends, relating experiences, and expressing likes/dislikes while ignoring such everyday communicative realities as rudeness, disrespect, and impoliteness. While neglected in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, impoliteness is likely to be experienced by second-language (L2) users in the target-language context or when interacting with other L2 users. (p. 375)

By investigating the differences between the students use of impoliteness in Persian and in English, the researcher wishes to realize whether or not they have enough knowledge of impoliteness and its relationship with power in English. This is a new dimension in the study of impoliteness. This study is both academically and practically significant for its contribution to the interdisciplinary fields of pragmatics, sociolinguistics and language teaching.

Following hypotheses are being tested:

1) There is no relationship between impoliteness and power in Persian.

2) There is no significant relationship between different power statuses (high and low) in the English questionnaire regarding the use of impoliteness strategies by high-intermediate students of English.

3) There is no significant difference between the frequency of impoliteness strategies used by high-intermediate and basic students in English and Persian questionnaires respectively, considering the situations where the participants are assumed to have more power over the interlocutor.

Brown and Levinson (1987) introduced 5 politeness superstrategies. For each one of these politeness superstrategies, Culpeper (1996) suggests an impoliteness superstrategy. These superstrategies will be used in analyzing participants performances to observe the amount of impoliteness they used.

Regarding the concept of power, it seems difficult to provide a definition for it which covers all its dimensions. Culpeper (2008) avoids giving a comprehensive overview or critique of power since . . . it looks like a many headed hydra in a voluminous literature (pp. 17-18). Spencer-Oatey (2008) points to the fact that there is not always agreement on equality or inequality of role relations, hence on the concept of power. For example some consider a customer/waiter relationship as equal whereas others believe it is unequal. However in relations like student/professor, clerk/boss, or parents/children, used in this study, there is widespread agreement among scholars about the inequality of power relationship. In general, power can be defined as the degree to which H (hearer) can impose his own plans and his own self-evaluation (face) at the expense of S (speaker's) plans and self-evaluation (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

## Methodology

### Participants

The original sample selected to participate in this study included 114 female students of English as a foreign language (EFL) at Iran Language Institute (ILI), Khorram Abad branch. Since some students were absent on the day the questionnaires were distributed, there was a decrease in the original number of participants; therefore, the final sample consisted of 94 Iranian EFL students. These students, belonging to intact classes (as a result of institutional constraints, random assignment was not possible), were divided into two groups:

*Group 1:* Forty four high-intermediate EFL learners who filled out the English version of the questionnaire. The proficiency level of high-intermediate students at this institute allowed them to read the questionnaire without difficulty and to answer them fluently as well. Although there were some grammatical mistakes and errors in their responses, since in this study the focus is on the meaning rather than the structure, these errors and mistakes were overlooked as long as the meaning was not impaired. Of course the mere fact that these students were studying at high-intermediate level does not prove their proficiency. Yet, these students have been learning English 4 hours a

week for about 3 years and have definitely gained enough competence to comprehend and produce meaningful language.

*Group 2:* Fifty basic EFL learners filled out the Persian version of the questionnaire. Basic students were selected because they are supposed to have been exposed to English language and culture the least; therefore their answers will be merely affected by their knowledge of their mother tongue.

### **Instrumentation**

The instruments used in this study were two versions (English and Persian) of a DCT (Discourse Completion test). This test contained 10 situations, a few of which were adopted from other studies like Cenoz and Valencia (1996) and the rest were designed by the researcher.

### **Is DCT a reliable measurement tool for pragmatic knowledge?**

Discourse Completion Test or DCT is a widely popular measurement device for pragmatics. However, the reliability of this kind of test (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Noorani, 2009), and also its validity in Non-Western contexts (Rose, 1994) is being questioned recently. Though these weaknesses cannot be denied, considering relevant references to the literature in each of the measurement tools for pragmatics, DCT has the longest list (Brown, 2001). This indicates that despite all the disadvantages mentioned, there are advantages to this kind of test which make it the most popular instrument in pragmatics. One advantage is obviously its feasibility. It can provide plenty of information in a short time and produces more authentic responses and is an appropriate instrument for interlanguage studies (for further discussions on reliability of DCT see Noorani, 2009).

**Preparing the questionnaire.** The DCT started by asking for the respondent's name (optional), age, and a question asking if the respondent has been to a foreign country and if the answer was yes, she would also have to specify the name of the country and the amount of time spent there.

In order to prepare the questionnaire, the features of contexts and situations had to be defined first. Since the subject under study is

impoliteness and power, the speech acts selected were request, complaint, disagreement and refusal which include the most probability of face threat, hence, occurrence of impoliteness (Chie, 2011). The questionnaire included some situations adopted from a questionnaire in another study (situations 2, 3, 4, and 5 from Umale, 2011) and the rest were designed by the researcher with a focus on the kinds of relationships needed. The situations selected were the ones in which hierarchical power relations were clearly observed and other factors of distance and imposition were controlled. The format of the DCT is summarized in Table 1. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part included the five situations in which the respondent was supposed to be dominant over the interlocutor. In the second five situations the respondent has less power than the interlocutor. Thus in the first five situations the respondent has a higher power status and in the second five ones, a lower status. Hereafter, we call the first group of situations high and the second one low.

Table 1  
*Characteristics of Situations in DCT*

Power status of participant	Speech act	Number
High	Refusal	3
	Complaint	1
	Request	1
Low	Refusal	2
	Request	2
	Disagreement	1

### Procedure

The respondents were asked to fill out the questionnaire in the classroom in 30 minutes. They were informed that the questionnaire

was part of a research and the researcher accepted to subsequently explain the reason fully and the results obtained.

Though included in the directions, they were also orally asked not to think about what they write so much and to write their responses as naturally as possible. The researcher also informed them that they did not have to write their names on the questionnaire.

Then the DCTs were collected and prepared by the researcher for analysis. In order to analyze the data, Culpeper's (1996) five superstrategies were selected as the basis. But since more details were needed for the analysis, his other impoliteness forms (2009, 2010), which were referred to as micro-strategies of impoliteness, were also used.

The five superstrategies defined by Culpeper are as follows:

- 1) **Bald on record impoliteness:** the FTA (Face Threatening Act) is performed in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way in circumstances where face is not irrelevant or minimized.
- 2) **Positive impoliteness:** the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's positive face wants.
- 3) **Negative impoliteness:** the use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's negative face wants.
- 4) **Sarcasm or mock politeness:** the FTA is performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere (Leech's (1983) irony).
- 5) **Withhold politeness:** the absence of politeness work where it would be expected.

### **Data analysis**

In analyzing the data, impoliteness categories introduced by Culpeper (2009) were used. Of course a question may arise in the validity of using such English-based category with Persian speakers; but as the study conducted recently by Culpeper (2009) (in which he compared reports of impoliteness from 5 different languages) shows, with differences only on emphasis, people with different languages all take

offence at similar things. Using Culpeper's impoliteness super-strategies along with their sub-strategies, the data were analyzed and the frequency of occurrences of impoliteness strategies for all respondents was calculated.

The frequencies obtained from WDCTs were analyzed as follows to answer different research questions raised previously:

1. Analysis of Chi-Square comparing the Persian group production of impoliteness strategies in high and low status.
2. Analysis of Chi-Square comparing the English group production of impoliteness strategies in high and low status.
3. Analysis of Chi-Square comparing the English and Persian groups production of impoliteness strategies in high status only.

## Results

The mean ages of the two groups (group 1: 24.33 and group 2: 22.61) suggests that participants were mainly young adults. Their ages though ranged from 14 to 45. The questionnaire also asked if the participants had been to a foreign country and how long they had been there. The responses to this question showed that only a few of the participants had been to a foreign country and among these few people only 2 of them had spent more than 2 months in a foreign country. This question seemed necessary since living in the culture of a language may have caused some pragmatic learning which has not been accounted for in the research design.

The descriptive statistics of the frequency of impoliteness strategies for each group and in each level of power is summarized in Table 2. A cursory look at the frequencies shows that in Persian group (respondents who filled out the Persian DCT) in high status situations or situations in which the respondent has more power over the interlocutor, the frequency of impoliteness strategies used is higher. Disparately, the frequency of impoliteness strategies for the low status is more than in high status for the English group (participants who filled out the English questionnaire).



Table 2

*Frequency of Impoliteness Strategies for the Two Groups in High and Low Status of Power*

	Group 1	Group 2
Frequency of impoliteness strategies in High	119	157
Frequency of impoliteness strategies in Low	133	84

Though the findings so far seem to be against the null hypothesis, in order to reject or prove them we need to refer to accurate statistics.

*Hypothesis 1: There is no relationship between impoliteness and power in Persian.*

Since one of the variables is nominal and frequencies are compared, an analysis of Chi-Square was run to compare the Persian group use of impoliteness in Persian DCT. The Chi-Square observed value is 22.11 (Table 3). This amount of Chi-Square value is higher than the critical value of 3.84 at 1 degree of freedom.]

Table 3

*Analysis of Chi-square for Persian Group's Use of Impoliteness in High and Low DCT*

LANGUAGE	SITUATION (high & low)	
	Chi-Square	22.112
PERSIAN	df	1
	Asymp. Sig.	.000

The Persian group has used 157 impoliteness strategies in High DCT with a residual of 36.5. That is to say, they have used more impoliteness strategies in High DCT than what was expected. On the

other hand they have used impoliteness in low DCT less than what was expected, i.e. with a residual of -36.5.

Based on these results it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between the Persian group's use of impoliteness in high and low DCT. Thus the first null-hypothesis as no significant relationship between impoliteness and power in Persian DCT is rejected. In other words, there is a relationship between impoliteness and power in the Persian DCT; thus when the person participating in a situation has more power over his/her interlocutor, he/she will use more impoliteness strategies.

*Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between different power statuses (high and low) in the English questionnaire regarding the use of impoliteness strategies by high-intermediate students of English.*

An analysis of Chi-Square is run to compare the English group's use of impoliteness in the DCT. The Chi-Square observed value is .77 (Table 4). This amount of Chi-Square value is lower than the critical value of 3.84 at one degree of freedom.

Table 4

*Analysis of Qui-square for English Group's Use of Impoliteness in High and Low DCT*

LANGUGAE	SITUATION (high & low)
	Chi-Square .778 <sup>b</sup>
English	Df 1
	Asymp. Sig. .378

Based on these results it can be concluded that there is no significant difference between the English group's use of impoliteness in high and low DCT. Thus the researcher **failed to reject** second null-hypothesis as no significant relationship between impoliteness and power in English DCT.

As displayed in Table 5 the English group has used 119 impoliteness strategies in High DCT with a residual of -7. That is to say, they have used less impoliteness strategies in High DCT than what was expected in the null hypothesis. On the other hand they have used more impoliteness strategies in low DCT than what was expected, i.e. with a residual of 7. However, the first null-hypothesis is retained because these minor differences are negligible.

Table 5  
*Frequencies, Expected and Residual Values for the English Group*

LANGUGAE		SITUATION		
		Observed	Expected	Residual
English	HIGH	119	126.0	-7.0
	LOW	133	126.0	7.0
	Total	252		

As shown in 5, the English group used less impoliteness strategies than what was expected in high DCT although the difference is not statistically significant. Therefore, in the English version of the questionnaire the independent variable that is power has no effect on the occurrence of impoliteness strategies. This is parallel to the claim that in the English DCT the person with more power did not use more impoliteness strategies.

*Hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference between the frequency of impoliteness strategies used by high-intermediate and basic students*

An analysis of Chi-Square is run to compare the Persian and English Groups in their use of impoliteness strategies in high DCT. The Chi-Square observed value of 5.23 (Table 6) exceeds its critical value of 3.84 at 1 degree of freedom. Based on these results it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between the English and Persian groups use of impoliteness strategies in high DCT. Thus the third null-hypothesis **is rejected**.

Table 6

*Analysis of Chi-Square for Persian and English Impoliteness in High DCT*

LANGUGAE (English & Persian)	
Chi-Square	5.232 <sup>a</sup>
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.022

### Discussion

In the previous chapter the data gathered during the process of the study were analyzed to find the answers to research questions and consequently test the research hypotheses.

As mentioned before, the instrument applied for gathering data was DCT. Though natural data seems the most appropriate data for analysis, gathering data through instruments like DCT has some advantages. One is that by narrowing down the situation more data of the desired type will be gained. Another is that DCTs can be easily administered to a large number of people. Yet another advantage for using DCT is that since relationships are clearly defined, knowing the prerequisites for its happening we can expect that impoliteness will happen. Previous studies have indicated that when the roles of participants are fixed (as with intimates or strangers) less effort will be invested in conveying politeness compared with situations with high degree of relationship negotiability (as with acquaintances) (Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993).

Despite the advantages mentioned above, since impoliteness is always considered the undesired behavior, in a controlled situation like that of a DCT, participants will use less impolite patterns than will be observed in natural situations. The researcher tries to decrease this effect by not asking for the participants' names or explaining to them before they filled out the questionnaires that they should write what they would say in that situation and not what they think they had better say.

After implementing the data gathering process, data analysis revealed that all the expected results were ultimately obtained. According to the analysis comparing participants' performance in high and low status situations in different questionnaires there was a positive direct relationship between impoliteness and power in the Persian questionnaire suggesting that when the speaker has more power over the interlocutor, he/she uses more impoliteness strategies and when the speaker has less power, he/she uses less impoliteness strategies. This result, however, was not found in the English questionnaire, indicating the lack of the knowledge of the relationship between impoliteness and power on the part of EFL students. In the process of answering the last question, the researcher found that the Persian group used a significantly higher number of impoliteness strategies in high status than the English group.

In the process of analyzing the data for detecting impoliteness strategies, the researcher encountered several problems. The most challenging one was recognizing the impoliteness strategies. There were cases in which the researcher intuitively spotted impoliteness but since Culpeper's (1996, 2009) model was used, only those cases which could be categorized as one of strategies introduced by Culpeper were selected. Another problem pertained to cases in which two impoliteness strategies seemed to merge in a sentence. An example for this is the following:

*I'm sorry, but I can't.*

This sentence is supposedly told by a clerk to her boss's request. Two strategies of withhold politeness and disagree outright are spotted. In such cases, two instead of one strategy are counted up.

The most frequently used strategy in situations in which the speaker has less power than the interlocutor was withhold politeness :

*But I think it's a bit boring.*

This is a student's opinion about a book which the professor has admired passionately in the classroom (see Appendix A, situation 7).

Other strategies used in such situations included disagree outright, fail to attend to H's interests and personalize or use pronouns I and you.

In situations where the speaker had more power, negative impoliteness strategies of belittling, frightening, scorn or ridiculing and the positive strategy of being unsympathetic were used among others. Some examples are provided below:

Frighten: *If you do it again, I'll kill you* (see Appendix A, situation 2).

Belittle: *It is too expensive for you to buy.* (see Appendix A, situation 5).

Use taboo words: *Don't do this again, stupid boy!* (see Appendix A, situation 2).

### Conclusion

In this study the researcher found significant results regarding the relationships between impoliteness and power. Results showed a powerful positive relationship between impoliteness and power in participants' performances in Persian while in English questionnaire no significant relationship was found. It was proved that the participants in this study did not have enough knowledge about the relationship between impoliteness and power in English language. However, the responses to the Persian questionnaire showed they had sufficient pragmatic ability to recognize the aforementioned relationship. These results point to a lack of pragmatic knowledge in the students of English as a foreign language. They have enough linguistic proficiency to understand different utterances and to provide a grammatically and semantically meaningful response. Yet, they fail to choose the best of a series of possible responses regarding pragmatic meaning.

This failure on the part of the students to recognize the relationship between impoliteness and power and further to utilize it in their speaking of English as their foreign language can be generalized to other pragmatic knowledge as well. It is a sign of the fact that Iranian

learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) get little pragmatic instruction in language classrooms.

Regarding universality of pragmatic concepts such as politeness or impoliteness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Culpeper, 2009), the results do not support it; since if this kind of knowledge were universal, the participants would perform more similar in two different languages.

Pragmatic knowledge cannot be achieved by learning the grammar or vocabulary of a language. It is an entirely distinct part of a language which students will not learn unless they are taught about it directly and led to use it in their practice of the language.

### **Pedagogical implications for teaching**

One of the challenges in language teaching is teaching how to use language appropriately. This is a greater challenge in foreign language teaching. The reason is that a second language learner has the advantage of being exposed to real life situations which undoubtedly enhance their pragmatic knowledge or their knowledge of how to use language appropriately. In Iran, increasing number of people refer to institutes every day to start learning a language, especially English as a foreign language (EFL). The question is: Are these learners being taught about the pragmatic aspect of language?

Actually what is more focused on in our classrooms are grammar and semantic meaning despite the proven fact that knowledge of grammar and meaning does not necessarily lead to knowledge of appropriate use of language. A second or foreign language user may be highly proficient in a language and yet fail to convey his/her intended message or even realize others .

Recently Spencer-Oatey and Jiang (2003) introduced the notion of sociopragmatic interactional principles or SIPs based on Leech's (1983) politeness maxims. They defined SIPs as . . . socioculturally based principles scalar in nature, that guide or influence people's productive or interpretive use of language (p. 1642). They claim their principles to be value-linked, that is in every context or culture, special norms or preferences guide their implementation. If such norms be clarified more, and if as claimed to be they are universal,

then they will be good sources for teaching pragmatics in the classrooms.

Apart from using such untested theories, there could be a slight inclusion of the concept of impoliteness and also power relationships in the classrooms just as culture is suggested to be taught. This definitely includes the description of the difference between impoliteness and rudeness and the fact that in some contexts using polite language is not appropriate.

Suggestions can be put forward to enhance or complement the present study such as using more natural data and doing a corpus analysis on them. Since the subject of this study is a rather new and untouched one, specifically in educational fields and more specifically in EFL, it is suggested that more studies be done on the subject. These studies can further lead to introduction of new approaches which consider teaching pragmatic concepts to students of foreign or second languages hence result in more adequate teaching programs.



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**Appendix A: English version of DCT:**

**In His Sublime Name**

Name:-----

Age:-----

Total time spent in other countries (please specify country and amount of time): -----

-----  
1. You are the principal at a school. One of the school teachers who has a big family comes to your house to borrow money.

**Teacher:** I have a big family and I just don't know where the money goes. The children always need something or the other. Could you lend me \$100 for a month?

**You refuse by saying:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. You are working in a college. Your boss who is the head of your department requests you to come at the weekend to help him. You are busy. How do you say no?

**Boss:** If you do not mind, I would like you to come during the weekend to help me with the library work?

**You refuse by saying:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. You are the boss in an Insurance office. There is a lot of pending work at the office and one of the clerks wants to leave early because of some personal work.

**Clerk:** I have some important work. Could I leave my office early today?

**You refuse by saying:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. You have joined a company recently and your boss invites you for lunch at his place; but you have something important to do.

**Boss:** How about you coming over to lunch tomorrow at my residence?

**You refuse by saying:**

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5. You have a servant at home. While ironing your clothes she spoils one of your expensive dresses.

**Servant:** Madam, I am so sorry, I didn't mean to but while ironing your clothes, I have burnt your dress. Please tell me from where you have purchased it? I will replace it with a new one.

**You refuse by saying:**

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6. You are a secondary school teacher and you ask one of your students (Peter Jones) to get a book from the library. What would you say to Peter?

**You:**

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7. This semester has just begun. During a class of fifty people, the professor wants everybody to pick a book as a reference book for the final paper. In front of the class, the professor passionately suggests a book he or she likes very much. However, you have read the book and found it very boring.

The professor says, "This is really a good book. I strongly recommend it to you!"

**You disagree by saying:**

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8. You are supposed to hand in an assignment to your professor today. You have not been able to finish it. You would like to ask for an extension. What would you say to your professor?

**You:**

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9. Your younger brother (or sister) has used your cell phone without asking for your permission. How do you complain?

**You:**

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10. You want to watch your favorite TV show but your father is watching another channel. How do you ask him to change the channel?

**You:**

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**Question:** In English classrooms in our society there has always been an emphasis on polite patterns without a reference to the less polite or the impolite patterns of language. Since every language includes both polite and impolite patterns, do you agree with the inclusion of this aspect of language in language classrooms? Please explain your reasons for agreement or disagreement.

**Thank you for your efforts and time,,,,,**

پرنال جامع علوم اسلامی

**Appendix B: Persian version of the DCT:**

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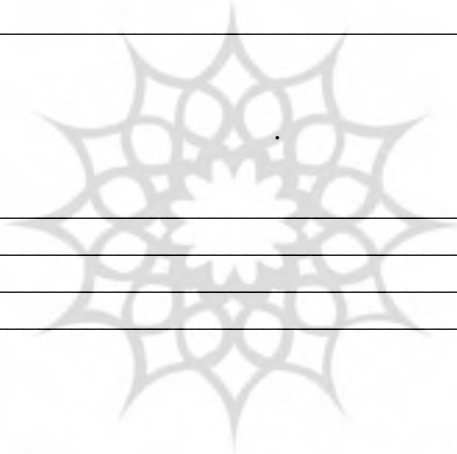
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